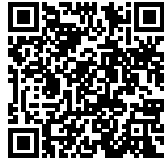




THE KATECHON IN CARL SCHMITT'S PHILOSOPHY

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The concept of the *katechon* first appears in biblical literature with two *hapaxlegomena* occurring in the second deuterio-Pauline epistle to the Thessalonians (2:6-7): "And now you know what is now restraining him [τὸ κατέχον], so that he may be revealed when his time comes. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains [ὁ κατέχων] it is removed."

In the context of apocalyptic literature, the function of the *katechon* is to constrain the eschatological enthusiasm of the Christian Thessalonian church who are eagerly awaiting the return of Christ.

The restraint that the *katechon* enforces is directly related to the forces of evil — the evil one — who brings about disorder and lawlessness. God's historical agent, the *katechon*, not only tempers the eschatological enthusiasm for the *parousia* of Christ, but also by doing so, attempts to restore order in the midst of crisis and chaos.

The image of the *katechon* is clearly situated within the context of the metaphysical conflict between the forces of good and evil. The period of the *eschaton*, wherein we wait for the heavenly kingdom to be instituted in our temporal reality, is marked by evil forces.

God, however, appoints the *katechon* to bring about the necessary stability in these last days. The deeply ambiguous figure of the *katechon* can thus be viewed both positively and negatively: restraining the forces of evil, but also holding back the return of Christ.

The symbolization of the *katechon* in Schmitt's thought is used not only to legitimize his concept of sovereignty, but also becomes the basic structural principle around which the totality of history is to be conceived.

The figure of the *katechon* is not treated systematically by Schmitt, although it appears frequently between 1942 and 1944 and [also in the postwar period](#) between 1950 and 1957.

This later usage of the *katechon* is revealing. On the one hand, it begins to explain the defensive and [apologetic tone of his work](#) after the war, and on the other, by way of this defense, evinces the first major reason for its deployment. Namely, as a justification or legitimization of the sovereign decision: a defence of a concept of the political which would justify the option of the total state to prevent chaos and produce order.

During Schmitt's time, this chaos would have been a direct reference to the on-going parliamentary crisis under the newly constituted Weimar Republic, as well as the persistent threat of the communist faction, [spurred by recent events](#) in Russia and Hungary.

Nowhere more clearly is the defense and desire for order seen in an often-[quoted piece of text](#) from Jacob Taubes:

"Schmitt's interest was in only one thing: that the party, that the chaos not rise to the top, that the state remain. No matter what the price. This is difficult for theologians and philosophers to follow, but as far as the jurist is concerned, as long as it is possible to find even one juridical form, by whatever hairsplitting ingenuity, this must absolutely be done, for otherwise chaos reigns. This is what he [Schmitt] later calls the *katechon*: The retainer [*der Aufhalter*] that holds down the chaos that pushes up from below."

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For Schmitt, the jurist, no matter the cost, chaos could not rise up (*nach oben kommt*) to the level of the state; the 'restrainer' is necessary, therefore, to suppress (*niederhält*) this chaos.

As Michael Hoelzl [comments](#), "The *katechon* is used here as a political and existential category to explain and justify Schmitt's option for a total state in order to prevent the chaos that threatened the Weimar republic."

Despite Schmitt having joined the Nazi party and having not regretted this decision in the future, Taubes' apologetic interpretation of Schmitt's understanding of the *katechon* was apparently welcomed by the latter, which lends credence at least to the fact that it was meant to justify a conception of state — and the decision taken by its sovereign — to suppress whatever it saw as the source of evil or chaos.

But more than an apology, the *katechon* is also the central eschatological principle which gives context to Schmitt's entire concept of history. This is a Christian eschatology of the present that makes possible a 'politics of the present.'

In a remarkable passage from [Der Nomos der Erde](#) (1950) Schmitt confirms the centrality of the *katechon* for his understanding of history:

"*Ich glaube nicht, daß für einen ursprünglich christlichen Glauben ein anderes Geschichtsbild als das des Katechon überhaupt möglich ist.* [I do not believe that for an original Christian faith another view of history other than that of the Katechon is possible.] The belief that a restrainer holds back the end of the world, provides the only bridge between an eschatological paralysis of all human effort and so great historical power like that of the Christian Empire of the Germanic kings.

Schmitt here establishes the *katechon* as both the condition for immanent politics and authentic Christian faith. Without the *katechon* which 'holds back the end of the world (*ein Aufhalter das Ende der Welt zurückhält*) we enter into a 'paralysis of all eschatological human effort' (*eschatologischen Lähmung alles menschlichen Geschehens*) and lose the explanatory power of the Roman empire and its Christian continuation to maintain itself against the forces of evil and disorder.

A similar conclusion with respect to history was reached in the posthumously published *Glossarium*: "*ich glaube an den Katechon; er ist für mich die einzige Möglichkeit, als Christ Geschichte zu verstehen und sinnvoll zu finden* [I believe in the *katechon*: it is for me the only possible way to understand Christian history and to find it meaningful"]".

Even though Schmitt was never explicit about where the *katechon* was to be found, the places where he does mention it all refer to its function as creating or maintaining order.

In a profound irony, if read from the political and juristic point of view – which is what Schmitt claimed at most he was trying to do – the desire for order in the present, which elicits a politics and eschatology required to maintain it, issues in a performative contradiction in Schmitt's work.

As Steven Ostovich *has noted*, "Schmitt developed his political theology as a criticism of legal positivism and its instrumental logic," but "his concept of the restrainer reintroduces instrumentalism: politics is not substantive but a matter of doing whatever is necessary to maintain order."

The principle of the *katechon* in Schmitt's eschatology is therefore about maintaining a political order, it is properly a 'politics of the present.' *It defines* "the space between the radically spiritual and the purely political. It is the time window, the mean-time, the in-between of the first and second coming of the Lord."

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The photo shows, "Scene from the Apocalypse," by Francis Danby, painted ca. 1829.

