



## Gottlob Frege's *völkisch* Political Theology

Stephen D'Arcy

Department of Philosophy, Huron University College, London, Canada

### ABSTRACT

Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) has been called 'the undisputed father of analytic philosophy' and 'the most important logician since Aristotle.' Even if his impact on philosophy were to extend no further than his decisive influence on leading early twentieth-century thinkers of the stature of Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Rudolf Carnap, that alone would assure him a notable place in the history of modern philosophy. Nevertheless, there are other areas of Frege's intellectual activity that have largely escaped the attention of his commentators. One of these is his seldom-noticed attempt late in life to write about political theology. In this reconstruction of Frege's view, based on a context-sensitive close reading of his fragmentary writing on theology, I document Frege's commitment to a highly politicized conception of theology's public role. This conception is infused with the ideology of Germany's Far-Right *völkisch* (pan-German ethnic-nationalist) movement and steeped in the political strife of early Weimar-era Germany. Frege's interest in theology was evidently rooted not so much in conventionally spiritual concerns as in the decidedly *innerweltlich* desire to help turn the tide in German politics in favor of the ultranationalist Far Right. His theology was, accordingly, a *political* theology of *völkisch*, antisemitic, and anti-socialist nationalism.

### Introduction

Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) has been called 'the undisputed father of analytic philosophy'<sup>1</sup> and 'the most important logician since Aristotle.'<sup>2</sup> Even if his impact on philosophy were to extend no further than his decisive influence on leading early twentieth-century thinkers of the stature of Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Rudolf Carnap, that alone would assure him a notable place in the history of modern philosophy. But his elucidation of the distinction between sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*), his pioneering, albeit ultimately unsuccessful attempt to reduce arithmetic to logic, and his decisive contribution to the emergence of quantificational logic, among numerous other

**CONTACT** Stephen D'Arcy  [sdarcy@huron.uwo.ca](mailto:sdarcy@huron.uwo.ca)  Department of Philosophy, Huron University College, London, Ontario, Canada

<sup>1</sup>Tyler Burge, 'Gottlob Frege: Some Forms of Influence,' in M. Beaney, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 356 (quotation marks around 'analytic philosophy' omitted).

<sup>2</sup>Rainer Born, 'Frege,' in S. Shanker, ed. *Philosophy of Science, Logic and Mathematics in the Twentieth Century: Routledge History of Philosophy*, Volume 9 (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 124.

innovations, elevate him to the highest level of importance in the history of the discipline.<sup>3</sup> These and other aspects of his thought have, quite properly, received careful and detailed study from scholars. Even so, there are other areas of Frege's intellectual activity that have largely escaped the attention of his commentators. One of these is his seldom-noticed attempt late in life to write about political theology. Many of those who study Frege's work with great care, including some experts on his work on philosophical semantics and mathematical logic, may be surprised to learn that Frege expressed himself at all on theological matters, beyond his relatively well-known critique of the ontological argument for the existence of God.<sup>4</sup> Yet he not only wrote substantively about political theology, he exhibited a passionate concern about it, developing distinctive positions on key questions and even expressing in 1924 the rather astonishing intention to write a work on the life of Jesus in order to help 'give rise to the founding of a religion,'<sup>5</sup> aiming ultimately (as I argue below) to promote the political aims of Germany's nationalist Far Right.

In what sense did Frege want to encourage 'the founding of a religion' in the mid-1920s? And why would a philosopher whose previously published works had all been strictly secular and devoid of religious interest<sup>6</sup> suddenly seem to attach great importance, in the setting of early Weimar-era Germany, to research on the life of Jesus? The answer to these questions can be established by means of a context-sensitive close reading of the relevant texts, but it is no easy matter. His writing on theology is fragmentary, and largely exterior to the body of works that most Frege scholars deem to merit detailed critical analysis. In this paper, I take a closer look at Frege's largely ignored fragments on theology and try to make sense of his late interest in the life of Jesus and the importance he attached to what he called the 'revival of religion.'<sup>7</sup> On this basis, I offer a critical reconstruction of Frege's political theology.

The proposal to 'reconstruct Frege's political theology' raises important questions, notably about how to understand the terms 'political theology' and 'reconstruction.' Frege does not use the expression 'political theology,' and explicitly recoils from the project of 'Social Theology,' as I document below. Even so, he does engage in explicit, extended discussion of matters falling under political theology, where that is understood to mean reflection, proceeding in the intellectual context of theology and engaging with

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<sup>3</sup>On the scale and scope Frege's influence on the development of analytic philosophy, see Michael Potter, *The Rise of Analytic Philosophy, 1879-1930: From Frege to Ramsey* (NY: Routledge, 2020), pp. 140-44. See also Burge, *op. cit.*, and Scott Soames, *The Analytic Tradition in Philosophy, Volume 1: The Founding Giants* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 3-4. For Frege's influence on the philosophy of language specifically, see Richard Kimberly Heck and Robert May, 'Frege's Contribution to Philosophy of Language,' in Lepore and Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), where the authors claim that Frege's contributions are 'so numerous and so fundamental that it is difficult to imagine the field without them' (p. 3).

<sup>4</sup>My interest here is in Frege's *political* theology, so I ignore his critique of the ontological argument for the existence of God. But see Gottlob Frege, *Foundations of Arithmetic* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1980), section §53, p. 65, and 'On Concept and Object,' in Gottlob Frege, *Posthumous Writings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), p. 101. See, too, Frege's Letter to Marty (28 August 1882), and his Letter to Peano (undated), both in Gottlob Frege, *Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 102 and p. 108, respectively.

<sup>5</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, p. 342. All citations from this work refer to the English translation: Gottlob Frege, 'Diary: Written by Professor Dr Gottlob Frege in the Time from 10 March to 9 April 1924,' edited and with commentary by Gottfried Gabriel and Wolfgang Kienzler, translated by Richard L. Mendelsohn, *Inquiry*, 1996, Volume 39: pp. 303-42. (The original German text was first published in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, Volume 42, Issue 6, 1994.)

<sup>6</sup>It is worth noting that Russell and Carnap – both figures of the secularist and antifascist Left – would have found nothing in Frege's publications, which they studied with care, pointing toward the views set out by Frege in the political-theological writing (only published decades after Frege's death) explored in this paper.

<sup>7</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

the work of theologians, that is thematically focused on (1) the place of political concepts like 'justice' and 'civic duty' in theological discourse and religious practice, and (2) the place of religious concepts like 'salvation' and 'religious obligation' in political discourse and political activity. By this standard, Frege fully qualifies as practicing political theology, as I show in detail below.

I also want to clarify upfront that when I use the term 'reconstruction' I do not have in mind a speculative hypothesis or educated guess about what Frege *might* have thought. (Exactly this sort of speculative guesswork has plagued the two book-length Frege biographies by Lothar Kreiser and Dale Jacquette.)<sup>8</sup> Rather, by 'reconstruction' I mean a careful sifting through the numerous fragments in his work that address theological issues (most of which are found in the posthumously published *Tagebuch* written in 1924), in order to piece them together and clarify how, when placed in their proper social and intellectual contexts, they hang together as a more or less coherent whole, even though this overall political-theological position is nowhere given a sustained, detailed articulation by him. By drawing together his fragmentary written comments, elucidating the religious and political contexts from which they emerged and with which they engage, and elaborating their theological significance, I hope to reveal a more orderly, structured, and coherent conception than is discernible to the casual reader.

In the following reconstruction I document Frege's commitment to a highly politicized conception of theology's public role. His conception is infused with the ideology of Germany's Far-Right *völkisch*<sup>9</sup> (pan-German ethnic-nationalist) movement and steeped in the political strife of early Weimar-era Germany. In particular, Frege's interest in political theology is closely bound up with his enthusiastic support for the ultranationalist Deutschvölkische Freiheitspartei (DVFP),<sup>10</sup> which was at the time formally aligned with Hitler's Nazi Party (NSDAP),<sup>11</sup> and which gave voice to Frege's own intense antisemitism. It is linked, too, to his hostility to the then-Marxist party that had weathered intense repression to become the largest political party in Germany, the

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<sup>8</sup>See Lothar Kreiser, *Gottlob Frege: Leben – Werk – Zeit* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2001), and Dale Jacquette, *Frege: A Philosophical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>9</sup>The term *völkisch* (as used in nationalist discourse in early-20th century Germany) is notoriously difficult to translate, although it is sometimes rendered in English as 'nationalist,' 'ethnic nationalist,' or even 'racist.' The *völkisch* movement emerged as a cultural current in Germany in the late-19th century, idealizing 'Germanic' or 'Aryan' traditions, insisting on Germany's cultural distinctiveness, and promoting an agenda of 'national resurgence' on the basis of conservative ethnic nationalism, overlapping extensively with political antisemitism. After the First World War, the *völkisch* movement aligned itself increasingly with Far-Right political parties like the NSDAP (Nazis) and the DVFP (Deutschvölkische Freiheitspartei), both of which claimed to be *völkisch* parties. For more on this, see David Jablonsky, *The Nazi Party in Dissolution* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1989), pp. 2-4. For a view of the relation between the *völkisch* movement and fascism that emphasizes the religious dimension of the *völkisch* 'milieu,' see Karla Poewe, *New Religions and the Nazis* (NY: Routledge, 2006), and Karla Poewe and Irving Hexham, 'The Völkisch Modernist Beginnings of National Socialism: Its Intrusion into the Church and its Antisemitic Consequence,' *Religion Compass*, 3/4 (2009), pp. 676-797. But the relatively secular-political dimension of the movement is also important, as emphasized by Stefanie Schrader, 'Völkische Weltanschauung on the Back Benches: The Deutschvölkische Freiheitspartei and the Reichstag of the Weimar Republic,' in Karcher and Kjøstvedt, (eds.), *Movements and Ideas of the Extreme Right in Europe: Positions and Continuities* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 43-56, and Guy Tourlaimain, *Völkisch Writers and National Socialism* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014).

<sup>10</sup>See Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 334. On the DVFP, see Reimer Wulff, *Die Deutschvölkische Freiheitspartei, 1922–1928* (Dissertation, University of Marburg, 1968), Stefanie Schrader, *op. cit.*, and Ilya Braverman, *Failed Nazism: The Rise and Fall of the Deutschvölkische Freiheitspartei, 1919–1928* (MA Thesis, Kent State University, 1967).

<sup>11</sup>On the DVFP/NSDAP alliance, see Volker Ullrich, *Hitler: Ascent, 1889–1939* (NY: Knopf, 2016), pp. 170-72. The alliance was 'formal' in the sense that in late February 1924, about a month before Frege started work on the *Tagebuch*, the two parties circulated a written agreement spelling out the terms of the bloc they had formed for the May 1924 Reichstag election. (The document is reproduced in David Jablonsky, *op. cit.*, p. 175).

Social-Democratic Party. Frege described the socialist movement as a ‘cancer,’ and a ‘dangerous illness’ that ‘had infected Germany,’ and he advocated ‘healing it ... by fire,’<sup>12</sup> that is, by means of ‘stern remedies’<sup>13</sup> and ‘harsh methods’<sup>14</sup> of repression. In this paper, I attempt to show that Frege’s interest in theology was rooted not so much in conventionally spiritual concerns as in the decidedly *innerweltlich* desire to help turn the tide in German politics in favor of the ultranationalist Far Right. His theology was, I claim, a *political* theology of *völkisch*, antisemitic, and anti-socialist nationalism.

The core of the *völkisch* political theology developed by Frege in the early 1920s can be reconstructed as a cluster of three complex ideas, to each of which I devote a section in what follows. Frege’s first idea (Section I) was that, reeling from its defeat in the First World War and subject to the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles, German society stood in dire need of a ‘statesman’ or great leader, described by Frege in messianic-eschatological terms, as a saviour-figure to come, who would ‘sweep away the people’ and lead the nation toward ‘deliverance’ in the context of an anticipated confrontation in which the forces of good would defeat the forces of evil. Frege’s second idea (Section II) was that, because the (*völkisch*-nationalist) statesman’s appeal to national unity and the nobility of self-sacrifice was at a disadvantage when trying to compete with the appeal of the (Social-Democratic) ‘demagogue’ to class antagonism and the ‘wretched’ motive of economic gain, it was the theologian’s duty to support the statesman against the demagogue by championing the ideal of self-sacrifice for the unity and welfare of the Volk against the corrupting lure of self-interest. Finally, his third complex idea (Section III) was that, in contrast to the directly political advocacy pursued by the Christian-Social theologians, like Adolf Stoecker, who Frege accused of conflating religious duties with legal obligations in a way that was insensitive to the specificity of politics in contrast to religion, it would be clarifying to take the prototype of noble self-sacrifice in Christian messianic eschatology, Jesus of Nazareth, and retell his life story as a vindication of ‘the noble side’ of humanity, in order thereby to encourage modern Germans, especially workers, to reject the appeals to self-interest and class antagonism put forward by Social Democracy. From these three complicated ideas, Frege’s core project in political theology took shape. His project – never carried out, but sketched by him a year before his death in 1925 – was to use the life of Jesus narrative, understood in messianic-eschatological terms, to promote popular appreciation of the nobility of self-sacrifice for the good of the nation (that is, the ethnic-German ‘Volk,’ not the country of Germany *per se*), and in this way to lend support to the emergence of an anticipated *völkisch*-nationalist great leader against the (supposedly) demagogic appeals to class antagonism that were typical of what he considered to be the ‘cancer’ of Social Democracy in the early Weimar Republic.

### **The messianic-eschatological anticipation of a saviour**

In taking up political theology, Frege makes it clear that his aim is to spark a religious revival, one that would address the needs of the moment in early Weimar-era Germany. He begins by laying out the rationale for this project:

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<sup>12</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

<sup>13</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

<sup>14</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

We urgently need a revival of religion. The Lutheran church is to some extent hardened in orthodoxy . . . [I]ndeed, even where orthodoxy does not prevail, the effectiveness of the parson is impeded by dogma . . . It is hardly to be expected that the civil- or church-appointed clerics will change themselves. We must have prophets proclaim something new to come that really is something old, namely just the old religion of Jesus himself.<sup>15</sup>

And then, on this basis, he lays out some *desiderata* for this effort.

The life of Jesus must be told according to the results of the German scholarly research. To be sure, because of the nature of this project, one cannot rule out errors completely, but the intention of the narrator must be directed to the purest truth . . . To make the life and work of Jesus intelligible, it will be necessary to portray the conditions and religious aspirations of the Jews at the time of Jesus; and to that end, the development of these conditions and aspirations under the influence of the Persian religion and the Hellenes (Maccabees) will have to be treated, with the exception of all that is not really necessary for the understanding of these things . . . The way [*völkisch* novelist] Gustav Frenssen describes the life of the saviour does not really suit my purposes, because therein fiction and truth are mixed together. I want truth and nothing but the truth, at least in the intention of the narrator. A life of Jesus, as I have it in my mind, should, I think, give rise to the founding of a religion without that being obvious as the intention.<sup>16</sup>

Here, Frege makes some things fully clear, but obviously leaves a great deal for us, as readers, to decipher. What comes through clearly are these five points: first, that Frege at least seriously entertained the prospect of writing a work on the life of Jesus; second, that he anticipated that his own account of Jesus would deviate from orthodox Lutheran theological positions; third, that it should be based on ‘results of the German scholarly research,’ presumably the so-called ‘First Quest’ research on the historical Jesus, usually seen as stretching from Reimarus in the late 1700s to Schweitzer in the early 1900s<sup>17</sup>; fourth, that it would highlight ‘the conditions and religious aspirations of the Jews at the time of Jesus,’ and in this context address ‘the influence of the Persian religion and the Hellenes (Maccabees),’ a terse formulation that needs to be unpacked; and finally, fifth, that he had hoped the effect of the project would be to ‘give rise to the founding of a religion,’ albeit one that ultimately equates to ‘the old religion of Jesus himself.’ This obviously leaves a lot of details about Frege’s aims unclear. Even so, these brief comments – and other passages in the *Tagebuch* and elsewhere – are suggestive enough, and in my view specific enough, to justify making an attempt to reconstruct the core of Frege’s political theology and to locate it in relation to his *völkisch*, Far-Right political aims, which are so central to the rest of the *Tagebuch*.

The starting point of Frege’s political analysis of the situation of Germany in the wake of its comprehensive defeat in the First World War was that the post-bellum period was ‘the time of the deepest misfortune of our fatherland.’<sup>18</sup> By the time he wrote the *Tagebuch* in 1924, Germany had been subjected for almost five years to the unfavorable terms

<sup>15</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, pp. 340-41.

<sup>16</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, pp. 341-42.

<sup>17</sup>See Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, translated by W. Montgomery (New York: A. and C. Black, 1910). It was Schweitzer’s book, still widely read today, that established this image of the First Quest, originating with Reimarus and culminating in Schweitzer’s own announcement that the Quest had exhausted itself and ended in failure. I discuss Reimarus later in this paper, but note that, although he did not really initiate historical Jesus research, he did come to be widely regarded as a pivotal early reference point in the discourse and learning process that historical theologians today call ‘the First Quest,’ and I accept that view here.

<sup>18</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

of the Treaty of Versailles, which Frege saw as entrenching French domination. According to his friend and colleague at the University of Jena, Robert Haußner, Frege ‘flatly hated Social Democracy and any other democracy, which [he believed] we had only to thank for the unfortunate end of the war and the ignominious peace of Versailles.’<sup>19</sup> In the *Tagebuch*, Frege states that he regarded the collapse of the monarchy, in the form of the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II and the consequent ascension to power of a socialist President, to have brought ‘humiliation’ and ‘distress’ in its wake.<sup>20</sup> Deeply alienated from the egalitarianism of the new Republican order, with its democratic political system and its extension (formally, at least) of equal civil rights to socialists, women, and Jews, all of which he explicitly opposed<sup>21</sup> during the Weimar years, Frege saw no place in the present for his own politics. ‘I don’t feel qualified to make proposals for the politics of the moment,’ he wrote.<sup>22</sup> This estrangement from the politics of post-War Germany meant, on the one hand, that he looked back with nostalgia to the past, namely, to what he saw as the golden age of ‘Bismarck and the old Kaiser [Wilhelm I], who with a special tender lustre stands in the starry sky of [the dethroned royal family] the Hohenzollerns.’<sup>23</sup> It also meant, on the other hand, that Frege looked forward with anticipation to ‘a more distant future, when [Germany] will be set free from France’s pressure ...’<sup>24</sup> More specifically, he looked forward to the emergence, in the coming years, of a new leader, on a par with his hero, Otto von Bismarck, who had served as the Chancellor of the German Reich from its founding in 1871 until 1890. This new leader to come, Frege hoped, could spearhead a revitalization of German society and throw off the yoke (as Frege saw it) of French political domination and cultural hegemony.<sup>25</sup>

On the face of it, these concerns, typical of Germany’s nationalist Right in the early Weimar years,<sup>26</sup> do not seem to be particularly relevant to theology or religion generally, much less to the life of Jesus specifically. Indeed, Frege calls the leader to come, not ‘the Messiah,’ but ‘the Statesman.’ However, a closer look reveals a remarkable point of

<sup>19</sup>Robert Haußner, quoted in Gottfried Gabriel and Wolfgang Kienzler’s ‘Preface’ to Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 306.

<sup>20</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

<sup>21</sup>In 1918, Frege expressed opposition to voting rights for women in his draft election law, *Vorschläge für ein Wahlgesetz* (self-published by Frege in bound-typescript format, 1918), pp. 23–24. In 1924, in the *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, he expressed his firm opposition to equal civil rights for socialists (pp. 332–33) and Jews (p. 336). I critically analyze the arguments advanced by Frege for these positions in Stephen D’Arcy, ‘The Arbitrariness Problem in Regimes of Civic Exclusion: Frege’s Political Thought’ (Paper presented to the Philosophy Department Colloquium, Huron University College, 22 March 2018). Although Frege supported elections, to some extent, and drafted a model election law and circulated it to prominent public officials, he was by no means a democrat. Under his proposed law, the vast majority of German adults would be denied the right to vote, notably, all women, convicted criminals, anyone too disabled to serve in the military, any recent recipient of alms, anyone who had never been married, or anyone currently enlisted in the military. These exclusions are duly noted by Paul Harrenstein, Marie-Louise Lackner, and Martin Lackner, in their fine article, ‘A Mathematical Analysis of an Election System Proposed by Gottlob Frege,’ *Erkenntnis* (2020), p. 3. Even so, they attribute to Frege a ‘concern for the representation of minorities’ and refer to ‘Frege’s high ambition that no voter’s vote be lost.’ These are not mistakes, because Frege does want votes of the *enfranchised minority* to be counted fairly, such that ‘no voter’s vote be lost,’ but we ought not to lose sight of the fact that Frege wants to bar most Germans from voting at all.

<sup>22</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

<sup>23</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

<sup>24</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

<sup>25</sup>Frege underlined the political hegemony of France in his *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, but he emphasized the cultural hegemony of France in both the *Tagebuch* and the *Vorschläge für ein Wahlgesetz*, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup>See Richard Frankel, *Bismarck’s Shadow: The Cult of Leadership and the Transformation of the German Right, 1898–1945* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005); Robert Gerwarth, *The Bismarck Myth: Weimar Germany and the Legacy of the Iron Chancellor* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005).

intersection between Frege's hostility to the Weimar Republic and his keen interest in religious 'revival' and the life of Jesus. What is striking, in the context of my aim to reconstruct the core of Frege's political theology from its fragmentary textual record is that, when expressing his *political* convictions about the predicament of Weimar-era Germany, he repeatedly invokes the *theological* resources of an eschatological idiom, and more specifically a messianic-eschatological idiom. He writes about the politics of his day, in short, in a manner that mimics the terminology and narrative framework typical of accounts of the life of Jesus.<sup>27</sup>

Although terms like 'messianic' and 'eschatological' are used inconsistently in both religious studies and theological discourse, I adopt here the convention of treating *eschatology* as an umbrella term for religious anticipations of a rupture between the present age and some future time, after a decisive confrontation between the forces of good and evil which remakes the world, ultimately for the better. When these anticipations make reference to an inspired revelation, like a dream or a vision, foretelling of a coming cataclysm as the occasion for a divine intervention on behalf of the forces of good and against the forces of evil, I call that form of eschatology *apocalyptic*. When the anticipations are oriented instead toward the emergence of a heroic saviour on earth, to lead the down-trodden to a new kingdom (*Reich*) that would free them from their evil oppressors, I call that eschatology *messianic*. Clearly, an eschatological narrative can be both messianic and apocalyptic, since these are by no means mutually exclusive, either in principle or in common practice. In Frege's invocation of an eschatological idiom, the emphasis is on the messianic dimension, wedded as he is to the idea that Germany needs to find a great leader, who will 'sweep away the people' and 'enjoy universal confidence.'<sup>28</sup> Even so, his anticipation of 'a warlike collision some day,' in which 'the sons and the grandsons of the now rising young Germans' will be called upon 'to perform heroic deeds,'<sup>29</sup> arguably bears some of the marks of an apocalyptic conception, to the extent that he adopts a visionary posture in these remarks.

Corresponding to his messianic perspective, and his sense of being unable to address the politics of the present, Frege seems to position himself (and presumably his *völkisch* co-thinkers) in the prophet role, as a voice in the wilderness anticipating the emergence of a new leader to liberate Germany. 'We must have prophets proclaim something new to come,' Frege says.<sup>30</sup> After mentioning his anticipation of 'a more distant future, when we will be set free,' Frege turns his attention to the leader-figure whose emergence he foresees: 'we are in need of a man who sees not only the present, but who has a plan in mind how to free Germany from the French pressure. He must enjoy universal confidence. But where is such a man?'<sup>31</sup> In the past, Frege claims, Bismarck was 'such a man,' someone who tried to save Germany and to free the Germans. But Bismarck's admonitions were ignored. 'Did they [Germans under Bismarck] know how well off they were? No, many of them have struggled like stubborn children against taking the path, the path of salvation, down which Bismarck and his revered Lord wanted to lead them.'<sup>32</sup> Still, Frege urges the

<sup>27</sup>Richard H. Hiers, *The Kingdom of God in the Synoptic Tradition* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1970), pp. 3-4, offers a vivid and concise summary of Jewish eschatology at the time of Jesus.

<sup>28</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, pp. 324, 323.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 341.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 323.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 318.

young people of Germany to prepare for a future confrontation: ‘The poor fatherland expects from you deliverance from its humiliation and its distress.’<sup>33</sup> Anticipating a ‘a warlike collision some day’ in Europe, Frege expresses his hope that Germany will be ready: ‘Hopefully, the situation in Germany will be cleared up by then. On this account we must hope that the collision will yet be postponed,’ since Weimar-era Germany he deemed to be weak and divided.<sup>34</sup> Frege looked forward, however, to ‘the establishment of a strong Kingdom [*Reich*],’ in the future.<sup>35</sup> He speaks, in this connection, of ‘the revelations of (His Excellency) Ludendorff,’ as a guide to the prospects for a national resurgence.<sup>36</sup> This vocabulary – prophets proclaiming something new to come, an impending collision that will remake the world, the expectation of a future charismatic leader to sweep the people away and to point out the path toward salvation, the hopes for a future deliverance from the present distress, culminating in the establishment of a new Kingdom, in which the nation will at last be free again – this mode of expression bears an unmistakable resemblance to the familiar idiom of messianic eschatology.

This insistent pattern of recourse throughout the political analysis of the *Tagebuch* to a messianic-eschatological idiom could perhaps be read as nothing more than a rhetorical strategy of reliance on a system of resonant metaphors, drawing on a vocabulary uniquely well-suited to describing Germany’s state of deep social crisis, a situation in which all sides were anticipating a future of sweeping social change and fierce social confrontation. On this ‘deflationary’ view, these many passages would be seen, not as committing Frege to a *theological* position, eschatological or otherwise, but simply as the adoption by a political thinker<sup>37</sup> of a quasi-theological or para-theological vocabulary to express views that were *secular-political*, not theological. That would probably be the most plausible interpretation of Frege’s recourse to the rhetoric of eschatology, had he not followed up this analysis of Germany’s desperate need for a saviour with an explicit formulation of a plan to stimulate ‘the founding of a religion’ on the basis of a proposed retelling of the life of Jesus. But since he did express this plan, it would strain credulity to claim that his messianic political rhetoric bore no relation to his interest in the contemporary relevance, in early Weimar-era Germany, of the life of Jesus narrative. Frege’s passionate concern, also expressed in the *Tagebuch*, about what he saw as the wrong-headedness of the political strategy of the ‘Christian-Social’ theologians of his day, who themselves underlined the relevance of the life of Jesus to contemporary politics (a topic to which I return in Section III), makes this convergence of theological and political messianism seem all the more readily intelligible.

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<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 318.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 331, translation modified slightly.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 333.

<sup>37</sup>Frege is not usually described as a ‘political thinker.’ However, in his letter to Hugo Dingler (17 November 1918), Frege wrote: ‘I am also concerned with matters that fall into the area of politics and political economy, as for example with proposals for an election law ... Here I have of course stepped onto ground outside the field of my usual endeavours.’ See Frege, *Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence*, *op. cit.*, p. 30. Frege’s writings on issues of public policy and constitutional law (in the *Tagebuch*), his draft legislation (in the *Vorschläge*), and his writing on political theology, jointly add up to something that can only be called ‘Frege’s political thought.’



## The theologian's duty to oppose demagoguery

Frege presents his religious turn as a response to 'an urgent need' in Germany at the time.<sup>38</sup> The 'need' in question is to remedy a defect he finds in German politics: the past failure to embrace Bismarck when the opportunity arose, and the prospect of a parallel failure to embrace the next great statesman that he expected to come. He writes: 'Bismarck was not able to ward off the Social Democratic danger because he lacked the necessary support in the Reichstag as well as with the [Kaiser]. Nation and Ruler failed.'<sup>39</sup> What worries Frege is that this same failure will dampen enthusiasm for the next great leader. And religious enthusiasm, enabling the new political 'saviour' to 'sweep away the people,' is what can break the deadlock between the coming great leader, 'the statesman,' and his antagonist, 'the demagogue.'

Although this statesman/demagogue dichotomy which Frege invokes originates in pre-Christian Greek antiquity,<sup>40</sup> the demagogue is construed by Frege in specifically Christian-eschatological terms, so that this is at least implicitly analogous to the classical Christ/Antichrist pairing. If the statesman is arguably a Christ-like figure, promising salvation and a new Kingdom (*Reich*), the demagogue recalls the figure of the Antichrist, an implacable adversary, cloaked in a surface pretence of devotion to justice, but on a kind of world-historic collision course with the anticipated statesman. The need for a vigorous Christianity is thus a corollary of the gravity and potency of the threat posed by the demonic demagogue. Frege goes so far as to depict the basis for the demagogue's success, namely, the seductive promise of material gain, as wielding influence through the work of 'devils.' Remarkably, Frege uses the word 'devil' over 20 times in the *Tagebuch*, and always in a clearly religious, yet politically charged way. Frege understands 'devils,' not in a metaphysical mode, as supernatural forces, but naturalistically, as harmful psychological weaknesses. Frege's devils are self-destructive compulsions that undermine the autonomy and good judgment of agents who fall into their grip. Aided by 'stupidity,' which is 'the night in which devilish works succeed best,' these devils play into the hands of the demagogue, who panders to the selfish and short-sighted impulses of workers.<sup>41</sup> In particular, these devils foster class antagonism, which in turn undermines nationalistic sentiments and the unity of the Volk. Frege writes:

Two devils have greatly harmed us by poisoning the relation between employers and employees: here the devil of pride, there the devil of envy. They are not stupid these devils, but very cunning; however, they make those possessed by them stupid, so that, misjudging their own interests, they harm themselves in a blind fury for they seem determined to struggle with one another more violently.<sup>42</sup>

Politically, in Frege's picture, the fundamental spiritual contest between Christianity's call for sacrifice, on the one side, and the 'devilish' stimulation of self-interest and class antagonism, on the other side, is expressed as a clash between two forms of politics:

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<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 334-35.

<sup>40</sup>The concepts certainly appear in Plato and Aristotle, but Melissa Lane, in 'The Origins of the Statesman-Demagogue Distinction in and after Ancient Athens,' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 73:2 (2012), pp. 179-200, argues convincingly that this was not thematised as a contrasting (virtue-vice) pair until Plutarch in the 1st century CE.

<sup>41</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 310.

statesmanship (associated by Frege with nationalism and Volk-unity) and demagoguery (associated by Frege with socialism and class antagonism).

Frege had famously touched upon the matter of demagoguery in his 1892 essay, 'On Sense and Reference.'<sup>43</sup> There, it was the very project of democracy as such, the project of discerning or attempting to forge a popular will, that Frege deemed to be, if not inherently demagogical, at least susceptible to what he called 'demagogic abuse.' The problem with the idea of 'the will of the people,' he claimed, is that 'it is easy to establish that there is at any rate no generally accepted reference for this expression,' thus enabling the term to be used to manipulate or deceive.<sup>44</sup> But over three decades later, in the *Tagebuch*, he returns to the topic and develops a new, more specific conception of demagoguery. He does so largely by elaborating on the contrast between the statesman and the demagogue. For Frege, this distinction maps onto the ethical distinction between noble and base, in a particular way:

Demagogues without any German sentiment, and most also with un-German parentage, dazzled before the workers a fair improvement of their economic situation and captured many for their goals in this way. Such demagogues do not believe in *the nobility of men* and seek to seize them through *their wretched and vulgar side*. They completely lack a sense of veracity.<sup>45</sup>

The statesman, on the contrary, appeals to the noble side of people, to their 'noble motives,' and opposes the influence of base impulses. 'Only one who can vigorously resist destructive tendencies in a people [*Volk*] is a true statesman.'<sup>46</sup> But note that 'destructive tendencies' in the *Tagebuch* can be used interchangeably with 'devils,' so when he counterposes the statesman to 'destructive tendencies,' it is yet another invocation of eschatological motifs, setting up a coming confrontation between the future statesman and the 'devils' promoting socialism and class antagonism.

At first glance, it may seem that Frege is depicting the demagogue as out of touch with or insensitive to something noble in humankind, and thus as likely to fail. But he actually takes the opposite view, that the statesman is at a disadvantage, because the cluster of destructive impulses to which the demagogue appeals, the 'wretched and vulgar side' of people, is actually too strong to allow the statesman's comparatively ineffectual appeals to 'noble sentiments' to win the day. Indeed, the disadvantage at which the statesman stands explains the rise of Social Democracy in Germany, Frege claims, since 'Bismarck's successors' made the mistake of trying 'to engage in a contest with [the demagogues] for popularity.'<sup>47</sup> Frege elaborates:

So [the Social Democrats] had easy work, for the painting of lustrous pictures of the future does not cost much. And all workers were taken in by them? It is hard for me to believe it, for really only especially stupid ones could be taken in, or those whose avarice had almost completely suffocated their noble motives . . . . The statesmen, so it seems, tried now to compete with the demagogues as to who could promise the workers greater prosperity.

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<sup>43</sup>Frege, 'On Sense and Reference,' in Geach and Black (eds.), *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, 3rd Edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 70

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 70. For a consideration of the political issues on Frege's mind while writing that text, see Göran Sundholm, 'Frege, August Bebel and the Return of Alsace-Lorraine: The dating of the distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*,' *History and Philosophy of Logic*, 22:2 (2001).

<sup>45</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 335, emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 335.

The prospects for the statesmen of being victorious in this race were from the beginning microscopically small, and the victory of the demagogues only strengthened their supremacy.<sup>48</sup>

In short, Frege claims that the Social Democrats gained a special advantage because their appeals, in the form of promises of post-capitalist prosperity, notably higher wages and other material advantages for workers, aligned with powerful 'destructive' impulses, the 'envy' and 'avarice' of workers, and thus motivated workers to support the anti-capitalist project of the Left. By contrast, the statesman can only offer *sacrifices* to the working class, as Frege admits. The freedom promised by Frege's imagined statesman to come was conceived in a distinctly *völkisch*, ultranationalist manner. It was bluntly formulated in a public declaration to which Frege (and about three thousand other academics across Germany) agreed to endorse as a co-signatory, the *Erklärung der Hochschullehrer des Deutschen Reiches* (1914). Freedom, according to Frege and his co-signatories, is a kind of 'manliness, loyalty, [and] courage to sacrifice [*Opfermut*],' by virtue of which one 'subordinates [*unterordnet*] oneself willingly to the whole.'<sup>49</sup> Frege wrote the *Tagebuch* ten years after signing the *Erklärung*, but by then he was, if anything, more committed than ever to this way of thinking about freedom. At the time, Adolf Hitler, Erich Ludendorff, and Friedrich Weber – the three lead organizers of the failed Beer Hall Putsch, a fascist coup attempt in Bavaria on 9 November 1923 – were all on trial for treason, and Frege commented sympathetically on the views publicly expressed by each of these Far-Right politicians while the trial was underway. In that context, he explicitly asserted his agreement with a particular remark made by Friedrich Weber (1892-1954), jailed leader of the Oberland Freikorps militia, confirming the starkly illiberal character of Frege's understanding of 'German freedom.' Weber stated, and Frege then expressly agreed, that 'a national state [must] be created which can gather together the power of the whole nation for the establishment of a strong, uniformly integrated Reich,' so that 'a genuine authority, which is independent of the influence of parties, of corporations and class antagonisms' can emerge, 'whose topmost principle is service to the nation ...'<sup>50</sup>

This political ideal, service to the nation as it is led by an authoritarian ethno-state, is a far cry from the egalitarian post-capitalist ideal offered to workers by the socialists, and Frege clearly worries that 'willing subordination to the whole' and 'service to the nation' suffer from a motivational deficit, because they cannot compete with the 'devils' of avarice and envy in shaping the behavior of workers. Frege thus depicts German politics as an asymmetric clash between the (nationalist) statesman and the (socialist) demagogue, mapping onto the fight between the 'noble' and the 'wretched' sides of humanity, where the latter is motivationally stronger than the former. This, he strongly implies, establishes a standing problem for the very project of anticipating a messianic saviour-figure in the form of a coming statesman, to 'sweep away' the people in a wave of nationalist enthusiasm. The problem, plainly, is that most of the enthusiasm will go in the opposite direction, as indeed it had done in election after election in Germany since 1890,

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>49</sup>*Erklärung der Hochschullehrer des Deutschen Reiches* (Berlin: Kaiser-Wilhelm-Dank, 1914), p. 1, my translation.

<sup>50</sup>Friedrich Weber (in *Deutschlands Erneuerung*, April 1924, p. 221), quoted and translated in Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 331, editorial note 47. Frege's explicit endorsement of Weber's statement appears on the same page.

which saw Social Democratic candidates attracting more votes than those of any other party, certainly far more votes than *völkisch* parties like the DVFP and its alliance partner, the NSDAP, which jointly mustered only single-digit percentages of the vote in Reichstag elections prior to the Nazi breakthrough that came in the late 1920s, after Frege's death.

I turn now to Frege's critique of the Christian-Social theologians, a matter that I believe forms the background necessary for understanding his hopes for a *völkisch* retelling of the life of Jesus.

### From objecting to christian-social theology to retelling the life of Jesus

Frege mentions very few theologians by name in the *Tagebuch* or in any of his writings. Indeed, on one rare but relatively high-profile occasion when Frege directly quotes a theologian, in the *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*, by recalling the question posed by one of the most influential German historical theologians of the nineteenth century, David F. Strauss, 'Are we still Christians?',<sup>51</sup> he pointedly declines to mention who he is quoting. Similarly, when he develops his critique of the ontological argument for the existence of God, associated with Anselm (as well as Descartes and others), Frege neither cites nor mentions any source for the broadly theological argument he debunks. But the one theologian that Frege *does* mention by name in his writings, Adolf Stoecker, was a leading figure in a movement within nationalist German theology, known as the 'Christian-Social' movement.

The Christian-Social movement to which Stoecker belonged was a late-19th, early-20th century development in German Protestantism. At its core was the idea that the Church had to reposition itself in relation to the 'social question,' most notably by becoming an advocate for redressing the grievances of workers. The aim of this repositioning was to compete more effectively with Social Democracy for relevance to and leadership over the German working class. Nationalist pastors and theologians noted with growing alarm in the last decades of the nineteenth century that the Social Democratic Party of Germany had begun to displace the Church's leading role in 'civil society,' winning over millions of workers to its message of egalitarianism, anti-capitalism, internationalism, and atheism. To restore the Church's influence, and to bolster support for nationalism and Protestantism among the working class, a revitalized, 'social' Christianity had to be developed and popularized. This, in short, was the mission of the Christian-Social movement. In the *Tagebuch*, Frege explains his understanding of the movement's project:

Before the [1914-18] war theologians too troubled themselves about the improvement of the economic conditions of poor employees ... They tried to exert moral pressure on wealthy employers. With this in mind, they wanted to influence public opinion through their Protestant-Social Congresses and similar events, which usually bore the name Christian-Social. Whenever employers and employees differed with regard to the fixing of wages or working hours, they believed that they must – being obliged to do so by their Christianity – in general come to the aid of the employees, as the poor, against the employers, as the rich.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup>Frege, *Basic Laws of Arithmetic* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), Volume II [originally published 1903], §56. See David Strauss, *The Old Faith and the New*, translated from the 6<sup>th</sup> edition by Mathilde Blind (NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1873), p. 13.

<sup>52</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, pp. 309-10.

As Frege notes in this passage, an important institutional expression of the movement was the Protestant-Social Congress, founded in 1890, which met annually until 1914, when it was dissolved in the context of the War.<sup>53</sup> The founding of the Congress in 1890 reflected and responded to a shift in that year in the policy of the German state toward its longstanding adversary, Social Democracy. Bismarck's policy of suppression of socialism by means of the 'Anti-Socialist Laws' was proving completely ineffective, as the movement continued to grow at a rapid pace, and Kaiser Wilhelm II opted for a change in strategy, namely, an attempt at a conservative-nationalist cooptation of Social-Democratic policy proposals. Historian Rita Aldenhoff explains:

In place of the repression of the Social Democratic movement, increased efforts were now to be made to find solutions to social problems, particularly those of the industrial workforce, through changes in social policy. The signal for these changes was given in the Kaiser's February [1890] proclamations on social policy, which contained promises of stronger national measures for the protection of workers, as well as announcing an international conference on workers' welfare.<sup>54</sup>

Frege, too, observed this shift in the Kaiser's policy, deeming it to be a fateful mistake, and he attributed it to the influence of Adolf Stoecker in particular: 'The theologian Stoecker, of whom the Kaiser was of the opinion that there was something of a Luther in him, may also have influenced the Kaiser in a socialist direction,' Frege says in the *Tagebuch*, making no effort to conceal his disdain.<sup>55</sup>

Although Frege shared with the Christian-Social theologians the *aim* of weakening the influence of Social Democracy over Germany's working class, by winning over workers to Christian piety and German nationalism, he found their *approach* to this task to be deplorable.

[W]hen they notice disagreement between employers and employees, [they] usually let themselves, so it appears, be led astray by their [view of] Christianity and immediately take the side of the employees without investigating how things really stand ... Thus, these theologians, instead of appeasing and reconciling, pour oil on the flames and help both devils in their devilish work.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, far from judging the Christian-Social project to be an effective way to foster national unity, as its advocates believed it to be, Frege saw it as a divisive force, driving a wedge between employers and their employees and inflaming working-class hostility to the rich. Because of what he saw as its adaptation to socialism and anti-capitalism, the claims of the Christian-Social movement to being 'Christian' or 'Protestant'

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<sup>53</sup>For details, see Liebersohn, 'Religion and Industrial Society: The Protestant Social Congress in Wilhelmine Germany,' *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 76:6 (1986).

<sup>54</sup>Rita Aldenhoff, 'Max Weber and the Evangelical-Social Congress,' in Mommsen and Osterhammel (eds.), *Max Weber and his Contemporaries* (NY: Routledge, 1987), pp. 127-29193. See also Jan Rehmann, *Max Weber: Modernisation as Passive Revolution, A Gramscian Analysis* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015).

<sup>55</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 312. His critique of Stoecker in the *Tagebuch* was not the first time Frege had registered a political objection regarding a defender of Christian-Social theology. He did so as early as 1898, by agreeing to lend his name as co-signatory to a public attack by dozens of Jena 'notables' on the Reichstag candidacy of the pastor Friedrich Naumann. The statement, entitled the *Wahlaufruf* (Election Appeal), was published in the local newspaper. See 'Wahlaufruf,' *Jenaische Zeitung*, No. 136, 14 June 1898, p. 4. Frege and his co-signatories criticized Naumann for expressing sympathy with the 'social' aims of the workers' movement. This made his candidacy dangerous, they claimed, and they urged voters to support the more 'reliable' candidate, Ernst Basserman of the (nationalist, centre-right) National Liberal Party.

<sup>56</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 310.

(*evangelisch*) were highly dubious, in Frege's eyes: 'I tend to the opinion that really they carried the words "Protestant" and "Christian" unjustifiably on their banners.'<sup>57</sup>

At the root of Frege's criticism of Christian-Social theology was his view that it indulged in a kind of overreach, effectively usurping the distinctive domain of the political by absorbing politics into religion. In pursuing this line of criticism, Frege is following up on criticisms of Stoecker made by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1896:

Political pastors are an abomination . . . [T]o be Christian and 'Social' is nonsense and leads to overweening and impatient behavior, both of which run flat against the grain of Christianity. The pastors should busy themselves with the souls of their parishes and cultivate brotherly love, but keep politics out of it, as it is in no way their concern.<sup>58</sup>

Frege elaborates on this line of criticism in terms of the specificity of *legal* or *civic*, as opposed to *religious* duties. In Frege's view, the Christian-Social movement assumed that religious obligations should be the basis for legal requirements, and that for this reason the priorities and values of the theologian should dictate public policy, for example, about the distribution of income and so on. (Whether this is an accurate account of the views of Christian Social theologians is questionable, but here I am only interested in Frege's understanding of it.) Although Frege agrees that theology should play a political role in *some* (broad) sense, he thinks that theology goes too far when it tries to prescribe laws or policies to the statesman.

Can one from the standpoint of religion transform the law to the advantage of poor fellow countrymen? Religion can influence the attitude [Gesinnung] of the law-maker and this attitude can later influence the construction of the law. Never, however, can religion or someone in the name of religion set himself up as law-maker.<sup>59</sup>

Alluding to Christian-Social agitation for higher wages and the denunciation by Stoecker and others of capitalist profiteering, Frege adds: 'Can one decide, on the basis of religion, what reward is appropriate for a given output in economic commerce? No, religion has nothing to do with that. It cannot judge, for example, what price is appropriate for an article of clothing or what pay for a piece of work.'<sup>60</sup>

Although Frege's messianic-eschatological way of framing his anticipation of a new 'saviour'-statesman for Germany could be interpreted as entailing or encouraging a kind of absorption of religion by politics, in the form of a 'political religion' in which ostensibly spiritual activity becomes nothing more than the conduct of politics by other means, he actually makes it perfectly clear in the *Tagebuch* that this is not his intent. On the contrary, he repeatedly insists that both politics and religion are distinct and indispensable elements of the kind of national renewal that he wants to promote. 'One speaks of religious obligation as well as of legal obligation; nevertheless, these are of different kinds.'<sup>61</sup> Frege tries to elucidate the contrast in terms of the difference between duties enforced by worldly, human authorities, which are 'civil,' and duties enforced by non-human authorities, which are 'religious.'

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<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>58</sup>Kaiser Wilhelm II, 28 February 1896, quoted in Harry Liebersohn, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>59</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 313-14.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 314.

A religious obligation is an obligation over whose fulfillment no human judge stands guard and judges. To be sure, a civil obligation can also be made into a religious one. But it is only because the obligation is at the same time a legal obligation, a civil obligation, that a human judge has to judge its fulfillment.<sup>62</sup>

He then proceeds to clarify the contrast somewhat by relating it to the differentiated motivations for compliance. Civic obligations may be incentivised with worldly penalties for non-compliance, but religious obligations are motivated exclusively by moral-spiritual factors:

[T]he state can never impose a punishment for the nonfulfillment of religious obligations; for that would make them into civil obligations and subjugate them to the judgment of its judges, thus of men. It is not good for a religion if the state makes all of its religious obligations into civil obligations, because the danger then arises that the religious motives for acting are influenced more and more by this fear of punishment.<sup>63</sup>

Frege gives special emphasis to a particular form of theological or religious overreach into law, namely, the intervention against the rich on behalf of the poor, construed as a religiously motivated but improper civil-political intervention.

Religion ... gladly places obligations on the rich which favor the poor. But these religious obligations are not legal obligations. If they are not held clearly separate from one another, religion can endanger the law, and therewith the state ... Also, judges strongly moved by religion are not permitted to allow themselves to be led astray by religious obligations to take the side of the poor against the wealthy.<sup>64</sup>

As these passages make clear, Frege insists on the specificity – the reciprocal irreducibility – of both politics and religion. But they are not unrelated to one another, in his account. Rather, Frege wants to see the statesman – the anticipated charismatic leader, heir to Bismarck's mission as Germany's 'saviour' – to enter into a collaborative relationship with the theologian and more generally with the revived version of Christianity he wants to encourage. The statesman, he hopes, can rely on and reap the benefits of the theologian's contribution to *preparing* the faithful for the statesman's arrival and fostering the statesman's enthusiastic popular embrace.

The proper social or political role of theology, according to Frege, is not public advocacy on behalf of the working class, as Stoecker and the Christian-Social theologians supposed. It is to promote national unity and class harmony, by discouraging greed and envy, and in particular by reconciling workers to the inequalities that might threaten to stimulate class antagonism: 'If the theologian had explained everything in this way, he would perhaps succeed in bringing about a peaceful settlement between employers and employees.'<sup>65</sup> Christian-Social theology, however, too often does the opposite: 'A devil crept over to the theologian with complete Christian bearing and appearance and whispered in his ear: "As a Christian, you must always place yourself on the side of the poor and oppressed if you see that his opinion differs from that of the rich."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 314.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 318.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 318.

How, if at all, does this intervention by Frege into the political theology debates in the Weimar Republic relate to what I began this paper by calling his ‘astonishing intention to write a work on the life of Jesus’? Or, to put the question a little more pointedly, how might his objections to Christian-Social theology feed into his approach to thinking about the historical Jesus? Recall Frege’s brief comments on his intentions for his life of Jesus project, already cited above:

The life of Jesus must be told according to the results of the German scholarly research ... . To make the life and work of Jesus intelligible, it will be necessary to portray the conditions and religious aspirations of the Jews at the time of Jesus; and to that end, the development of these conditions and aspirations under the influence of the Persian religion and the Hellenes (Maccabees) will have to be treated ... .<sup>67</sup>

Here, Frege tells us bluntly that he wants to base his life of Jesus narrative on ‘the results of the German scholarly research,’ viz. the ‘First Quest’ for the historical Jesus, which is usually seen as having come to a close in the early twentieth century. But he does not tell us *which* results he is particularly interested in taking up. The literature on the historical Jesus in the 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is vast, even if we only consider the German literature, which indeed makes up the bulk of the historical Jesus scholarship in that era. And it is shot through with doctrinal disputes, methodological and factual disagreements, and controversies of every possible kind. Still, we are not helpless in figuring out his aims, since we have by now developed a fairly clear grasp of how he thinks about many important theological matters, and these might help us reconstruct the import of his fragmentary and opaque comments about his intentions.

One way to frame this inquiry – not the only way, to be sure, but one that has the merit of shedding considerable light on Frege’s project – is in terms of the overall trend or trajectory of the ‘First Quest,’ on the questions that were most important to Frege. And Frege’s primary concern in theology was how to get the relationship right between nationalist politics (or civic duty) and Christian piety (or religious duty), which is the issue on which he thinks the Christian-Social movement faltered. The ‘First Quest’ was launched at the end of the eighteenth century by Hermann Reimarus, who saw Jesus as a kind of Jewish-nationalist revolutionary, hoping to throw off the yoke of Roman domination and to found a new political Kingdom, heir to the Davidic model of Jewish Kingship. Jesus, according to Reimarus, ‘could have had no other object than to rouse the Jews in all parts of Judea, who had long been groaning under the Roman yoke, and so long been preparing for the hoped-for deliverance, and to induce them to flock to Jerusalem.’<sup>68</sup> In this way, Reimarus claimed, Jesus aimed ‘to build up a worldly kingdom, and to deliver the Israelites from bondage.’<sup>69</sup> This, of course, is a view of Jesus that would align rather neatly with the broad contours of the Christian-Social project that worried Frege so much: a view of Jesus as politically engaged in a directly practical, essentially activist mode. Although this construal of Jesus as a politically motivated Zealot-like figure wields considerable influence today,<sup>70</sup> the politically

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 341.

<sup>68</sup>Reimarus, *Fragments from Reimarus*, translated by Rev. Charles Voysey (London: Williams and Norgate, 1879), p. 12.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>70</sup>For some relatively recent expressions of views of this type, see S.G.F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (NY: HarperCollins, 2006), Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life*



oriented depiction of Jesus by Reimarus was largely rejected by the 'results of the German scholarly research' in the late First Quest period (most notably in the work of the extremely influential Religionsgeschichtliche Schule), specifically because it was held to have overlooked the way Jesus treated such aspirations to worldly power as 'temptations' to be disavowed. Admittedly, the complexity of the historical Jesus literature defies simple summary or sweeping generalization. But I think it is fair to say that, in the course of the nineteenth century, there was a discernible tendency (e.g. in the work of Wrede, Bousset, Weiss, Wernle, Schweitzer, and Hollmann<sup>71</sup>), on the one hand, to place a growing emphasis on the *eschatological* character of Jesus as prophet of a coming new Kingdom, but on the other hand, to insist with growing confidence and unanimity that, even if Jesus could only be understood against the *backdrop* of Jewish nationalism, nevertheless he was himself more interested in preaching moral-spiritual *repentance in preparation* for a Kingdom of a *new type*, not a practical-political founding of a neo-Davidic Jewish state, in the manner of the Maccabees. Thinking about 'the results of the German scholarly research' on the historical Jesus in this way, which is consonant with how it was regarded by Albert Schweitzer in his extremely influential review of the First Quest, we can think of the Quest as a sifting process that separated out the plausible aspect of Reimarus, namely, the depiction of Jesus as an eschatological prophet of a Kingdom to come, from the implausible aspect of Reimarus, the reduction of his mission to a political-activist and worldly-revolutionary project. What emerged from the scholarly examination of the life of Jesus, specifically with respect to the matter of Jewish nationalism and religious piety, was a rough consensus that, in one way or another (and they did not agree on the details), Jesus was an eschatological prophet of a non-worldly, non-political Kingdom to come, who emphasized the importance of repentance, repudiation of worldly values, and the cultivation of a new morality, in order to prepare oneself to enjoy the benefits of the coming Kingdom. If the earlier view of Reimarus seemed to lend support to Stoecker and the Protestant-Social Congress, the views that held sway in the late-19th, early twentieth-century historical Jesus discourse, particularly among the academics of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule (above all, Bousset), would seem to lend support to Frege's view that religion's role is not to *assume the powers* of the state, but to prepare people to *welcome the statesman*.

If we look again at Frege's *desiderata* for the life of Jesus narration in light of this analysis of the trajectory of historical-Jesus research in Germany, his comments seem rather less cryptic and opaque. When he announces his intention to address 'the conditions and religious aspirations of the Jews at the time of Jesus' and 'the development of these conditions and aspirations under the influence of the Persian religion and the Hellenes (Maccabees),' we can correlate this with the way the nationalism-piety relationship had come to be viewed by scholars toward the end of the First Quest. First of all, the relevant 'conditions and religious aspirations of the Jews at the time of Jesus' would seem

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*and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (NY: Random House, 2013), and to a lesser extent, John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (NY: HarperCollins, 1992).

<sup>71</sup>See William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, translated by J.C.G. Greig (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1971), Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im Späthellenistischen Zeitalter*, 3rd edition, Gressmann (ed.) (Tübingen: Verlag von J.C.B. Mohr, 1926), Johannes Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, 2nd edition (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1900), Paul Wernle, *Beginnings of Christianity, Volume 1*, translated by G.A. Bienemann (London: Williams & Norgate, 1904), Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus, op. cit.*, and Georg Hollmann, *The Jewish Religion in the Time of Jesus*, translated by E. Lummis (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1909).

to be the aftermath of the defeat of the nationalist Maccabees in their struggle against Hellenism, the subjection of Jewish Palestine to Roman domination, and the irrepressible *national hopes* for Jewish liberation from the Roman yoke. However, when Frege mentions *religious* aspirations specifically, he seems thereby pointedly to avoid identifying these aspirations or hopes as *political*. And this fits perfectly with the expectation that he would insist on the difference between (1) someone like Reimarus (or the earliest work of Karl von Hase), according to which the hopes of the Second Temple Jews were *national* and oriented toward political transformation, and (2) later historical theologians like Bousset, Weiss, Schweitzer and Hollman, according to whom the Jewish hopes with which Jesus engaged had *mutated* over time, changing from political and worldly hopes into religious hopes for an *other-worldly* rupture with ‘this world.’ As Bousset would put it, the Religionsgeschichtliche-Schule position was that the ‘national limitations’ of Jewish political hopes were transformed, either by the time Jesus appeared or else under his direct intervention, into a *universal* vision that was more spiritual than national, more universal than specifically Jewish. But Bousset and Hollmann, in particular, insisted that this transformation, which they deemed to have weakened the grip of Maccabean nationalism and opened the door to a new receptiveness toward Hellenistic ideas with which diasporic Jews were especially inclined to engage, was the result – very specifically – of *Persian influence* on Second Temple Judaism.<sup>72</sup> ‘As surely as Judaism was independently striving for such a development,’ Bousset claimed, ‘it is likely that a foreign influence was involved from the outset,’ and one finds ‘in the Iranian religion a transcendental eschatology and an ethical-religious dualism already in the oldest layers of the Gathas ... , which we can attribute to the personality of a Zarathustra.’<sup>73</sup> The worldly nationalism of the Maccabees, under the influence of the distinctive dualistic and eschatological-apocalyptic spirituality of Persian Zoroastrianism, thus turned into a less political, more spiritual and other-worldly form of eschatology. Jewish piety underwent what Bousset called a ‘denationalization’ process, in the absence of which it could not (he claimed) have yielded the emergence of the figure of Jesus.<sup>74</sup> This particular way of (to borrow Frege’s way of putting it) ‘mak[ing] the life and work of Jesus intelligible’ in terms of ‘the influence of the Persian religion’ in the shift from Maccabean to Hellenistic Judaism, would evidently be well-suited to lend support to someone like Frege, who was concerned to debunk the Christian-Social construal of the mission of Jesus as shot through with *immediately* practical-political implications, in the worldly sense.

In short, I think it is plausible to suggest, even if it is not obviously true, that Frege’s emphasis on the Persian impact on Second-Temple Judaism points to his way of thinking about the life of Jesus having been shaped by the account pioneered by Wilhelm Bousset in particular, in his massively influential *Die Religion des Judentums im Späthellenistischen Zeitalter* (first edition, 1903), and subsequently popularized in part by Hollmann in *The Jewish Religion in the Time of Jesus*. This way of thinking would, in any case, have been a very attractive line of argument for someone like Frege who was keen to ward off the overextension (as he saw it) of religion into the territory of the statesman, and

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<sup>72</sup>On the understanding of the Persian influence on Second Temple Judaism, as understood in Religionsgeschichtliche Schule, see Bousset, *Die Religion*, etc., *op. cit.*, and Hollmann, *op. cit.*

<sup>73</sup>Bousset, *Die Religion*, etc., *op. cit.*, p. 480. My translation.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 87. My translation.

correspondingly to attack the Christian-Social movement for failing to respect the distinctiveness and autonomy of the political, and the irreducibility of civic to religious duty.

## Concluding thoughts

Interestingly, the only life of Jesus narrative that Frege mentions in the *Tagebuch* is the one published by *völkisch* writer Gustav Frenssen. Frenssen adopted a view quite similar to that of Frege about the need for religious zeal as a generator of national renewal. Probably influenced, directly or indirectly, by the interpretation of Jesus as an inspiring hero set out by Thomas Carlyle,<sup>75</sup> Frenssen depicted Jesus as a hero-figure, who could offer to modern Germans a *model*, an ideal, to emulate. And this enthusiasm ('stir and excitement') for the model of Jesus, Frenssen claimed, could revitalize the German nation:

Such was his faith, his love, his hope: and he announced it in words like morning dew or the water of a deep and sparkling spring, to a people of quick understanding, deep piety, and ancient race, who looked back from the desperate misery of the present to the glory of the past and yearned for freedom and happiness. It was natural that he roused them. Excitement spread all through the northern district ... Stir and excitement took the place of the old lassitude.<sup>76</sup>

It was apparently this power to inspire popular enthusiasm and zeal that Frege thought the life of Jesus narrative could offer the statesman, to position the latter more favorably for the fight with Social Democracy. To be sure, Frege distanced himself from Frenssen's life of Jesus narrative, noting that 'the way Gustav Frenssen describes the life of the saviour does not really suit my purposes.'<sup>77</sup> However, in context, it is clear that it is the literary, fictionalized character of Frenssen's depiction (in which Jesus is rendered as a kind of modern Romantic figure), not the political rationale for it (to generate the kind of spiritual zeal that could stimulate national renewal), that Frege rejected. Frenssen's approach won't do, he says, 'because therein fiction and truth are mixed together. I want truth and nothing but the truth, at least in the intention of the narrator.'<sup>78</sup> His critique of Frenssen's *way* of using the Jesus narrative to promote what Frenssen called a 'national renaissance' was by no means a critique of the *aim* of doing so, which Frege fully embraced.

In conceiving this project, Frege was perhaps emulating his own father, Karl Alexander Frege (1809-1866), a theologian in his own right who wrote a life of Jesus narrative in the early days of the First Quest, entitled *Das Leben Jesu als treffliches Urbild ächter Frömmigkeit und der edelsten Liebe geweihten Lebens* (1840), or 'The Life of Jesus as an Excellent Archetype of True Piety and a Life Consecrated to the Noblest Love.'<sup>79</sup> The elder

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<sup>75</sup>See Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, eds. Sorensen and Kinser (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 28. Wilhelm Bousset underlined Carlyle's influence on German Christian thought in his 1897 article, 'Thomas Carlyle. Ein Prophet des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts'; on this point, see Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009), pp. 181-82.

<sup>76</sup>Gustav Frenssen, *Holyland*, translated by M.A. Hamilton (Boston: Dana Estes & Co., 1906), p. 317.

<sup>77</sup>Frege, *Tagebuch*, *op. cit.*, p. 341-342.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>79</sup>See Karl Alexander Frege, *Das Leben Jesu als treffliches Urbild ächter Frömmigkeit und der edelsten Liebe geweihten Lebens*, Zweite Ausgabe (Leipzig: Verlage der Ernst'schen Buchhandlung, 1840). This work was an attempt to present, for young people, a supposedly chronological narration of episodes in the life of Jesus, interspersing among Gospel passages brief comments and notes by K.A. Frege. It showed (and explicitly acknowledged on p. 46)

Frege described his motivation in terms that anticipate Frenssen's idea that Jesus could serve as a model to emulate with enthusiasm and zeal, and thereby to resist the temptations of worldly gain:

[E]xamples and models ignite the heart [*Gemüth*]; for there are then many opportunities to instill a pious and noble way of thinking and to extinguish the worldly one; it is then possible ... to remove the allure of ostentatious life and vain morals, and to place before [the mind] an archetype [*Urbild*] of a pious life dedicated to the noblest love. And where can you find such an archetype, where does a more excellent, more perfect, more sufficient image appear to you than that of the life of Jesus?<sup>80</sup>

The younger Frege, too, was interested in the life of Jesus on the basis of his conviction that modern Germans grappling with political strife and social crisis stood in dire need of a model, an archetype, an 'Urbild,'<sup>81</sup> as his father would say, to orient their social engagement with the issues of the day. But, while Frege himself took this to be a morally worthy motivation, we cannot regard it as anything but dangerous and morally reckless, precisely when we pay attention to his context and his motives. In the end, we cannot but be appalled by his most basic moral and political commitments: his intense antisemitism, his hostility to equality and democracy, and his embrace of the extremist militancy of the Weimar-era German Far Right. Equally appalling is his complicity with and affiliation to what was at that time an all-too-widely embraced project in political theology: to offer up to the Far Right the possibility it craved of advertising its aims as consistent with the moral and religious responsibilities of individual Germans and the religious communities to which they belonged.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author

### Notes on contributor

*Stephen D'Arcy*, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Huron University College, in London, Ontario, Canada. His research focuses on democratic theory, social movement studies, and German philosophy in the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He is author of *Languages of the Unheard: Why Militant Protest is Good for Democracy* (Zed Books, 2014), and co-editor of *A Line in the Tar Sands: Struggles for Environmental Justice* (Between the Lines and PM Press, 2014). He is presently completing a book on Gottlob Frege's relation to fascist politics in early Weimar-era Germany.

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the direct influence of Karl von Hase, whose own view owed a great deal to the influence of Reimarus, although less and less so over the many decades of Hase's long career at the University of Jena. The elder Frege insisted, though, that a 'purely political' view of the coming Kingdom was rejected by Jesus, even if he shared the hopes of the Maccabees for 'liberation from the Roman yoke' [die Befreiung vom Römerjoch] (p. 17).

<sup>80</sup>Karl Alexander Frege, *op. cit.*, pp. xi-xii. My translation.

<sup>81</sup>Karl Alexander Frege evidently borrowed the term 'Urbild,' prototype or archetype, and indeed the term's application to Jesus, from Kant's philosophy of religion. On the role of this concept in Kant's view of Jesus, see James J. DiCenso, 'The Concept of Urbild in Kant's Philosophy of Religion,' *Kant-Studien*, 104:1 (2013), pp. 100-132, and of course, Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009).