

**Jacob Taubes**

*Occidental Eschatology.*

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*From Cult to Culture: Fragments Towards a Critique of Historical Reason.*

Edited by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Amir Engel,  
with an Introduction by Aleida Assmann, Jan Assmann,  
and Wolf-Daniel Hartwich.  
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Jacob Taubes (1923-1987) did not leave behind a large body of work. At the time of his death his only book, based on his doctoral thesis and published in 1947, had long been out of print. He had, however, devoted students who sought to make his teachings, essays, and other interventions public. The posthumous publication in 1987 of a small pamphlet on Carl Schmitt (*Ad Carl Schmitt. Gegenstrebigte Fügung*), and in 1993 of his seminar on St. Paul (translated into English in 2004), brought his ideas to the attention of a wider public. Then in 1996 *Von Kult zur Kultur*, a collection of his essays, was published and is now available in an English version.

Taubes was born in Vienna to a family of rabbinical scholars. He moved to Switzerland in 1936 where he pursued rabbinical studies. From 1942 on, he also pursued university studies in Basel and in Zurich, where he was exposed to the teachings of the theologians Karl Barth and Urs von Balthasar as well as the controversial jurist and political philosopher Carl Schmitt. After completing his studies, he did a stint at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. In 1951 Taubes was awarded a scholarship to work at the Hebrew University with Gershon Scholem. He later moved back to the US, where he had a series of appointments at prestigious universities, finally settling in Berlin in 1965 where he held a chair in Jewish Studies and Hermeneutics until his premature death.

While Taubes was known in his day in German academic circles, and to a lesser extent in American universities, his current fame seems due to a renewal of interest in the question of the relationship between religion and politics. Taubes' reflections on the

apostle Paul, on Gnosticism, Messianism and apocalyptic thinking, and on their influence on the development of modern philosophy, resonate with a group of European left-wing thinkers reacting to the spiritual crisis brought by the demise of ‘really existing socialism’. Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Tony Negri, among others, revisited the paradigm of Paul as an inspiration to think anew the problems of social activism. Agamben, Negri, Laclau, Moffet, and Žižek are also attracted to the thought of Schmitt, with whom Taubes had a complex relationship. Even in quarters with impeccable credentials, the question of the nature and legitimacy of ‘political theology’—in particular of the chiliastic or apocalyptic variety—and its meaning for a democratic society is being seriously discussed. And while, to some extent, these questions can be discounted as coded references to the problem of integrating Muslim minorities within Europe, and to the question of multiculturalism, further examination reveals there to be wider issues at stake. What Mark Lilla called in a recent book ‘the great separation’ between politics and theology is under attack, and has been for some time. Suddenly, the questions that Taubes and his contemporaries asked now seem relevant again.

*Occidental Eschatology (OE)*, originally published in 1947, is a revised version of Taubes’ doctoral thesis. Postwar shortages required Taubes to excise 200 pages from his draft in order to allow the publication. When the book went into print, Taubes had already left Switzerland for the USA, and he was unable to proofread the galleys. Whether by design or because of these external constraints, the book does not have the elaborate and erudite footnotes that are usually expected in this type of work. This led some of his contemporary readers to be ambivalent about it, acknowledging the originality of its ideas but wondering about its scholarship and the support for its conclusions.

*OE* is divided into four books. Book 1 is philosophical in nature, and lays down the general principles of a theory of eschatology. Books 2 and 3 outline the history of eschatological thought in the West, starting with its roots in late prophetic Judaism, through Jesus, early Christianity, the thought and influence of Joachim de Fiori (1135-1202), and Thomas Müntzer. Book 4 develops the thesis that in modern times eschatology becomes secularized, and reflected in the work of German Idealism, beginning with Lessing, and concluding in the opposed but complementary heritages of Marx and Kierkegaard.

The English translation is prefaced by David Ratmoko, who also translated the work. He provides a short biographical note and some interpretation of the work (xvi-xvii), discussing the similarities and differences between this work and Karl Löwith’s *Meaning in History* (1949). He also offers some parallels with Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* (xix), a book that Taubes quotes in his *Lectures on Paul* but which he is unlikely to have known in 1947. The English translation does not include the detailed ‘Analytical Register’ appended to the first edition of *OE*, and dropped from the second German edition.

*OE* is not strictly an essay in the history of ideas, even if it advances daring hypotheses about the origins and development of 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophical thought. Its focus is interpretative more than historical or philological; it is more a contribution towards a new philosophy of history than a reconstruction of the past. Hence the importance of Book 1, where Taubes develops a general theory of apocalypticism, one which subsumes both late Israelite prophetic Messianism, Christian chiliasm, Gnosticism, and even secularized philosophies of history (Lessing, Hegel and Marx).

Book 1 starts with a series of abstract discussions of the nature of history and time and of the general categories of eschatological thought. Taubes differentiates between a 'theistic transcendental', a 'pantheistic-immanent' and an 'atheistic-materialistic' thought. These are not strictly historical categories, as Taubes claims that the 'pantheistic-immanent' belongs to antiquity and to German Idealism (6), whereas the categories 'theistic' and 'atheistic' are represented in modernity by the complementary but competing philosophies of Kierkegaard and Marx (7). In both 'theistic' and 'atheistic' categories, reality is seen as a problem: Kierkegaard rejects the claim that reality can be 'pressed into a system', as does Marx (8). Both Kierkegaard and Marx require a 'miraculous *leap*': for Kierkegaard the leap is over history, whereas for Marx the leap is from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom (9).

Apocalyptic thought is not just any philosophy of history. Apocalyptic thought considers the *eschaton* or 'end of the days' to be 'not in some indeterminate future but entirely proximate' (10). This remark introduces what is possibly Taubes' most important observation, and one of the central tenets of his book: the idea that Apocalypticism follows a certain pattern. We do not find a systematic presentation of this theory in *OE*, but its components can be found scattered throughout the book:

The formulation of God's Kingdom on earth is ambiguous and the emphasis lies either in the beginning or the end. First, it is the idea of the coming future Kingdom of God which burst the established horizons of a cycle of life. A self-contained, mature system...is then burst open by the prophecy of God's Kingdom as *the ecclesia spiritualis*. But the inner light of an *ecclesia spiritualis* burns down the walls of external institutions. The inner light becomes a devouring flame and is transformed into a world on fire. This is how the final stage of the apocalyptic formula comes front and center. The proclamation of God's Kingdom presses toward its realization. This rhythm of proclamation and realization, of 'ecclesia spiritualis' and 'on earth' permeates eschatological events (85).

But then,

If the telos of the revolution collapses, so that the revolution is no longer the means but the sole creative principle, then the destructive desire

becomes a creative desire. If the revolution points to nothing beyond itself, it will end in a movement, dynamic in nature but leading into the abyss... A 'nihilistic revolution' does not pursue any goal..., but takes its aim from the 'movement' itself and, in so doing, comes close to satanic practice (10-11).

The section 'Spirit and History' and the remaining sections of Book 1 adopt a more conventional and historical approach, linking the beginnings of apocalyptic thinking to the history of Israel and the rejection of the mythical worldview of circular time (16). This historical view of the world is based on the ideas of creation and final redemption. However, it is in the idea of a 'turn back' and repentance that the internal connects with the external. The prophetic theology elaborated in the Babylonian exile interprets the exile as a repetition of the wilderness state that is the origin of the people of Israel. In exile, the God of the wilderness becomes the God of the world while also remaining the God of Israel. Israel is a 'theocracy', which Taubes describes as a form of belligerence against any social order, a community without authority, a form of anarchism. In the following section, apocalypticism is extended to the entire Aramaic speaking region. It is not clear whether Taubes claims that Israelite apocalypticism spread within the Aramaic realm, or if these are parallel phenomena (23). Furthermore, Aramaic Apocalypticism developed in a world which was already permeated by Hellenistic influences. This seems to confirm Taubes' idea that Apocalypticism and Gnosticism are related, i.e., that Gnosticism is one of the forms of Apocalyptic thought. 'Gnosis is the kindred spirit of apocalypticism...the boundaries between apocalypticism and Gnosis are, of course, fluid' (36). And, further, he observes that 'the apocalyptic, Gnostic God is not *beyond* this world...but *essentially* against this world' (39). Concluding the section, Taubes adds that '[t]he God beyond, the God of apocalypticism and Gnosis, is by nature eschatological because he challenges the world and promises new things...The original meaning of this expression becomes clear from the apocalyptic, Gnostic eschatology, and not from the static ontology of Hellenic, Hellenistic philosophy' (40).

Book 2 deals with the history of apocalyptic thought, from the prophet Daniel, through John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, early Christianity, Augustine, and it ends with the teachings of Joachim de Fiore. According to Taubes' interpretation, the *Book of Daniel*—a blend of cosmic and national eschatology—is the first fully developed exposition of Apocalyptic thought. When the Zealots adopted this vision, 'two world principles clashed in...tenacious, even desperate, struggle.... This may not have been their first confrontation but it was the first time they were fully aware of the nature of the conflict: the global empire of masters against a world revolution of the oppressed' (45).

This spiritual turmoil provides the background to an understanding of the historical figure of Jesus. Jesus' message is different from John's, but he still builds on the expectations that the people associate with the Kingdom of God, a mixture of national eschatology, Davidic messianic, and transcendent eschatology of a Kingdom of beyond.

This message is particularly good news for the poor, because it teaches repentance and the reversal of the social order. The declaration that the kingdom has come is also the proclamation of the end of the kingdom of this world, i.e., of the Roman Empire. With Paul the message of salvation becomes universal and transnational, offering a response to the spiritual malaise of the Roman Empire (64-5). But the main problem of the new Christian movement is the 'non-occurring event of the Parousia' (65). The later development of the Church shows the gradual fading away from the eschatological hopes (72) and their metamorphosis into an internal dimension. Gnosis is but one stage in this process, which develops into theology. Taubes singles out Origen (72-3), whose teachings live underground in Joachim and in Lessing (where they connect to German Idealism). The interiorization process is reinforced when the Roman Empire adopts Christianity as its official religion. Now the Empire is referred to as 'Holy' (77). Finally, with Augustine, individual eschatology emerges (80). According to Taubes, Augustine does not fight chiliasm; he reinterprets it in such a way that that it loses its eschatological vigor.

Book 3 deals with Joachim de Fiore, the Spirituals movement, and with Thomas Müntzer. Characteristically, the section dealing with Joachim carries the title 'Joachim's Prophecy and Hegelian Philosophy', preparing the ground for the more extensive treatment of Hegel in Book 4. Taubes stresses the influence of the Apocalypse of John, of which Joachim's theology can be seen as a historicization. Joachim develops a dialectics that, like the Trinity, has three periods which stand in a progressive relation. This is, according to Taubes, the essence of the Hegelian trilogy of 'thesis-antithesis-synthesis', which corresponds to the ages of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in Joachim. Taubes also traces back to Joachim the Hegelian concept of 'sublation' (*Aufhebung*), and the equating of the history of the spirit with world history (93). What is prospective prophecy in Joachim turns into retrospective philosophy of history in Hegel (96). Both the Spirituals and the Left Hegelians drew similar revolutionary consequences from the theories of Joachim and Hegel respectively. Taubes devotes eight pages to tracing the historical influence of Joachim's teachings, before concluding this section with a study of Müntzer. Following in the path of Ernst Bloch, Taubes traces the influence of Müntzer on Anabaptism and Pietism, connecting thereby the early Johannine speculations, through Joachim, with the emergence of modernity.

With modernity, eschatology becomes philosophical. This is the subject of Book 4, which covers more than two centuries in a terse succession. Taubes deals here with selected figures of the Renaissance and early modernity. A central figure in this treatment, besides Hegel, is Lessing. According to Taubes, Lessing is a transitional figure in the continuation and transformation of Joachim's teaching into a philosophy of history, connecting Joachim with Kant and with Hegel, and finally with the opposite but complementary philosophies of Marx and Kierkegaard.

After such a rollercoaster, Taubes does not relent, and in the short epilogue that concludes this work he develops speculative conclusions about the 'crisis that is still

shaking our present age' (192). This crisis represents a terminal point in the development of occidental history (it is difficult to know whether Taubes is speaking as an interpreter or a believer in this section). He adds that we are situated between the 'no longer' of the past, and the 'not yet' of a potential future, and that we need to face the decision to remain steadfast 'in the nothingness of the night, and thus remaining open to the first signs of the coming day' (193). About the nature of the 'coming day', it would appear that Taubes conceives of it in a fairly traditional religious and even mystical language:

If looking into the beauty of night, man does not mistake it but sees the darkness for what it is, if he recognizes his protective shells as mirages...if he perceives his insistence as dogged resistance...and unmasks his self-made measures for the lies and errors they are—then day will dawn in this human world (194).

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*From Cult to Culture (FCTC)* is a collection of twenty-two articles published by Taubes between 1949 and 1984. Most were originally published in English and are reprinted here in their original form. Other articles, originally published in German, are here translated for the first time. The editors of the English version follow closely the German edition in matters of organization, and they included the important 'Introduction to the German Edition' by Aleida Assman, Jan Assman, and Wolf-Daniel Hurtwich, which provides context and background. The American editors also follow the German edition in organizing the material in thematic rather than chronological order. By choosing a thematic rather than a chronological order for the essays, and by giving the book the title of one of the essays, the German editors and the English translator provide us with an interpretation of Taubes' thought which—while plausible—is not the only one. But in one respect at least they seem to diverge. Whereas the German editors subtitled the book '*Bausteine* [building blocks] *zu einer Kritik der historischen Vernunft*', the English renders 'Fragments towards a Critique of Historical Reason', thereby implying that Taubes did not produce a systematic exposition of his insights.

*FCTC* is divided into four parts. Part 1 deals with studies of law and messianism, and it includes Taubes' 1983 criticism of Gershon Scholem's concept of Jewish messianism, a paper Taubes presented at the World Congress of Jewish Studies in 1981. This section also includes studies of the philosophies of history of Martin Buber and Nachman Krochmal that date from the early 1960s. Part 2 brings together essays on Gnosticism and its manifestations in contemporary thought, and in the philosophy of Heidegger. Part 3 is composed of articles dealing with the theologies of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich. These articles were originally published in the mid-1950s, when Taubes was living and teaching in the US. Part 4 collects under the title 'Religion and Culture' a number of articles dealing with the nature and destiny of religion, and it includes the article that lends its name to the book. It includes as well two articles on psychoanalysis

and religion; the text of a 1968 presentation to the German Congress of Sociology which engages critically with the Frankfurt School and which shows the influence of the student movement on Taubes; and a few others on miscellaneous subjects.

The Preface to the English edition stresses the polemical nature of Taubes' thought. For Taubes, 'discussion is a form of thought' (xiii). The German editors amplify: 'the rule of thumb of his hermeneutic approach reads: "against whom is this text written" or "what key issue was this text written to conceal"' (xix). But he is less a practitioner of the hermeneutics of suspicion than someone who seems fascinated and (as many of his generation) frightened by the counter-discourses that he surveys.

'The Price of Messianism' is a critical engagement with the work of Gershom Scholem. Taubes challenges Scholem's claim that while in Judaism redemption takes place publicly and historically, in Christianity it takes place only in the interiority of each individual. Scholem's interpretation presumes an essential difference between Judaism and Christianity that Taubes rejects as dogmatic. Taubes claims that the separation between Judaism and Christianity that occurs in Paul's thought follows a Jewish logic, and should be considered an inner Jewish event. Moreover, the same event happened twice in Jewish history. Taubes claims also that there is an essential similarity between Paul and Shabbetai Zvi, as both are responding the frustration of messianic hopes. Taubes also dismisses Scholem's negative evaluation of Hasidism. Noting the negative effects of the messianic movement and particularly of its extremist Frankist branch, Taubes endorses the interiorization and spiritualization of the messianic hopes in Hasidism (8), along with their quietist implications. He concludes his lecture admonishing that

if one is to enter irrevocably into history, it is imperative to beware of the illusion that redemption (even in the beginnings of redemption, *athalta di geula*) happens on the stage of history. For every attempt to bring about the redemption on the level of history without a transfiguration of the messianic idea leads straight into the abyss (9).

This is an uncharacteristically concrete political statement, probably directed against sectors at the right of the Zionist movement which interpreted the 'Six Days War' in providentialist terms and Jewish settlement of the West Bank as a messianic event. This was not Scholem's position. He was a political moderate and Taubes is probably only making a general point here.

Of a totally different nature, and written 27 years earlier, 'From Cult to Culture' deals with Oskar Goldberg, a thinker immortalized by Thomas Mann in *Dr. Faustus* and today almost completely forgotten. It is probable that this article, published in *Partisans Review*, was intended to generate interest for the publication of a collection of Goldberg's writing in English translation, a project which did not materialize. It is not clear what Taubes' opinion was on the controversial theories of Goldberg, whom he probably had

met briefly in Zurich in the years before the war. It is likely similar to the one that he ascribes to Thomas Mann, of whom he says that

it speaks of the deep insight of Thomas Mann that he describes the process of reason's self-annihilation by analyzing Goldberg's philosophy of myth.... Goldberg's interpretation of the Pentateuch presents a serious challenge to the accepted theological interpretations of it, be it orthodox, conservative, or liberal (240).

In Goldberg's view, religion represents a degraded development from an original situation in which myth was experienced not as an allegory but as an actual reality, which connects at the biological level the members of a discrete community of people or clan living in a certain territory. This territory is needed in order to actualize its cult. The cult is needed for the covenant with the God or Gods and aims to control the forces of matter. Taubes notes that, for Goldberg, the cult does not have a spiritual dimension, but has a quasi-technical character. Indeed, after the decadence of the cult and its replacement by culture, man had to substitute technique for the ritualistic sacral act, and the State, or artificially organized society, for kin communities. In the domain of religion, this is represented by the shift from concrete national religions to abstract world religions. Goldberg claims that in the Old Testament we can find traces of these older cultic communities, and of the transition to religion as reflected in the prophetic literature. Taubes partially rejects Goldberg's exegesis of the Old Testament as being unfaithful to the varieties of strata found in the Pentateuch. What seems most valuable to Taubes is Goldberg's attempt to develop a theodicy reminiscent of the Jewish Gnostics of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Like Goldberg they also rejected the question of one or multiple gods, and put their emphasis instead on the dialectic between the present and the absent god (246).

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With the publication of these two books, together with the already published English translation of the *Political Theology of Paul*, most of Taubes' work is now available to the English reader. These primary works will be supplemented soon with more work in process. The historian Jerry Z. Muller is working on an intellectual biography of Taubes, and he was kind enough to share with me some unpublished material which helped me understand the life and ideas of Taubes. Across the ocean, Raphaël Lellouche, who translated *OE* into French and added a fascinating interpretative essay 'La flèche des amis: La guérilla herméneutique de Jacob Taubes' (Friends' Arrow: Jacob Taubes Guerrilla Hermeneutics) is also undertaking a similar project. Finally, the late Susan Taubes, Jacob Taubes' first wife, author of the *roman à clef*, *Divorcing* (1969) and an original scholar of the history of religion in her own right, is also attracting renewed interest.

**Michael Maidan**