INTRODUCTION

Hanging from the beam,
Slowly swaying (such the law),
Gaunt the shadow on your green,
Shenandoah!
The cut is on the crown
(Lo, John Brown),
And the stabs shall heal no more.

Hidden in the cap
Is the anguish none can draw;
So your future veils its face,
Shenandoah!
But the streaming beard is shown
(Weird John Brown),
The meteor of the war.

Herman Melville, "The Portent"[1]

JOHN BROWN, Herman Melville wrote, was *weird*. While Brown struck many people as unusual, even odd, Melville's poem made a stronger claim. It described Brown as weird like the Three Sisters in *Macbeth*, who were "so withered, and so wild in their attire" that they looked "not like th' inhabitants o' the earth, And yet [were] on 't" (1.3.39). Like Shakespeare's weird women, Melville's Brown was in the world but not entirely of it.

Melville's placement of the poem in the collection of his poems about the war further illumined its vision of Brown as one whose significance could not be fully contained in the ordinary flow of history. "The Portent" was the first poem in Melville's *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*. The poems that followed moved mostly chronologically through the Civil War, from accounts of early misgivings all the way to a description of Robert E. Lee's visit to the Capitol after his defeat. That final poem was followed by a closing meditation and then—as if to make sure there would be no heroic ending—a prose supplement. "The Portent" started this long cycle. But in the original edition of 1866 it did not appear in the table of contents. It was an unlisted introduction to a set of historical events of which it was not a member. The poem about John Brown

was an exception. It was separated from the poems that followed not only by its omission from the table of contents but also by the ways in which it was printed. Alone among the poems, "The Portent" was set entirely in italics. A blank folio page—the only gap in the book—divided it from what followed. Like the body it described, the poem was suspended between heaven and earth.

The first stanza of the poem depicted the destruction of John Brown's body and the body politic that executed him. "Hanging from the beam," the poem began. But it did not say just what, or who, was hanging. The second line described the body as "slowly swaying," but it still did not resolve the question of the body's identity. Its parenthetical reference ("such the law") could mean both that the body was hanging in accordance with the law and that *this was the manner in which the law itself was hanged*. In this hanging the law was executed in two senses: it was both followed and destroyed. The rest of the stanza only deepened this sense that the hanging executed both Brown and the order that killed him. The hanging body cast a shadow on the whole Shenandoah Valley. "The cut is on the crown," both of Brown's head and of the ruling power. Brown and Virginia were wounded together in this execution. "And the stabs shall heal no more."

The second stanza filled out the poem's vision of the hanging as a sign, even as it insisted that the referent of this sign was not known. Unknown anguish was hidden in the cap the hangman put over Brown's head. With that hangman's cap, Shenandoah's future was placed behind a veil. No mortal hand could move this veil, as no hand could move the veil and live to tell what lay beneath in Friedrich Schiller's poem "The Veiled Statue at Sais."[2] But Melville's veil did not cover everything. Brown's beard streamed out from under the cap like the tails of the meteors that people reported seeing in the sky around the time of his execution.[3] The poem called Brown himself "the meteor of the war." The tail of his beard indicated that some kind of sign in the night sky was under the hood. But the face of the meteor remained hidden. In Melville's telling, the final significance of Brown remained open. He was a sign whose referent was not secured. He was a portent.

The poem depicted Brown's execution as having some meaning beyond ordinary history. The hanging of John Brown destroyed not just the body of one old man but the legitimacy of the sovereign powers that once prevailed in the Shenandoah Valley. The poem described the destructive power of Brown's execution. But because the poem did not know the full significance of Brown— because it could not lift the veil—it could not write Brown's execution into a story with an ending that made sense of the suffering along the way. It could

not make Brown's execution into the sacrifice that founded a new social order. The portent of John Brown, in Melville's poem, signaled the destruction of an order committed to slavery without authorizing anything to take its place.

Such weird violence—like what Walter Benjamin called "divine violence"—was both above and below what ethics as it is usually practiced today can consider.[4] When the old standards are destroyed and new ones are not yet established, it is not clear how any kind of ethical evaluation can be offered. Infused with this sensibility, "The Portent" was notable for its lack of moralizing. It was especially notable in contrast to poems written by other Northerners around the time of its composition. They tended to offer confident appraisals both of the meaning of Brown's death and of the morality of the violence done by and to him. Louisa May Alcott's tribute to Brown, for instance, celebrated the ways that "Living, he made life beautiful,— / Dying, made death divine."[5] William Dean Howells sounded a similar theme in his poem "Old Brown":

> Death kills not. In a later time,
> (O, slow, but all-accomplishing!)
> Thy shouted name abroad shall ring,
> Wherever right makes war sublime.[6]

Amid lines like these, Melville's stark images and understated rhymes stood out. They did not elevate Brown's death, his cause, or his violence to sublime heights. But neither did they strip Brown of significance that transcended historical events. Melville's lines insisted on some significance for Brown's death, but they did not present his life as right or wrong. They did not even reduce his violence to an ethical dilemma in which each side had some merit and some fault. Instead, they presented Brown as a portent, a sign whose meaning was not yet known. The tone of Melville's lines was not ethical ambivalence but eschatological fear and trembling.

Perspectives like Melville's have been rare in the more than 150 years that Americans have been remembering John Brown. The ethics of Brown's actions have been endlessly debated, and with strong arguments on every side. Conversations about Brown have tended to proceed as if getting the ethics right would tell us all we needed to know about John Brown—and ourselves. In this book, however, I hope to show the limits of ethics for thinking about the violence done to and by John Brown. I hope to show the costs of forgetting those limits. And I hope to stir theological imaginations that can remember both John Brown and the nation that endlessly tells his story as weird.

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In remembering John Brown as weird, I hope to make connections to three different conversations: one about the limits of ethics for practical reasoning, a second about the relationship between religion and violence, and a third about the significance of race for any truthful story about the United States. These conversations do not always overlap. But they are held together in the body of John Brown.

As Melville saw, close considerations of John Brown's story make visible the limits of ethics. "Ethics" can mean many different things, of course, and I do not mean to lump them all together. Instead, I intend to make a more focused argument against the sufficiency of one particular but pervasive mode of ethics, a mode marked by its granting of a privileged place to universalizable moral obligations that play out within immanent networks of cause and effect. Ethics in this sense might appeal to "secular" motives, "religious" motives, or some combination of the two. What defines this mode is not the source of the motivation but the nature of the obligation.

The obligations that matter most for this mode of ethics share three important features. First, they apply equally to all moral agents in all situations. This emphasis on universalizability has perhaps been developed most explicitly in traditions that run through the categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant and the (U)-Principle of Jürgen Habermas. But the emphasis on universalizability ranges far beyond this set of traditions. It extends to consequentialist ethics that cannot imagine situations in which we should not seek the greatest good. It even shapes those modern accounts of virtue that describe universal obligations to promote human flourishing. Universalization can shape many forms of ethics. What it cannot do is imagine good reasons to make exceptions.

The obligations that define the ethics I mean to describe share a second feature. They have a distinctly *moral* quality that is assumed to give them precedence over obligations related to other kinds of goods, like beauty, piety, or rational inquiry. They make a claim not just about what is pleasurable, for instance, but what is *right*. And they assume that what is right should take priority over what is pleasurable, what is beautiful, what is true, and every other kind of good. Of course, ethics could be, and often has been, expanded to include other kinds of value. But this capacity for expansion only underscores the tendency of ethics to stand in for the whole of practical reasoning. And it does not happen without cost. When this expansion happens within the wider frame of moral obligation, it changes the character of the other goods at stake. Goods

like playing with a child, eating delicious food, enjoying pleasurable sex, loving a neighbor, and praying without ceasing all suffer qualitative transformations when they become moral obligations.[7]

A final common feature marks the obligations that feature most prominently in the frameworks I am trying to resist here: these obligations come to life entirely within immanent networks of cause and effect. A mode of ethical reasoning that highlighted such obligations might take into account things like the this-worldly consequences of an action, the empirical features of an action in itself, or the character of the actor. It could evaluate any of these dimensions morally. But it would refuse to take into account any reference to something that exceeded the web of immanent cause and effect. It would refuse, for instance, a vision like the one the narrator ascribes to Joseph at the end of the book of Genesis. Joseph's brothers had betrayed him. They had sold him into slavery. But then Joseph's story takes a turn, and he rises to become a powerful adviser to the pharaoh. When his brothers come before him to beg for food, they do not recognize him. And when he makes himself known to them, they are terrified. But Joseph reassures them, saying, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today" (50:19–20).[8] The mode of ethics I am trying to criticize here would not disagree with Joseph's assessment so much as it would rule it out of order. An ethics of immanent moral obligation can accommodate many kinds of moral reasoning. But it resists any interpretation that suggests that the decisive significance of an act, consequence, or character lies beyond the immanent frame of this-worldly relationships. It resists any sense that the meaning of historical realities—and so our ultimate evaluation of them, and so the actions we should take in relation to them—might be defined by a moment that exceeds the ordinary course of history.[9]

This constellation of universalizable moral obligations within immanent chains of cause and effect does much to define contemporary imaginations of religion and politics. There are significant exceptions and outliers, even in relatively recent times. Thinkers as diverse as W. E. B. Du Bois, Karl Barth, Mary Daly, Oscar Romero, Pope John Paul II, and John Howard Yoder only begin the list of those who have offered visions that exceed this frame. But it continues to exert a strong gravitational pull. That pull can be seen in academic work that translates theological commitments into ethics, political reasoning that turns the rule of law into an ideology, and manifold forms of everyday life that make immanent moral obligation the sole source of meaning.

In arguing against the *sufficiency* of universalizable immanent moral obligations, I do not mean to refuse all of their claims. On the contrary, I will argue that they should play a significant role in any practical reasoning. I only mean to resist the idea that universalizable immanent moral obligations can stand alone to define the whole of practical reasoning. If they are significant, they are not sufficient in themselves.

Considerations of universalizable immanent moral obligations have played an especially significant role in contemporary discussions of violence. Philosophers and theologians often describe love in terms that exceed or defy each of the features I have described for the obligations that constitute this kind of ethics.[10] But the great stronghold—and historically important source—for the social imaginary that privileges this kind of obligation comes in considerations of violence.

If we can imagine exceptions to universal norms in relation to love, we resist exceptions pertaining to violence. Here the universal quality of the norms—whether of just war, pacifism, or some other standard—is taken to be inviolable. Moreover, depictions of violent actions that stress their aesthetic qualities, like the films of Quentin Tarantino, feel transgressive because they grate against deeply shared assumptions that moral categories, not aesthetic ones, provide the resources with which we should think about violence. Just so, religions are sometimes taken to be problematic precisely because they can suggest ways of thinking about violence, like those performed in sacrifice, that cannot be reduced to distinctively moral obligations. If religions sometimes seem to challenge the primacy of moral categories for thinking about violence, they can also seem dangerous because they involve ways of understanding violence that outrun immanent chains of cause and effect. Notions of "divine violence" become especially problematic. Usually exceptional, not necessarily moral, and decidedly not immanent, notions of divine violence cannot be easily assimilated to frameworks that stress the sufficiency of universalizable immanent moral obligations. Modern critics of religion have therefore tended to describe the ways religions pull reasoning about violence beyond the frame of such obligations. At the same time, apologists for religion have tended to renounce or reinterpret any talk of divine violence to make it fit within this frame.

In the chapters that follow I take a different tack. I try to show the interpretive poverty of frameworks that stress the sufficiency of universalizable immanent moral obligation for practical reasoning. And I try to display the steady collusion of these claims to sufficiency with the legitimation and expansion

of state violence. These two features become especially clear when thinking about John Brown. Brown's theological visions of the meaning of violence in history were so baldly stated and so bluntly performed that considerations of Brown bring more immanent understandings of violence into the high relief that only contrast can provide. In this book I do not affirm Brown's theological understanding of his violence. But I do try to argue with him on his own terms. I follow the conversation beyond the bounds of immanent moral obligation. I try to show the ways that some notion of "divine violence" can enrich our understanding of the world and our reasoning about how to live together in it. That is, I take up the old genre of John Brown's story with the old intention of doing political theology.

My purpose is not to dig up new facts about Brown's life, not even about the theology he in fact espoused. A raft of excellent biographies of Brown has appeared in recent years, and I depend on them throughout the book.[11] Likewise, my ultimate goal is not to give a history of the interpretation of John Brown in and beyond the United States. Again, a series of recent books has done much to meet this need.[12] My primary purpose is rather to *add to* the history of interpretation with a series of critical, constructive, theological reflections on John Brown. Through those reflections I hope to show the difference that a theological imagination can make for questions of religion and violence.

It is impossible to think about John Brown without thinking about race (though more than one commentator has tried). The violence of John Brown has come to matter in the ways it does because he was a white man who tried to attack a system that enslaved African Americans. The evils of that system and its legacies are so destructive and so pervasive that Brown's violence demands to be taken seriously. The system of slavery enshrined murder, rape, kidnapping, forcible servitude, torture, humiliation, and other evils on a massive scale. It was already, as Brown saw, a state of war. It was also established in law. Thousands of state and local statutes and the Constitution itself secured its place. Deep-seated social customs in every part of the country presumed its existence. It is hard to imagine its disappearance without violent action.[13] One need not engage in the profane parlor game of comparative atrocities to say that if any states of affairs have ever justified violent action outside the law, the system of slavery in the United States was one of them. Perhaps even more strongly, we might say that if there have ever been moments for which talk of "divine violence" would be fitting, the destruction of the system of slavery in the United States defined one of them. If slavery in the United States were not

so evil—if race did not matter as much as it did and does—John Brown would not pose difficult questions.

Those questions take on an even sharper edge because Brown was white. If he himself had been an enslaved African American, like Nat Turner, his violence might be wrapped in the familiar paper of self-defense. If he were a free African American advocating armed resistance, like Henry Highland Garnet, he might be framed as a fairly typical revolutionary. But because he was white, and because the structures of American society have worked so hard to separate black and white in both fact and thought, Brown poses a different kind of question. Because commentators have not seen him as fighting for "his own" people, his religious motives come into sharper focus. He looks like more of an extremist. Racism, then, did not just fuel the evil that defined John Brown's times. It also shapes the ways that questions about Brown are asked today—even for those who would reject racism root and branch. Realizing the significance of racism in framing questions about John Brown does not dissolve the questions that he poses. On the contrary, it raises the stakes for thinking about them critically.

Attempts to think about race, religion, and violence rightly lead to considerations of ethics. Any conversation about race in the United States must attend to universalizable immanent moral obligations. But I will argue that coming to terms with the full horrors of the violence of slavery and its legacies will require more from us than such obligations can measure. They cannot supply the whole of our vocabularies for interpreting the world and thinking about how to live in it, especially when the wounds in this world are as deep and enduring as the wounds left by slavery. In each chapter that follows I try to show the ways that an ethics of universalizable immanent moral obligation, when taken to be sufficient in itself, distorts and limits our abilities to understand situations and act in relation to them. I try to show some of the visions that a richer kind of practical reason might make visible and some of the actions that it might make thinkable. I argue that we need to cultivate the ability to reason about situations in ways that leave room for exceptions, that do not reduce all goods to moral obligations, and that cannot fit within an immanent frame. In particular, I argue that we need some notion of divine violence.

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This work of thinking beyond the limits of ethics has particular urgency for what is sometimes called "mainline" Protestant Christianity in the United States. Marilynne Robinson gestured toward that need in her Pulitzer Prize–

winning novel, *Gilead*. The novel is, among other things, an eschatological recollection of Christian ministry. It tells the story of three generations of Congregationalist ministers at a time when the next generation is still to be defined. In telling these stories, it gives a theologically inflected history of American Protestantism from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. John Brown haunts the book as a powerful presence who stays just outside the narrator's line of sight. Brown is heard more than seen. But he leaves his mark.

The narrator, writing as an old man in the 1950s, remembers that his grandfather had provided a safe house for Brown. The grandfather preached with a pistol in his belt and a bloody shirt on his back, both relics of the guerrilla war Brown helped lead against slavery in Kansas. For the grandfather's generation, Brown was the prophet who made the faith come alive. Brown's violence was a kind of sacrament, making manifest the presence of God in the world. For the next generation, though, Brown was the fanatic who had caused violence on a massive scale. Like many preachers who came of age after the Civil War, the narrator's father became a pacifist on principle. Out of that principle he rejected any talk of divine violence. And when he pulled violence within the frame of universalizable immanent moral obligations, he could find nothing but reasons to reject it.

The third generation in Robinson's novel displays more ambivalence, neither celebrating Brown nor rejecting him but trying to make sense of him. The narrator himself is part of this generation. He refuses both his grandfather's flat identification of Brown's violence with the work of God and his father's refusal to entertain any possibility of divine violence. In thinking through his own times, he recalls a sermon that he wrote when Spanish influenza was raging through his corner of Iowa. It was especially intense at Fort Riley, where the troops were mustering to join the fighting in World War I. The ordinary work of the fort ground to a halt, as barracks were converted to hospital wards. The whole place had to be closed down. "Now," the narrator writes, "if these things were not signs, I don't know what a sign would look like. So I wrote a sermon about it."

> I said, or I meant to say, that these deaths were rescuing foolish young men from the consequences of their own ignorance and courage, that the Lord was gathering them in before they could go off and commit murder against their brothers. And I said that their deaths were a sign and a warning to the rest of us that the desire for war would bring the consequences of war, because there is no ocean

> big enough to protect us from the Lord's judgment when we decide to hammer our plowshares into swords and our pruning hooks into spears, in contempt of the will and the grace of God.[14]

The narrator's sermon combined his grandfather's willingness to think about violence outside an immanent frame with his father's pacifist conclusions. "It was," he writes, "quite a sermon . . . the only sermon I wouldn't mind answering for in another world." But he never preached it. He knew that the only people who would be at the worship service would be "a few old women who were already about as sad and apprehensive as they could stand to be and no more approving of the war than I was." He burned the sermon and preached instead on the Parable of the Lost Sheep.[15]

It was his greatest sermon, yet he never preached it. He "meant every word," so he burned the manuscript. Thus, the narrator's sermon, like John Brown himself, haunts *Gilead* without ever quite appearing as an event within the narrative. Talk of divine violence should be undertaken with such hesitation, indirection, and modesty. If in this book I sometimes write in less graceful ways, I do so because the idea of divine violence has been buried so thoroughly that it can be raised only with some strain. In *Gilead*'s chronicle of generations, I would write as the narrator's grandson. Any sense of divine violence has faded, especially in the Protestant tradition Robinson describes and that I call home. Blunt words, perhaps too much in themselves, are necessary to reopen the possibility of the indirection that is more appropriate to the topic.

The generations of "mainline" Protestant Christians in the United States since Robinson's narrator have continued to work to close that possibility down. We have tended to take up violence within the frameworks of universalizable immanent moral obligation just described. What has marked considerations of these immanent phenomena as "theological" has often been the source of the norms used to evaluate them. If those norms come from the Bible, or church teaching, or a sense that God wills justice, then the reasoning is taken to be theological. But something is lost in the reduction of theology to a source of norms for ethical reasoning within an immanent frame.[16]

Wrestling with John Brown's story helps make that loss visible. On his way to the gallows Brown described the violence that he did and the violence done to him as part of a process in which the land was purged of its sins with blood. For Brown, the significance of violence extended beyond any chain of this-worldly cause and effect. It was part of an eschatological history of redemption. Brown's critics have seized upon this remark as a sign of his fanaticism. And Brown's con-

temporary defenders, whether they have identified as religious or secular, have tended to ignore it or translate it away. They have tended to defend Brown from within an immanent frame that would have been alien to him. That frame has come to seem natural through many social processes, but the Protestant generations *Gilead* describes have played a crucial role in its production. In straining against this immanent frame for thinking about violence, I am trying to criticize one of the great legacies of this tradition even as I work within it.

This book is therefore part of a tradition of Protestant Christian reflection on politics, violence, and the meaning of history. But it does not draw exclusively on sources that might be identified as Protestant, Christian, or even theological. Indeed, the most significant source for these reflections is Walter Benjamin's 1921 essay "Critique of Violence." I read Benjamin as one of the greatest thinkers of messianic hope within the conditions of modernity. The present book aspires to something like that hope. But, again, this is not a book *about* Benjamin. While I have tried to give serious attention to Benjamin's writings and significant commentaries on them, and while I do offer interpretations of "Critique of Violence" and other texts, the primary purpose of this book is not to make a contribution to the secondary literature on Benjamin. It is to do Christian political theology in ways that have learned from Benjamin. There is a risk here of seeming to conscript Benjamin into the service of Christian theology, to baptize him into the church after his death. Nothing could be further from my intentions or, I hope, the effects of these pages. I will leave to Benjamin's biographers the questions of how to describe his complex identity in relation to religion.[17] Whatever it was, though, it was not the kind of thing that involved him in anything that should be described as Christian political theology. The present book does not claim identity with Benjamin. It does not make a claim to the mantle of his authority. It is more like the fruits of interfaith dialogue. One could argue that any number of sources more closely identified with Christian traditions could have done that work. That is surely true, even if layers of commentary can make it difficult to hear people like Julian of Norwich or Augustine of Hippo as anything but right-minded ethicists. As it happened, though, it was not one of these figures who convinced me of these things. It was Benjamin who roused me from my normative slumbers.

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A political theology that makes visible the limits of ethics need not spell the end of ethics. It can instead restore an immanent ethics to its rightful place in

practical deliberation. Delivered of the pretense of being all-in-all, aware of it-self as a practical reason for the time between the times, an ethics of immanent obligation can return to offer guidance for everyday choices. With the state-ment of this hope another of the book's deepest affinities becomes clear. I am trying to write about Brown in ways inspired by Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. I want to tell a story in which Harpers Ferry appears as an American Mount Moriah. As Kierkegaard's opening meditations sought to break the hold of immanent moral obligations on the ways his readers imagined Abraham, I mean to critique merely ethical accounts of Brown's violence. And as Kierke-gaard negated ethical understandings to open up the space theology would fill to overflowing, I try to negate ethical interpretations of Brown in order to form desires for a political theology that cannot be reduced to social ethics. Kierke-gaard's "teleological suspension of the ethical" meant not the end of ethics but a renewal of a chastened ethics. Just so, I hope to suggest the possibilities for a political theology that reveals the limits of ethical discourse in ways that renew the critical potential of ethical discourse.[18]

I begin in Chapter 1 by giving a short history of Brown's life and tracing his role as a touchstone that reveals qualities of American national life that are usu-ally hidden from view. Debates about Brown have tended to revolve around the question of whether he was a freedom fighter or a fanatic. Those two options seem to exhaust the field only because the prevailing social imaginary is so deeply structured by the twin assumptions that violence should be considered within the bounds of ethics alone and that the state should have a monopoly on legitimate violence for political ends. The largely unquestioned status of those assumptions comes with a cost. In Chapter 2 I begin to count that cost, espe-cially for the years after 9/11. I describe the ways these assumptions combine to offer mythological justifications for violence and the ways those justifications legitimate escalations of violence by the state. I argue that we need to develop a capacity for reasoning about exceptions—a political theology—to diagnose this dynamic and break this pattern. In Chapter 3 I turn more explicitly to Ben-jamin to develop a political theology that can do that work. In particular, I try to develop a notion of "divine violence" that makes possible eschatological memories of a weird John Brown.

In Chapters 4, 5, and 6 I take up the task of remembering Brown by consid-ering a string of perennial questions about him. I appeal to divine violence in order to blast concepts like the higher law (Chapter 4), pardon (Chapter 5), and sacrifice (Chapter 6) out of discourses defined by assumptions of monopolies of

ethics on practical reasoning and of the state on legitimate violence. The chapters try to imagine these concepts in relation not to the sovereignty of the state but to the redeeming sovereignty of God. What would it mean, for instance, to imagine "the higher law" not as a better version of the laws on the books—a code the state might be reformed to follow, a code that might be enforced by violence—but as a divine gift that broke the hold of unjust laws and made possible free response? In these chapters I try to show how insisting on the sovereignty of God changes not just the locus but also the *qualities* of sovereignty.

Sovereignty is a risky concept to invoke for political reasoning. It has often been used to reinforce the racist structures I hope to subvert and suppress the democratic energies I hope to encourage.[19] But appealing to the sovereignty of God need not commit a political theology to any kind of fundamentalism. That is, it need not lead to declarations of *identity* between the will of God and particular actions or entities. On the contrary, I try throughout this book to describe the sovereignty of God as manifest, in this age, in a divine violence that negates any claims—including those of lawful states, religious organizations, fugitive movements, and ethically minded NGOs—to sovereign violence.

These claims to identity with some sovereign power could be criticized in other ways. One could, for instance, deny the epistemic possibility or political relevance of anything beyond a code of universalizable immanent moral obligations. But this kind of denial is not the same as the negation performed by divine violence. Negation defines a *saeculum* that is a moment in a larger history of redemption, not a secularized universe of causes and effects that is taken to constitute all that is relevant for practical reasoning. Negation reveals the ideological qualities of these attempts to eliminate ideology. Thus, divine violence opens up alternatives to both "religious" and "secular" fundamentalisms that function as if the politics of this age were complete in themselves.

The divine violence described in this book does not directly generate a particular kind of politics. "The guiding principle," as Walter Benjamin wrote, is that "authentic divine power can manifest itself *other than destructively* only in the world to come (the world of fulfillment)."[20] Divine violence does not found a political order. But it does break the grip of dominant orders to open up a space for genuinely free response, a space in which practical reasoning about public goods can be developed and refined in conversation. Divine violence therefore produces neither theocracy nor a political sphere that has been purged of every trace of theology but a negative presence, a present negation, that makes politics possible.