Turning Loss into Gain: Historical and Theoretical Reflections on Church Conversions Inspired by the Writings of Walter Benjamin

by

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For centuries, churches have been described as monuments to faith or to cultural heritage.
Churches are generally held to be timeless and above the passing historical fray. However, the
striking rate at which churches are increasingly being decommissioned in the West is forcing a
re-examination of this way of thinking about churches that, until recently, had seemed so self-
evident. This unprecedented and growing phenomenon has altered the traditional representation
of churches, with the rising number of church conversions striking at the very architectural
integrity of these buildings. However, instead of mourning this development, we should take the
opportunity to better reflect on the fundamental parameters that underlie the representation of
churches. Given that churches have traditionally been under ecclesiastical control—that is,
control by a so-called secularized elite that has generally exhibited the traditional ecclesiastical
shortcomings—the current situation also offers, at long last, the opportunity for a democratic
appropriation of churches through the agency of the idea, fully assumed, of their architectural
conversion. However, a theological undertaking is unavoidable if we are to get to the bottom of
this situation. In such an undertaking, the writings left to posterity by the self-taught theologian
Walter Benjamin in the middle of the 20th century appear to be a gold mine that will be
profitably worked in the coming pages.
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Introduction

It was a day in 1973, if memory serves, and I was 11 years old when I stopped playing in the park momentarily to take a hard look at the church steeple overlooking my suburban Montréal neighborhood. I contemplated the church, wondering what it represented. Clearly, it was not a house or school, not a municipal community centre or bank, not a fire station or any of those things. This church at the heart of my childhood neighborhood represented something that was, despite my best efforts, extremely hard to grasp. It was so familiar, yet so mysterious, so immanent and yet so transcendent. This church had given my neighborhood its name, Saint Maxime, and was a part of the surrounding urban fabric. Still, I was unable to grasp its precise nature. As with so many questions in the life of a child, this one remained unanswered then, of little concern to one who believed he still had a lifetime in which to find the answer.

With these reflections, I had unwittingly taken part in my first theological, and philosophical, exercise. I had unwittingly tapped into the source of aesthetic experience as it had been formulated in the West. Now, in my early fifties, I realize that I have made little real progress since that early introduction to intellectual life. In many respects, here I am, here I remain.

In my childhood exercise, I had not automatically accepted the idea that my neighborhood church was a place of worship under the Roman Catholic Church, and that Roma locuta est, causa finita est [Rome has spoken, the case is closed]. In distancing myself from this traditional definition in favour of a more radical enquiry, I was showing signs of the new paradigm in which I had already begun to evolve. My approach flowed from the cultural revolution that had begun in Québec with the election of Liberal Premier Jean Lesage on June 22, 1960. That election ended 16 years of Union Nationale rule, and with it the Church’s place of privilege in the life of the
province. Indeed, the Quiet Revolution that followed the 1960 election freed an entire people from ecclesiastical guardianship.

I did have a religious sensibility, although it did not take a conventional form. I attended Sunday mass at Saint Maxime Church only when I felt like it; truth be told, I rarely felt like it. Instead, I fed my religious sensibility mostly through long conversations with my paternal grandmother, a fervent Roman Catholic with a social progressive outlook, and with an agnostic aunt, also a social progressive. My two interlocutors never questioned the way I lived my religious sensibility; instead, they granted me the greatest possible freedom and respect, which helped further my spiritual and intellectual journey. One thing led to another and I enrolled in an ecclesiastical institution, eventually becoming a priest. However, I never again found the great freedom and respect that I had gotten from my grandmother and my aunt, and that had taken me so far. I sought to make up for this with a busy university life. Even though freedom of expression is greater in university than in the Church, my search ended by dividing me between two loyalties rather than uniting me under a single one.

For a time, those basic childhood questions about churches were not top of mind. However, that changed in 1989 when the Bishop of my diocese asked me to join his committee on sacred art. The mandate of this diocesan committee was to advise Bishop Bernard Hubert on all questions relating to the architecture and furnishings of churches in the diocese of Saint Jean Longueuil. As there were some 100 churches in the diocese, including many of great aesthetic and historical significance, this was a heady assignment for a 27-year-old with Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in theology from Université de Montréal and a Bachelor’s degree in art history from Université du Québec à Montréal. I was joining a team of a dozen advisors from the fields of urban planning, the arts, art history, architecture, and the like.
In 1992, the Bishop appointed me to chair the committee. This second mandate proved more stormy because word had begun to spread that we would soon have to divest ourselves of some churches, including several beautiful ones. The 1992 document *Risquer l’avenir* [Risking the Future], ¹ published by a committee of the Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops, took the view that churches were of only secondary importance to the work of evangelism. The watchword had been given: Christians were free of this heritage, noble as it was. For me, this watchword was too abrupt and, more importantly, ill-founded. It appeared to give a green light to the fire sale of a heritage that was, in places, 400 years old. I was frustrated by the lack of solid arguments in defence of this approach, and by the indifference of public opinion. I felt pressured, and I needed to reflect at length and to read more about this subject with the same freedom I had enjoyed in my youth. In the meantime, my diocese, like other Roman Catholic dioceses in Québec, was preparing to divest itself of these churches without really asking why. Somewhat upset, I resigned as chair of the sacred art committee in 1995.

In order to learn more about all this, I began studying for a Master’s degree in art history, specifically the role of diocesan sacred art committees in Québec. ² My supervisor was Professor Robert Derome of Université du Québec à Montréal. I completed my Master’s thesis in 1997 under the title *Une intelligence de l’art chrétien dans le Québec contemporain. L’apport des comités d’art sacré des diocèses de Québec, Montréal et Saint-Jean-Longueuil* [An Understanding of Christian Art in Contemporary Québec: The Contribution of the Sacred Art Committees of the Dioceses of Québec City, Montréal and Saint Jean Longueuil].

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In the thesis, I analysed the meeting minutes of the province’s three biggest diocesan sacred art committees, Québec City, Montréal and Saint Jean Longueuil, in an attempt to grasp their *raison d’être*. The first of these three committees was founded in Québec City in 1937, and the other two followed in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, between 1960 and 1965. The three committees had their day in the sun in the period that followed Vatican II, when their bishops mandated the committees to apply the liturgical decrees of Vatican II to church architecture. It is worth noting that the words “sacred art” in the committee names came from an anthropological reading of religious architecture and arts fashionable in France at the time the first committees were established. Later, the Benedictine monk Frédéric Debuyst used the term “sacred art” to designate the period between 1920 and 1962, and then “Christian art,” covering church architecture and all that it contains with respect to the arts, to designate the period from 1962 to the present. The two terms co-exist in the title of my thesis; any understanding of today’s Christian art requires a grasp of a history that begins well before 1962.

A study of the meeting minutes of the diocesan sacred art committees from 1937 to 1997 suggests that the committees devoted their energies to three tasks:

1. refurbishing old churches to align them with the new liturgy as harmoniously as possible;
2. ensuring that designs of new churches were in keeping with the new liturgy that followed Vatican II; and
3. watching over the physical state of churches in their respective dioceses.

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By 1966, all existing churches had been refurbished according to the decrees of Vatican II, and there was a marked decline in the construction of new churches following the accelerated secularization of Québec society. Thus, the third task, that of watching over physical properties, became the committees’ principal one. They had become guardians of the venerable tradition of church architecture.

The short 1990 document *Restaurer avec l’esprit du petit propriétaire*[^5] [Restoring in the Spirit of the Small Landlord] by Father Claude Turmel, head of the sacred art committee of the Montréal diocese, is clearly oriented toward this guardianship. Turmel invites his readers to regard churches as old and difficult to maintain, and he suggests that maintenance costs be adjusted to reflect the reality of their survival. For Turmel, patchwork maintenance was the least costly and most realistic option. It was also preferable to a total takeover by the state, which would have cost Québécois considerably more. Church upkeep, when the property is under ecclesiastical control, is done by volunteers and funded by donations.

The diocesan sacred art committees saw themselves as guardians of the churches, which they treated as museum pieces that were witnesses to the past. In a way, this was their “understanding” in the sense of the title of my Master’s thesis. However, they lacked a deeper “understanding” of the situation; the committees appeared to have forgotten that they were not just guardians of churches, but also responsible to watch over a living tradition that was in the process of transforming itself, sometimes in profound ways. We will call this living tradition “church architecture;” it is to churches what an apple is to the apple tree. For close to 2,000 years, church architecture has provided a reservoir of theoretical and formal resources that make

possible the regeneration of churches. The very dynamics of church architecture are such that it would be an error to ignore these potentialities.

In light of the 1992 Quebec Bishops’ document *Risquer l’avenir* that had sparked my reflection, I found myself having to retreat before the diocesan sacred art committees in a move more defensive than thoroughly thought out. As with *Risquer l’avenir*, I disliked the lack of cogent arguments from the diocesan sacred art committees. I also disliked the scholarly and condescending pretensions with which they answered popular sentiment. The committees appeared to me to be as elitist as the authors of *Risquer l’avenir*. This claim by some to hegemony was, in my view, as ill-founded as it was suspect.

Dissatisfied, I felt the need to continue my reflection. In 1997, I was admitted in the first cohort of the new inter-university program of doctoral studies in art history offered by four Québec universities (three Francophone institutions and one Anglophone). As it was necessary to adopt the university of the professor who had agreed to supervise one’s thesis, I was attached to Université Laval in Québec City, where architecture historian Claude Bergeron taught. Trained at Princeton University in New Jersey, Bergeron had acquired a prestigious reputation following his meticulous study of the evolution of church architecture in Québec between 1940 and 1985.  

Because of the Québec context, Bergeron’s study had concentrated on churches in Catholic parishes. I approached Bergeron for two reasons: his mastery of the theological syllabus at the root of the churches he studied, and his mastery of their architectural evolution. For Bergeron, theory blended with architectural evolution so that he was able to show the path to properly understanding that the definition of churches had gone from “houses of God” to “houses of the

people of God” during the period he had studied. I could find no expertise equivalent to Bergeron’s that wed theology to church architecture among other Québec professors of architecture history or theology. Bergeron and I quickly agreed that I would follow up his study by analyzing the evolution of church architecture after 1985. This was not just because of my preoccupation with the new circumstances facing churches; I also wanted to study up close how church architecture can demonstrate flexibility and the ability to adapt to our times.

After a year of work, however, Bergeron asked whether I should direct myself toward a doctoral program in theology rather than architecture history. He consulted Professor Jean Richard, a theologian and Roman Catholic priest at Université Laval, about this. Richard encouraged Bergeron to continue to supervise me, and offered his services as assistant supervisor. Richard cited the following thought to support his encouragement that I continue in architecture history: theology is always connected to culture. It is embodied within the depths of cultural realities, and mixes it up with them. Theology evolves with culture at its heart. Still according to Richard, theology must be accessible to the people. As a result, I found myself with one supervisor in architecture history and another, assisting the first, in theology.

In 2004, I submitted my doctoral thesis in architecture history, and it was published the following year by Presses de l’Université Laval under the title *Le devenir de l’art d’église dans les paroisses catholiques du Québec. Architecture, arts, pratiques, patrimoine (1965–2002)* [The Evolution of Church Art in the Catholic Parishes of Québec: Architecture, Arts, Practices, Heritage (1965–2002)]. The thesis allowed me to formulate a syllogism in which two propositions support a conclusion:

7 Ibid., 31
**First Proposition:** The partial or total conversion of churches has pretty well become the new current phenomenon for church architecture in Québec.

**Second Proposition:** There is no reason to worry about this because church architecture has always adapted itself to that which was apparently foreign to it.

**Conclusion:** The new phenomenon of partial or total conversion of churches is therefore to be interpreted as the start of an architectural renewal in the tradition of the nearly 2,000-year history of church architecture.

In the period between 1940 and 1985 that Bergeron studied, it is the liturgical renewal culminating in Vatican II that gave impetus to the architecture of churches in Québec’s Catholic parishes. The spirit of this renewal emphasized the participation of the faithful, which led to architectural designs centred on the altar. Pews for worshippers were better positioned around the altar, or placed much nearer to it, to facilitate the dialogue between officiating clergy and the faithful. The spirit of liturgical renewal continued after 1985, the year Bergeron published his study on churches. However, this movement overlapped another of growing importance—that of the partial or complete conversion of churches. (A partial conversion involves a combination of liturgical and secular use under the same roof. In a total conversion, the church is decommissioned as a place of worship and turned over to secular use exclusively. In all cases, economic reasons motivate the conversions).

In Québec, the new phenomenon began in earnest with the partial conversion of Sainte Françoise Romaine Church in the municipality of the same name. In 1996, the church was sold to the municipality. It now serves as a gymnasium for the neighboring school and as a place of worship on Sundays, and for weddings and funerals on other days as required. The overall architecture
and the sanctuary have been preserved in their original state, although the nave has been transformed into a multi-use space. Before the partial conversion of Sainte Françoise Romaine, church conversions in Québec were rare; afterwards, they became increasingly frequent. As a general rule, worshippers and other citizens prefer partial rather than total conversions. The former continue to define churches as places of worship while the latter do not. Regardless, even a partial conversion brings change for worshippers and other citizens alike. This change is seen as an infringement of the church’s integrity, but also as a stopgap measure preferable to a total conversion or, worse still, demolition.

The first three chapters of my first doctoral thesis demonstrate how it is not simply the physical integrity of churches that has been transformed; our very image of churches was being altered between 1965 and 2002. In the first chapter, an in-depth review of the meeting minutes of sacred art committees of Québec’s three most populous Catholic dioceses shows a noticeable change in their role: they see themselves increasingly in the service of all citizens rather than just in the service of liturgy. The first chapter also cites an international survey in France, the Vatican and the United States suggesting that church architecture is seeking to open itself to contemporary culture. There are many examples in Quebec to illustrate this point but let us take just one: the Benedictine abbey of St. Benoît du Lac, whose monks sought to install their organ in that part of the abbey church best suited for concerts. The second chapter exposes varying artistic performances, and new rituals and additions to heritage that also contribute in Québec to these changes in the perception of churches.

The third chapter attempts to articulate a theory on the relation between church architecture and its secularized modes of representation. The conceptual tools of the Québec sociologist Fernand Dumont (1927–1997) are useful here. According to Dumont, the religious impetus of church
architecture must become more discreet in societies such as ours. Although intended for worship, churches must nonetheless portray themselves in a more secular way. We willingly ascribe heritage value to churches with artistic and historic merit. The very idea of heritage presents a church as something of wider public interest, regardless of individual beliefs. However, the religious impetus of church architecture remains critical for Dumont; he sees it as essential to the proper functioning of the system, as something that strengthens it from within. Dumont uses the example of the family to explain his thinking: although the family operates in the most private of spaces, it nonetheless remains crucial to the good order of wider society. So it is, for him, with church architecture.

In fact, the fifth chapter of my first doctoral thesis refers back to church architecture in order to demonstrate the dynamism of its architectural tradition. Church architecture has always adapted itself to that which was apparently foreign to it. As this chapter illustrates, church architecture was first Roman, when it adapted Roman basilicas to Christian worship. Afterwards, at the time of the Second Council of Nicea in 787 CE, church architecture confirmed an iconology that resembles the representation of pagan gods; it looked at the time as if it had become pagan, as some Protestants later charged. Church architecture also made itself frivolous with the rococo churches of Southern Germany in the first half of the 18th century. Finally, it sought to portray a more diffuse and universal religious sentiment in the last century, in keeping with what we called “sacred art.” The Rothko Chapel, built in Houston, Texas, in 1971, is an example. Inside, there are big abstract artworks in monochrome tones of wine red by the American artist Mark Rothko that invite meditation. Now, the partial and total conversions of churches testify to the start of yet another renewal in church architecture. The case of Québec is typical of an increasingly serious phenomenon throughout the West.
Finally, the conclusion of my first doctoral thesis reports that only about 50 Québec parish churches were sold between 1965 and 2002, and most of these were put to new uses. This number was negligible at the time, as Quebec had 1,800 Roman Catholic churches. However, a significant rise in this number was in the offing.

Armed with all of these observations, I concluded that there is no escape for churches; everything goes. There is no refuge possible of the kind sought by the three diocesan sacred art committees that treated churches as museum pieces and witnesses to earlier times. There are no churches to protect from the perils of history. It is instead an “evolution,” the same term as in the title of my first doctoral thesis, of the transmutations experienced within a long and venerable architectural tradition—church architecture—that has seen it all (“church architecture” is a term more proper to North America than “church art,” which is more common in French-speaking countries and was adopted in 2004 for that thesis). As church architecture has always adapted itself to that which was apparently foreign to it, there is therefore no basis to worry overmuch in the current context of church conversions.

The publication of my doctoral thesis in 2005 led to a two-year postdoctoral appointment from 2005 to 2007 as Canadian Chair in Urban Heritage at Université du Québec à Montréal. Once again, the decommissioning of churches was on the agenda. This led me to write several scholarly articles on the subject and to discuss it at various colloquia. I served as consultant to provincial and federal governments, and even to municipal governments and parishes grappling with the challenges inherent in the process of church conversions. This experience helping

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various levels of society reach decisions was particularly enriching. It allowed me to note the attachment of a goodly number of my fellow citizens to their churches, and to get a sense of the dimensions of the challenge that conversions represented for them. The people seek to take charge of their churches; their forebears built them and now, on a shoestring, the people feel responsible for conserving them, regardless of whether it is by partial or total conversion. In short, the people are very attached to their churches, and vigorous debates always take place when the future of those churches is compromised.

It was in this context that the Québec government decided to assume a leadership role in the space vacated by ecclesiastical institutions. In the course of things, my postdoctoral status brought me to serve as secretary to closed-door working groups organized by a senior level of government. Within the realm of government preoccupations, two important colloquia were held, one after the other.

The first was a prestigious international symposium held in Montréal in 2005, the first-ever international colloquium on the new phenomenon of church conversions. Called “What Future for Which Churches?”9 the meeting brought together architecture historians and public administrators from several Western countries, all grappling with the decommissioning of churches, to share their experiences and offer their comments. They spoke of inventories that needed to be drawn up and churches to protect according to their heritage value. There was also discussion of church conversions, with case studies presented and discussed. However, the approach of the colloquium was to deal with the management rather than the nature of churches.

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Contrary to the studies of Bergeron and myself, the approach of the colloquium dissociated churches from church architecture. As with the three diocesan sacred art committees I had studied, the symposium neglected the unsuspected potentialities of the venerable architectural tradition inherent in churches. Instead, it continued to define the ideal church as a museum piece, a witness to the past. The colloquium included a goodly number of architecture historians, but few theologians.

All of this was moving further away from my field of study and, as a result, my contribution was relegated to a secondary place. Apart from my right to speak at the colloquium, I was responsible only for drafting the participant’s handbook, a 39-page guide in French and English that summarized the problematic and was distributed to participants ahead of the meeting. Nevertheless, I used the opportunity to insert in the handbook a personal conviction against elitism by certain people, something I held dear ever since I read the Québec Bishops’ *Risquer l’avenir* in 1992. I was fighting on the one hand the elitism of architecture historians who determine the heritage value of churches without involving the people in the process. On the other hand, I was also taking on the theologians who neglected the very real attachment of the faithful and their fellow citizens to their churches.  

In writing this, I believed my position was supported by the one adopted earlier by Father Richard, the priest and theologian who helped architecture historian Claude Bergeron supervise my doctoral thesis. In formulating my polemic writing, I also had in mind the 1996 book of the Swiss Protestant theologian Bernard Reymond,

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who bravely defended the theological value of churches from certain theologians. For Reymond, churches are “theological places” for the people.\(^{11}\)

The second symposium, organized by the Québec government, was more modest, its scope only province-wide. Held in Montréal, it brought together theologians, which was the reason it interested me. Entitled *Le patrimoine religieux du Québec. Éducation et transmission de sens*\(^{12}\) [The Religious Heritage of Québec: Education and the Transmission of Meaning] this 2006 colloquium was set in the context of the new ethics and religious culture program of the Québec Ministry of Education, which promoted, as per the symposium’s subtitle, education and the transmission of meaning with the help of churches. I had been consulted by the Commission des biens culturels du Québec [Québec Commission of Cultural Goods] in my capacity as an architecture historian about the creation of this program in the fall of 2006. But as I was not a theologian, I was not invited to this colloquium.

One snag with this symposium was that it did not question the Ministry of Education’s framework; a good thing about it was that it did discuss the education that could be done through churches. However, one of its basic assumptions was that churches still needed to be separated from their architectural tradition. Once again, churches were being defined as museum pieces. In short, the bias of the Ministry of Education with which the invited theologians had to deal appeared to me to misrepresent churches rather than give them meaning. In the end, this colloquium of theologians did not break out of the dead end in which churches had been

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imprisoned. As with *Risquer l’avenir* and the three diocesan sacred art committees, this symposium did not work very hard to justify the position it had taken.

As a result, one must turn to an extension of the 2005 international colloquium “What Future for Which Churches?” to shed a little more light on the subject. As its organizer was the Québécois architecture historian Luc Noppen, understanding his approach helps to understand the theoretical parameters of this first international symposium on the conversion of churches in Québec and elsewhere in the West. Happily, a fairly lengthy 2013 article by Noppen, entitled “Explorations autour du destin des églises du Québec” [Explorations into the destiny of the churches of Québec], sheds light on the spirit in which the 2005 colloquium was organized, and helps make the point that this architecture historian’s thinking has not fundamentally changed since then.

Noppen starts his long programmatic article by saying that since 1995, Quebec churches are being decommissioned at a high rate.\(^\text{13}\) Using current statistics, Noppen observes that there are currently 2,194 active places of worship in Québec (of all denominations). He adds that between 1900 and 2013, 518 churches were converted, 104 of them only partially so that worship coexists with one or more secular activities. Also between 1900 and 2013, 179 churches were demolished.\(^\text{14}\) (A more recent survey by a Québec government agency noted that 434 places of

\(^{13}\) Luc Noppen, “Explorations autour du destin des églises du Québec,” *L’Action nationale*, 103, no. 6 (June 2013): 54.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 59.
worship were in the process of being decommissioned as of November 2014, compared to 270 in April 2012).\textsuperscript{15}

All of these numbers intersect with those I used in my 2004 doctoral thesis. In addition, they correspond to my prediction of the time: that church conversions are the start of an increasingly necessary renewal in church architecture.

As with the colloquium of 2005, the solutions proposed in Noppen’s 2013 article to deal with the new phenomenon of church conversions are along the lines of administrative management. On the one hand, he advocates that the state assume financial responsibility for those churches that have significant heritage value (principally because of their significant artistic or historical interest) and, ideally, that these churches continue to be used as places of worship. He also suggests that trusts be created in several regions of Québec to take control of decommissioned churches that neither the ecclesiastical authorities nor the state want (each for their own reasons) so as to ensure their complete conversions be done to the benefit of everyone.

That said, Noppen then separates those churches having heritage value from all the others. Those of major heritage interest must be preserved in their entirety because they are witnesses to an era, like museum pieces. The others can be converted. One problem arising from this proposition is that deciding which church merits a heritage designation, and which doesn’t, is a difficult art. One could also say there is a hidden arbitrariness to such decision-making, one ultimately sanctioned by an elite rather than the people.

A second problem with this approach is that the growing number of church conversions, partial or otherwise, have come to affect the common image we have of churches. In a landscape where one church has become a library, another a restaurant, still another a private residence, and so on, the common image of a church becomes scrambled, and this affects all churches, whether they are of heritage value or not. In other words, the distinction between churches to be preserved in their entirety on the basis of their heritage value, and the rest, does not really protect the former from the alteration caused by the latter. In short, the new rising phenomenon of church conversions already affects all churches. It will continue to affect them all, if only at the level of their common image. There is no room for an image of a church that is timeless. All of them must go through an “evolution;” none can escape.

Noppen also proposes a concordat\textsuperscript{16} between the state and ecclesiastical authorities to preserve the greatest possible number of churches from decommissioning on the basis that only worship gives churches meaning and substance. To those who would object to this proposition in the name of separation of church and state, he responds that when a church is a place of worship, the maintenance costs to be borne by the state are less (I believe Noppen refers here to Turmel’s “spirit of the small landlord”).\textsuperscript{17} That could be true. However, a problem arising out of this proposition is that if worship alone truly gives meaning and substance to churches, as he says, why does he reduce it to just a simple theatrical staging? To give meaning is no small thing; it is a direction given in the same way a sea captain does for his ship. Establishing substance is no small thing, either. Substance is the solemnity that emanates from a church bathed in the holy

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 79.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 77.
mysteries; this degree of seriousness is far removed from theatre. As I take him literally, I must ask why Noppen persists in bequeathing primary responsibility for churches only to civil administrators, while giving only token roles to those who give the churches meaning and substance? Would it not make more sense to put in charge of churches the people who give them meaning and substance, or at least to make them active front-line players? More important still, and this is one of my convictions, those who have always given meaning and substance to churches should make up a critical level of authority, recognized as such and with all of the theological work that this would require.

However, in outlining his detailed thought, Noppen does us an enormous service, one that Risquer l'avenir, the three diocesan committees of sacred art, and the theologians’ colloquium of 2006 had not bothered to do. In his 2013 article, Noppen not only illuminates the general direction arising out of the 2005 international colloquium on churches; he also seeks to present the totality of the most decisive elements in the problematic of churches that worship has abandoned. Even if I disagree with his approach, the fact he seeks to articulate a global approach does him credit because for the first time in Québec, we can at least discuss the subject from a tangible starting point. His speeches and his writings have started a debate, and it is now up to us to take up this invitation.

I’m game, because I see in Noppen’s 2013 article contradictions and confusion that could have been avoided by a different approach. But we should avoid personalizing the debate, because Noppen’s thinking is based on the French model of protecting the heritage value of churches. This model was formulated in 1905 and in 1907, and has since then spread to the rest of the
world. In 1905, churches became the property of the French State, and a 1907 law granted the power to assure the continuity of the public exercise of worship. For the French state, the question is to preserve at all costs a certain number of churches as museum pieces, and this based on their heritage value. It is also a question of working in collaboration with ecclesiastical authorities within a sort of concordat to ensure that the greatest possible number of churches be maintained as places of worship. For the French state, only worship gives meaning and substance to churches. However, the growing number of decommissioned churches upsets this model because the state can no longer manage adequately such a high number of decommissioned churches using this model’s criteria; the pace of this phenomenon has caught it off guard.

Noppen, like many others, believes in the French model. He expresses his uncertainty in the face of this contemporary context that merchandises and privatizes such a high number of churches. He also seeks rapid solutions. For him as for others, it is urgent high time to avoid changes to the integrity of such a high number of churches.

I do not share this sense of urgency; nor am I as pessimistic with respect to the merchandizing and privatization of churches, if only because I know that the first churches in England were privately owned by nobles before they became part of the English nation’s network of parish churches. Are we not really experiencing another new beginning, one in an endless series of new beginnings, in the long architectural tradition of nearly 2,000 years that is church architecture? In the aftermath of Bergeron’s 1985 book, and of my doctoral thesis that he

19 Ibid., 184–186
20 Ibid., 67.
supervised with the help of the theologian Richard, I continue to believe that church architecture has not spoken its last word. Church architecture has always adapted itself to that which was apparently foreign to it, and there is nothing to suggest this would be any different with the new phenomenon of church conversions. The more I read the work of those who neglect to evaluate the unsuspected potential of church architecture in the name of an ideological bent or a conformist mindset, the more I am inclined to take seriously only this venerable architectural tradition that has always proven its richness.

My doctoral thesis in architecture history identifies the keyword in the current situation facing churches as “alteration;” that is, the alteration of the architectural integrity of the church as well as what it represents. Alteration is the great foil of the French model adopted by Noppen and most of the civil servants and university researchers working throughout the West to protect heritage, at least if the international colloquium of 2005 is to be believed.

In contrast, the idea of fully taking on alteration implies that churches be put in the hands of those who do not constitute the recognized elite. Thanks to the alteration of churches, the people can benefit from a rare opportunity to take charge of the churches. For certain lucid thinkers, such as Paul Claudel in 1913, it is up to the people to appropriate churches in their own fashion, that is to say without fancy manners. 22 In 1934, T.S. Eliot affirmed far and wide the greatness of the public appropriation of churches when he wrote The Rock (a title that was a metaphor for what the church represents to the people):

22 Paul Claudel, Art poétique (Paris: Mercure, 1913), 155.
There always ‘as been someone buildin’ a church. Always someone buildin’, buildin’ buildin’. It’s God’s ‘ouse and it’s the people’s ‘ouse and it’s our ‘ouse.²³

In other words, building, rebuilding or converting a church, partially or otherwise, responds to a sort of survival instinct of the people. For Claudel, as for Eliot, this is theology incarnate (which is self-evident for a religion that presents itself as one of incarnation), accessible to the masses. Another important 20th-century thinker on churches, Georges Bataille, believed churches become “beastly” when they become, as they must, popular;²⁴ that is to say that churches should be exempt from the religious or aesthetic criteria of high culture. In keeping with these ideas, the alteration of churches offers a good opportunity to return churches to the people and, in the process, to reject the ruling elite by disassembling the myths they so painstakingly built to consolidate their dominion.

In the clear light of day, it is readily apparent that it was the French model that discreetly served as a reference to the authors of Risquer l’avenir, the thee diocesan committees on sacred art, the 2005 symposium on churches, the 2006 theologians’ colloquium, and, once again, to Noppen in 2013. It would appear that the French model, although shaken by the current situation, continues to provide the only available interpretative matrix, bringing with it still more confusion and stagnation because of the absence of a viable solution. One of its most tenacious biases is that it dismisses, without a second thought, church architecture as a future solution because it is fundamentally religious.

Faced with the disarray created by the imperiled French model, it would be wise to propose again the relevance of church architecture as bearer of still unsuspected potentialities. Church architecture, having amply demonstrated that it can adapt to that which is apparently foreign to it, could absorb in a powerful, simple, and coherent manner the new phenomenon of church conversions. Furthermore, the current situation allows church architecture to finally become a device for liberating the people from the elite and the myths they built in an ill-concealed desire to dominate. In other words, the new phenomenon of alteration of churches invites theology to be more critical than ever of the too self-evident systems and the habits they encourage.

At least the three diocesan committees on sacred art, the theologians’ symposium in 2006 and Noppen’s 2013 article all go in the same direction as the one I identified in the third chapter of my first doctoral thesis: a concern about the coexistence between the religious and the secular to ensure the future of churches. However, I had written this with the idea that the religious inspiration of churches is primary and that this foundation must remain. This is why a concordat between the religious and the secular to ensure the future of churches is not my primary concern. The 2008 book *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* warned that working on the connection between the religious and the secular is an immense task within an enormous intellectual field. As working in such a field does not strike me as a priority, I will abstain from getting involved.

There is also no question of creating out of whole cloth a new theology that would furnish new parameters for church architecture. As my first doctoral thesis suggests, the tradition of church architecture as bearer of still unsuspected potentialities is relevant. However, the concern about the coexistence between the religious and the secular is not my primary concern. I will abstain from getting involved in such a field.

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architecture is always dying and being reborn; it has a long-term perspective, and cares nothing for our short-term views. As we do not reinvent the wheel with each new generation, the option I put forward is to orient myself toward the most pertinent current theological contributions to illuminate a general situation that has become confused and stagnant with respect to churches.

My first doctoral thesis maintains that church conversions are the launch of a renewal in church architecture. That was my diagnosis as an architecture historian. It is from this diagnosis that I must now consolidate a theoretical viewpoint that draws attention to the fact that such an architectural renewal is rarely pleasing because of the alteration that it brings to churches and, by this very fact, to our usual ideas about them.

On this subject, one theoretical contribution increasingly drew my attention during my reflection in this area, and finally imprinted itself in my thoughts: the work of the self-taught theologian Walter Benjamin in the first half of the 20th century. Benjamin’s contribution has the merit of embracing all of the problematic, and of going straight to its heart, because he anticipates as decisive the very idea of the alteration of churches. In contrast with all that is confused, contradictory, superficial, and stagnant, his contribution is fairly clear (although he was partial to esotericism), coherent and fundamental. It meets our expectations of an intellectual by offering a finely articulated solution. Until something better comes along, I use his contribution as a reference.

The first reason I choose Benjamin is his view that the alteration of churches was a positive because it finally makes possible the popular appropriation of churches through their conversion. Today, his thinking appears judicious; increasingly at odds with the challenge of maintaining a church without sufficient help from the state or ecclesiastical authorities, the people take things
in hand themselves and undertake conversions on a shoestring. In taking things in hand, the people also speak: they affirm themselves with pride in a church conversion, even if the price they must pay is the alteration of the church.

In the evening of March 24, 2008, as I was returning home from a consultation with local authorities in a small Québec village struggling with the need to convert their church by themselves, I reflected on this connection between the alteration of churches and popular emancipation. I asked myself at the time if the work of the Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács would be helpful here because he, too, believed in popular emancipation through aesthetics. For me, the link between aesthetics and popular emancipation is a serious path leading to a satisfying future for the churches. However, I came to abandon Lukács because he neglected the question of alteration, which is also now on the agenda for the churches. To my mind, only Benjamin’s theological work offered a promising path because a conversion very often links the alteration of a church to a taking of control by the people. Thus, an entire community becomes aware of its capacity to speak to itself through the perspective of converting its church. It delivers itself from silence and servitude, and into a realm usually reserved for the elite. It liberates and actualizes itself.

A second reason motivating my choice of Benjamin is that churches are, for him, closely tied to their architectural tradition. Innovating on a church harkens back to church architecture as a living tradition that carries within it unsuspected potentialities. This is exactly what Bergeron and I promoted in 1985 and 2004, respectively. The alteration of churches therefore puts things back in a historical perspective. It invites an evaluation of the new phenomenon of church alterations in the light of its own architectural tradition, and to find there the theoretical resources and the architectural forms to legitimize the new order of things.
In other words, church architecture offers the possibility to confirm church conversions (which the elite never want) as speech returned to the people. For Benjamin, each church is like a language that harkens back more fully to its rich linguistic treasure: church architecture. The people are called upon to speak and affirm themselves in the conversion of their church. Church architecture, as a tradition of architectural theories and forms, can help the people in this enterprise. Even if the final result leaves something to be desired, the important thing is that people speak through church conversions.

In summary, here are the key points of Benjamin’s thinking that interest me:

1. The alteration of churches is a reality of our time that must be accepted with serenity (I would add that alteration happens through a partial or total conversion of churches).
2. Alteration is a positive because it returns churches to the people (I would add that this happens through church conversions).
3. Every church is intimately linked to its long architectural tradition. Within church architecture are resources to reformulate a theoretical framework, and architectural forms that are adequate to adapt to our times.
4. Architecture is like a language, and church architecture is its linguistic treasure.

Finally, everyone agrees that religious inspiration lies at the origin of churches. They are built to meet the needs of worship. However, Benjamin goes further. He believes that religion is at the foundation of culture, and that a healthy relationship with religion is possible. On this decisive point, he articulates his thinking as a response to the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

In his 1872 book on Greek tragedy and in his 1888 book *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche reproached Socrates for having submitted philosophy to the dictates of religion. Socrates was
sentenced to death in Athens on the pretext that he corrupted youth and failed to honor the gods. Socrates did not flee his accusers. He accepted his death sentence and held a philosophical discourse on the primacy of eternal life. Then he drank the deadly poison. Nietzsche took the view that to accept such a fate was to submit to the religious underpinnings of Athenian law. Thus, Nietzsche does not regard Socrates as a model for those who want to live free, because Socrates submits to religion.

Opposite Nietzsche, Benjamin saw Socrates as the first to introduce in an exemplary manner a new way of being with respect to religion. With Socrates, the human person finally emerges from the silence to which the divine had until then consigned him. Before Socrates, man resigned himself to his fate in silence, as evidenced in the Greek tragedies: man moaned and shouted his despair in the face of the fate imposed by the gods. But with Socrates, a space now exists within which it is possible to reason and argue without necessarily running roughshod over religion. In his “Socrates,” written in 1916 and published posthumously, Benjamin says that questions related to the death sentence are secondary; of primary importance is the recourse to language as a tool of emancipation, regardless of one’s human condition. There is a balance between argument and freedom; one who knows how to reason and argue is free. For Benjamin, the genius of Plato was to present Socrates as the model par excellence of this new relationship with religion:

[t]he Socratic inquiry is not the holy question which awaits an answer …. [r]ather, a mere means to compel conversation, it forcibly, even impudently, dissimulates, ironizes ....

Unlike Nietzsche, Benjamin was not seeking to destroy religion. Just as Plato had done with Socrates, Benjamin seeks to make more flexible the overly rigid relationship between the human person and religion. For the writings of Plato and of Benjamin regarding Socrates, language is the medium that makes freedom possible. The interplay of language makes possible a new outlook. Through reasoning and argument, one comes to see things differently. The status quo imposed by the order of things is undone by the unsuspected potentialities of language. Language appears as a peaceful revolutionary tool. Through, with, and in language, a space of freedom is finally possible in the framework of the relationship between the human person and religion:

The Socratic dialogue needs to be studied in relation to myth. What did Plato intend with it? Socrates: with this figure, Plato annihilates the old myth while adopting it.27

Contrary to Nietzsche, Benjamin took the view that there is a Socratic moment that is exceptional in history; that is to say, there is a pre-Socratic time, and a post-Socratic time. Since Socrates, we can no longer regard the relationship with religion in the same way. Since Socrates, religious servitude ends when the person begins to reason and argue. Unfortunately, there is a distinction between Plato, who makes obvious the importance of the Socratic moment, and the erroneous interpretations of Plato’s writings that followed. In Christianity, in particular, a long string of falsehoods claiming to be drawn from Plato’s writings, held sway. These falsehoods minimized the importance of the Socratic moment or, at best, hijacked it to the benefit of an elite. To Nietzsche, this drift away from the writings of Plato was reason enough to simply invalidate

27 Ibid., 52.
the entire tradition of Western thought, including its religious foundations. Not so for Benjamin, for whom it was sufficient to make a return to the Socratic moment while remaining inside a theological framework.

In any case, Nietzsche and Benjamin agree that churches have been impregnated to their very marrow by the erroneous interpretations of Plato’s writings. Indeed, Benjamin would willingly have subscribed to the conclusion of Nietzsche’s commentary on churches:

[A]s houses of God and spaces for ostentatiously displaying our intercourse with the World-Beyond, these buildings speak much that is too emotional and too partisan for us godless ones to be able to think our thoughts here.  

In this extract from *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche thunders that there is no room to think for oneself in churches. In other words there is no place to express and develop a personal thought. It would appear that the divine seeks through a church to gag human beings, just as in the time before Socrates.

However, while Nietzsche rebels in the face of this, becomes unhinged and clamors, Benjamin takes a different path. Benjamin refers to the Socratic moment, more particularly to the dialogues initiated by Socrates after he is sentenced to death. According to those writings of Plato that culminate in his book *Phaeton*, Socrates after he was sentenced to death continued to argue calmly, even turning the arguments of those who sentenced him to his own advantage. The

specter of death and the distress it can engender remained in the background. In the end, it was
by speaking that Socrates kept all of his human dignity to the last and confounded his
adversaries. Benjamin does not forget this lesson. He will define the church as a language hiding
unsuspected potentialities that need only to be discovered. As with the dialogues arising from the
death sentence of Socrates, such a language can be turned to the advantage of those who were to
be intimidated or silenced.

Benjamin is careful to add that the people argue in their own way, and that they have their own
language. Absent a mastery of the finer points of high culture, the people have always sought to
appropriate a way of speaking that is their own. This is why Benjamin was interested by labour
strikes as a form of popular speech. In *Critique of Violence* (1921), he discusses how the strike
illustrates the degree to which capitalism depends on workers. The strike halts production of
commodities destined for sale, and money no longer flows into the coffers of the powerful. Thus
a myth is destroyed: big capital seeks to make people believe that they are at its mercy, but the
strike reveals in a raw way that it is big capital that is at the mercy of the people. As with
Socrates speaking to those who sentenced him, Benjamin did not go further with *Critique of
Violence*. He let language do its revolutionary work, and relied only on the power of language to
dismantle the mystifications used to defend the interests of the powerful. Benjamin did not hijack
language toward other ends that took us further from democratic debate. He knew that Georges
Sorel had warned in *Reflections on Violence* (1908) that hijacking language toward other ends
risks replacing one elite with another that would seek its own opportunity to curtail free speech.

After analyzing the labour strike as a language, Benjamin continually sought to ascribe nobility
to popular speech. He invited the people to behave in a “barbaric” way, that is, to respect their
own manner of appropriating things. The use of the word “barbaric” can appear similar to that of
Bataille and Claudel on the “bestiality” of a church appropriated by the people. But in his programmatic 1931 text *The Destructive Character*, one is struck by how Benjamin takes up almost entirely the thinking of architecture historian Aloïs Riegl on this subject. In *Late Roman Art Industry* (1901) Riegl looked with favour upon the churches of late antiquity built by the so-called “barbarians” who so clumsily interpreted the architecture and classic arts of earlier times. The churches built by the “barbarians” were asymmetrical, and made of composite materials. They often squandered columns from classical temples by adding them to a makeshift assemblage. In other words, they did not meet the classic criteria; that is why this manner of doing things was later described as the origin of the gothic style of cathedrals (Goths being “barbarians”). However, Riegl says barbarian know-how marked the start of a new era. To fully appreciate it, it was necessary to stop evaluating it in the light of the criteria of the Greco-Roman elite:

> [T]he old propositions, on which the ancient situation depended, had to be destroyed and made to give way to transitional modes ….

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In other words, Riegl is saying that beyond the loss of classical representation, a new world has emerged that deserves to be appreciated according to new criteria:

> [B]eside its negative role of demolition in order to **make room** [emphasis added] for the new, late Roman art always had positive aims, which have to date remained unrecognized, because they

29 Ibid., 11.
appear so different from our accustomed ideas of the aims of
modern art which to some degree are the aims of classical and
Augustan-Trajanic art.\textsuperscript{30}

In \textit{The Destructive Character}, Benjamin reformulates Riegl:

The destructive character knows only one watchword; \textbf{make room}
[emphasis added]. And only one activity; clearing away. His need
for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred. The
destructive character is young and cheerful.\textsuperscript{31}

In total agreement with Riegl, Benjamin reconnected with the “barbarian” origins of church
architecture in order to rediscover the grandeur of this founding moment. Just as Riegl did,
Benjamin took the view that it was necessary to stop using criteria foreign to churches when
seeking to appreciate them.

Benjamin’s thinking was far-sighted. Now that church conversions are happening with
increasing frequency, we are being invited to take seriously the instructions of Riegl as relayed
by Benjamin, so as to reinvent churches based on new criteria arising from the history of
architecture itself.

With this aim, the first chapter of this new doctoral thesis will discuss the interpretations of the
writings of Plato that framed church architecture down through the centuries. In academic
circles, we call this support structure “Christian Platonism.” Long dominant, Christian Platonism

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 12.

\textsuperscript{31} Walter Benjamin, “The Destructive Character,” in \textit{Selected Writings 2} (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), 541.
evaded the Socratic moment. The silence in which the individual was locked before Socrates was reintroduced by the clergy. I will in the first chapter look at several churches to demonstrate how the clergy came to offer people churches that moved their sensibilities without giving them the power they deserved. In other words, the sensibilities of the people are placed under guardianship, just as with a child. The current situation amply demonstrates the frustration to which this can lead: on the one hand, ecclesiastical institutions make decisions about churches without really consulting worshippers and other citizens in a serious way; on the other, the state manifests these same reflexes with its reliance on the elite.

The second chapter will present a detailed view of the evolution of Walter Benjamin’s thinking, starting with the writings of his youth and up to those that preceded his sudden death in 1940. In my view, two phases marked his intellectual journey. The first culminated with his 1928 book on German baroque drama, the only book published during his lifetime. The second phase continues the preoccupations of the first. Benjamin’s adherence to Marxist ideals give him a Marxist orientation. A key term arises in this second phase of his writings: the “aura”. He defined it for the first time in his 1931 essay on photography as follows: “A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be,” that is, a metaphysical reality which maintains a distance while allowing itself to be glimpsed. For Benjamin, the archetypal functioning of the aura is the priest at the altar. The altar is oriented toward the holy mysteries. The priest contemplates the holy mysteries while keeping his distance. Far removed from the faithful, the priest is privileged before God. Once again, Benjamin reminds us that the aura rests on a religious foundation that encourages elitism. In his

essay, he shows how the aura came to be democratized with the advent of photography. The primitives had it right: photography makes it possible to capture the soul. Far from being frightened by this, as the primitives were, Benjamin welcomed it. He was looking to give back to the people the aura that had until that time been left in the hands of the elite (including the priest). With the help of photography, the aura of things and people becomes accessible to a greater number of people, and can be manipulated by them. Paradoxically, this is a winning proposition for the people. They profit from it and give themselves over to the creativity that photography brings. The necessary diminution of the “distance” of the aura is compensated by the gain of ownership. Starting with the example of photography, Benjamin proposes a new approach for the aura. Like Plato, he recognizes that religion is at the foundation of culture. He seeks to pursue the work begun by Plato and to integrate the Socratic moment to the religious foundation of architecture and the arts (that is, the aura). In other words, Benjamin seeks to insert the aura into the rules of the game for language. In matters of architecture and the arts, Benjamin thus presents himself as a new Plato pursuing the task left unfinished by the first Plato in this area.

The third chapter will probe the question of church conversions by testing some of Benjamin’s ideas about architectural language. The aura of churches permeates this language. However, as we are primarily engaged in a theological exercise rather than an architectural one, I want to caution that this chapter will aim for formal rather than theoretical solutions. It is ultimately to be hoped that Benjamin and his idea of language become theory in action, in the form of practical theology taking shape.

With respect to the conclusion, I say that what Benjamin sought to do was return the aura to the people, to democratize it. This involves a radical questioning of the received ideas about the
nature of a church, its integrity and its common representations. The work of Benjamin appears to me completely à propos, given the new phenomenon of church conversions that the elite so disapprove of because conversions alter churches. His thinking illuminates the current situation in a manner that is as appropriate as it is rare. It is a marker. We might even say that his initiative questions the way theological work was carried out with clericalism and all its secular derivatives. Indeed, the church is idealized by Risquer l’avenir, the diocesan committees of sacred art, the 2005 international symposium on the future of churches, the 2006 theologians’ colloquium and the 2013 article by Noppen. They all put it in the “distance,” making it practically unapproachable by defining it as a museum piece untouchable by any save self-appointed specialists. They do this without recognizing that by acting in this way, they base their action on a type of pre-Socratic religion. The reference to the French model destined to preserve churches is put into question. The people get no say with the French model; they are condemned to silence, as they were before the time of Socrates in matters of religion. Because of this drift, many of the resources of church architecture are neglected. With Benjamin, it is the opposite: the church and all that underlies it metaphysically (the aura) takes part in the rules of the game of language. Thus, unsuspected resources of church architecture can come to the rescue of this enterprise that seeks a better democratic debate. In seeking to return the church to the people, is it not theology itself that Benjamin seeks to return to the people? In this case, church conversions constitute a “theological place” whose dynamic should be followed attentively and in the name of theology itself.

Finally, to properly understand Benjamin as he seeks to diminish the aura for the salvation of the people, it is first necessary to ensure that we properly understand how church architecture was
theologically founded and articulated from its beginnings nearly 2,000 years ago. That is what the first chapter, starting now, will discuss.
Chapter 1
Churches as Witnesses to Christian Platonism

1.1 Introduction

I place the beginnings of church architecture in the reign of the Roman emperor Constantine, who ended the persecution of Christians in the fourth century of the Common Era. While there were Christian places of worship before then, it would be difficult to speak of them in the context of church architecture because they were not churches in the sense of easily recognized public buildings fronting onto streets.

A convert to Christianity, Constantine benefited from a new political theology drafted with care by Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea. In a panegyric delivered on July 25, 335 CE, Eusebius praised the emperor-convert on the 30th anniversary of his reign.\(^3\) In the panegyric, probably delivered in Constantinople, Eusebius also designated the emperor as the Vicar of Christ on Earth. He explains that the earthly here-below is the antechamber of the celestial hereafter; through a universal empire, the Roman and Christian emperor represents the here-below. In this play of reflections between Heaven and Earth, Eusebius maintains that there can be only one worldly power on Earth, just as there is only one God in Heaven. In this context, the Emperor alone has the duty to watch over the well-being of humankind, and is answerable for it to God. Moreover, the tone of the panegyric borrows from Platonism, defined as those interpretations of Plato’s writings that had already become commonplace by then. Many Christian apologists of the time

borrowed from this Greek interpretive framework to proclaim the Gospel, and Eusebius was one of them. He sought to ensure that non-Christians as well as Christians could grasp his panegyric, so he worked to translate Christian terms into Platonic ones, relying heavily on this interpretive framework inherited from Greek philosophy.

I note in the panegyric the beginnings of a rough outline for a theological program for church architecture. There was a pressing need for this as the growing number of new believers made necessary the construction of many new churches. At the time, imperial Roman power derived from divine right, so it was up to the state to meet this need. In this context, the political theology of Eusebius furnished certain guiding principles to the fledgling field of church architecture. As with the rest of his panegyric, Eusebius’s comments on church architecture had all the hallmarks of Platonism, in that they were programmatic, and after Eusebius, the entire history of church architecture will become intertwined with Platonism. In the panegyric, non-Christian Platonic themes come to be mixed in with Christian themes. A way of making Christian theology was coming into being that would endure for a very long time, and come to be known as Christian Platonism. It is only with the pamphleteering of Friedrich Nietzsche toward the end of the 19th century that Christian Platonism began to come into serious question. Today, in the specific field of church architecture, I am among those who think that the conversion of churches has seriously shaken up Christian Platonism. I will therefore focus my attention on the fundamental questions arising from this seismic shift. It would appear that an epic 2,000-year tradition of church architecture is being profoundly transformed. However, before going any further, I think it would be useful to set out in more detail the relation between Christian Platonism and church architecture.
1.2 Church Architecture and the Search for a Theoretical as well as Formal Synthesis

With the sudden advent of many new converts in the time of Constantine, it was necessary to find adequate places of worship, and quickly. As Christian worship was based on the idea of the faithful gathering together, attention turned to the Roman basilicas that served as great halls in the heart of the imperial cities. Roman basilicas were used for community gatherings, and it was there that magistrates meted out justice and dealt with current affairs. Now converted to a church, the basilica supplanted the temple, a place of worship rooted in Greco-Roman concepts. Nevertheless, elements of Platonism quickly made their way into the newly Christianized Roman basilica. Gradually, these elements came to form a systematic church architecture. Through this systemization, the idea of a temple once again came to the fore: the temple was the house of God, the church was the house of the people of God. However, Christian Platonism increasingly sought through the ages to redefine the church as the house of God, under guard of the clergy.

It would be impossible to identify all of the constituent elements of Christian Platonism in church architecture and to present them in a large, articulated and scholarly whole, because these elements, often presented as parts of a harmoniously closed system, are in fact parts of a rather motley amalgam. The theoretical jumble that will come to embody church architecture is in fact the hidden face of Christian Platonism. It is today incumbent on theologians to unveil this construct in the interests of truth.

In order to understand the history of church architecture, this first chapter will aim to examine each of the principal constituent elements of Christian Platonism, and to expose the contribution of each to church architecture. To this end, I will use the following reference points, each representing a constituent element:
1. the allegory of the cave from Plato’s *Republic*;

2. the Eros from Plato’s *Symposium*; and

3. the powerful idea of the will to order, a key theme in Plato’s *Timaeus*.

These three reference points will be sufficient to provide a clear picture of the development of church architecture from its origins to our time.

The first reference point is the allegory of the cave at the start of Book VII of Plato’s *Republic*. The story presents men chained in a cave since childhood. They have never seen the sun, except for its glimmer on the rock wall before them. They know only the twilight, and nothing of broad daylight. If one of them is taken out of the cave, he will have to grow accustomed to the full light before he can begin to clearly distinguish forms. For Plato, this man will come to better appreciate the light than the darkness.

In his panegyric, Eusebius borrows the idea of passing from darkness to light from the story of the cave. He says that the world was in darkness before the Christian emperor Constantine. With Constantine, the light of Christ floods the world. For Eusebius, the worldly and the divine communicate with each other through the intermediary of Christ, who is the light unto the world. As the Vicar of Christ on Earth, the emperor makes the divine light visible. In his panegyric, Eusebius goes so far as to compare the emperor to the Sun. One peculiarity of this new political theology is that, unlike the paganism of antiquity, it never requires a pilgrimage to any particular site. The Sun represented the beyond, and was impossible to confine to the Earth. One reflection of this on church architecture was the growing trend to orient churches toward the Sun. This orientation bathed churches in a light symbolizing Christ chasing out the darkness.
In his 1967 book *Liturgy and Architecture*, the theologian Louis Bouyer demonstrates how the earliest Christian churches borrowed from Jewish synagogues of the time for the choice and layout of their liturgical furnishings. Churches, like synagogues, were also organized along a longitudinal axis.

The difference, however, was that churches were oriented toward the east and the rising Sun, rather than Jerusalem. Eusebius explains in his panegyric the theology underlying this new orientation: Christ, like a sun, brought with him a universalism that freed humankind from the darkness of local divinities. In many respects, Judaism found itself disqualified in the name of the new universalism that expressed itself in Greek philosophy, the only universal language of the time. Lactantius, another theologian of Eusebius’s day, also stressed the universalism of the Christian message; both men believed the new religion would transcend cultures. Thus, in order to express itself, the new religion would don the mantle of Greek philosophy.

The churches signalled the passing from darkness into full light. Then came the role of the bishop as the emperor’s official representative. Eusebius had taken great care in his panegyric to compare the Roman Christian emperor to a sun that shines over all of the empire; the bishop, sitting in the semi-circular apse, symbolizes this sunlight. Metaphorically, the church is oriented to the invisible light that is Christ, while the bishop embodies the visible light of the emperor as the Vicar of Christ on Earth. Two logics of illumination are thus juxtaposed in the earliest churches. They will reappear in the High Middle Ages, when the court and the nobility sit in the


monumental west-facing entrance section of churches, called Westwerk in Carolingian churches. With the Westwerk, worldly power looks out over the sanctuary from the heights of a balcony so as not to directly face the spiritual power that occupies the sanctuary. In the 17th century and the time of Louis XIV of France, the Sun-King, the chapel at Versailles will again copy the Carolingian model of worldly power looking out at the sanctuary from on high.

At first sight, the bishop of the Middle Ages is no longer a civil magistrate; he has first and foremost become a representative of the pope. In a sense, worldly power has been thrown out of the sanctuary by this change in legal status. The panegyric of Eusebius had undergone an ecclesiastical re-reading that strengthened the pope at the expense of the worldly authorities, and this for the same reasons evoked by Eusebius and Lactantius: that the universalism that arrived with Christ reduced local peculiarities to almost nothing. In the meantime, the Roman Empire had been fragmented into multiple kingdoms; Ancient Rome was giving way to Christian Rome, and the figure of the pope was now dominant. In church architecture, the result was a more pronounced emphasis on sunlight at the very site of the sanctuary as the site par excellence of ecclesiastical power. According to the allegory of the cave, which still served as an interpretive framework for the clergy, ecclesiastical power was the only true participant in the full illumination. Whether he was powerful or not, the believer was held to be living fairly deep inside the cave, far from the exit, and only on his way to the light. As the situation of the believer did not authorize him to pronounce on theology, he had to remain quiet.

It was historian Georges Duby who ably demonstrated how church sanctuaries were redesigned according to this thinking. 36 Between 1140 and 1144, Abbott Suger rebuilt the eastern end—the

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chevet—of the Saint Denis abbey church, near Paris. Suger opens up the walls of the sanctuary, and light floods the sanctuary and all of the surrounding chapels. Suddenly, it is as if the many monk-priests who officiate at mass at each of the chapel altars are brought together in unison. Daylight provides a unity to the liturgical site. It could almost be said that the half-circle of the chevet becomes a church within a church. But Suger also brings down the rood screen that serves as a screen between the sanctuary and the long nave. The partition falls and light spreads more fully in the interior of the abbey church. The *Theologia mystica*, a writing attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, had served as a theological reference to Suger. Its guiding principle was that of a mystical illumination, metaphorically presented as a sun shining down on all earthly creatures. This was a revival of a theme dear to Eusebius, even though the clergy had now become the principal player in this mysticism. Confined to the nave and just about relegated to the role of spectator, alongside the laity, the worldly authorities nonetheless kept a wary eye on things.

Suger’s reconstruction of the chevet of the abbey church of Saint Denis in the 12th century represented a peak in architecture in relation to this idea of passing from the dark into the light. The chevet of the abbey church, as well as its underlying theological program, will subsequently serve as a major reference to others.

The second reference point that helps to better understand the relation between Christian Platonism and church architecture is Plato’s *Symposium*. In it, Plato writes of the assembled guests discussing the erotic attraction of beautiful bodies in their relation to the ideal of beauty, and expressing a variety of opinions. When it is the turn of Socrates, he repeats the words he had heard spoken by the priestess Diotima, whom he regards as an authority on the subject. For her, the erotic attraction of beautiful bodies is a call to reach higher, to return to the source of beauty, in the same way one climbs a ladder (the metaphor of the ladder is in section 211c of
Symposium). As the source of beauty coincides with the highest metaphysical realities, the carnal is called upon to purify itself. In ascending, the process of integration demands time and effort, but the ultimate goal is worth the trouble; it alone does not disappoint.

In late antiquity, Saint Augustine had taken up the link of erotic attraction to beauty as developed in Plato’s Symposium, having been introduced to the book by his mentor, Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. However, Saint Augustine gave a Christian inflection to his reading of Symposium because the pagan Platonism of his time was often fairly intellectualized. This was evidenced by the writings of the philosopher Porphyry, who dismissed worship because he saw in it a psycho-affective dimension he deemed valueless. Intellectualism distanced itself from the evangelical message that gave value to the psycho-affective dimension in the human person and its need to pour out its heart. Saint Augustine’s strategy therefore consisted of giving more value to the psycho-affective dimension of Diotima’s speech Symposium, and to “Christianize” this reading of it. As with many Church Fathers who evolved in a world influenced by Greek culture, Saint Augustine sought a universal authority figure to legitimize his theological approach; Diotima’s speech served this purpose.

In her speech, Diotima dealt with a progression in stages (210a-211b) from the coarsest to the most refined. In other words, there is a journey from the carnal to the full contemplation of the essence of beauty. Saint Augustine makes use of Diotima’s speech in his book De Vera Religione, written in 387 CE. Despite the fact that he softens the cerebral approach of Diotima in favour of a more holistic approach that better integrates the psycho-affective dimension of the

37 Michel Fattal, Plotin chez Augustin, suivi de Plotin face aux Gnostiques (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2006), 51.
38 Augustine (of Hippo), Of True Religion (Chicago: Regenery, [387 CE] 1959), 44–49.
human person, he remains attached to Plato. As in Eusebius’s panegyrical, Saint Augustine clearly
distances himself from certain philosophical currents of the time that confounded God and
Nature. As with Eusebius, Plato provides material with which to avoid pantheism. The option to
transcend nature appears in a fictitious dialogue with an architect in De Vera Religione, in which
Saint Augustine downplays the importance of the architect’s work.39 For Saint Augustine, that
which makes for cohesion in architecture is invisible and not of this world; thus, for him, the
theologian has precedence over the architect. This recalls the free interpretation in 1767 of
Plato’s Phaedon by Moses Mendelssohn, who describes architecture that does not draw from the
invisible as a vulgar pile of stones without value.40 This is precisely what Saint Augustine sought
to say in his time.

The Christian appropriation of Diotima’s speech does justice to an important aspect of the
theological program of a church architecture still in its infancy. With the advent of a Roman and
Christian empire, Roman basilicas were converted in a manner consistent with the idea of a
linear itinerary in successive stages, as with Diotima’s ladder. The architecture historian Bruno
Zevi skilfully explained how the initial design of basilicas was changed to serve the new religion
in his 1948 book Architecture as Space.41 Prior to Christianity, symmetry of the architectural
elements prevailed, as with the second-century Roman basilica at Ulpia (it no longer stands
today). The Ulpia basilica had a long body with two semi-circles at either end. This is no longer
the case with the advent of Christianity; one of the two semi-circles is truncated. Hereon in, it is
the spiritual itinerary that prevails, ending in internalization. As with Saint Sabine in Rome, built

39 Ibid., 56–57.
between 422 and 432 C.E., the idea of making one’s way in stages and in a straight line is made manifest by the two colonnades flanking the long unobstructed nave. The path leads to the sanctuary in the front, where the last stage of the itinerary becomes that much more mystical. For the faithful, it implies the contemplation of worship at the altar that addresses itself to the Most High.

In contrast with the previous architectural model of the Greek temple, which emphasized symmetry and proportion, the Christianized Roman basilica instead developed a dynamic architectural character articulated around the spiritual journey of the believer. In many respects, this was how the Roman basilica became the church in the West.

Everything leads to the conclusion that Saint Augustine and his Christian contemporaries preferred to draw from Plato than Plotinus, understandable in light of the fact that the long bodies of Roman basilicas easily harmonized with the idea of linearity evoked by Diotima’s ladder. But not to be outdone, Plotinus in his third-century book *Enneads* (section 2.2.1) combines the linear movement to the circular movement through the psycho-affective dimension. Plotinus’s idea of a psycho-affective dimension associated to the circular is not entirely unknown to Saint Augustine; it is possible to say that the anthropology of Saint Augustine that is concerned with integrating all the dimensions of the human being into the spiritual adventure is closer to Plotinus than to Plato. With Saint Augustine, it is a question of regaining control of oneself at every stage of the spiritual progression. This regaining of control implies a certain turning into oneself (a circularity) projecting forward to the spiritual adventure (a linearity). It remains that this idea of circularity combined with linearity in the name of the psycho-affective dimension was inadequately translated in the church architecture of the time. In the West, it will be necessary to await Suger’s theological program, and its architectural correspondence to the
The chevet of the Saint Denis abbey church in the 12th century, to see the appearance of Plotinus’s idea of circularity. Suger did not render Plotinus’s idea of circularity as such. After Enneads in the third century, the philosopher Proclus, a disciple of Plotinus, wrote Elements of Theology in the fifth century, several decades after the death of Saint Augustine. In it, Proclus added something new to the ascending movement suggested by Diotima’s ladder: a descending movement. For the ancient Greek world, the human being seeks to attain divine realities, even though the gods mock them, and Diotima’s speech had returned to this common ground. But under the influence of Christianity, Proclus was instead advocating the idea of a divine that was less condescending toward its creatures, more caring and seeking to reach them, to bring them to it. To the ascending movement was added a descending movement, and the image of a sort of cosmic dance began to be articulated. The participation of each creature in the divine realities was thereby enriched. Writings such as the Theologia mystica, attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite and used by Suger to guide construction of the chevet of the abbey church, are evidence of the growing influence of Plotinus, through Proclus, on the theological program of churches. The effect being sought was one of a more pronounced circularity around the high altar as centre of the church. With the rood screen down, light also flooded the nave and reflected on all of the church’s interior surfaces. From the point of view of church architecture, something was taking shape that would reach its apogee with the advent of the baroque in the 17th and 18th centuries.

In church architecture, Baroque is the last great Christian style, a sort of hyper-Augustinism: it exalts human desire and pushes it to its ultimate entrenchment right up to the moment when it is metamorphosed by the powerful mystical force that carries it away. The result is a strong and dynamic circularity that creates a strong, almost dizzying, whirlpool effect. In 1469, prior to the
Baroque period, the early Italian Renaissance priest and philosopher Marsilio Ficino wrote a commentary on that part of Plato’s *Symposium* which presents God at the centre of all things (II, 3). For Ficino, the place occupied by God is a haven of peace surrounded by a whirlpool of elements in fury, like the eye of a tornado. The cupola of many baroque churches will make use of Ficino’s formulation in anticipating the relief that the peace of God will bring in end times. Over time, circularity and its reference to the psycho-affective dimension will come to greatly dominate the idea of linearity in church architecture. The cupola overlooking the oval shape of the body of the church will become a typical design feature in the Baroque period. But the idea of an oval for the body of the church indicates that linearity is not completely gone. As a geometric shape, the oval simultaneously implies circularity and linearity. As Plotinus’s first instinct made clear, circularity still and always combines with linearity. This will effectively become the case in church architecture, if only because the idea of a spiritual progression in stages from the nave to the sanctuary has always been a central element of Christian worship.

Built in the late baroque period of the first half of the 18th century, Rococo-style Roman Catholic churches of southern Germany are particularly strong witnesses to this relationship between circularity and linearity.

The third and last reference point in the relation of Platonism to church architecture arises from the idea in Plato’s *Timaeus* of a placing in order. In his panegyric to Constantine, Eusebius interprets *Timaeus* along Christian lines. The Demiurge, the great order in a chaotic world, is replaced by Christ as an active agent uniting Heaven and Earth. Eusebius uses in his panegyric the Greek term *logos*, designating the entire demiurgic enterprise, to designate Christ. As the Roman and Christian emperor is, for Eusebius, the Vicar of Christ, it becomes incumbent on him to participate in the demiurgic putting in order. Still according to Eusebius, the peace brought to
the world by the Roman Empire (peace in the sense that Christians do not suffer religious persecution) is the benefit of the demiurgic action. Thus, the theology of Eusebius’s panegyric presents the political organization of this world as copied from the celestial one thanks to the intercession of Christ; the hereafter appears as the firm foundation on which all politics are built. The idea will go far.

In the Middle Ages, the transformation of the content of Eusebius’s panegyric displaced the respective roles of the worldly and spiritual authorities. As we now know, the disintegration of the Roman empire gave way to many small kingdoms that, although Christian, were politically disadvantaged. As a result, and gradually, the torch of the defence of universal values was placed in the hands of the pope. Theology followed and, with it, church architecture. The pope and his clergy assumed the role once held by the imperial court, and this led to worship being glorified. In this new order of things, worship became the sole point of contact between Heaven and Earth. As the action now took place in the sanctuary, the role of the laity and the worldly authorities was reduced to barely the contemplation of worship and of the holy mysteries involved in worship. It was even said in some quarters that the humblest of priests was worth more than all the kings. Implicitly, this was the theology of the time. The cathedrals will say it in their own way by dominating the skies of Europe. The roles were now well entrenched: in theology, only the clergy had the right to speak, and believers, powerful or not, had to be quiet and obey.

It is in this spirit of consolidation of spiritual power that Suger rebuilt the abbey church of Saint Denis in the first half of the 12th century. We already know that his theological program was inspired by the *Theologia mystica* of Dionysius the Areopagite. But what is less well-known is that Suger was also influenced by the theology of Hugh of Saint Victor, one of his contemporaries also working near Paris. Hugh is said to have sought to transpose theology into
church architecture, and church architecture into theology.\textsuperscript{42} With Hugh, the idea of this world reflecting divine realities had reached a peak. For this scholarly theologian, everything is isolated, compartmentalized. But at the same time, each thing is part of sets that themselves are part of greater sets, leading to a perfectly unified framework. Now, for Hugh, it is around worship that the unique meeting point between the worldly framework and the celestial world is organized.\textsuperscript{43} Outside the Church, there is no salvation.

Suger’s work at the Saint Denis abbey church represents, fundamentally, the adoption in church architecture of Hugh’s theological program, which in turn integrates the contribution of Dionysius the Areopagite’s \textit{Theologia mystica}. In the chevet of the abbey church, architectural forms fit together into a united whole. There is here a certain state of mind, and the pointed arches create favorable conditions for the creation and flourishing of the Gothic style.\textsuperscript{44} Architecture will become theology, and theology architecture. Combined, the two will gather into a great united whole both the light and the Christian journey, thus setting the world in order on the path to expressing perfection.

With the abbey church of Saint Denis, Christian Platonism prepares to reach its full maturity in church architecture. To make free use of the well-known formulation of Bernard of Chartres, Christian Platonism saw itself as a dwarf astride the shoulders of Plato. The alliance between Christian Platonism and church architecture combined different approaches of Plato’s writings, with the difference that it now claimed to have reached a perfect equilibrium between the two. It

\textsuperscript{42} Dominique Poirel, \textit{L’abbé Suger, le manifeste gothique de Saint-Denis et la pensée victorine} (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005), 118–199, 123, 132.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 169.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 15–16.
nonetheless remains that this construct has been seriously questioned in the modern era. Indeed, what exactly can be the connection between the light of the Sun and the invisible light that bathes all beings in its illumination? What exactly is the nature of the link between carnal attraction and the essence of beauty? How exactly does the act of glimpsing celestial realities through a church work? These and many other questions were left unanswered despite the enormous work invested in reinterpreting the writings of Plato since Christian antiquity. As the medievalist Jacques Le Goff observed in his 1957 masterpiece on intellectuals of the Middle Ages, it looks like the intellectuals of the day were content just to emulate the Ancients. Of course, we must also bear in mind the sometimes daunting ecclesiastical and civil penalties that would certainly have intimidated anyone tempted to stray from conventional thought. In fact, the prestige of the past and the powerful disincentives to straying gave Christian Platonism long life. Long presented as a perfect system bringing together spiritual as well as worldly authorities, Christian Platonism also benefited from a secular arm in whose interest it was to accept ecclesiastical verdicts because Christian Platonism provided the worldly authorities with the divine right they needed to continue to subjugate the people. As the start of modern times saw both the weakening of the emulation of the Ancients by the intellectuals, and made problematic the traditional support of worldly authorities to spiritual ones, Christian Platonism found itself in an increasingly precarious position. It is today indefensible, except in fairly reactionary circles.

At this point in my inquiry, it is time to take a look at the first serious efforts to correct Christian Platonism in connection with church architecture. Despite appearances, we will see that these

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efforts during the Reformation fundamentally changed very little with respect to church architecture.

1.3 The Reformation and its Relationship to Christian Platonism and Church Architecture

In the first quarter of the 16th century, the German reformer Martin Luther wanted to reorient Christianity around Holy Scripture. Reformation preachers rose in their pulpits to read from the Bible and to preach. The faithful would gather in circles at the foot of the pulpit to listen. Hearing became the most important sense, and the rest of the church was ignored, at best. At worst, the more zealous Reformers came to smash statues, stained glass windows, and all the paraphernalia that made up a medieval worship based on the belief that it is possible to glimpse celestial realities from the here-below. In short, sight or contemplation was replaced in the Reformation by hearing, because the first Reformers did not believe in the idea of Diotima’s ladder as the place from which the sight of beautiful bodies would lead to the supreme contemplation of the essence of beauty. For the first Reformers, the idea of the ladder establishing a junction between the here-below and the hereafter contravened the Christian idea of sin: all of humankind is complicit in the original sin of Adam and Eve, and this must therefore close the heavens to us, preventing us from glimpsing anything of it. As structures articulated around the desire to glimpse celestial realities, medieval churches had thus lost a large part of their raison d’être at the start of the Reformation.

To the successive waves of iconoclasm in the churches was added the popular grumbling against the worldly authorities, notably in Germany. The worldly authorities attributed these woes to the Reformation, thus placing the early Reformers in a delicate position. At the time, religion was something too serious to be left only to church people and theologians. Indeed, the worldly
authorities had the situation in their sights because, since the panegyric of Eusebius in 335 CE, the established Christian order made it impossible to imagine a worldly power not founded on religion.

To avoid the cruel fate of Thomas Müntzer, a radical Reformer who advocated murder before himself being tortured to death in 1525 by the Reformation’s secular arm, the second generation of Reformers had taken note of the interest of the worldly authorities to guarantee the established order. To satisfy this pressing need, Reform theology had to get creative—quickly. This state of affairs brought to the fore the theologian Philip Melanchthon, a disciple of Luther.

To calm things down, Melanchthon drew from Erasmus, a Roman Catholic priest sympathetic to the cause of Reform whose moderation was the target of thunderous attacks by Luther. In siding with Erasmus in 1523, the Lutheran Melanchthon was clearly distancing himself from the first generation of Reformers, who were for him a little too zealous.

For Erasmus, Europe rested on a common culture based on the emulation of the greatest philosophers of pagan antiquity. He believed this was the best of the common heritage of Europe because it reminded us of the peaceful social order arising from a certain universalism now under threat. Faced with the religious conflicts that had rained fire and blood on the Continent, Erasmus called for the regeneration of this common culture and, thus, a renewal with emulation of the Ancients as a bulwark against irrational impulses. Underlying all of Erasmus’s enterprise was the ideal of an education that would promote reasoned discourse rather than surrender blindly to primitive emotions, pious as they might be. The watchword for Erasmus was “concord;” Melanchthon was to speak the same word, and take the same approach.
In this framework of aiming at all costs for peaceful human relations, Melanchthon had outlined with other moderate theologians a theological contribution in two parts, one of private order and the other of public order, and this around the idea of adiaphora.

Cultured people of the Reformation were not unacquainted with the notion of adiaphora, based on the writings of Plato and popularised by the Stoics. In theology, the notion of adiaphora has traditionally been translated as that which concerns “things indifferent” not essential to the salvation of the soul. This is not an entirely accurate rendering. According to Émile Brehier, a scholar of ancient Stoic thought, the Stoicism of Antiquity distinguished itself from the various radical currents of skepticism. Stoicism aimed neither for an ideal of indifference nor a general apathy.46 A serious reading of Brehier suggests that a truer definition of the notion of adiaphora would be “secondary things,” not things totally devoid of interest; there is a difference. With respect to salvation of the soul, secondary things do not take priority but it would be unwise to overly devalue them.

In making emulation of the Ancients a common reference for all Europeans regardless of their religious convictions, Melanchthon was not breaking with the Middle Ages; emulation of the Ancients was an ideal of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance. Indeed, Saint Thomas Aquinas had already written in the 13th century in his *Summa Theologica* (I-II, 99.2; 101, 4; 108.1–2) that adiaphora are left to individual free will. However, when the common good is at stake, Saint Thomas Aquinas believed that worldly and spiritual authorities had to work together to preserve the established order:

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Thomas Aquinas spoke of adiaphora being left to ‘man’s own decision’, but also qualified this statement to mean that while adiaphora are sometimes left to the decision of the individual, at other times, when the common good is at stake, to the decision of the temporal or spiritual superiors.\footnote{Bernard J. Verkamp, *The Indifferent Mean: Adiaphorism in the English Reformation to 1554* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1977), 132.}

In this case, Melanchthon and other moderate Reform theologians of the time were merely picking up on a Christian reflection about the adiaphora that had already begun. Fundamentally, their approach did not differ at all from that of Saint Thomas Aquinas. On the one hand, the free will of each believer was held in high regard and, on the other, spiritual and, especially, worldly powers were responsible to guarantee the established order. Nevertheless, troubles sparked by religious division made it such that the Christianized notion of adiaphora now had less to do with speculation and more with a most urgent practical concern—the idea of preserving the established order won out.

In Germany, a series of meetings of Reform clergy with their theologians—under the watchful eye of the worldly authorities—was conducted in desultory fashion, with Melanchthon, as leader, playing a key role. For him and the other theologians of his generation, it was necessary to avoid throwing into disarray the popular sensibility, as he noted in the minutes of one of these meetings.\footnote{Oliver K. Olson, *Matthias Flacius and the Survival of Luther’s Reform* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrasowitz, 2002), 138.} For reasons of emotional balance, it was necessary to accept in its entirety all of the Roman Catholic church paraphernalia—the layout of churches, their adornments, and the
customary liturgy. The spiritual equilibrium of a large number of the faithful, and especially of
good public order, depended on it. More disconcerting for certain radical Reformers, the old
connection to Diotima’s speech was kept unchanged: churches were once again presented as an
organized space that allowed one to glimpse celestial realities. Melanchthon dared write this in a
1528 response to the Anabaptists! The sole difference was that all the inherited paraphernalia
of the Roman Catholic Church would hereon in be tied to the notion of adiaphora; all of these
things, in other words, were just old habits to be excused because they could not be changed
overnight.

This pastoral solution so prudently drafted with the notion of adiaphora by Melanchthon and
other Reform theologians swept towards other northern European countries that had also moved
from Roman Catholicism to Reformation. It also travelled to England because Melanchthon
enjoyed the favour of that country’s Royal Court.

The English example warrants particular attention. Even though its theological program is of less
interest because it only imitates that of Melanchthon, existing studies on the impact of this
program on church architecture are numerous, well researched, and accessible. They are all the
more useful because English know-how in church architecture was exported around the world,
along with its imperial policies. As with the Lutheranism of the northern European countries,
mainly Germany and Scandinavia, Anglicanism also rests on the theological program inherited
from Melanchthon. The result is a sort of federation for a “catholic” approach to churches that is
slightly different from that of the Roman Catholic Church. In many respects, the English

49 Michael B. Aune, “To Move the Heart:” Rhetoric and Ritual in the Theology of Philip Melanchthon (San
contribution merits attention as an aid to better grasp the panorama of the evolution of church architecture.

As with her father Henry VIII, Queen Elizabeth was favorable to Melanchthon’s gentler approach. In her reign, it would thus be necessary to find another theologian to draft the Anglican theological program on the lines offered by Melanchthon. Richard Hooker took on this role.

As theologian to the English court, Hooker produced the masterful *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1594–1597). Book V, written in 1597, picks up on the theological program of Melanchthon by recognizing the value of the Roman Catholic paraphernalia of worship. For Hooker, the desire to glimpse celestial realities through these external signs was noble.\(^50\) As with Melanchthon, Hooker’s approach to the notion of adiaphora implied that external signs and the usual ways of seeing them through contemplation play a useful role in Christian salvation. By adopting this position, Hooker was coming to the defence of the Anglican church and the royal court, both at odds with the demands of radical Reformers. More precisely, he was defending the 1559 *Act of Uniformity* that preserved the traditional know-how of English church architecture while simultaneously seeking to adapt it to the requirements of the Reformation.\(^51\)

It is necessary to understand that England was a conservative country compared to others on the Continent. As heir to the Middle Ages, the English parish had provided the country’s organizational basis. Its churches were of the Gothic style, and the interior of each was laid out


along a single longitudinal axis, which made sight rather than hearing the predominant sense. The majority of churches built between 1558 and 1662 were of the Gothic style. This was exceptional in the face of the more worldly stylistic currents fashionable elsewhere in Europe.\textsuperscript{52}

In other words, England in the Reformation continued to take a conservative and Roman Catholic approach to its churches.

Nevertheless, it was necessary to adapt worship to the Reformation. While the first generation of Reformers had struck down the rood-screen between the nave and the sanctuary, the Anglican church and the court of Queen Elizabeth restored it out of respect for the traditional English model of churches. However, the spiritual and worldly authorities together took the precaution of adopting a term thought to be less papist to designate the rood-screen; they called it the “partition.” The nave also changed names; it became the “body,” the idea being to preserve the interior spatial organization of the church, all the while regarding the nave and the sanctuary (the “chancel”) as two connecting rooms. The Morning Prayer and the Evening Prayer were held in the “body” with the priest. As for the communion, it brought together the priest and the faithful in the sanctuary around the altar, seen as a Eucharistic table.\textsuperscript{53}

However, this layout remained unsatisfying to the English sensibility. The evolution of the Anglican liturgy thus resulted in the layout moving even closer to the Roman Catholic impulse of the church architecture typical of England. For example, the redevelopment of church interiors led by William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1633 to his death in 1645, reaffirmed the


importance of the longitudinal axis. Inside the church, the pulpit was moved out of the way of the longitudinal axis to provide the faithful with an unobstructed view of the altar. A balustrade, the “communion rail,” now surrounded the altar as if to reinforce the holiness traditionally attached to the Eucharistic liturgy. In the 19th century, the vogue of the neogothic style in England further reaffirmed this theological program of Roman Catholic inspiration. Up until the liturgical renewal of the mid-20th century, we could thus argue that Roman Catholicism was the reference par excellence of Anglicanism in church architecture. In short, the old formula of Saint Thomas Aquinas continued to be applied to medieval churches: “the invisible church was nearly entirely included within the visible,”54 as the theologian David Neelands, a specialist in the history of Anglican church architecture, observed in 1988.

All this led Lutheran architect E. A. Sövik to observe in 1973: “the last four centuries have been the children of the Middle Ages, not of the Reformation. And most churches have continued to establish ‘holy places,’ more or less on the medieval patterns.”55 As a result, we could well say that the totality of the history of church architecture, as an architectural tradition that is nearly 2,000 years old, is merely the expression of a phenomenon little inclined to draconian change.

In the field of church architecture, therefore, Christian Platonism as it developed in the Middle Ages triumphed, and the Reformation finally capitulated, because worldly and spiritual authorities were obsessed by the need to preserve the established order. However, a Trojan horse had penetrated the seemingly impregnable Roman Catholic fortress: the idea, still timorous, of free will, and what this entails as a subjective approach to churches.

1.4 Conclusion

As church architecture of the Reformation was largely of Roman Catholic inspiration, the Christian Platonism underlying it remained fundamentally unchanged. With the Reformation, and the baroque period that followed, the link between Platonism and church architecture that will dominate is the one that reopens Diotima’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium*. This theme will dominate the other received themes from Antiquity for a very long time—for Hegel in 1835, it dominated to the point that it founded what was for him the only worthy definition of church architecture: an architecture attuned to the desire to glimpse celestial realities. The Romantics and Goethe will continue in this direction by emphasizing ecstatic transports in churches. Even today, this theme dominates wherever the talk is of churches.

In other respects, the Christianized notion of adiaphora was only slightly reworked since the Reformation. In theology, it is hereon in referred to only as a stopgap for more pressing issues. As the notion of adiaphora concerns secondary things, it has endured the same fate as those secondary things; it has come to be thrown into the limbo of theological reflection. And yet, Brehier had warned in 1962 of the risks of such backsliding, which he says takes us further away from its original meaning. More recently, in 1996, Bernard Reymond also sought to recall the value of the notion of adiaphora for Christianity. For this Swiss Reform theologian, churches have a certain importance from a theological point of view. This was exactly what Melanchthon and Hooker were saying in their words and their time, even if their strictly theological reflections on the subject were only roughly sketched out because priority had been given to political outcomes.

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Although church architecture of Roman Catholic inspiration went unchanged through the Reformation, it remains that a certain value had been recognized in, and loudly proclaimed for, free will. Favoured by the Reformation, the notion of adiaphora offered more than ever before a personal choice with respect to what was, and was not, valid for spiritual growth. On the one hand, a critical sense arises, albeit timorously; on the other, church architecture loses at least some of its charm as it endures criticism, timorous as it is. Church architecture has thus lost a little of its ascendance. Coming mainly from Lutheran northern Germany, Hegel, Goethe and the Romantics would have been influenced by this idea of free will associated to the notion of adiaphora in the Reformation because for them, the old reference point of Diotima’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium*, fashionable during the Romantic era of church architecture, united with the still relatively new themes of free will and disenchantment.

The link between the notion of adiaphora as advanced during the Reformation and the 19th century, while still unsettled in the absence of sufficient theological work, also helps anticipate the existence of another underground influence that establishes a cause-and-effect link between the Reformation notion of adiaphora and the current conversion of churches: Free will in religious matters has grown exponentially as a value since at least the last quarter of the 20th century, just as churches have lost some of their enchantment. The whole enterprise comes apart simultaneously as church architecture and the images we have of churches both come under the battering ram of subjectivity. Could it be that, as a result of this, the Christianized notion of adiaphora implying subjectivity is reaching its maturity with respect to church architecture? I have no intention of discussing this point at great length because of the paucity of scholarly work on the subject, and because I do not wish to stray further from my primary preoccupations. However, I am willingly carried along by this working hypothesis because it reinforces my idea
that church architecture results from slow developments of unsuspected potentialities. This working hypothesis also has the merit of giving a certain historical perspective to the work on churches of the self-taught theologian Walter Benjamin. Just as with Hegel, Goethe and the Romantics, Benjamin grew up in the culture of a Germany awash in Lutheranism. With this in mind, I turn in the next chapter to an overview of Benjamin’s works.
Chapter 2
The Writings of Walter Benjamin as a Reference

2.1 Introduction

The Reformation took church architecture back to square one by consolidating rather than calling into question Christian Platonism as the defining force behind the architecture of churches. With the Reformation, churches once again rested upon a theological and aesthetic apparatus whose decision-making centres were beyond the reach of the faithful, who once again were reduced to silence.

This observation serves as a starting point from which to examine Walter Benjamin’s thinking in this second chapter, continuing the reflection begun in the first. It is therefore appropriate to start by examining the context leading from the Reformation to Benjamin.

The Reformation left the order of things pretty much unchanged, but a seemingly trivial event would come to rock that order: in the middle of the French Classical period, the English philosopher John Locke visited Versailles and attended the morning rising of Louis XIV. Locke emerged thoughtful and troubled from this encounter with one of great worthies of Christian Platonism, and he began a personal journey that would lead to the Enlightenment.

In the France of the Great Century, running from the early 17th century to the early 18th, Louis XIV interpreted literally the political theology of Eusebius’ long-ago panegyric to the Roman–Christian emperor Constantine, and he applied it for his own benefit. Louis XIV was the Sun

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King and he wanted, like Constantine, to exercise control over the ecclesiastical realm. In response to the pope, he sought to create a national church—the Gallican Church—conceived in the image of the Constantinian Church. The idea of a national church had been bruited about in all the royal courts of Europe, both Roman Catholic and Reformed. However, the major issue with this political theology for the people was the despotism of the royal court and the exorbitant costs of its luxurious trappings. By all appearances, Locke was disgusted by a Christian Platonism that served as guarantor of such absolute power and, in this context, his philosophical writings were at odds with Christian Platonism.

Locke was not alone in seeking an alternative to this interpretation of Plato that had come to be seen as a source of great evil; as a result, the Age of Enlightenment would come to choose Aristotle over Plato. As the older of the two, Plato offered theoretical parameters favourable to the totality, the unity and the timeless. Plato was religious and an idealist, above the fray of his fellow citizens. He especially loved those subjects that correspond today to theology and the arts. The younger of the two, Aristotle, was a pragmatic philosopher who saw logic and analysis as tools in the service of free citizens. The Renaissance painter Raphael ably represented the difference between Plato and Aristotle in a fresco at the Vatican: Plato is depicted lifting an arm to the heavens while Aristotle points to the earthly horizon.  

In response to Christian Platonism and its flagrant abuses, the Enlightenment adopted Aristotelian thought. Arthur Herman observed that while this choice encouraged the rise of empirical science, commerce and a certain freedom, it also revealed some weaknesses by

58 Ibid., xxi.
59 Ibid.
creating a new kind of citizen: the bourgeois. The philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau was unhappy about this development, finding in bourgeois complacency only a drought of the soul. The church architecture of the time appears to support his view; it had since the mid-18th century stiffened into a neo-classicism as severe as it was insipid. Flat ceilings bereft of any grand decorative themes replaced the flamboyant cupolas of the Baroque Period; it was as if Heaven was now closed to humankind, and humankind did not even care enough to complain about it.

Reason alone was also seen by some, Johann Georg Hamann among them, as prideful. Friendly for a time with the philosopher Immanuel Kant, Hamann responded to the spirit of the Enlightenment with a 1759 masterwork entitled *Socratic Memorabilia* that examined the emblematic figure of Socrates. Hamann’s approach was skilful with respect to public opinion, as Socrates remained highly regarded during the Enlightenment: he had been condemned by obscurantist and intolerant political forces, just as Enlightenment free thinkers had been by the Church. The difference was that the watchword of *Socratic Memorabilia* was Socratic Ignorance, while Enlightenment free thinkers left to posterity writings that were as pompous and dogmatic as those of the churchmen they so vigorously denounced. Hamann rejected them all because he found their writings conceited, and based on vices similar to those of their predecessors. But he was not interested just in preaching to them; starting with the idea of Socratic Ignorance, he began to sketch a program that aimed instead to bring deep upheaval to areas as diverse as aesthetics, philosophy, and theology. In essence, Hamann was not just taking on Christian Platonism and its secular offshoots, which never lacked for priests or apologists; Socrates was

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60 Ibid., 373, 387, 391, et passim.
but a pretext in his otherwise ambitious enterprise, an alternative figure leading to another worldview.

In 1762, Hamann published his *Aesthetica in nuce* [Aesthetics Primer] and, in 1784, his *Metacritique of the Purism of Reason*. His quest for a more integral human experience than that promoted by the Enlightenment had attracted the attention of several intellectuals of his day. Around 1800, Goethe and some Romantics drew inspiration largely from Hamann in their work to interpret a difficult-to-articulate way of thought. In turn, the self-taught theologian Walter Benjamin was to draw inspiration from Hamann in the first half of the 20th century, continuing a reflection already well under way since its beginnings a century earlier in a paradigm inherited more from Plato than from Aristotle.

### 2.1.1 The Relevance of the Writings of Walter Benjamin

Walter Benjamin occupied a place apart in the German university world of his day. He was reputedly unable to meet conventional academic standards and, as evidenced by his writings, his intellectual contributions did not enjoy a reputation for great clarity or precision. At first glance, his writing style appeared rather difficult to follow. As a result, his habilitation thesis was unfavourably received by the Department of Art History at the University of Heidelberg in 1923. By force of circumstance, Walter Benjamin became self-taught. In retrospect, it was probably for the better as he required a certain latitude to think and write that the rigid university culture of his time could scarcely provide him with.

Benjamin’s insights had already attracted the attention of more famous contemporary academics. Among these was Florens Christian Rang, a theologian unknown today but famous during his lifetime and until his death in 1924. Benjamin considered him an ideal interlocutor for the
preparation of his book on German baroque drama. Theodor W. Adorno, a German academic who had emigrated to the United States, was another. An influential member of the Frankfurt School, a social-sciences research institute founded in 1923 that put modern ideologies under the microscope, Adorno was one of Benjamin’s privileged correspondents up to the latter’s untimely death in 1940. Since that fateful year, the number of academics who recognize the worth of Benjamin’s writings has never ceased to grow. It is worth noting that the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas used an approach styled after Benjamin for his *Theory of Communicative Action* when he wrote:

This disenchantment and disempowering of the domain of the sacred takes place by way of a linguistification of the ritually secured, basic normative agreement; going along with this is a release of the rationality potential in communicative action. The aura of rapture and terror that emanates from the sacred, the *spellbinding* power of the holy, is sublimated into the *binding/bonding* force of criticisable validity claims and at the same time turned into on everyday occurrences.61

The discerning reader can connect this central point of Habermas’s 1981 *Theory of Communicative Action* to a *leitmotiv* in Benjamin, for whom the sacred is linked to the rules of communication that govern human relationships. For Benjamin as for Habermas, the potential for violence that lies in all things sacred must be tamed in order for a civilized debate to take

place. However, the sacred remains necessary to communication because it provides the interlocutors with a common ground whose foundation rests on venerable religious beliefs. It would be perilous for life in society to ignore this foundation just because of the dangers inherent in the sacred.

As it happens, Benjamin also belonged to that long line of thinkers dissatisfied with the spirit of the Enlightenment who, since the end of the 18th century, deemed it too superficial and not sufficiently self-critical. Indeed, the Enlightenment had the unfortunate tendency to present itself as inviolable in the same manner as the Christian Platonism that it continually assailed. The Enlightenment saw the religious only as an adversary to strike down in order to take its place and adopt the same twisted posture. Such warpage between reason and religion persisted, according to Benjamin and a goodly number of thinkers such as Habermas, hence the timeliness of a reflection that must be undertaken everywhere that has endured the unfortunate effects of a badly resolved problem.

In this, Benjamin remains a figurehead. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben wrote in his 2007 book *Profanations*: “…‘to consecrate’ (*sacrare*) was the term that indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law, ‘to profane’ meant, conversely, to return them to the free use of men.”62 Agamben then concluded: “The profanation of the unprofanable is the political task of the coming generation.”63 In the manner of Benjamin, Agamben pleaded for the ability of the human being to finally appropriate for himself that which was too often forbidden to him either by fallacious religious discourse or its secular offshoots. Aware of the nefarious repetition

63 Ibid., 92.
of certain mechanisms of thought, Agamben sought an alternative to break the vicious circle of servitude. For him, the theological work begun by Benjamin is still very topical.

As Benjamin’s habilitation thesis was refused in his day by the Department of Art History at the University of Heidelberg, it is entirely relevant to note the about-face of art historians since then. Among them is Georges Didi-Huberman, who drew upon the essential theological work of Benjamin and applied it to the field of the arts. As Agamben did after him, Didi-Huberman invited in 1992 the profanation of the sacred, which puts a halo over art and keeps us at a respectful distance from it. In other words, he invited us to refuse to be intimidated. The goal was to make art accessible and manipulatable in order to, rationally speaking, better appropriate it. For Didi-Huberman, a psychoanalyst and an art historian, the exercise involves a psychic equilibrium: reducing the distance to a work of art responds to the need to rationally appropriate one’s own aesthetic experiences.

In relying on a paradigm inherited from Plato, Benjamin was aware that all theology is also political, and politics is the rub, as the trial of Socrates underscored (Socrates’ supposed impiety was cited in the charge against him). Benjamin was aware that most of the time, it is necessary to fight an established sacralised order as such, because the established order deliberately turns religion to its advantage. In most cases, politics simply tows theology along behind it, as Christian Platonism amply proved in the history of church architecture: for a time, towed by the emperor, for a time by the pope, or, simply, towed by the collusion between civic and ecclesiastic authorities. In short, theology more often than not flies to the rescue of the strongest. As a free spirit without any major institutional attachments, Benjamin persisted during his entire

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life as a self-taught theologian in defending an approach to religion that distanced itself from fashionable religious models and their secular offshoots.

As a result, he sought alternative resources in his theological work to encourage the primacy of the individual over established powers. Two in particular caught his eye: history and language.

For Benjamin, history and language complement each other. Language becomes a useful tool for emancipation only through the appropriation of one’s personal adventure on Earth: “I name my experience, therefore I am,” one could say. However, Official History is always written by the victors, and for their benefit alone. Everyone knows that it is vae victus [woe to the vanquished], with the oppressor reducing the oppressed to silence. Fortunately, another history lurks under Official History, its existence heralded by prophetic characters with strongly individualized speech and who have made atypical human journeys. They alone proclaim this other history waiting to be freed. With Benjamin, there is also a question of immersion. Indeed, hidden history implies the existence of heroes who more often than not are anonymous, or relegated to the background of Official History. Such heroes do not have the halos of prestige that Official History accords its own. Benjamin thus calls into question an entire mode of representation of that which is supposed to be legitimate, and that which is not. He did not wish for a total break from these familiar worlds of representation, because language requires some common references so that we may communicate with one another. Rather, Benjamin sought to bring about ways of changing this amalgam of theology and aesthetics in the service of emancipation. The solution that Benjamin advocated was like a delicate surgical operation: it is necessary to find a way to create a free space in which each person may free himself, by himself, without breaking with a common heritage. It is in this sense that history must be, before anything else, a personal adventure. However, Benjamin wanted something bigger; he sought a way to alter this
theological and aesthetic amalgam in the name of collective emancipation, although his concept of collective emancipation differed from the generally accepted ones. Like a detective, Benjamin set out to retrace the moments and the marginalized characters going against the currents of Western history. From Socrates to the Last Judgment and by way of Adam, Benjamin brought together the Greek, Jewish and Christian legacies through the common thread of an alternative history that is still hidden, biding its time. Like a sentry awaiting the dawn, his attention was drawn to the other side of Official History since its beginnings. He tried to make the entire theological-aesthetic problematic of all of history converge toward an all-inclusive formal resolution.

Benjamin knew well that the reference of choice in the world of Western representation is that of the priest, who alone is authorized to enter the sanctuary. Before Benjamin, architecture historian Aloïs Riegl said roughly the same thing during the Belle Époque [which dates from 1871 to the start of the First World War], when he wrote that the church had become the model of representation in the West. As an admiring reader of Riegl, Benjamin had made note of this and he began from there conceptually in many respects.

Before going directly to Benjamin’s writings, it is useful to this analysis to divide them into two major periods.

The first runs from Benjamin’s youth, around 1910, up to the publication of his book on German baroque drama in 1928. This period takes in a panoply of penetrating insights that converge in the drama book. Church architecture is condensed in the book and treated as a style—in this

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65 Benjamin, *Petite histoire de la photographie*, 39–42.
case, the baroque style. The art historian Meyer Schapiro has written that a style provides a diffuse atmosphere to a given era. Schapiro takes a fairly idealized view of style: for him, it is like a standard emblazoned with royal insignia that waves majestically over an era. To better respect Benjamin’s approach to church architecture, it is preferable to see in church architecture a reality that is more submerged in representation, something like a game of mirrors where the difference between the subject and its reflections becomes so scrambled that the images blend into one another. The church is a representation of the world, and the world a representation of the churches, in these reflections that could be called infinite. Vincent de Beauvais took this approach in the 13th century, and art historian Émile Mâle deemed it the best to describe the nature of churches. In his book, Benjamin starts with a similar approach to broach the subject of church architecture and its issues. As church architecture and its representations are closely intertwined, it is necessary to work from this amalgam.

The second period of Benjamin’s writings continued the reflection that began in the first, and runs from the drama book in 1928 to his death in 1940. In this period, the reader is brusquely moved from the Baroque Period to the Industrial Era. In this new and dizzying framework of capitalism, it appears that Benjamin took literally the words of Louis Aragon, who wrote in his 1926 book *Paris Peasant*:

> Wandering through the countryside, I see nothing but abandoned chapels, overturned calvaries. The human pilgrimage has forsaken these stations, for they demanded a far more leisurely pace than the

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one now adopted. The folds of these Virgins' robes presupposed a process of reflection wholly incompatible with today's principle of acceleration governing movement from one point to another.\(^69\)

The world under capitalism is no longer propitious to noble contemplation. It is no longer selfless. It is now selfish, even small-minded, because it is mercantilist. Aragon continues:

> Man no longer worships the gods on their heights. Solomon's temple has slid into a world of metaphor where it harbours swallows' nests and corpse-white lizards. The spirit of religions, coming down to dwell in the dust, has abandoned the sacred places.\(^70\)

In his second period, Benjamin shifted his attention to a bigger framework than the churches, although he did not abandon his interest in theological work. He had kept in mind the idea of the game of mirrors that had changed since the end of Christian Platonism to articulate itself in a new idea of representation, the one that holds sway in capitalism. In the new capitalist context, it is the city, as well as architecture, that interests him. Frenetic and mercantilist, the city dictates to humankind its conduct as people make their way yet again through a world that does not resemble them. Nonetheless, the relevance of theological work remains for Benjamin, who would weave his way in and out of the cracks in the new culture.

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\(^{70}\) Ibid., 27.
2.1.2 First Period: From Youthful Writings to the Book on German Baroque Drama

“Socrates”, written in 1916, is an important early essay to help understand how Benjamin’s thinking developed. In it, Benjamin presents Socrates as a serious thinker, but also as having the traits of a satyr. Not only was Socrates ugly, as tradition has it, but he is depicted in this essay as someone of suspect sexuality, passionate about a type of knowledge that is equally suspect to those who prefer the Heaven of Ideas. According to Benjamin, Socrates’ suspect manner of inquiring into the relationship between religion, reason, and passion was fairly removed from that of any “philosophy of forms”\(^1\) (generally associated to the god Apollo rather than to a satyr), because the irony personified by the satyr valued religious ignorance. “The Metaphysics of Youth,” an essay from 1913–14 published after Benjamin’s death, already describes this Socratic program well: “Knowing no answers but forming the center …”\(^2\)

In his search for a new aesthetic sensibility, Benjamin advanced a delicate balancing game. On the one hand, he recognized at a formal level the importance of the categories of beautiful and ugly, which for him were always relevant to aesthetics because they allow for a better mutual understanding, which is part of the well-being of communication between human beings. Furthermore, the ugly and the unpleasant can force one to appreciate another type of beauty, one that differs from that generally promoted by the “Temple of Good Taste.” This beauty is not just internal for Benjamin: it remains fundamentally external and thus intertwined with the familiar world of representation, although a decisive shift within it opens a breach for the future.

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\(^1\) The term “philosophy of forms” was mentioned for the first time by Diogenes Laërtius in the third century of the Common Era. (Tom Rockmore, *Art and Truth after Plato* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013], 39). Rightly or wrongly, “philosophy of forms” is associated with Plato. It eventually became Christian Platonism.

To better understand what Benjamin was getting at with “Socrates,” it is helpful to examine a story of Greek mythology involving the satyr Marsyas and the goddess Athena. In this story, Athena invents the aulos, a musical wind instrument. However, the act of blowing into the aulos deforms her face. This displeases the goddess so she throws the instrument away. The satyr Marsyas picks it up and plays it without caring how he looks; for him, the important thing is the harmonious beauty of the sounds emerging from the instrument. Beauty is relative; it descends from the Heaven of Ideas and depends on the context.

Didi-Huberman envisaged Benjamin’s diminution of the aura in this sense of preconceived ideas needing to be called into question by the context (the aura is here defined as an uplifting theological-aesthetic system of the Greek world recovered by Christian Platonism as a legacy of Plato):

As we know, Benjamin speaks of the “decline of the aura” in the modern age, but for him, “decline” does not means disappearance. Rather, it means (as in the Latin declinare) moving downward, inclining, deviating, or inflecting in a new way.73

A question arising from “Socrates” is whether Benjamin was addressing himself to Socrates’ contemporaries or to his own, those faithful disciples of Kant so fond of speculative theories. The answer is probably both. In the face of those who claim to hold final immutable truths, Benjamin answered with a Socrates making his way in the world as it was, and sincerely

accepting his own ignorance about the hereafter. It did not matter whether he was chaste; he was, first and foremost, a human being.

Irony, in the manner of the Socratic dialogues, is unmistakably evident in Benjamin’s “Socrates.” Socrates liked to agree with everything he was told, before asking the fatal question. In the dialogues, he always triumphed over his interlocutor in the same way. He overturned the pretty assurances of those too sure of themselves. Essentially, the very Socratic conclusion of Benjamin’s “Socrates” was the radical questioning of the “Temple of Good Taste” on which the West’s aesthetic parameters had always rested. Benjamin’s answer to all those fine minds was to be a man humbly living his changing human condition. The furthest that Socrates could go in matters of religion was to recognize that he was motivated by a daemon, a sort of spirit possessed of some religious tone that he was unable to further identify. The best that Benjamin’s “Socrates” could do in matters of religion was to overturn the idols that made it impossible to fully live different types of aesthetic experiences.

The year he wrote “Socrates,” Benjamin also wrote “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” published posthumously. This time, the action is set in the biblical book of Genesis. Like Johann Georg Hamann in the second half of the 18th century, Benjamin sought to rally the great Western religious traditions against Kantian philosophy. After the character of Socrates, we now have the character of Adam. The context is different, but the concerns are the same.

In “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” Adam personifies the human being immersed in a world where language is the only medium. Nothing metaphysical exists; there is only language. Adam cannot rise higher because of his condition as a human creature; he is tethered to the Earth. In fact, he is immersed in the world of language. In opposition to the idea
that existed about genius in the time of Benjamin, the first man was created by God only to
speak: “Mental being communicates itself in, not through, a language ...”\textsuperscript{74} Language trumps
innate genius, which would not have to express itself to be genius. What’s more, everything in
Creation is made subject to the appointment of Adam. The very essence of things is this
appointment: “Language communicates the linguistic being of things. The clearest manifestation
of this being, however, is language itself”.\textsuperscript{75} For Benjamin, Adam plays the role of an artist.
Through his appointment, he regroups and gives agency to the things around him, making them
is own. By virtue of his appointment, his experience of the universal is total.\textsuperscript{76} In this way, the
communion is complete because, in the end, communion with God is in the language: “Man
communicates himself to God through name …”\textsuperscript{77}

The original error in all this would come from the disconnect between the signifier and the
signified, or the object and that to which it refers. For Benjamin, this disconnect is at the root of
intellectual speculation:

[I]n the Fall, man abandoned immediacy in the communication of
the concrete—that is, name—and fell into the abyss of the
mediateness of all communication, of the word as means, of the
empty word, into the abyss of prattle.\textsuperscript{78}

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\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 68, 73.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 74.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 72.
\end{flushright}
He has described Babel, that hodgepodge of clutter that obscures the simple purity of original language. Melancholia is proof that humankind is in exile, and that language is broken. In the Bible, the original sin is pride. This says much about what Benjamin thought about the “philosophy of forms” associated with Christian Platonism, and about what he thought of the philosophy and the theology of his time: it was all far too ethereal.

However, one must not necessarily think that the interpretation of this Bible passage by Benjamin is closer to Judaism than to Christianity. Although of Jewish origin, Benjamin in this essay moved closer to the Lutheran tradition that had previously inspired Hamann. Indeed, in “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” it would appear that the watchword is the Sola scriptura of Martin Luther: everything is in the language, only in the language.

Strengthened by this conviction, Benjamin pointed the reader to a program aimed at all those who work in the arts: “For an understanding of artistic forms, it is of value to attempt to grasp them all as languages and to seek their connections with natural languages.” In other words, aesthetics must anchor itself to understanding rather than to metaphysics (as with Luther’s heartfelt desire to translate the Latin Bible into common German).

Another equally decisive tilt began with Benjamin’s 1921 “The Task the Translator,” which puts history front and centre. Already, in “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” he alluded to history when he wrote: “Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity.” In one

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79 Ibid., 73.
80 Ibid. It will be useful to bear this program in mind in the following chapter, which will be guided by Benjamin in its discussion on the conversion of churches.
81 Ibid., 70.
sentence, Benjamin brought history into his reflection on language. He saw in language a long series of events made of the texture of a personal experience rather than based on some cosmic point of view. He develops this guiding principle further in “The Task of the Translator,” to which he will again bring some formal concerns:

Translation is a form. To comprehend it as a form, one must go back to the original, for the laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of its translatability.\(^{82}\)

As with “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” Benjamin accorded an overriding value to the original moment of a given tradition. For him, it is at the original moment that the greatest potentialities are to be found:

If translation is a form, translatability must be an essential feature of certain works. Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential for the works themselves that they be translated; it means, rather, that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability.\(^{83}\)

There would therefore be a formal decisive element dormant in the heart of the history of a tradition that waits to be finally detected and activated:


\(^{83}\) Ibid.
Unlike a work of literature, translation finds itself not in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.\textsuperscript{84}

In integrating history into his undertaking, Benjamin will develop a hybrid approach that will take him further away from the Greek legacy; history, after all, was not the exclusive preserve of the Greeks.

One suspects that, again, it was his reading of Hamann that put Benjamin on the trail of Jewish and Christian interpretations of history, because these would be fairly foreign to Greek thought. We have already seen how, for Hamann, history and language are complementary. As Hamann scholar Larry Vaughan wrote, language occupies a place of exile in history. In the manner of the Hebrew people, the finality of language is the way out of exile.\textsuperscript{85} Following the position staked out by Hamann, the idea of a way out of exile will become a formal issue for Benjamin.

Benjamin feels ready to confront Kantian philosophy head-on in 1918 with “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy.” To understand this essay, published after his death, it is first necessary to have some idea about the evolution of Kantian philosophy. In the 17th century, the French philosopher René Descartes developed a new theoretical framework in which the critical spirit is called upon to maintain a certain distance from an object so as to better analyse it. Such distance

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 258–259.

\textsuperscript{85} “Redemption signifies the possibility for the end of exile when man grasps the opportunities before him.” (Larry Vaughan, \textit{Johann Georg Hamann: Metaphysics of Language and Vision of History} [New York: Peter Lang, 1989], 129).
requires reducing the affective and intuitive interference between the observer and the object to a bare minimum. This method is called Cartesian dualism, and Kant drew on it at the end of the 17th century, distinguishing the phenomenon (the object) from the noumenon (the idea one has of the object). Questions nonetheless arose about this use of Descartes by Kant, because an element was missing from this theory to cover the distance separating the observer from the object being observed. At the start of the 20th century, Edmund Husserl was fully aware of the many attempts seeking to remedy Cartesian dualism. For a period stretching from the second half of the 19th century to the start of the 20th, psychologizing approaches were promoted as a way to cover the distance between the observer and the object being observed. In aesthetics, the notion of empathy (Einfühlung) was advocated in this context. The notion of empathy encouraged a communion between the observer and the observed, and through this observed object, communion with other observers as they debate together. The notion of empathy promoted an ideal communion that accorded a metaphysical status to the object (as if surrounded by a halo) as well as to the observer (also idealised). Husserl sought to correct Cartesian dualism without falling into the coarser errors of the psychologising that was fashionable at the time. He defended the notion of intentionality in order to integrate it with psychologizing elements—without much success, according to American philosopher Tom Rockmore’s 2011 analysis of Husserl’s phenomenology. Absent something better, Husserl fell back on the dualism inherited from Descartes and Kant.

Aware of all these unresolved difficulties, Benjamin proposed another path in “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”:

The task of future epistemology is to find for knowledge the sphere of total neutrality in regard to the concepts of both subject and object; in other words, it is to discover the autonomous, innate sphere of knowledge in which the concept in no way continues to designate the relation between two metaphysical entities.  

In this brief excerpt, Benjamin says that the observer and the observed are both sublimated into the sphere of metaphysics under Kant. In saying this, Benjamin associated Kant to the excesses brought about by the notion of empathy, a throwback to a procedural flaw that was already present in Kantian philosophy.

With “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” Benjamin sought a better appropriation of experience by the individual that would finally free him from Kant’s “epistemological mythology” and from the path of the metaphysical tradition in which he found himself.

This led Benjamin to explore with his doctoral thesis the corrections attempted by the Romantics around 1800 on the subject of Kantian philosophy.

Under the title “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,” Benjamin successfully defended his doctoral thesis in 1919 (cum laude), and it would be published the following year. In it, Benjamin was concerned mainly with the works of the Romantic Friedrich Schlegel in philosophy of art. He began the thesis with a reference to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, another German philosopher writing around 1800. For Fichte, everything in experience begins with the

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88 Ibid., 103.
self; it is up to the “I” to affirm itself and to appropriate its own experiences. Fichte sought, like others, to correct Kantian philosophy. Benjamin begins with Fichte to arrive at a better understanding of a central idea of the Romantics: Criticism (*Kritik*).

The idea of Romantic Criticism raises the question of *Streben*, the impetus that leads one first to investigate an object, and then to appropriate it. Passion is part of intellectual investigation, which mobilizes the entire being. For Schlegel as a promoter of Criticism, it is the poet’s task to recombine formal elements so as to bend the entire work to one’s creative will. Schlegel used the word *Witz* to signify this ability to skilfully recombine the work so as to give it added value. As Benjamin had emphasized, everything in a work of art is submitted to this high faculty of recombination: “Criticism sacrifices the work totally for the sake of the single sphere of connection.” Commentary, or irony of the form as Benjamin calls it, “assails the form without destroying it.” Schlegel sought to join the entirety of his philosophy of art to the work of art; representation and forms were one and the same. In other words, criticism is the work of art rendered in the very medium of reflecting on it. With Schlegel, it was possible for the first time to imagine an art that did not idealize.

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90 Ibid.
91 Ibid., 138.
92 Ibid., 149.
93 “The idea of art as a medium thus creates for the first time the possibility of undogmatic or free formalism – a liberal formalism, as the Romantics would say” (Ibid., 158).
Benjamin makes no mention of Schlegel’s approach to churches, although Schlegel was passionate about them. Fortunately, Schlegel referred to churches to illustrate his approach in his “Principles of Gothic Architecture” in 1804–05:

I have a decided predilection for the Gothic style of architecture; and when I am so fortunate as to discover any monument, however ruined or defaced, I examine every portion of it with unwearied zeal and attention, for it appears to me that from a neglect of such study the deep meaning and peculiar motive of Gothic architecture is seldom arrived at.94

Schlegel’s method involved recombining various elements around a “force field” while using Witz. He believed that there are force fields in church architecture around which secondary elements aggregate into new combinations. For Schlegel, these force fields also serve as guidelines:

The general design of the cathedral, like most other Gothic and old German churches, is according to the primitive style of

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Christian architecture, [...]. The Latin cross **terminates in the**

**choir, towards the east, in a circular apse** [emphasis added].

Most important for Schlegel was to take a church’s force fields into account so as to respect its nature while working to recombine it. Around these force fields, many combinations are possible.

Schlegel thought of these force fields as magnetic metal filings, which are pliable enough to allow for varied recombinations. It is even possible to go so far as to actually play with these force fields. In “Principles of Gothic Architecture,” Schlegel described churches as “ruins” (indeed, churches were often dilapidated around 1800). To take this image further, we can say the architect was called upon to recombine the “ruins” of a church around a longitudinal axis that has a certain flexibility, just like the filings.

Like many Romantics of his day, Schlegel will come to venture into a syncretic mysticism that allies a Spinozan pantheism to elements drawn from Christian Platonism. Benjamin deplored this, saying that in so doing, Schlegel breaks with his most penetrating insights. In the time of the Romantics, Goethe deplored it for similar reasons, and this was enough for Benjamin to align himself with Goethe in pursuing his research.

Indeed, as Benjamin well knew, Goethe’s approach differed from the Romantics; it was reputed to be more cerebral. First, Goethe’s thinking was informed by the *Phaedon* of Moses Mendelssohn (1757), which he aligned to his reading of Plato’s *Phaedo*. In *Phaedon*,

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95 Ibid., 173.
96 Ibid., 152.
Mendelssohn returned to Plato’s famous book of the same name, although he made a fairly free interpretation of it. Strongly marked by the spirit of the Enlightenment, the Mendelssohn book returned to the dialogues relating to the condemnation of Socrates. This was a pretext for harshly judging the Christian religion in the time of the Enlightenment, and for praising reasoned discourse. In associating religion to an irrational force, Mendelssohn distanced himself from the spirit of Plato’s *Phaedo*, siding instead with the spirit of the Enlightenment.

It nonetheless remains that with *Phaedon*, Mendelssohn put back on the agenda the paradigm inherited from Plato. In a roundabout way, Mendelssohn was thus joining those who criticised the old Aristotelian basis of Kantian philosophy. The common thread connecting Mendelssohn to Goethe also runs through Mendelssohn’s *Morning Hours*, a 1785 work well known under its German title *Morgenstuden*. Significantly, it deals with enthusiasm, a major theme in Plato’s *Symposium*. Goethe will favour the *Symposium* over all Plato’s books. However, Mendelssohn took the view that we must absolutely refrain from enthusiasm. For his part, Kant will draw on this imperative for his notion of objectivity in his *Third Critique* of 1790. However, Goethe will give another direction to this requirement by interpreting it in his own way through his reading of the *Symposium*.

In the second part of his 1809 novel *Elective Affinities*, Goethe presents an architect who remains upright and imperturbable even in the face of two lovers before him, in the throes of passion. The action takes place in a church, and the architect must not fall in love. In reading the book, Karl W.F. Solger openly asked if this observation about the architect was correct. In a January 1827 letter, Goethe indicated that Solger was right: The architect must not fall in love. He must keep
his wits about him. In other words, he must not follow to its conclusion the ascension promoted by the priestess Diotima in the *Symposium*. In this case, it would appear that Mendelssohn’s *Phaedon* and *Morning Hours* would have something to do with Goethe and his re-reading of Plato’s *Symposium*.

Goethe was thumbing his nose at the Romantics, many of whom had converted to Catholicism, a Christian denomination we now know to be closely associated to Christian Platonism. As for Benjamin, he will focus his attention on the response of Goethe to the Romantics. Like Goethe, Benjamin had a predilection for the works of Hamann, and both seem to draw from Hamann’s *Aesthetica in nuce*, Goethe to write *Elective Affinities* and Benjamin to analyse it.

Benjamin uses his “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” an analysis he wrote in 1919–20 and published in 1924–25, to confront Goethe, who wrote: “Time maintains its rights.” This observation that all is vanity can be strongly discerned in Benjamin’s analysis. With the passage of time, even the hardiest myths also fade away. Their annihilation also takes with it the “Temple of Good Taste.” Basically, Benjamin was signalling the extent to which aesthetics become problematic in the face of the inevitable annihilation of all things. As with “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” Benjamin used the occasion to question the artificial gap between the signifier and the signified in language. According to Benjamin, this gap drains the very truth of the work of art, leaving something artificial and false. Benjamin maintains that at the time of the Last Judgment, “… beauty, as a semblance of reconciliation, remains behind with the others.” In other words, the signified cannot save the signifier. No matter how brilliant, the signified and the signifier are

mere constructs of the human spirit. It will be up to the Last Judgment to become that moment of truth to judge all things according to their true worth, to raise them up from the void. As with Hamann in *Aesthetica in nuce*, Benjamin saw in the idea of the Last Judgment the final overthrow of all idols, which are legion on Earth right up to the end of time. In this perspective, Benjamin as well as Hamann fell back solely on critical work, formal as it was (in Benjamin’s case). They thus acted as proper disciples of Luther, who had warned that the human being cannot assume for himself any divine prerogatives, including those pertaining to justice: “Vengeance is mine! I will repay,” he quotes the God of the New Testament as saying (Rom. 12:19).\(^{100}\)

Benjamin’s analysis returns Goethe’s architect to the fore, this time as an architect-philosopher. Benjamin describes him as imperturbable and rational, as was Mendelssohn’s Socrates.\(^{101}\) The architect-philosopher does not allow himself to be carried away by the fear arising from the awareness that all things are ephemeral; nor does he allow himself to be distracted by the illusions of life. Instead, the architect-philosopher stands upright, ready to assume his ultimate duty:

> Because true reconciliation with God is achieved by no one who does not thereby destroy everything—or as much as he possesses—in order only then, before God’s reconciled countenance, to find it resurrected. It follows that a death-defying leap marks that moment when—each one wholly alone for himself


\(^{101}\)Ibid., 340.
before God—they make every effort for the sake of
reconciliation.\footnote{102}

In his analysis, Benjamin reckoned that the last word of the architect-philosopher in Goethe’s novel is of the order of the Lutheran Sola fide; his wager on eternal life requires the affective detachment from all things, including human love. In so doing, the world is returned to its profane reality. It is worthless in the end. The world being disenchanted, the architect-philosopher gives himself over only to God.

Benjamin’s principal interest in Goethe relates to the latter’s interest in associating every work of art to its own intrinsic truth. In Elective Affinities, it is through the figure of the architect-philosopher refusing to cede to enthusiasm that the truth of the work of art manifests itself. In his doctoral thesis on Romanticism, Benjamin had already acknowledged this, although he deplored certain theoretical weaknesses in Goethe’s approach.\footnote{103} For example, the strongly judicious supports of Criticism that Schlegel had introduced are absent in Goethe.\footnote{104} In other words, the primacy of a thought fully joined to language is missing. According to Benjamin, the result is an idealised approach that associated Goethe to the Greeks:\footnote{105} Goethe emphasized transcendence over immanence.

After his analysis of Goethe, Benjamin felt ready to begin his book on German baroque drama.

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item[102] Ibid., 342–343.
\item[103] Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,” 179.
\item[104] Ibid.
\item[105] “In this conception, Goethe makes contact with the Greeks” (Ibid.).
\end{itemize}}
The book, whose German title was *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, deals with the “origin” of German baroque drama and, in particular, with the *Trauerspiel*, a type of play from Silesia. In the title, the term “origin” (*Ursprung*) illuminates the range of the work. In his book, Benjamin warned the reader that the use of the term *Ursprung* has nothing to do with “origin” in the sense of a development where all is foreseen in advance, as with destiny. Rather, it is a reversal of situation caused by initiatives that more often than not are personal, as evidenced by the actions of the sovereign as a central character in the *Trauerspiel*. Benjamin was adamant about this trait in the use of the term *Ursprung*. With this term, the question is one of history focused on the trial-and-error of an individual discovering, not without disquiet, the arbitrary nature of his decisions. Left to his own devices in a disenchanted world, the individual is now an agent of history based on the humble and scattered materials of his personal history. In fact, there is an upheaval: history loses its grand founding myths to become a very subjective and individual experience. *History becomes history*, leavened so little by greatness and so much by mediocrity.

There is a labour of demystification at work in the term *Ursprung*. The originality of the *Trauerspiel* lies in its being a theatrical drama that formally integrates this demystification. The use by Benjamin of the term *Ursprung* would at first glance appear to have been influenced by Goethe. But as Goethe was more theocentric than anthropocentric, it is necessary instead to go back to Hamann and his anthropocentric vision of history to better understand Benjamin’s use of

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107 “[I]t is not the conflict with God and Fate, the representation of a primordial past, which is the key to a living sense of national community, but the confirmation of princely virtues, the depiction of princely vices, the insight into diplomacy and the manipulation of all the political schemes, which makes the monarch the main character in the Trauerspiel. The sovereign, the principal exponent of history, almost serves as its incarnation.” (Ibid., 62).


Ursprung: demystification is experienced as the start of another history getting under way and breaking from the old mythological foundation. The originality of the Trauerspiel lies in its being the very form of this demystification. Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels is a title that sees itself as an aesthetic program. In fact, it is a program that aims to integrate the truth of theatrical drama within the work itself.

The book uses Christian Platonism to represent the starting point. Benjamin shows in it that the baroque dramas of Lutheran Silesia depicted a Lutheran sovereign who reclaimed for himself the prerogatives of a Roman Catholic sovereign. There is nothing surprising here, as the first chapter indicates. Indeed, the Lutheran sovereign had always been endowed by divine right. As with his Roman Catholic predecessor, the Lutheran ruler’s exercise of his authority was once again founded in the conceptual setting provided by Christian Platonism.

This conceptual setting was at the service of power. For Benjamin, Christian Platonism did not serve truth but, instead, those who claimed to serve truth; its goal was to dominate the people and reduce them to silence. The influence of Carl Schmitt’s political theology on his thinking led Benjamin to present in his book the law, rather than truth, as guarantor of Christian Platonism. This was the basis of Schmitt’s approach, which had reached a peak in 1938 with his book on Hobbes. For Schmitt, the discovery of arbitrariness in all legal decisions is a modern phenomenon. Benjamin borrowed from Schmitt this idea of arbitrariness associated to the start of modernity. He will also make note of the topicality of the political theology attached to it

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110 Benjamin read the Carl Schmitt book Political Theology (1922) while he was completing his habilitation thesis. Schmitt’s book, like so many others by the same author, strongly influenced Benjamin’s book on baroque drama, as Benjamin acknowledged in a December 9, 1930, letter to Schmitt.
because, for Schmitt, the discovery of the arbitrary does not eliminate political theology; it only displaces it. In effect, Benjamin finds in the *Trauerspiel* something that corresponds to the ideas of Carl Schmitt.

The character of the Lutheran sovereign is at the heart of the court intrigues that constitute the theatrical action in the *Trauerspiel*. In the baroque world that marks the end of a Christian religion (with the advent of the Reformation), the end of Euro-centrism (with the discovery of the Americas) and the end of Antiquity’s conception of the universe (with Copernicus), the foundations are strongly shaken. In such a context, the Lutheran sovereign indeed becomes aware of the arbitrary nature of his decisions. He finds himself exercising his authority in a world without God. It has been well-known since the sociologist Max Weber that the Lutheran idea of *Sola fide* (we do not bring our good works to heaven because they have no value before God) sends the profane world back into itself. The world as interpreted by Lutheranism is disenchant. The return of Christian Platonism to official Lutheranism will have difficulty concealing this disenchantment. The result is a Lutheranism filled with paradoxes, almost as if official Lutheranism had all the appearances of an empty shell. It is in this setting that the sovereign argued with himself, struggling with an unprecedented theological-juridical situation.

In many respects, Christian Platonism in the West articulated itself on the model of Diotima’s ladder, in 211c of Plato’s *Symposium*. This was certainly the case for the Baroque Period that concerned Benjamin in his book. It was also the case for the Romantic Period that had long served Benjamin as an intellectual matrix before he wrote the baroque drama book in 1924–25, five years after his doctoral thesis on the Romantics. For many, Christian Platonism is closely linked to a Christian re-reading of the *Symposium*, and Benjamin’s book is no exception.
In his book, Benjamin associates acedia to the confusion of the Lutheran sovereign of the Baroque Period.\textsuperscript{111} For the promoters of Christian Platonism, acedia is a serious shortcoming, arising from spiritual stagnation and representing a complete lack of divine enthusiasm. In Benjamin, the ironic figure of a sovereign who is at once very Christian while simultaneously exhibiting acedia recalls the equally ironic figure of his 1916 depiction of Socrates as a satyr. As with Socratic Ignorance, the acedia-bound Lutheran sovereign is the figure through which Benjamin answered one theology with another: the theology that mystifies against the one that demystifies. No neutrality is possible: we are either for or against myth.

In this confrontation, Benjamin interpreted acedia in a positive way, as symptomatic of a religious repositioning that now favoured a new sensibility in the face of Christian Platonism. Indeed, acedia marked the start of a new, entirely personal initiative (albeit one that remains confused and anguished). Where the authoritarianism of yore presented a clearly ordered direction, acedia represents a certain lack of direction in spiritual life. Of course, spiritual life becomes more disquieted and tentative as a result, but it also becomes more human because it better accepts the heteronomy required for all spiritual progressions to be lived on this Earth. In other words, acedia marks the end of myth as we take in hand our own personal history. In this perspective, there would be something in the Lutheranism of Martin Luther to favour the individual spiritual journey in a world become disenchanted. In this respect, Johann Georg Hamann would have been this connection bridging Luther and Benjamin.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{111} Benjamin, \textit{The Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 19, 156.

Acedia pointed to a new sensibility. However, acedia was always associated with melancholia in the West. For Benjamin, it is less a question of feelings (as with the Romantics) than of an intellectual aim with the idea of a melancholia fully assumed. In order to write his book, Benjamin had exhaustively plumbed the work of art historian Erwin Panofsky on melancholia and, notably, on the melancholia depicted by the Renaissance painter Albrecht Dürer. One finds a written remark by Panofsky about Dürer that sheds light on Benjamin’s idea of including melancholia as an element of a new sensibility:

His melancholia is neither a miser nor a mental case, but a thinking being in perplexity. She does not hold on to an object which does not exist, but to a problem which cannot be solved.\textsuperscript{113}

Melancholia for Benjamin thus draws from his idea of Socratic Ignorance as depicted in his “Socrates” of 1916, in which ignorance expresses a new religious sensibility. Similarly, melancholia as a feeling associated to acedia expresses the religious sensibility of a humanity seeking as best as it can to accept its finiteness and end its search there. In this way, Benjamin’s program picked up on the idea of the Renaissance priest Marsilio Ficino who conceived of melancholia as a force of spiritual inertia that solidly anchors us in our human condition.\textsuperscript{114}

To this new religious sensibility and to melancholia, Benjamin associated an artistic and architectural sensibility: baroque churches. His book associated the baroque to churches of the time rather than to civic architecture. In the Baroque Period, civic architecture was plain and stiff


\textsuperscript{114} Marsilio Ficino, \textit{Three Books on Life (De vita libri tres)}, 1489, 1:4.
while baroque churches were spectacular, massive and, in the words of architecture historian Heinrich Wöfflin in 1888, bearers of exacerbated tensions. Indeed, the game of architectural forms reached an extreme tension with baroque churches, like a warning that the world was headed toward ruin. In this fairly moralistic enterprise, the baroque church seemed about to collapse onto itself in the way of an unbearably heavy legacy. Benjamin mentions in his book that baroque ruin is the ultimate expression of a great effort that is nonetheless fated for annihilation. For his psychologizing descriptions of the baroque, Benjamin drew abundantly from descriptions such as those of Wöfflin on baroque churches. This may be one of the weak points of his book, which used these other descriptions to compensate for a lack of information about the baroque stagings of the Trauerspiel.

The baroque church was made of excesses and congestion, giving the impression that its foundational system was crumbling under its own weight. It appeared as the last great Christian style, bidding farewell to Christian Platonism. For Benjamin, it can also be said that the baroque made possible a history of the kind he wanted. One chapter of the baroque drama book draws parallels between the Greek tragedies and the Trauerspiel. During Antiquity, the Greek tragedy promoted the unity of the stage: man’s fate was already drawn out on a stage that looked more like an altar readied for a sacrifice. Benjamin speaks of “fatal stage property” suspended

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115 “The secular architecture of the baroque style stands in remarkable contrast to the ecclesiastical. After the vigour and magnificence of the church façades, the severe, unassuming palaces are so unexpected, that one is inclined to think that in palace architecture the baroque period saw no stylistic development at all.” (Heinrich Wöfflin, Renaissance and Baroque [London: Collins, 1984], 124).

116 “That which lies here in ruins, the highly significant fragment, the remnant, is, in fact, the finest material in baroque creation.” (Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 178).


118 Ibid., 132
in the time of a guilty verdict requiring the death penalty. It is as if the human person had nothing
to say, nothing to do, but to suffer his baleful fate. However, the Greek tragedy was static, while
the theatrical action of the Trauerspiel was dynamic, with the incessant comings and goings of
court intrigue. The heart of the intrigue dealt with the indecision of the Lutheran sovereign
casted with his new freedom. In response to the sententious tone of tragedy, there was the new
discovery of a freedom that led critics to say that the Trauerspiel is a bad tragedy. Benjamin
underscores this aspect in his book, and adds that the sovereign often appeared ridiculous.

Benjamin held that if the Trauerspiel was reputed to be a bad tragedy, it was because the wrong
conceptual tools were being used to criticize it. Aristotle’s Poetics was of no help in
understanding the Trauerspiel. Aristotle’s categories do not do justice to the human experience
operating in the Trauerspiel because, for Benjamin, the categories are far too superficial.

The symbol that cast a shadow over the Baroque Period is the allegory of death, usually
represented by a skull or a skeleton. Benjamin pays particular attention to it in his book. The
allegory of death, known since the Middle Ages, returns with a vengeance in the time of baroque
churches. For Benjamin, this allegory is at odds with the conceptual structure of Christian
Platonism, founded on the idea of harmonious interweaving of two worlds, one of which is but
the antechamber of the other. In his book, Benjamin associates the “symbol” to this conceptual
structure. The idea of the symbol evoked a system that held itself as closed and flawless.

119 “The Trauerspiel is therefore in no way characterized by immobility, nor indeed by slowness of action (Wysocki
has remarked: ‘immobility is encountered in place of movement’), but by the irregular rhythm of the constant pause,
the sudden change of direction, and consolidation into new rigidity.” (Ibid., 197).
120 Ibid., 50.
121 Ibid., 124–125.
122 Ibid., 60–61.
Contrary to the symbol, the allegory of death addressed a problem that was like a grain of sand in a too-well-oiled machine: the signifier and the signified are in a problematic relationship. The allegory was the hidden face of Christian Platonism: it was a figure of exile pointing to a truth buried beneath the supersaturated baroque.\textsuperscript{124}

For Benjamin, the search for the truth of baroque aesthetics is like a search in the confused chaos of signs. In this way, his book again addresses his preoccupations from the time of his “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”. Still in the wake of the Lutheran Hamann, Benjamin concludes the book by warning that the truth is not to be found in the smoke and mirrors of Christian Platonism. The truth, rather, would be at work in an exit from this “Egypt.” With the idea of the exodus, the beginnings of an authentic aesthetics start taking shape, and this observation concludes the book.\textsuperscript{125}

As his friend Gershom Scholem had mentioned, Benjamin’s book on baroque drama marked the end of his youthful period, and the start of another period. All the while remaining fundamentally theological, this second and last period will be unambiguously marked by Marxism.\textsuperscript{126}

\textbf{2.1.3 Second Period: From the First Marxist Writings to the Last (1940)}

By the end of his first period, it is possible to advance the idea that Benjamin had already seriously studied Marxism. He had read, among others, \textit{History and Class Consciousness}:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{124} “The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the \textit{Trauerspiel}, is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things. This explain the baroque cult of the ruin.” (Ibid., 177–178).
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 235.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 15.
\end{quote}
Studies in Marxist Dialectics (1923), by the philosopher Georg Lukács, which greatly influenced the development of Marxist thought in the West. The Lukács book illustrated the importance of the aesthetic dimension in human relationships, and it discussed the alienation maintained by bourgeois representations. Like other Marxist thinkers in the West, Lukács had indicated the importance of the need for work on the very material of these representations with a view to establishing a culture of justice in capitalist society, an idea much in the air at the time. Even before the publication of History and Class Consciousness, Benjamin had already produced in 1921 two essays that demonstrate a certain proximity between his Marxist approach, and that of Lukács. The first was “Capitalism as Religion” and the second “Critique of Violence.” With these two essays, Benjamin continued his reflection on myths, but this time adding a strong Marxist inflection. For Marx, as for Benjamin, religion is the most powerful force on Earth. Man made religion, but religion did not make man. In taking this into account, Marx sought to eradicate religion, and Benjamin, if I may, to exorcise it.

In “Capitalism as Religion,” published after his death, Benjamin argued that capitalism functions as a religion: it demands worship. The difference, however, is that there are no dogmas or theology, and worship is permanent. As Benjamin wrote, it is a religion “without dream or mercy,” and with no holidays: capitalism demands the complete mobilisation of the person. Faced with this imperative, one’s will is inhibited by a vague feeling of guilt. The essay depicts capitalism as the first religion that creates guilt without offering any possibility of salvation. The religious state created by capitalism engenders impotence and despair. The goal is the same as

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with Greek tragedy: capitalism only demands, and brooks no objection or competition. In his book on baroque drama, Benjamin had already questioned the fatalism of the Tragedians that Christian Platonism had perpetuated. Now, with “Capitalism as Religion,” Benjamin notes a continuity between Christian Platonism and capitalism. From Greek tragedy to capitalism by way of Christian Platonism, there were therefore a series of metamorphoses whose shared trait would be the alienation of people by the modes of representation required by policies founded on theology. In response to this, Benjamin showed in his 1921 essay “Critique of Violence” that there are breaches in the seemingly ironclad system of capitalism. One of these is the workers’ general strike, which interferes with the good working order of capitalism’s modes of representation by revealing that capital can do nothing without the workers. More scandalous still for the fine minds: a form adjudged ugly—the general strike—can become very effective! By bringing his attention to bear on the general strike as an aesthetic form, Benjamin once again put into perspective the criteria for good taste to the benefit of something transitory and pragmatic. He was still bent on a work of implacable demystification. For Benjamin, this demystification of savage capitalism was fundamentally a work of justice; it was the truth incarnate of the general strike. For him, this was a truth buried within an aesthetic already taking shape.

As a good Marxist thinker, Benjamin was also preoccupied by the idea that emancipation is lived through history. He believed that the conventional history of architecture scarcely addresses

129 Ibid., 289.
individual and collective emancipation. Already, in 1923, he had written to his good friend Florens Christian Rang that he didn’t believe in the conventional history of architecture.\(^\text{131}\)

On several occasions, Benjamin confirmed in his personal notes the degree to which the 1901 masterwork *Late Roman Art Industry* by architecture historian Aloïs Riegl was important to him. Riegl had examined the beginnings of church architecture during late Antiquity. Many of his historian-colleagues held that the churches of late Antiquity were decadent, but Riegl had serious reservations about this judgement, finding it expeditious and superficial.\(^\text{132}\) He argued that a phenomenon such as churches must be evaluated using criteria other than the old ones.\(^\text{133}\) In any case, he argued, church architecture is unjustly devalued merely because a church is not a temple.\(^\text{134}\)

The call for a new non-classicizing sensibility was picked up unchanged by Benjamin in his 1931 essay “The Destructive Character.” The word-for-word adoption by Benjamin of a formulation in *Roman Art Industry* (“make room”) clearly reveals Riegl’s influence.\(^\text{135}\) For Riegl as for Benjamin, one must rid history of the clutter of old and obsolete ideas in favour of a new

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\(^\text{132}\) “It is significant that no one ever undertook to investigate closely the violent process claimed for the destruction of classical art by the barbarians. One only talked in general terms about ‘barbarization’ and left the details in an invisible fog … everyone agreed that late Roman art did not constitute progress but merely decay?” (Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 8).

\(^\text{133}\) “The old propositions, on which the ancient situation depended, had to be destroyed and made to give way to transitional modes…” (Ibid., 11).

\(^\text{134}\) “[B]eside its negative role of demolition in order to make room for the new, late Roman art always had positive aims, which have to date remained unrecognized, because they appear so different from our accustomed ideas of the aims of modern art which to some degree are the aims of classical and Augustan-Trajanic art.” (Ibid., 12).

\(^\text{135}\) “The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred. The destructive character is young and cheerful.” (Benjamin, “The Destructive Character,” 541).
aesthetic sensibility better suited to the present. This new sensibility thus implies an overthrow of
values, as Riegl wrote:

This ultimately lay in the social aspects of Christ’s message: the
struggle against the exclusive right of the stronger and the
establishment of an existential right for even the weak, the
suffering, and the vanquished.136

The God of Christians having become flesh, he made himself humble. This was the basis of a
new aesthetic sensibility corresponding to the nature of churches:

Forms that are imperfect in nature will be made to look even more
so in art; thus these can be exalted all the more as precious vessels
of art! This attitude explains the striking decline of a sense of
beauty in late Roman Imperial art. Some commentators have
described this phenomenon as ‘barbarism’, meaning that protracted
contact with barbarian peoples had sapped the late Romans of their
previous refinement of artistic sensibility.137

In “The Destructive Character,” Benjamin did not clearly endorse the Christian program
associated to this new sensibility. However, there are parallels between Benjamin’s approach in
the essay and Martin Luther on the subject. Like Luther, Benjamin sought to detect the traces of
an alternative history whose manifestations were at first glance “barbaric.” This link to Martin

137 Riegl, Late Roman Art Industry, 74–75.
Luther is not happenstance; it represents a radicalization in the development of Benjamin’s intellectual thinking during the 1930s. In many respects, Martin Luther also had fairly revolutionary ideas. In any case, there would be a causal link between Luther and Marx, as argued in the 2011 book *Religion and Violence.*

In “Experience and Poverty” (1933), Benjamin continued his reflection, this time on the subject of soldiers returning from the First World War. Benjamin observed that they were often aphasic, unable even to name their new experiences because these had been so beyond the pale. Benjamin noted that they had gone to war as soldiers of the 19th century, but had lived the war in an unimaginable manner. Through this example, Benjamin warned his readers that the new sensibility he advocated was still only in a fragmentary state, even though it was to play a determining role in the future. In “Experience and Poverty,” Riegl’s “barbarian invasions” return to the fore, again with a tone that brings Benjamin closer to Luther’s radicalism:

> Hence, a new kind of barbarism. Barbarism? Yes, indeed. We say this in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism. For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right.

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139 “For Germany’s revolutionary past is theoretical, it is the Reformation. As the revolution begins in the brain of the monk, so now it begins in the brain of the philosophe.” (Juergensmeyer and Kitts, eds., *Religion and Violence*, 176).

For Benjamin, there was also the question of theatrical staging, and his association with the Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht would illuminate his thinking here. This was not Benjamin’s first time on the subject; he had touched on it briefly in his baroque drama book to criticize the staging of classical tragedies, which he found coercive. With the theatre of Brecht, Benjamin’s reflection will focus more attention on the problematic of the stage. Before 1939, he wrote the following on the subject of Brecht’s theatre:

The point at issue in the theatre today can be more accurately defined in relation to the stage than to the play. It concerns the filling-in of the orchestra pit. The abyss which separates the actors from the audience like the dead from the living, the abyss whose silence heightens the sublime in drama, whose resonance heightens the intoxicated of opera, this abyss which, of all the elements of the stages, most indelibly bears the traces of its sacral origins, has lost its function. The stage is still elevated, but it no longer rises from an immeasurable depth; it has become a public platform.141

In this passage, Benjamin was observing that Brecht’s theatre requires a stage that no longer intimidates the audience. The idea is to no longer seek to impose using all manner of artifice. Brecht’s stage was minimalist, at the service of a social conscience that was beginning to wake among the proletariat. The stage was set up so that speech became free and there could be a public debate. As a result, Brecht had freed the stage from its artifices, founded on myth, in favour of an appropriation of the theatre that followed individual and collective self-awareness.

The diminution of the aura on the stage is thus a loss compensated by a gain: speech becomes unbound!

Benjamin returned to his approach on the aura as developed in his brief history of photography, written in 1931, by finding parallels with Brecht’s theatrical staging. With photography as with Brecht’s theatrical staging, the distance shrinks, disenchanted the aura and making it manipulatable. This is because a strong aura forbids that we touch it; it is a sacrilege (in Latin, sacrilege means: “we cannot put a hand on the sacred.”) Having become manipulatable, the aura as halo around people and things becomes diluted, and this is a happy fact for Benjamin: there is here a loss in exchange for a gain! Humankind finally appropriates for itself the role of gamekeeper of the dominating myth.

With his reflection on the problematic of Brecht’s theatrical staging, Benjamin had not only enriched his observations of 1928 on the staging of the Trauerspiel, but also added useful additional information following up on the ideas he had advanced with the help of Riegl in his approach to the history of church architecture. With the help of Brecht, the history of church architecture now appears like the history of a liberation of speech awaiting its time.

If we follow the logic that Benjamin applied to Brecht, only a diminution of aura in churches would allow such emancipation.

Moreover, in the 13 years up to his death in 1940, Benjamin had been working on a reflection on modern life that was at the same time aesthetic and theological. The city of Paris at the time of the Second Empire in the 19th century served as a framework for his reflection. The subject was the Parisian arcades of the time, structures of iron and steel in urban settings that presaged the skyscrapers of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. In Paris, as elsewhere, it
sometimes happened that arcades covered busy streets. As the architecture historian Paul Scheebart observed in 1914, arcades heralded a new era.\textsuperscript{142} Scheebart added that they bore witness to a capitalism that had completely broken with the past.\textsuperscript{143} He also evoked the reflections of the sun in the glass\textsuperscript{144} that created the effect of a game of mirrors enveloping the section of covered street. In other words, arcades were like the glass cathedrals of a new myth with its own modes of representation: those of capitalism triumphant. Benjamin had read Scheebart. He also concluded that the arcade of the 19th century was the new temple of a capitalist society where, from now on, anything could be bought.\textsuperscript{145}

With the increasing number of churches being put up for sale today, it would appear this is still the case.

Doing away with the values of the past, capitalism presents itself as the end of history, as in the famous neo-liberal 1992 book \textit{The End of History} by Francis Fukuyama. It is as if time has stopped and congealed in the eternity of another myth. In 1918, Guillaume Apollinaire had evoked the nostalgia that can overcome someone strolling in a city that, like Paris, has been changed by capitalism.\textsuperscript{146} Apollinaire’s \textit{flâneur} wanders, seeking his familiar path in this new urban labyrinth, and he no longer finds it. In 1926, the surrealist Louis d’Aragon wrote something similar on the new human condition: In the capitalist city, there are no more traditions and not really any history, only a whirling flow of mirages led by the dance of the dollar-god. It

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 50.
\textsuperscript{145} Walter Benjamin, \textit{The Arcades Project} (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2002), 879.
is not for nothing that *Nadja*, a 1928 novel by another surrealist, André Breton, presented Paris as an unreal and ghostly city where architecture appears to float around the characters of the novel.

The Passage of the Opera was a well-known Parisian arcade of the 19th century that housed a motley population. Some Surrealists frequented it regularly before its demolition in 1924. At the time of the demolition, Louis d’Aragon had dedicated to the Passage an essay that was to become the first chapter of his book *Paris Peasant*. A den of iniquity, it was demolished to make way for a big urban boulevard. Urban planning triumphed over this “court of miracles.”

In reading Benjamin on the arcades, one comes to understand that the new myth is repressive. The gears of this particular system do not take kindly to anything that impedes their smooth functioning. The administration of capitalist society plans, calculates coldly, and builds only in its own interests. For Benjamin, the new myth is fundamentally castrating. All myth would be castrating, but he now brought a particular attention to the subject with his reflection on capitalism in an urban setting. The figurehead of the *flâneur* is evidence of this. In the past and to this day, the *flâneur* is not really welcome outside certain areas; he interferes with the proper functioning of the urban flow (hence all those “no loitering” signs). In his own way, the *flâneur* is subversive, and that is why Benjamin is interested in him.

For Benjamin, the poet Charles Baudelaire personifies the figure of the Parisian *flâneur* at odds with an alienated world. In his writing on arcades, Benjamin mentions “Loss of Halo,” a poem by Baudelaire in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857).147 “Loss of Halo” signals that capitalism puts

everything up for sale, including that which was once considered sacred. For Benjamin, the new human condition implies from now on the diminution of aura. The result is a loss which provokes in Baudelaire a “spleen,” a melancholic feeling that typifies the lack of participation by the flâneur in social life. He breaks away. He is “uprooted,” in Benjamin’s words. As with Apollinaire’s flâneur, Benjamin’s questions his past while standing astride the places of an urban memory that has been disfigured, or has ceased to exist altogether. As Benjamin had already written in “The Return of the Flâneur” in 1929: “Baudelaire is the source of the cruel aperçu [insight] that the city changes faster than a human heart.” However, this would be a breach in the seemingly ironclad system of capitalism, because it is in the search for lost time that something else gets under way.

Sexuality plays a predominant role in Benjamin’s writings on arcades. In fact, sexuality plays a part in all of his reflections on the urban life of capitalist society. Already in his “One-Way Street” of 1928, he was dealing with urban life as a catalyst of energy. In a way, Benjamin had returned to the themes of Plato’s Symposium in the new framework of capitalism, with the difference that the clear direction of Diotima’s ladder leads to Heaven while indirection belongs to sexual energy in the urban setting. In fact, something is fundamentally awry, as Baudelaire’s “spleen” indicates. Bluntly stated, it would be the Garden of Eden that becomes the model for a way to live together, one where sexuality would find a harmonious place among all the signs of a
truly re-established communication. The evocation of paradise lost in Benjamin’s “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” returns to the agenda, as timely as ever.

For example, the Baudelaire poem “À une passante” [To a Female Passerby], published in 1855 and appearing in *Les Fleurs du mal*, deals with the flâneur exchanging a momentary conspiratorial glance with a passing woman. In an instant, the moment of eternity of an authentic relation is experienced. It comes, and it is gone right away; such is the state of hectic modern life. Nonetheless, the memory of this magic moment remains vivid. Indeed, something significant has successfully taken shape in the urban flow, and this cannot be forgotten! The diminution of the aura that is the lot of relations made false by mercantilism has not succeeded in preventing such a transitory experience of authenticity; indeed, the diminution of aura inflames the quest for such authentic experiences, as precarious and as transitory as they might be!

In all this, the figure of the flâneur resembles that of Adam. In “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” Adam acts: he names the creatures and takes ownership of his world. Now, it is the flâneur who rebuilds his universe as a work of recollection carried out on the sly.¹⁵³ In other words, the figure of the unknown flâneur is like that of Adam: it relaunches history at the individual level. This is why Benjamin designated the flâneur as the new “priest of the genius loci.”¹⁵⁴ The term “priest” here is in the Lutheran sense of a lay person assuming his most noble task: fully appropriating his spiritual heritage in his own way.¹⁵⁵ This means that the flâneur

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¹⁵⁴ “[T]he flâneur includes a knowledge of ‘dwelling’. The primal image of ‘dwelling’, however, is the matrix or shell …. The flâneur is the priest of the genius loci.” (Benjamin, “The Return of the Flâneur,” 264).

¹⁵⁵ In his thinking on art and aesthetics, Benjamin’s primary consideration is of a theological nature. Benjamin saw the idea of the priest associated to both Adam and the flâneur as flowing out of a 1524 writing of Luther that says “…the languages and arts were laboriously recovered – although imperfectly – from bits and fragments of old books
alone is capable of gleaning a bit of humanity in the heart of the most hostile urban setting. He alone can deal cunningly with the infernal logic of mercantilism to patch together an art of living, pending the advent of something better. The appropriation of the urban framework by the *flâneur* is much like looking at the reverse side of a tapestry still being woven, awaiting the time when the entire work is completed and the tapestry’s good side can fully reveal its themes. In carrying out this endless task, the *flâneur* does not seek to recreate; he is content to momentarily tinker. In awaiting the end of time, the ingredient of (religious) hope is part of the formal work,

hidden among dust and worms. Men are still laboriously searching for them every day, just as people poke through the ashes of a ruined city seeking the treasures and jewels.” Luther also wrote: “This is essential, not only that those who are to be our spiritual and temporal leaders may have books to read and study, but also that the good books may be preserved and not lost, together with the arts and languages which we now have by the grace of God. (Cf. Theodore G. Tappert, ed., “To the Councilmen of Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” in *Selected Writings of Martin Luther, 1523-1526*, p. 31-70, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1967, p. 65 and 66). Jewish mysticism of the Middle Ages had formulated the idea of the Constellation (*Konstellation*), which is central to Benjamin’s thinking and in his book on the Baroque. The idea of the Constellation is drawn from the Jewish theological tenet that the Jerusalem Temple had to be destroyed and its stones scattered (Cf. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, The Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies, #2, Seattle, WA, University of Washington Press, 1982, p. 23). According to this tradition, the Messiah can reveal himself only after much laborious work of recollection and interpretation is completed. The idea of redemption dominates here. Benjamin liked this idea of redemption and had secularized it (although his secularization of the idea had something to do with a current of Jewish millenarianism that held the Messiah was to live on Earth with his disciples for a thousand years before the end of the world). In his writing on aesthetics, Hamann had already joined this Jewish mysticism to Luther. Benjamin follows in Hamann’s footsteps, but in so doing insists on a certain degree of egalitarianism between the scholar and the ordinary man; both participate in the “ministry” of the *flâneur*. As churches pertain more to the Christian world than to the Jewish one, I will not deal here with the importance of Jewish mysticism for Benjamin. However, the messianism of each of these two worlds points to a direction that is similar in many respects. Finally, a later text of Benjamin’s, entitled “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (Third Version, 1939, in *Selected Writings 4*, 251–283. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2003) makes clear that theology was, for Benjamin, always in the foreground. The work of art, traditionally hidden or kept at a distance by specialists, is now mechanically reproduced and disseminated, exposing its aura to broad daylight. As a result, a disenchantment sets in that does not destroy it but, rather, displaces it and exposes its content to everyone. Once out of bounds for the people, the work of art now puts into play its appropriations, spiritual pathways and a theological search where the use of critical reasoning and analysis occupy a central place. Bruno Tackels highlights this in his book *L’œuvre d’art à l’époque de l’aura de W. Benjamin. Histoire d’aura* (series Esthétiques, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1999, 186 pages).
as Benjamin notes. In “One-way Street,” he invites the reader to note the fact that on the portal of the Baptistery of Florence can be read the word Spes (Hope).\textsuperscript{156}

Finally, the last important text of Benjamin was “On the Concept of History,” written in 1940, the year of his death. It discusses the question of theology in the service of Marxism. For Benjamin, theology is ugly, small, and to be kept out of sight.\textsuperscript{157} Once again, the image of Socrates in the eponymous 1916 essay returns implicitly. Socrates was ugly, and reputed to be ironic when he thought it necessary. It nonetheless remains that he was pretty efficient in tripping up his adversaries when came the time to argue. Now, this strange being who comes to derogate good taste and acceptable standards in polite society becomes, with Benjamin, the very face of theology.

As with Socrates, Benjamin attributes to theology the capacity for a work of demystification that is, furthermore, peaceful. When it wants to, theology can truly demystify the rants of myth-believers. For Benjamin, theology is, in this respect, an irreplaceable tradition. In the West, it alone furnishes enough matter for thought to demolish the myth-based foundations of dominant conceptual structures. It alone is truly capable of shedding light on the most hidden aspects of such systems without falling prey to the same abject violence. As much against the devious efforts of Christian Platonism as against those of the spirit of the Enlightenment, such a theology is always at work, and it is not irrational, as a superficial interpretation might conclude. Instead,
it works in the name of the best of Enlightenment values. It alone would be able to detect and expose to all the traces of mythomania that still and always persist.

This, above all, is the spiritual legacy of Benjamin.

2.2 Conclusion

Benjamin’s writings can as a general rule be difficult to decipher, so it is necessary to make use of helpful guides in order to grasp their meaning. The approach I took in reading Benjamin was to keep in mind the writings of the Lutheran Johann Georg Hamann, whose work is based on important writings of Martin Luther that were quickly set aside by official Lutheranism. We already know that Benjamin was inspired in part by Hamann’s writings; in his “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” Hamann is mentioned twice, including a reference that condenses into one sentence that part of Benjamin’s program that overlaps Hamann’s:

“[L]anguage, the mother of reason and revelation, its alpha and omega,” says Hamann.\(^{158}\)

It would be difficult to say, however, that such an investigation into the Benjamin-Hamann-Luther connection is a common one in the numerous existing interpretations of Benjamin’s writings.\(^{159}\) Nevertheless, I found this connection promising because it offers a quick and illuminating overview of Benjamin’s writings. Indeed, my analysis of Benjamin’s book on

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\(^{158}\) Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” 67.

\(^{159}\) My summary research in the libraries of the great Canadian universities to find an article or book on the Benjamin-Hamann-Luther connection, especially in the arts or architecture, was fruitless. However, a scholarly article in 2009 takes a similar path to mine through a Benjamin-Luther connection. (Will Hasty, “The Singularity of Aura and the Artistry of Translation: Martin Luther’s Bible as Artwork,” in *Monatshefte*, vol. 101, no. 4 [Winter 2009], 457–468).
baroque drama supports this “Lutherising” connection, whose echoes can be easily discerned throughout the second period of Benjamin’s writings. As a result, the Benjamin-Hamann-Luther connection serves as the backbone of this second chapter.

In order to get a useful glimpse into the Lutheran genealogy of Benjamin’s thinking, it is relevant to identify in it the zones of influence. At the root of the Lutheran enterprise, there are, of course, the writings of Martin Luther. The 2011 book by Philippe Büttgen entitled *Luther et la philosophie* is an excellent reference to establish the anchor points of the Benjamin-Hamann-Luther connection in Luther’s writing.\(^{160}\) According to Büttgen, Luther believed that:

- The signs have been blurred since the introduction of sin to the world. Luther maintained that books were the main contributor to this, and there were too many books that blurred rather than helped.
- It is necessary to revisit Official History in order to trace the moments of an alternative history that itself is marginal and fragmentary until it is fully revealed on Judgment Day. However, such a history is not completely beyond convention. For example, Luther borrowed from the shared rules of communications, if only in the negative, by qualifying its approach as “barbaric.”
- Aesthetics plays a very small role in truth and, like books, it will be annihilated on Judgment Day.
- Each individual is a whole. The human being is total; he is flesh, spirit, and soul. His unifying power expresses itself in language.
- Aristotle and all philosophers work against the Bible.

In the Benjamin-Hamann-Luther connection, the bridge between Martin Luther and Walter Benjamin is Johann Georg Hamann, who liked to say that he “Lutherises.” In the latter half of the 18th century, Hamann sought to bring to the fore those writings of Luther that had been

neglected by official Lutheranism. In aligning with Luther’s anchor points, it is useful to examine Hamann’s program. Hamann believed that:

- The world is a jumble of signs.
- Official History persecutes hidden history, which awaits its time on Judgment Day. As with Luther, Hamann takes the view that an alternative history nonetheless requires a minimal number of conventions so that all may spot the precursor signs.
- Aesthetics also participates only in a small way in truth. As indicated in the conclusion of his *Aesthetica in nuce* (1762), it will disappear on Judgment Day.
- The human being is whole. By the totality of his personal experience (concentrated in poetic language) it is possible for another history to be launched. It is therefore at the modest scale of each individual that an alternative to Official History can be initiated.
- Philosophy is not necessarily bad. Hamann worshiped Socrates with his *Socratic Memorabilia* (1759). However, he had issues with Kant and his Aristotelian categorisation, which he criticised as piecemeal and as making personal experience superficial, thus weakening it.

Hamann’s merit was in having developed the idea of language already present in Luther, and of having enriched it to such a degree that he made it the only point of contact between God and humankind. For Hamann, everything is in language, which is a human adventure appropriating its own experiences. It nevertheless remains that Hamann distanced himself from Luther when he associated to Christian theology that which he considered the best of Jewish theology and Greek philosophy. With language as a hub between God and all humankind, Hamann sketched out an approach to religion that distanced itself from the usual Christian dogmas.

As for Benjamin, he consolidated Hamann’s more universalizing foundations. Without leaving the Lutheran theological base that he shared with Hamann, Benjamin distanced himself from Luther and Hamann by concerning himself with the formal aspects of aesthetics. In fact, this is at the root of his originality. For Benjamin, the truth of the work (the Judgment Day) can, paradoxically, be translated in the imperfection of a form. As a result, the Benjamin-Hamann-Luther connection could complete itself as follows with Benjamin, who believed that:

- The world is a jumble of signs.
- The fine minds had neglected certain strongly significant dimensions of aesthetics under the pretext that these dimensions had *hic et nunc* distanced themselves from the “Temple of Good Taste.” In so doing, their conceptual constructs do not take part in the truth (Judgment Day).
- Aesthetics can be a part of the truth (Judgment Day) by finding the form that best renders this truth. Unmistakeably for Benjamin, this form will be a marginalized one in the eye of the aesthetic criteria of the fine minds because its criteria for evaluation will also be a perspective oriented to the end of all things.
• The human experience is whole, consisting of trial and error mixed with disquiet. It is through such an experience that hidden history reveals itself. There are formal consequences to the taking control of history by a personal language: it is up to each to play according to the rules of a given artistic or architectural tradition to communicate the transitional mode that best suits the truth of the work.

• Human experience is fundamentally a “theological site.” In this, Benjamin distances himself from an Aristotelian paradigm like that of Kant to revisit and correct in his own way a paradigm inherited from Plato.

It is hard to imagine that these parallels between Benjamin, Hamann and Luther are mere happenstance; instead, they reveal a connection, a sort of discreet Lutheran tradition along which Walter Benjamin’s thinking progressed.

As Isaiah Berlin remarked, intellectual knowledge for the 18th century British philosopher David Hume came from history. Hume believed we can think only by referring back to tradition. He held that left to its own devices, speculative thought gets carried away with itself. Only its fundamental link to tradition keeps it from such flights. As did many others, Berlin knew that Hamann fundamentally agreed with Hume on this point. It is on the basis of this other complementary connection going back, this time, to Hume, that we can also place Benjamin’s theological undertaking. Whether we believe in a particular religion or not, we cannot escape from these venerable traditions when comes the time to think.

162 Berlin, The Magus of the North, 31–32.
Finally, it is now time to test the idea promoted by Benjamin of a diminution in the aura of churches as being something beneficial. This practical aim will be the task for Chapter Three, which follows.
Chapter 3
Possibilities Inspired by Benjamin

3.1 Introduction

What is a church? Well, it is a building that belongs to a venerable tradition of architecture going back nearly 2,000 years. It is usually recognized by its monumental facade, its street-level location, its nave ending in a semi-circle, and its one or two steeples. Churches have changed over the centuries, but the form has nonetheless remained so recognizable that a brief glance is enough to conclude: “Ah, here is a church!”

A church converted to a purpose other than worship is usually still referred to as a church. It is easy to say, for example, that this particular church has become a concert hall, and that one a library. For a variety of reasons, affective attachment not the least of them, popular language will always speak first of a church, then that it has been converted.

In light of this, most architects commissioned to convert a church strive to respect this common sensibility by working to preserve the architectural integrity of the converted church. Whether we like it or not, a church is characterized by a certain conservatism at the level of both the evolution of its architectural forms and the attachment to what it represents in history. The heart has reasons that reason cannot know.

But, again, what is a church? A church is also a finely articulated system that is at the same time open and closed. In the history of church architecture, the separation between the nave and the sanctuary plays a determining role in this game of open and closed. Since the Middle Ages at least, non-liturgical activities were regularly held in the nave, as John G. Davies notes in his
1968 book *The Secular Use of Church Buildings*. The pressure on the sanctuary of these types of activities led to a decision to reinforce the separation between the nave and the sanctuary with a barrier whose width and height varied according to the premises: the opening (to non-liturgical activities) was concentrated in the nave, while the closure (always to non-liturgical activities) was concentrated in the sanctuary. The primary rule was to preserve the distinction between the two principal spaces of the church, rather than give free rein to chaos. In this sense, the history of church architecture already carried within it part of the solution to the current challenges of church conversions. Obviously, this open-and-closed system rested on a clerical ideology that required a clear separation between clergy and laymen, to the detriment of the latter. The architectural system of the church encouraged segregation, and this is the Gordian knot that the architect dealing with a church conversion has to slice through.

3.2 The Architect-Theologian

If we follow the central thread in the writings of Walter Benjamin, an architect must master and make knowledgeable use of architectural language, and include in it the most determinant formal element of the work. For Benjamin, this determinant formal element is spiritual, because it indicates in the finiteness of a form the most intrinsic truth of the work, which also implies an ideal of justice.

First, the truth of a work is that it eventually passes from the world, and so it is for churches. A day will come when there will be nothing left of churches. This may appear obvious, but a quick

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historical review of religious architecture in the West, from the Greek temple to the modern historical monument (the temple’s secular derivative), reveals a long series of illusory attempts to stave off this fate. This history rings false to those who say that all is vanity. For Benjamin, it is better to accept the implacable logic of passing time rather than to live in denial of how it ultimately ends. So it is for any honest architecture.

As for the ideal of justice, it is a narrow concept for Benjamin. It is a clearly religious reference, drawn from the Judaeo-Christian tradition and its idea of Judgment Day, when each thing must ultimately be evaluated in the light of divine justice. In other words, each thing without exception will appear before God’s Tribunal. For Benjamin, the merit of such a narrow concept is its effectiveness in demystifying the conceptual constructs that claim to offer more than they really can. It is a good thing to discredit such constructs in the eyes of the humble, because the constructs have not served them well.

If we align ourselves to Benjamin’s approach with respect to a church conversion, there would be three guidelines for the architect:

- The architect has the expertise to manipulate the forms of the church.
- The architect has the expertise to detect in the history of church architecture the most spiritual formal element of the church.
- The architect has the expertise to manipulate the forms and to reveal the most spiritual formal element of the church according to common rules of communication. By this very fact, the architect is a co-creator, standing as much with the history of church architecture as with his contemporaries.
The goal is to use language to demystify, and no more, while remaining in the very heart of the history of church architecture. In its own way, the expertise of the architect-theologian is powerfully effective: it seeks to show in the very language of church architecture that myth is as foreign as it is obsolete. This is because the work of the architect-theologian must reveal architectural language as it is: a precarious, transitory and human reality in the flux of a history that is experienced at the grassroots. When the architect-theologian succeeds in exorcising myths in the very language of the church, he finally stands with the best of the history of church architecture; he stands with all those who were dominated by powers that turned the nature of churches to the service of base ends. Through his expertise, the architect-theologian thus performs a work of justice by locking the emancipated church into an eternal moment that finally dispels the myths that had previously encumbered the tradition of church architecture.

In a church, the nave and the sanctuary are formally connected by a longitudinal axis that begins at the former and ends in the latter, thus making the sanctuary the focus of attention. In the middle of the sanctuary is the altar, also situated on the longitudinal axis. Traditionally, it is in the sanctuary that the clergy officiates, having at times represented the Roman-Christian emperor, and at other times the ecclesiastic powers. In a church, the sanctuary is the ultimate symbolic site of power, its seat. But there is also the longitudinal axis which leads to the sanctuary, and what it represents: it is unilateral and despotic, according to Friedrich Nietzsche, who called this contribution to the clerical system “perspectivism.” In his own way, Nietzsche put his finger on a problem that made many citizens uncomfortable in church: they feel directed

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165 “[S]imply is no true world. Thus: a perspectival appearance whose origin lies in us …” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* [London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, (1901) 1968], 14).
to it. As Nietzsche pointed out so judiciously, the modern individual prefers to make his own way in a church, taking all the latitude necessary, rather than allow himself to be directed, as the faithful before him were. As for Benjamin, his idea of the *flâneur* suggests a certain parallel with Nietzsche; the *flâneur* ambles along at his own pace, obsessed only by his personal quest. But Benjamin does not break entirely with “perspectivism;” he sought a language for all, and such a thing is accessible only through recourse to tradition. Contrary to Nietzsche, the solution advocated by Benjamin in response to the problem of “perspectivism” lay in church architecture as a grammar whose common intelligibility, minimal as it is, must absolutely be maintained. Nietzsche’s rejection of tradition brought his theoretical approach to a dead end, as he himself finally conceded.

The solution is not to destroy the sanctuary and the longitudinal axis, and thus the hegemonic burden associated with them, but, rather, to formally foil the hegemony that has traditionally lain coiled within them. We should remember that Benjamin aimed for the diminution of the aura, not its destruction. In this, he respected the minimum required for a common and shared understanding of church architecture and its tradition. This minimum requirement was important to him, and to his *flâneur*, who manifested the desire to enter into authentic relationships with beings and things. It is, after all, in the nature of a church to be a centre of community life, recognizable by all.

166 “[W]e want to take walks in us when we stroll through these hallways …” (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 160).
167 “Writing in *Twilight of the Idols* in 1888, Friedrich Nietzsche stated: ‘I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar’. For Nietzsche, metaphysics, or ontotheology, is sustained by the ideology of the subject that pervades Western thinking right down to the level of the structure of representation and language.” (Christopher Kul-Want, ed., *From Kant to the Postmodernists* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2010], 2.
It is therefore an art to alter a church for the purpose of conversion; the goal of this art is to diminish the majesty of the sanctuary and soften the rigidity of the longitudinal axis, to alter without destroying. In light of this approach, the growing number of church conversions today speak to failure as well as success. It would not do, however, to take strong offence to the failures, given the inevitable process of trial and error inherent in the circumstances. In church architecture, a period of crisis involves failures that are inevitably part of the process in the same way as successes. Benjamin would not have been offended by this; on the contrary, he would have approved of this process of trial and error, and seen it as learning a new language using the resources of church architecture and its tradition. It is in good part to integrate the failures that Benjamin accorded value to the “barbaric.” His approach was consciously democratic, not elitist, and aimed to be inclusive by according the greatest possible room to a variety of explorations. The freedom of the creator was dear to him. Nevertheless, just as Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot invited creators to alter knowingly (“May your ruins be learned!”), Benjamin maintained the idea of an art.

An interesting example of church conversion is that of St. Matthew’s Anglican Church in Quebec City, converted to a neighborhood library in 1980. In light of Benjamin’s writings, this example can offer a glimpse into what he sought to communicate by testing on church architecture some of his more penetrating theological insights. For this reason, the St. Matthew’s conversion deserves a closer look.

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3.3 A Conversion Test Case: St. Matthew’s Anglican Church, Québec City

The conversion of St. Matthew’s into a neighbourhood library drew the attention of academics when the Bishop of the Quebec Anglican diocese, Msgr. Bruce Stavert, saluted its success in an address to a 2004 colloquium entitled *Quebec’s Religious Heritage: Between Worship and Culture*.169

In the case of this conversion, the Anglican diocese of Quebec had set guidelines for the architectural program, and had made a generous gesture prior to the undertaking: the church bells would remain in the steeple, and a goodly number of ornamental pieces would remain inside the church, after the conversion. The hushed atmosphere of the holy was to remain after the building had become a library. Such a gesture is unusual in Quebec, where

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the Roman Catholic Church would normally frown on such an approach. At the initiative of the Anglican diocese, the agreement with the municipal administration of Quebec City\(^\text{170}\) stipulated that the sanctuary must remain vacant, with a small gate separating it from the nave and barring access to it. This was the only formal requirement in the agreement. Thus, all that remained was to install in the nave the shelves, service counters, seats, and study tables. The conversion of the nave was done in such a way that the longitudinal axis was not very pronounced; it is in fact rather discreet and just barely maintains the traditional link between nave and sanctuary.

There is no anecdotal evidence about the initial intention of the ecclesiastic authorities. But one thing is certain: the result of this conversion was a fortunate one. Instead of disappearing, the solemnity of the church was brought back to a more human scale. With the sanctuary emptied of its liturgical pomp, the church appeared “de-clericalized.” With the longitudinal axis attenuated, the citizen no longer has the disagreeable feeling that he is being directed, as has traditionally been the case. Deliberately or not, this church conversion achieved a rare balance. Once converted, the church became more human, all the while offering a space for quiet contemplation to anyone wanting one. One may well ask whether, with St. Matthew’s, the church has now reached a certain maturity, architecturally speaking, as its nature is no longer to reach a small

\[\text{Plate 4 – The steeple of the refurbished St. Matthew’s Church (Photo: Martin Dubois).}\]

\(^{170}\) Ville de Québec, “Acte de la vente de l’église Saint Matthew et de ses conditions particulières” (Québec City: Division d’enregistrement, document #999 416, October 28, 1980).
number of citizens through solemn liturgy. With its opening onto the street, the church is now intended for the greatest number of people. The conversion to a library now reaches more people, all the while preserving that *je ne sais quoi* that makes a church. Better still, that *je ne sais quoi* is better suited to the new sensibilities of our times. Many citizens now experience this converted church without the least bit of discomfort.

A conversion as interesting as this one is thought-provoking in light of Benjamin’s ideas. It could even lead us to question the term “conversion,” which implies a brutal break with church history. As architect Jean Nouvel has suggested, a better term might be *réaménagement* [redevelopment]. As well, redevelopment implies for Nouvel that we continue to situate ourselves in the tradition of church architecture,¹⁷¹ a position fairly consistent with Benjamin’s approach.

Indeed, the conversion (or, rather, the redevelopment) of St. Matthew’s offers much to think about. As this redevelopment illustrates well Benjamin’s approach to church architecture, I consider it a reference, so I will use it to present a three-stage process for undertaking the alteration of a church.

### 3.4 Altering a Church in Three Phases

In the tumultuous context of church decommissioning, too many decisions are postponed for too long, and then suddenly rushed into; improvisation becomes the dominant approach. I propose a process of church alteration in three phrases to relieve the unfortunate effects of this lack of vision. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

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3.4.1 The First Phase

In the first phase, the church continues to be used for liturgical purposes. Popular sensibility still holds that even only occasional liturgical use is the best way to ensure the preservation of a church’s primary nature. However, it would be wise to prepare for the second phase by making it easier for liturgical activities to share the building with other activities. This requires that the liturgical layout be flexible.

On the subject, the liturgical renewal of the mid-20th century benefited from a reflection that is useful here. In that period rich in explorations, at least two complementary approaches emerged for a flexible liturgical layout. The first had its roots in the ideas advanced by architect Edward A. Sövik, and the second in those by theologian Louis Bouyer. The first approach relies as much on the liturgical experiences of boy scouts in the first quarter of the 20th century as to experiences by others in the two world wars: at the time, there was a new awareness that Christian liturgy did not depend on a building. The liturgy may have evolved inside a church, as Sövik’s 1973 book *Architecture for Worship* observes, but it can occupy any space, as if we all lived outdoors or in a military theatre of operations. Liturgy is free and could, as past experience has shown, get by without the physical church. The second approach also offers flexibility. In his 1967 book *Liturgy and Architecture*, Louis Bouyer promoted the use of chairs laid out around the altar, as close as possible to the nave. It is even possible with Bouyer to imagine the altar inside the nave, leaving the sanctuary vacant. In contrast to Sövik, Bouyer maintained the tradition of aligning the altar on the longitudinal axis, and directing the gaze of the priest to the

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172 Sövik, *Architecture for Worship*. 
rear of the sanctuary.\textsuperscript{173} His liturgical layout conformed at the same time to the spirit of liturgical renewal of the mid-20th century, and to what he considered the best of past tradition.

We can presume that Benjamin would situate himself halfway between Sövik and Bouyer. In opposition to Sövik, the ideas defended by Benjamin suggest that a complete elimination of the liturgy from church architecture would be too much of an affront to convention. On the other hand, the fact that an approach like Bouyer’s does not break with a rigid definition of the longitudinal axis would certainly have raised Benjamin’s eyebrows. He would have seen in this the persistence of a directed art that is experienced at the expense of individual freedom. It would thus be necessary to soften the longitudinal axis to bring Bouyer’s approach into conformity with Benjamin’s ideas. As a result, we can imagine a liturgical layout around an altar in the nave that leaves the sanctuary vacant while more or less respecting the longitudinal axis. This is the liturgical layout that I have in mind. It strengthens the idea of alterations that render the sanctuary less imposing and the longitudinal axis less directive. Such a layout offers an exemplary manner in which to occupy a church outside of liturgical celebrations, and it would pave the way to the following phases regarding a more dramatic alteration.

3.4.2 The Second Phase

The second phase involves the religious decommissioning of the church. All that is required here is to allow the sanctuary to remain vacant and to more or less respect the longitudinal axis. With these two guiding principles already established in the first phase (where the liturgical coexists alongside other activities) there would be a continuity rather than a break. Psychologically, this

\textsuperscript{173} Bouyer, Liturgy and Architecture, 97–98, 111–112.
would make a difference in that it would soften the idea that a church is on the path to a complete
decommissioning.

3.4.3 The Third Phase

The third and last phase pertains to the eventual demolition of a church (for all kinds of reasons,
the usual one being issues with its structural elements). It is good at this stage to preserve the
minimum required to evoke the familiar silhouette of a church, all the while keeping to the
requirements of the previous phases, including the vacant sanctuary and the attenuated
longitudinal axis. Where possible, complete demolition should be avoided; a small portion of the
structure could, for example, be kept and used as a park. The important thing is to underscore the
continuity of church architecture right up to the end. As the subtle dislocation of the sanctuary
and the longitudinal axis were present in the preceding phases, they help to presage the
preservation of a small remaining part of the building in this third phase.

As redevelopments of churches always come about as the result of financial constraints, my
suggestion for an alteration process in three stages adjusts naturally to these constraints. Given
that we cannot escape economic imperatives, why face off against them? Benjamin himself
invited accommodation to financial constraints—in order to cleverly manipulate them, not
surrender to them.

In addition, my three phases of alteration lead to the leitmotiv that churches will pass from this
world. Benjamin strongly wanted to inscribe this truth in the very forms of church architecture:
demystification requires the establishment of this truth in church architecture. Thus, we can ask
if, for Benjamin, the priority is the overthrow of idols rather than individual and collective
emancipation. I am inclined to answer this question in the affirmative, but I would add that, still
according to Benjamin, emancipation requires iconoclasm. For Benjamin, emancipation is to iconoclasm what effect is to cause. In this case, the role of the architect-theologian (or his equivalent, because we saw with St. Matthew’s that it is not always an architect who leads the architectural program) would be to play with the architectural language of a church in the same way as the child who cried: “The Emperor has no clothes.” We all know the Hans Christian Andersen tale of dishonest weavers who convince the Emperor that the clothes they have made for him are woven from a fabric invisible to the eyes of fools. Not wanting to appear a fool, the Emperor pretends to believe he is indeed clad in sumptuous garb. When he parades publicly in this “attire,” nobody dares say a word—until a child cries: “The Emperor has no clothes.” All at once, people begin telling each other the Emperor is naked. Through untethered speech, the Emperor revealed himself the equal of his subjects, an ordinary man among other ordinary men. As with the child of the Andersen tale, it is now up to the architect-theologian to use the architectural language of a church to demystify it, and thus return it to his fellow citizens.

Finally, one must concede that the link between the noble ideals of truth, justice, liberty and love (love does not fear truth, it seeks justice, and wants to make one’s fellows free) is fairly loose in official Lutheranism because it is not anchored in the reality of this world. In his Theses on Feuerbach, written in 1845, Karl Marx had reproached the long speculative tradition in the West for not being anchored in reality. Benjamin agreed, and seemed to prefer Marx’s point of view to that of Luther or Hamann when he advocated a formal resolution to problems of aesthetics. On this subject, it is possible to make a connection between Benjamin’s theological work and that of Reinhold Niebuhr. For Niebuhr, a Lutheran and an American theologian who was a contemporary of Benjamin’s and who survived him, it is the entire Christian tradition that has not yet succeeded in anchoring itself sufficiently in reality. Significantly, the operation of the
liturgy would support Niebuhr. The liturgy is said to be indifferent to issues such as those raised by the religious decommissioning of churches. Instead of ignoring such issues, liturgists could rally around them by contributing to the emancipation of church architecture, and with it the emancipation of citizens. Indeed, this was the liturgical impulse that I wanted to give to the first stage of the process of altering a church.
Conclusion

It could reasonably be argued that the Reformation was unable to restrain the Christian Platonism that contaminated the history of church architecture. As a result, Christian Platonism and its secular offshoots are still seen today as the correct framework within which to interpret churches in the West. The unprecedented large number of churches currently being decommissioned, sold, and converted provides an opportunity to better understand how this came about, and to better identify previously overlooked factors in the history of church architecture that could help clear the current impasse and open a way to the future.

At the end of Chapter 1, I raised the intriguing suspicion that official Lutheranism had, like a palimpsest, superimposed itself over early Lutheranism. By definition, a palimpsest is something that ineffectually conceals what it has tried to erase and overwrite. Indeed, it was possible to detect a greater autonomy for worshippers in early Lutheranism. However, the conceptual structure put in place by Reformers in the generations following Luther so muddied the waters that people came to devalue in church architecture the very aspects that Luther valued: freedom of the Christian, aesthetics, and a corresponding sense of history. In other words, there had been one step forward that freed people from Christian Platonism – and then one step backward that returned them to it!

Something in the Reformation had failed, something that I believe deserves greater attention. I am among those who believe it is necessary to return to the tradition of church architecture in order to find a cure for its ills. This tradition appears to me unavoidable, as suggested in the Introduction and Chapter 2. The Introduction warned that scholarly reflection on churches still tended to use modes of thought associated with Christian Platonism, while Chapter 2 used the
writings of Walter Benjamin to discuss the same problem. Benjamin was of the view that if we are to take church architecture in a new direction, it is first necessary to revisit its historical underpinnings. Chapter 3 sought to illustrate the practical aspects of his approach. However, the self-taught theologian also took the view that in exploring the tradition, we should not avoid Christian Platonism; we must confront it head-on and correct it, not maintain or reproduce it (consciously or otherwise).

In Chapter 2, a connection between the writings of Benjamin and those of Martin Luther proved useful for two reasons: it furthered the understanding of whole sections of Benjamin’s writings, and it hearkened back to a noble aspect of Christian tradition: Luther’s theological contribution, as mediated by Johann Georg Hamann, up through to Walter Benjamin. It would be difficult to find a better figurehead than Luther to validate the entirety of Benjamin’s approach!

Two writings of Luther in 1520, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* and *The Freedom of a Christian*, together sketch an outline that contains similarities to Benjamin’s approach. In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther describes the conceptual structure of medieval theology as flowing out of Dionysius the Aeropagite.\(^{174}\) For Luther, this conceptual structure is despotic and tyrannical, its rules oppressive to freedom.\(^{175}\) In opposing it, Luther articulates in *The Freedom of a Christian* two propositions on freedom:

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\text{I shall set down the following two propositions concerning the freedom and the bondage of the spirit: A Christian is a perfectly}
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\[^{175}\text{Ibid., 422, 423.}\]
free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully.  

For Luther, there is the freedom of the individual, and then the freedom of all, each harmonising mysteriously with the other. The Freedom of a Christian further says that these two freedoms harmonise through a spiritual power that makes Christians participants in the same egalitarian society. According to Luther, this spiritual power arises from the Word of God: “Christian community should not and cannot be without the Word of God.” Indeed, it is the mysterious spiritual power of the Word of God that links the freedom of each to the freedom of all. To distance oneself from this life-giving wellspring is to compromise the harmonious communication of humankind. Luther was strongly preoccupied with the serious problem that afflicted language in the biblical account of Babel. He saw in the profusion of books of his time a problem whose origins go back to the confusion of languages in the Babel story. He believed that, except for Holy Writ, the books of his century failed to meet their promise to edify. Luther wished for the disappearance of his own books pending the blessed day when better ones would arrive. Regardless, more than two centuries later, the Lutheran Johann Georg Hamann will pick up and develop this theme of the importance of communications that are as harmonious as


177 Ibid., 31.


they are egalitarian. Luther abandoned this theme too hastily after the German princes, increasingly concerned about the threat to their power of the Reformation, pressed him to re-establish a discourse that would again legitimize the existing class inequalities. Sensing his life was in danger, Luther made an about-face, and it was clear by 1525 that he had changed heading.\textsuperscript{180} The type of official Lutheranism that resulted from this has been well known since Kant, and is identified by the cynical words: “They say what they want, and I do as I please,” spoken by the Prussian King Frederick the Great about his subjects. It also marked the end of the \textit{Herr Omnes} [Mr. Everyman], Luther’s proud description of sovereign people. The freedom of Christians had once again gone into exile.

The Word of God is at the heart of Luther’s theology, and history alongside it. For Luther, God is the master of history, and each person has a role to play at a precise moment in history. This Lutheran idea of the moment (\textit{tempus, occasio, Stündlin}) is derived from the Greek term \textit{kairos}, meaning “favorable moment,” in the New Testament. Each must remain faithful to his own vocation while awaiting the time when that vocation must come to the fore. Thus, it is not vainglory that we must seek but, instead, something more furtive that lies within a hidden history which has contempt for the vanities of this world.\textsuperscript{181} Hidden history has its heroes, and only they, through the testimony of their lives, truly “make” history; the rest is only vain actions.\textsuperscript{182} It should be noted that Luther conceded that heroes who pre-date Christ contributed to holy history

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\textsuperscript{181} John M. Headley, \textit{Luther’s View of Church History} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), 10.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 54.
\end{flushright}
as co-operators with God (cooperator Dei), but it will be necessary to await Hamann for a more emphatic tone on this.

The church is where the Word of God meets history; for Luther, it is the perfect form for the adventure of the Word of God on Earth. The church is a sacrament, the definition of which is a divine act attesting to the presence of Christ in history. The church is neither an abstraction nor a celestial entity; it participates in the three-dimensional reality of this world. However, it nonetheless remains that it is also a promise by virtue of its sacramental nature. Indeed, it is only through the mediation of the church’s sacramental mystery that the Gospel will finally come to pass in the life of the world, and that God will finally bring his people together. The church is the sign that the last word will go to the oppressed, the witnesses to hidden history. As Luther observed: “Where the Word of God resounds, there is the people of God; God’s Word cannot be present without God’s people.”

This detour by Luther throws an instructive light on Benjamin’s approaches to language and history. Already, a certain link between Benjamin and Hamann on language had been established in Chapter 2. This helped draw attention to the importance of the Benjamin-Hamann-Luther connection, as Hamann drew from Luther’s theology in this respect. The analysis of Benjamin’s book on the baroque Lutheran drama of Silesia gives a glimpse into an element that will take on more importance in the second period of his writings: Benjamin’s interpretation of history

\[183\] Ibid
\[184\] Ibid., 19.
\[185\] Ibid., 34, 35.
\[186\] Ibid., 28, 29.
\[187\] Ibid., 38.
abundantly overlaps Luther’s. Like Luther, Benjamin promoted anonymous oppressed heroes evolving in a hidden history. Like Luther, Benjamin concentrated language in a formal resolution that anticipates the Day of Justice. Luther considered the church as the sole formal resolution anticipating the Day of Justice, whereas Benjamin considered this formal resolution mainly as an aesthetic problem.

So, was Benjamin a new Luther? The answer is no, because Benjamin did not engage in religious propaganda. We could instead say that Benjamin styled himself a new Plato, one who “Lutherises” (to use Hamann’s elegant formulation). Indeed, Benjamin sought to tackle head-on the legacy of Christian Platonism so as to “Lutherise” it. He sought to return to this legacy a vigorous inflection that neither eliminates nor ignores Christian Platonism, but reorients it, as was tried unsuccessfully in the Reformation. Benjamin’s postulate behind all this is that we cannot escape tradition, especially in the very act of thinking. All of Benjamin’s theological work can be understood in this way: it is impossible to think properly of something new concerning a phenomenon that arises from a given tradition without completely re-examining that given tradition. In truth, Benjamin did not initiate this approach; Hamann, his Enlightenment predecessor from the 18th century, had read and understood David Hume, a contemporary British philosopher, and adopted Hume’s contribution on tradition and its relationship to human understanding. Like many thinkers, Hume did not specifically discuss churches and the new interpretations we could make of them. That is why it is necessary to refer to a work like Maurice Halbwachs’s *La mémoire collective* (1950) to understand to what point a church is for

Hume a conservative phenomenon accompanied by an equally conservative way of thought for most people.

Unless one aims for an approach that forces things – an ideology – it is imperative to include the most obscure mechanisms of thought in any process of reflection. Otherwise, Hume warned, what he called “superstition” (and what Benjamin would have called “myth”) continue to exert a hold and distort the entire process of reflection. Benjamin could have written something similar. For Hume as for Benjamin, the human person is like an iceberg: only 10% is visible, and the remaining 90% is submerged. Put another way, innovation by thought represents little, while inferences arising from tradition represent much. It would thus be hazardous not to carry out a serious examination of tradition before venturing further into a reflection on churches.

The result is that churches remain “theological sites” requiring a theological work that remains relevant in democratic and pluralistic societies such as ours. Benjamin, like Hamann, intended his rejection of Aristotelian-inspired thought as a severe critique of any superficial approach to a phenomenon like the church. My reading of Rainer Rochlitz (1946–2002) supports Benjamin. Rochlitz was a French philosopher of the 1990s known for having promoted Aristotle’s *Poetics* as a tool to help evaluate works of art – and in his analysis of the aura in Benjamin, he manages to miss the essence of the issues raised by Benjamin. Thus, I am convinced that a Platonic

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191 “[L]eave superstition still in possession of her retreat? It is not proper to draw … the necessity of carrying the war into the most secret recesses of the enemy?” (David Hume, *Enquête sur l’entendement humain* [bilingual edition] [Paris: Vrin, [1748] 2008], 46).

paradigm would be more useful than an Aristotelian one in any serious analysis of a phenomenon like churches, and in a debate about their future path.

Finally, I do not know if Benjamin is the sole choice to open future paths for an imperiled church architecture, and I am not so dogmatic as to swear only by him. But at the very least, I do know that he deserves credit for alerting us to the importance of being courageous enough to ask truly fundamental questions about church architecture. In failing to do this, would we not be abandoning those very tasks that it is now incumbent on us to perform?
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