



Paolo Costa

The Post-Secular City

The New Secularization Debate

The Post-Secular City

Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society – Supplementa

Editors

Kurt Appel (University of Vienna, Austria),
Jakob Deibl (University of Vienna, Austria)

Advisory Board

Schirin Amir-Moazami, Eileen Barker, Martin Baumann, Lori Beaman,
Angelika Berlejung, Azelarabe Lahkim Bennani, Alfred Bodenheimer,
Lieven Boeve, Paolo Luigi Branca, Patrice Brodeur, Nina Caputo,
Mauro Ceruti, Jörg Dierken, Luca Diotallevi, Adriano Fabris, Jean-Marc Ferry,
Charlotte Fonrobert, François Foret, Guiseppe Fornari, Alfred Friedl,
Ingeborg Gabriel, Volker Gerhardt, Chiara Giaccardi, Necmettin Gökkir,
Jeffrey Haynes, Susannah Heschel, Klaus Hock, Ernst van den Hemel,
Hans Joas, Ulvi Karagedik, Assaad Elias Kattan, Jakub Kloc-Konkolowicz,
Julia Kristeva, Cristina Lafont, Karsten Lehmann, Lucian Leustean,
Adrian Loretan, Andrew Louth, Vasilios N. Makrides, Pavel Mikluscak, John
Milbank, Sigrid Müller, Sighard Neckel, Klaus Nellen, Peter Nynäs, René
Pahud de Mortanges, Detlef Pollack, Sabrina Ramet,
Niamh Reilly, Marco Rizzi, Mathias Rohe, Olivier Roy, Thomas Schmidt,
Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Adam Seligman, Pierangelo Sequeri,
Riem Spielhaus, Levent Teczcan, Christoph Theobald SJ, Jan-Heiner Tück,
Bülent Ucar, Hacı Halil Uslucan, Giuseppe Visonà,
Herman Westerink, Paul M. Zulehner

VOL. 2

Paolo Costa

The Post-Secular City

The New Secularization Debate



BRILL
SCHÖNINGH

Published with the support of the Research Centre “Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society”, University of Vienna.



This is an open access title distributed under the terms of the CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 License, which permits any non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided no alterations are made and the original author(s) and source are credited.

Further information and the complete license text can be found at
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

The terms of the CC license apply only to the original material. The use of material from other sources (indicated by a reference) such as diagrams, illustrations, photos and text samples may require further permission from the respective copyright holder.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30965/9783657795260>

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data available online: <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

© 2022 by the Author. Published by Brill Schöningh, Wollmarktstraße 115, 33098 Paderborn, Germany, an imprint of the Brill-Group (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands; Brill USA Inc., Boston MA, USA; Brill Asia Pte Ltd, Singapore; Brill Deutschland GmbH, Paderborn, Germany; Brill Österreich GmbH, Vienna, Austria) Koninklijke Brill NV incorporates the imprints Brill, Brill Nijhoff, Brill Hotei, Brill Schöningh, Brill Fink, Brill mentis, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Böhlau and V&R unipress.

www.schoeningh.de

Brill Schöningh reserves the right to protect the publication against unauthorized use and to authorize dissemination by means of offprints, legitimate photocopies, microform editions, reprints, translations, and secondary information sources, such as abstracting and indexing services including databases. Requests for commercial re-use, use of parts of the publication, and/or translations must be addressed to Brill Schöningh.

Cover design: Evelyn Ziegler, Munich
Production: Brill Deutschland GmbH, Paderborn

ISSN 2747-7010

ISBN 978-3-506-79526-7 (hardback)

ISBN 978-3-657-79526-0 (e-book)

To Davide

Contents

Acknowledgements IX

Introduction: Secularization: A Modern Myth? XI

PART I

Deconstruction

1. A Strange Dispute at the Deathbed of Religion:
Blumenberg and Löwith Cross Swords 3

2. A Work of Demolition and Reconstruction:
David Martin Defies the Establishment 15

3. In Search of a New Grand Narrative: Charles Taylor's Secularity 31

4. Working within a New Paradigm:
Hans Joas's Convergent Trajectory 53

5. Standing on the Edges of the New Paradigm:
A Postcolonial Point of View 71

PART II

Maintenance

6. A Probe into Deep Time:
Marcel Gauchet and the Problematic Exit from Religion 99

7. The Fragile Supremacy of Reason:
Jürgen Habermas and the Concept of Post-Secularity 121

8. After the Death of God: Nietzsche's Long Shadow 153

9. Conclusion: Do We Still Need the Concept of Secularization? 179

Index 183

Acknowledgements

This book is the English translation, slightly edited and updated, of a volume published in Italy by Queriniana in 2019. I am delighted that it can now see the light of day in a language comprehensible to almost all members of the scholarly community involved in the study of religion and especially of its modern tribulations. It will thus better serve the task of ‘aggiornamento’ for which it was designed and written. None of this could have happened without the consent of the Italian publisher and the support of Kurt Appel, to whom I am glad to renew here the expression of my esteem and friendship.

If *The Post-Secular City* exists, it is thanks to Rosino Gibellini’s foresight, obstinacy and patience. It took me a long time to decide to write it and an even longer time to give it its final form. Eventually, my attempts to lighten the burden by sharing it with others (first with Ulrike Spohn and then with Matteo Bortolini – with the latter, in particular, the human and intellectual debt is huge) did not relieve me of the strain of writing it and the responsibility to bring it to a close.

I have the impression that, with the changes taking place in the world of research, it will be increasingly difficult in the future to invest money, time and energy in a project as ambitious as the one underlying this volume. If I was able to carry it out, it is because I had behind me the support of an institution – the Fondazione Bruno Kessler – which still believes, as its official motto states, that the “Future can only be Built on Knowledge”. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank, besides FBK as a whole, the staff of the Centre for Religious Studies where I work, and in particular the three directors (Antonio Autiero, Alberto Bondolfi, and Marco Ventura) who, over the last ten years, have first suggested and then allowed me to dedicate myself with the utmost commitment to such an exciting but insidious topic as secularization. Isabella Masè, the former secretary of the Centre, is a woman of many talents whom I have been able to rely on even in the most difficult moments.

Writing some of the book’s chapters would have been much more arduous without the selfless help of Claudio Ferlan (who supervised the introduction with his both friendly and relentless eye), Boris Rähme (to whom I owe important insights that have trickled into the conclusion), Joe Paul Kroll (whose unpublished doctoral thesis enabled me to find my way through Hans Blumenberg’s labyrinth), Micha Knuth (who has a knowledge of Marcel Gauchet’s work that only a German doctoral student can have).

Over the years, the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen in Vienna has become more than just a scientific community of reference for me. The

feeling of belonging to an extended family is the result of the benevolence of people like Ludger Hagedorn, Mary Kemle-Gussnig, Luisa Wascher, Marion Gollner and Ana Mohoric, who have made my periodic stays at the IWM unforgettable. I am especially grateful to Ana, whose biblical patience went so far as to gracefully endure my philosophical disquisitions at the dinner table. Peter Kleyhons, Matthew Ratcliffe, Kurt Appel and Jakob Deibl, and all the young members of the research platform RaT (Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society) are another reason why Vienna feels like a second home for me.

For long-term intellectual support I owe a debt impossible to quantify to Charles Taylor, David Martin, Hans Joas, Jürgen Habermas, José Casanova, Hartmut Rosa, Martha Nussbaum, Charles Larmore, Ulrike Spohn, Rajeev Bhargava, George Levine, Tony Carroll, Jean-Claude Monod, Ulf Bohmann, Gesche Keding, Fiona Ellis, David McPherson, Katya Nemenko, Marthe Kerkwijk, Enzo Pace, Alessandro Minelli, Mauro Piras, Enrico Donaggio, René Capovin, Italo Testa, Ferruccio Andolfi, Stefano Cardini, Barbara Carnevali, Marcello Neri, Ilaria Bianco, Francesca Magni, Dimitri D'Andrea, Paolo Pombeni, Alessandro Ferrara, Lucio Cortella, Massimo Rospocher, Maurizio Cau, Fernanda Alfieri, Andrea Felis, Enrico Piergiacomi, Sergio Berardini.

A penultimate and grateful thought goes to my mother and father, to whom I have been wanting to explain what secularization is, more or less since I was fourteen and announced to them with the solemnity of a teenager that I was done with the parish. When my energy was at its lowest and despondency was just around the corner, even the memory of this unspoken commitment curbed my desire to raise the white flag. The last thank you, however, is due to Cecilia and Andrea, who stoically put up with my perfectionism and my dedication to what is nowadays such an old-fashioned activity: the life of the mind. I have promised them that this is the last time I will force them to endure such a *tour de force*. The truth, however, is that – as I see things in my *sui generis* Platonism – the fulfilment of this promise is not entirely up to me.

The book is dedicated to the memory of Davide Zordan. Come to think of it, it is a miracle that I was able to finish it without his support and wisdom. His premature death was not only a human misfortune with incalculable costs, but also a minor intellectual catastrophe for Italian Catholic theology and for the research centre where I work. Despite my best efforts, I cannot say that the result lives up to his intelligence. But an unforgettable aspect of Davide's personality was his talent for understanding people and smiling benevolently at their always oversized projects. That way of being understood all the way through is one of the things I miss most about him today.

Secularization: A Modern Myth?

Between History and Autobiography

The topic I am dealing with in this book is the near past of secularization theory. Ideally, the text would like to offer to an audience of readers who are specialists or, if not specialists, at least motivated and interested in the subject a reliable picture of the recent developments of a debate that has accompanied the great social and political upheavals happened in the West over the last three centuries and that has recently returned to the centre of public discussion.

The topic is, at least at first sight, within everyone's reach. Who does not have an opinion on the fate of religion, or secularism, today? In an arc ranging from the jeremiads of those who complain that nothing is sacred anymore to the dismay of those who cannot understand how the hell obscurantism and superstition have not yet disappeared from the face of the earth, the opinionated niches in which to huddle comfortably are numerous and well known.

At the same time, however, it seems hasty to take for granted the inclusion of the term in the vocabulary of educated people. It is an easily verifiable fact that, if asked, many struggle to explain what exactly "secularization" is, demonstrating a hesitation that does not seem to touch semantically contiguous terms such as disenchantment or de-Christianization.

The uncertainty of this lexical appropriation can be read as a symptom of a theoretical operation that was only half successful. In some respects, the word seems to function as a proper noun and denote a state of affairs analogous to a numerable event in the physical world (e.g. that felled tree there or the dead cat on the side of the road). In reality, however, this is not the case. Secularization is not a fact of the world around which an informed conversation can spontaneously arise. It does not denote a fullness, but an emptiness: not a presence, but an absence – and, indeed, not an emptiness as much as an emptying, not an absence as much as a sinking into absence. In other words, we are not dealing with a concept whatsoever, but with a concept of process, with which one aspires to grasp a significant historical transformation that incorporates a change of state: the metamorphosis from one condition that is sensed as familiar to another, familiar but elusive – the transition from one mode of existence or experience to another. What is more, the transition does not concern a negligible change, but regards people's most basic moral, political, spiritual – even

ontological, if you like – commitments. ‘Secularization’ is both a manifesto-concept and an ideological litmus test.¹

There can therefore be no functioning concept of secularization without a narrative context, i.e. without some form of storytelling that clarifies how the transition from *there* to *here*, i.e. from a non-secularized to a secularized condition, took place and what it consists of. This constraint places an additional burden on those who tackle the topic with a scientific intent. The narrative in question belongs to a very specific literary genre: the autobiographical tale where – as Walter Benjamin noted in his celebrated essay on Nikolai Leskov² – the narrator has earned the right to dispense advice by virtue of his ability to encapsulate the gist of his own life in a coherent whole. By placing herself in the ‘here and now’ and projecting a beam of light on the past, the narrator can take stock of her own experience, and with it that of many others, transforming the story she has lived into an exemplary tale that rises above the plane of ordinary contingency without losing its familiarity.

In this sense, the pre-understanding of the historical phenomenon of secularization is conditioned by a series of narratives, either trumpeted or merely overheard, that superimpose the linearity of physical displacement in space onto the complexity and confusion of long-term transitions. The idea may sound abstruse at first glance, but one example should suffice to convey the insidious sense of familiarity with which such narratives are suffused. To this end, I have to interrupt my long argument for a while in order to immerse myself in the atmosphere of those quasi-ethnographic novels which, in a range of characters, styles and plots going from Carlo Levi’s *Christ stopped at Eboli* to Annie Ernaux’s *The Years*, have sought to capture the biographical significance of a key historical change which, observed retrospectively, has not lost, indeed has even increased its astonishing character.³ It is no coincidence that in these stories, the narrator’s voice often has a dreamy timbre, a trace of the shakiness of the events brought back to memory. The dissonance between the brute fact of continuity (in substance) and the sense of discontinuity (in experience) produces a significant effect of estrangement to which, in view of the aims pursued in this book, it is important to devote some preliminary thoughts. Let us imagine for a moment that we are sitting in front of a direct

1 On the *sui generis* nature of the concept of secularization, see Monod, Jean-Claude, *La querelle de la sécularisation. Théologie politique et philosophies de l’histoire de Hegel à Blumenberg*, Paris: Vrin 2016², pp. 16–22.

2 Benjamin, Walter, *The Storyteller. Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov*, trans. H. Zohn, in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, New York: Schocken Books 1968, pp. 83–109.

3 Cf. Levi, Carlo, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, trans. F. Frenaye, London: Penguin 2000; Ernaux, Annie, *The Years*, trans. by A.L. Strayer, New York: Seven Stories Press 2017.

witness of the silent revolution that transformed Italy in a few decades from a largely peasant civilization to a modern consumer society: what can we expect in such cases?

The beginning of the story will be likely set in an exotic, almost fairytale-like place: a form of community life that gives the impression of having always existed – with no before or after, so to speak. In this world, the fulfilment of basic physical needs is so painful and urgent that there is literally no room for detaching personal beliefs from context. Put simply, for those born into it there is an implicit reason for everything and the explanation for the hardships is simple and brutal: it has always been so.

This compression of the space of reasons, on the one hand, encourages an unreflective conformism, but, on the other hand, prevents the emergence of a pressing need for coherence. In short, people live for the day, not caring much about the gap between words and things. There is a society that does not need a well-defined picture of itself and the world. The main problem for them is the unexpected – family disasters or natural catastrophes – but such periodic events immediately translate into daily challenges so dramatic that there is no time left for anything other than the struggle for survival. This also explains how a high level of communal virtues can coexist aproblematically with an astonishing laxity of personal morality when measured against a bourgeois ethical code.

In this context, religious rituals operate as an invisible glue of social life. The parish is the cornerstone of the community both because it exercises an ordering power over everyday affairs and because, in doing so, it embodies and gives shape to the idea that, despite everything, human existence is not reducible to drudgery, squalor, callousness, in a word, to 'brutality', albeit the latter is an obvious dimension of people's ordinary living. The essential thing is that it is not all there is. That is why the church, and the rites it administers and oversees, act as a bulwark against the ever-looming risk of disintegration of the involuntary solidarity between subalterns holding the community together.

So far, there is nothing epic about such story. The narrative only accelerates when this form of life loses its exclusive character and, as a result, fails to saturate people's imaginations. The change is heralded by the intensification of the marginal effects of a History from which it is increasingly difficult to isolate oneself. Gradually, the community ceases to be an elusive and insurmountable horizon. In the space of a few generations, not only does the idea spread that true life is 'elsewhere', but – more importantly – the conviction matures that it is an attainable good, placed on the same level, within the same horizon of ordinary existence.

It is at this point that the tale requires a change of backdrop. The twist is the transition to a new form of life: from 'community' to 'society'.⁴ The shift from a life centred on the parish to one revolving around the factory and the market is initially a source of enchantment. The magic of crowds, technology, commodities, of a mode of elective sociability, unknown freedom and unprecedented focus on the future have a disorientating effect at first, but immediately afterwards an exhilarating influence on the fugitives. Such experience of enchantment, however, is inseparable from the impact of disenchantment. All it takes is just a minor bump in the road, for the magic city to fall silent, to lose all resonance. After that, the fact that everything is on the same level, ideally within reach but in fact unattainable, is bound to produce a disheartening backlash.

Hence, it is not surprising that a sense of alienation and nostalgia for a lost world may take hold in people's minds. A return to the origin, however, is only possible through an imaginative effort that puts the transplanted person in a painful performative contradiction. The disillusioned world from which one has escaped now reappears in the guise of an enchanted universe, sunk in space and time, archaic. But this form of primitivism, which projects into the past the only conceivable source of meaning and authenticity, has only become possible after the rebound produced by a failed enchantment that reverberates on the world of yesterday, generating the image of an original place that is simultaneously beyond and above the present. Only in this way can the 'here and now' appear as a profane, mundane, impoverished reality: an evanescent trace of a lost world.⁵

It can, but it does not have to. Nostalgia is not the only plausible response to disillusionment. The alternative exists. It lies in willingly cutting the ties with the past, and inventing, building or embracing a different way of being a person. The challenge, in this case, is to live without roots, being pulled by the future rather than stuck in an irretrievable past. In the end, however, it is symptomatic that, in this type of fictional memoirs, the narrator gives up the

4 It is worth remembering in passing that Ferdinand Tönnies, the inventor of the 'Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft' dyad, was a member of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ethische Kultur*, one of the associations most committed to the campaign for secularization of German culture and society in the second half of the nineteenth-century. See Monod, Jean-Claude, *La querelle de la sécularisation*, p. 25; Lübke, Hermann, *Sakularisierung – Geschichte eines ideenpolitischen Begriffs*, second edition, Freiburg/Munich: Alber 1975, p. 62.

5 Michel de Certeau has written memorable pages on this aspect of the question. See Monod, Jean-Claude, "Inversion du pensable et transits de croyance: la trajectoire de sécularisation et ses écarts selon Michel de Certeau", in: *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* (54/2004), pp. 333–346.

last word. Given its figurative function, it is essential that the story ends on an ambiguous note, suspended in a state of genuine indecision.

As in fairy tales,⁶ the story that I have tried to condense into a vignette has a pivot, i.e. the decision to migrate: an exterior and interior exodus that leads the storyteller from a home that has now lost its 'point' to a world full of opportunities but lacking a recognizable form. On a macro level, the protagonist's journey, which is at the same time a journey through space and time, is governed by the antitheses between a closed and an open world, dark and light, poverty and wealth, prose and poetry, dead and living, stagnation and progress. While the details of everyday life and experience complicate the overall picture, the story is dominated by a vague sense of radical change, of a quantum leap from one form of life to another. It is this contrasting intuition that ends up grabbing the audience's attention. Something cumbersome has been left behind in favour of a new way of being in the world that is not self-explanatory and poses a problem of intelligibility.

The space for theory opens up precisely in this gap between the intuitive certainty of change and the indecision about its meaning. Not just any theory, in fact, but a theory forced to come to terms with ultimate values, and the related emotions, around which personal and collective identities always take shape. In this sense, many arguments about 'secularization' have been, and still are, attempts to neutralize the autobiographical short-circuit hanging over genealogical narratives.⁷

For a long time, the perspective that has established itself in many circles of Western societies as *the* narrative capable of making this kind of experience and its causes intelligible is what we have come to call the 'classical theory' of secularization.⁸ In its implicit *métarécit*, the peasant who decides to 'make the

6 Cf. Propp, Vladimir J., *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. by L. Scott, Austin: University of Texas Press 1968.

7 If someone needs an example to render what I am talking about less abstract, one only has to browse through Nietzsche's blistering *Genealogy of Morals* and reflect, even superficially, on the effect that the reading has on one's own mood.

8 For a concise presentation of the "received orthodoxy" see Gorski, Philip S., "Historicizing the Secularization Debate: An Agenda for Research", in Michele Dillon (ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003, pp. 110–122. For an up-to-date defence of the standard view see Bruce, Steve, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011; Pollack, Detlef, "Varieties of Secularization Theories and Their Indispensable Core", in: *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* (90/2015), pp. 60–79. For a reconstruction of the sociological debate on secularization based on Kuhn's notion of a paradigm shift, see Tschannen, Olivier, *Les théories de la sécularisation*, Geneva: Droz 1992. See also Goldstein, Warren S., "Secularization Patterns in the Old Paradigm", in: *Sociology of Religion* (70/2009), pp. 157–178. The work that best

journey' and change his life suddenly finds himself in a world devoid of the sacred – a demagified and disenchanting world that has been and is being created elsewhere, routing the traditional cosmic, social and religious imaginary. Between the factory and the market, there is no longer any room for the pre-modern analogies of the religious *basso continuo*, nor for the many countryside 'madonnas' that the American anthropologist Edward C. Banfield observed with condescension at the end of the 1950s.⁹ Now what you see is all there is. In the metropolis, what remains of the traditional religious imagery dries up to become an appendage of the political struggle or of a generic civilizational effort. Entering modernity means, therefore, moving from a context of continuous communication between this and the other world to a condition of increasing rationality in which the plane of immanence ends up exhausting all available space. It is the experience in which a marginal aspect of the earlier form of life, namely *hic et nunc* existence, becomes the 'whole', without remains, without metaphors, without *depth*. Without a sacred that can, from time to time, break into everyday life to tear the individual and his family away from life-as-is. From this point of view, the story of the expansion of modernity involves, as such, the marginalization and obliteration of the sacred, as if there could only be modernity at the cost of the extinction of religion.

Using a less immediate vocabulary, one could summarize the issue as follows. The classical theory of secularization is based on a reading of the transition from the archaic to the modern that has the form of a parallelogram generated by two contrasting pressures: addition/growth of modernization on the one hand, and subtraction/diminution of religion on the other. In short, like water and oil, religion and modernity do not blend together. The space and influence reserved for religion are dependent variables that diminish in proportion to the colonization of pre-modern forms of life by practical and structural logics that share a rationalizing and immanentist tendency. Hence the infiltration into theoretical discourse of a sense, depending on the case, of loss or overcoming, which gives scientific argumentation a characteristic emotional tone.

If it is true that any theoretical field is by definition a contested, controversial, *open-ended* space, we can imagine the classical theory of secularization as an identity axis, a social imaginary that functions as an 'unthought', a field

exemplifies the theoretical *new wave* within the contemporary sociology of religion is the book by Casanova, José, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994. For a balanced assessment of the dispute between "orthodox" and "revisionists" see Lingua, Graziano, *Esiti della secolarizzazione. Figure della religione nella società contemporanea*, Pisa: ETS 2013.

9 Cf. Banfield, Edward C., *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, New York: Free Press 1958.

of ideal forces that carves out the space of the thinkable and shapes it. Within this discursive field, a set of plausible positions is distributed, which are linked by an understanding of the process of modernization as an evolutionary slope that, depending on the image favored by the various authors, 'marginalizes' or 'dislocates', 'disarms', 'shapes', 'empties' the experiences, practices and religious forms that were supposed to exist before.

Therein lies the paradigmatic and, in a non-derogatory sense, 'myth-historical' character of the thesis of the inescapable decline of the sacred in modern society. In practice, it has influenced the investigative efforts of scholars with the configuring power of those traumatic or glorious memories that act as attractors with respect to individual or collective beliefs, providing them with a universal pass even vis-à-vis the most intransigent epistemic police.

How New is the 'New' Debate on Secularization?

The question, now, is whether the classical secularization theory has succeeded in meeting the epistemic challenge of consistently thinking about a historical change of this magnitude without betraying the phenomenon it set out to explain. To put it in interrogative form: does the world that our storyteller has left behind have a name, a definition, an essence? Does it have a precise and unchangeable temporal location ('pre-modern' or 'archaic') or is it rather a permanent possibility of the human form of life? In short, is the mainstream theory of secularization the mature fruit of a judicious imaginative exploration or the product of the projective fantasy of a misfit?

The very possibility of asking such questions depends, of course, on the fact that today, as I am writing these pages, the classical secularization theory has already lost much of its ability to shape the views of researchers. The plausibility of a theoretical activity heavily relying on concepts of process depends on its ability to do justice to the simultaneous sense of foreignness and familiarity aroused by major historical transitions as it strives to bring the perceived contrast into focus. In order to compensate for the inevitable drive to abstraction, a language is needed that does not conceal differences and creates the conditions for a creative and stereoscopic redescription of the relevant transition within a space of discordant reasons that allows it to be illuminated without completely dissolving its enigmatic nature. The general opinion these days is that secularization theory has failed in both tasks.

But why? Why does the standard theory no longer function as a description and explanation of the experience of the sacred in contemporary society? Is it, as some would have it, a forced reassessment due to an unexpected and

momentous return of religion that would have falsified the theory of secularization from the outside, or are we dealing here with a redefinition of categories and concepts that is wholly internal to the scientific field?

Reflecting almost half a century later on the merits and flaws of *The Secular City*, the book that perhaps better than any other embodied the spirit animating the advocates of secularization, its author, the Protestant theologian Harvey Cox, interpreted the change of atmosphere as the product of an overlap of internal and external factors.¹⁰ The most important of these is globalization, which has prompted Western scholars to acknowledge the local, 'regional', historically and politically conditioned character of the process of secularization. "Certain deep-seated religious impulses," Cox wrote, "have never died. They had once remained under the radar, out of sight of cultural elites, but they are now becoming more assertive and visible".¹¹ From this awareness comes the need to rethink the very concept of secularism, which not only could not be understood, but in all likelihood could not have spread so rapidly if it had not served the interests of the new entrepreneurial classes both within Europe's borders, and outside, in colonial expansion.

Cox's intuition is important. Indeed, there is often nothing more effective in changing the tone of an autobiographical narrative than a touch of healthy realism and a little imaginative effort to shake up what Bertrand Russell once called the dogmatism of the untravelled. The evolution of the secularization debate could be summarized by noting how the aim of theoretically shielding a single narrative of change by anchoring it to a stadial view of history has given way to a change of narrative in which the linear view of human development has lost influence, as well as the guiding metaphor of tra(n)slation. What has replaced it is a rhizomatic or, better, mycelial model of change, in which the various cultural and institutional incarnations of religion (and secularity) appear as the macroscopic, visible outcomes of an underground thick web of complex practical and ideological relations whose previous manifestations had been pushed to the margins of the experts' field of attention by a more or less generic endorsement of the thesis of its inevitable decline.

Thus, in the best cases, the re-opened debate has encouraged a multiplication of the meanings of the very concepts of religion and secularity (or modernity) rather than issuing in a mere swinging of the theoretical compass. Once

10 Cf. Cox, Harvey, "Introduction to the New Edition", in Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2013³, pp. xi–xxxviii.

11 Cf. Cox, Harvey, "Introduction", p. xiv.

the search for their intemporal essence has been set aside, the 'religious' and the 'secular' open up to a situated and tentative work of redefinition and re-imagination, offering themselves as culturally determined routes that coexist alongside other options that can be appropriated in different social contexts and adapted to them. Hence, there are no longer two simple substances competing for the same share of reality, nor is there a single (anthropological) matrix that manifests itself in different guises according to the stage of development reached by humanity, but we have a plurality of contingent cultural constructs whose understanding cannot be separated from thick and contextual descriptions.

This should make the recent vicissitudes of the public image of religious beliefs less puzzling. On the one hand, at least in the West, religion has almost pulverized, disappearing and then reappearing in the most unpredictable ways. The more some of its traditional expressions seemed to have entered an irreversible crisis, the more its revivals and 'resurgences' ended up attracting the attention of opinion-makers outside and inside the scientific community. On the other hand, however, this oscillation of views and moods has contributed to reinforcing in some intellectual circles the tacit judgement about the *special* nature of religion that has been circulating in Europe since the Enlightenment. From this perspective, religion appears as an odd human phenomenon, inasmuch as it is seen as the expression of a distinctive, objectively describable mindset or psychological configuration – for instance, as the tendency to see intentionality even in physical phenomena, or as an above-average propensity to wonder or enthusiasm.

Perhaps, one way to mitigate the cognitive dissonance between the two equally plausible insights about the mercurial or substantial nature of, let us say, the 'sense of the sacred' is to suppose that the unity of the religious phenomenon is to be found not so much in its most striking devotional or institutional manifestations, but in that way of being in the world straddling the gap between the visible and the invisible that intersects the human condition *as such* at many points. From this point of view, the fact that the recent metamorphoses of this habit of heart and mind has taken on the appearance of an out-of-the-ordinary epistemic challenge should appear less puzzling. After all, explaining human nature is no child's play.

An indirect evidence of this problematic density is that secularization as an object of study admits no disciplinary monopoly. This means that we must accept that it is a subject that solicits different approaches and perspectives (primarily sociological, historical and philosophical, as well as, obviously, those developed in the plural realm of Religious Studies) and that, moreover, cannot

ignore the contribution of the type of knowledge most reluctant to modern epistemological discipline: theology.¹² From this point of view, the challenge for students of secularization today revolves around the possibility of finding or creating places where such a plurality of interpretations, conceptualizations and patterns can lead to coexistence or fruitful interaction, rather than open and unproductive conflict.

In this book, philosophy is given the task of drawing a reliable portrait of the recent debate on secularization. On what basis? The key idea is that the inclusive, not autarchical, character of philosophical knowledge is a valuable asset in view of this goal. As Charles Taylor recently argued, “philosophers cannot answer the questions at the heart of their enquiries without referring to the knowledge produced by other disciplines”.¹³ The ability, as it were, to speak many languages and, when necessary, to poke one’s nose into the affairs of others is a distinctive feature of philosophical practice from its earliest days. It is no accident that Plato ironically pictures it in the *Symposium* as an activity motivated by scarcity and unachievable without expedients. Although this epistemologically impure attitude has now become a self-evident drawback in the hyper-compartmentalized universe of contemporary scientific research, it remains a valuable resource for anyone wishing to offer a meaningful insight into a debate which, despite some esoteric aspects, remains a crucial junction in the global human conversation.¹⁴

After all, before the sociological moratorium proposed by Max Weber, it was classical German philosophy that shifted the notion of *saecularisatio* from the legal plane (where it indicated the expropriation of ecclesiastical property) to the level of universal history, envisioning a progressive inversion of polarity in human development between high and low, transcendent and immanent, abstract and concrete – what Hegel, exploiting the flexibility of German language, called *Verweltlichung* (mundanization, worldliness, ‘enworlding’) as the end goal of human mind’s growth.¹⁵ This is the terrain on which, willingly

12 On this theme see Costa, Paolo/Zordan, Davide, *In una stanza buia. Filosofia e teologia in dialogo*, Trento: FBK Press 2014.

13 Cf. Taylor, Charles, “Was ohne Deutung bleibt, ist leer”, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (16 January 2016), available at: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/forschung-und-lehre/was-ohne-deutung-bleibt-ist-leer-charles-taylor-zur-kontinentalen-philosophie-14009167.html> (date of last access: 11.04.2022). I myself have relied on an analogous view of philosophy in Costa, Paolo, *La ragione e i suoi eccessi*, Milan: Feltrinelli 2014.

14 For a study of modern philosophy’s fascination with the topic of secularization, see De Vriese, Herbert, “The Charm of Disenchantment: A Quest for the Intellectual Attraction of Secularization Theory”, in: *Sophia* (49/2010), pp. 407–428.

15 On these topoi in the history of the concept of secularization see Maramao, Giacomo, *Cielo e terra. Genealogia della secolarizzazione*, Rome/Bari: Laterza 1994; Zabel, Hermann/Conze, Werner/Strätz, Hans-Wolfgang, *Säkularisierung, Säkularisation*, in Otto Brunner/

or unwillingly, all those who still confide in the value, or perhaps just in the inescapability of the concept of secularization, are to test themselves. In the following eight chapters, thus, I will make use of all the sources (and the intellectual freedom) necessary to answer the key framing question: how new is the 'new' debate on secularization? And why are we still exercised by it?

A Book, a Map

In the book, the first question receives an affirmative, albeit qualified, answer. In short, my claim is that something like a paradigm shift has occurred in the secularization debate over the last fifty years. More precisely, what has happened is a shift in the burden of proof between supporters and critics of the standard view. It makes sense, therefore, to regard the deconstruction of the supposed obviousness of the standard thesis as the true novelty of the debate. At the same time, however, the efforts to clarify and maintain the secularization theorem should not be disregarded, as they have helped to make the debate less muddled than it was before. In short, the deconstructive effort has also benefited those – and there is plenty of them – who have not let themselves be spellbound by religion's alleged global comeback. Understandably, the hunch that the key to human history lies in the long-term trend towards the overcoming of 'religion' in favour of 'secularity' can reach the status of a well-rounded statement aspiring to become a justified true belief only when it ceases to be a truism. Progress, in short, has been twofold and should be recorded as such.¹⁶

That said, the book is offered to the reader as a reasoned account of recent strands of the secularization debate that are worthy of consideration as they indicate an upheaval in the understanding and conceptualization of the phenomenon. Borrowing the vocabulary of plate tectonics, the evolution of classical theory is in some respects reminiscent of the division of the original supercontinent, Pangaea, and the beginning of continental drift. Untangling

Werner Conze/Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 1984, pp. 789–829; Filoramo, Giovanni, "Secolarizzazione", in Piero Coda/Giovanni Filoramo, *Il cristianesimo: grande dizionario*, 2 vols, Turin: UTET 2006, vol. 2, pp. 693–696; Bremmer, Jan N., *Secularization: Notes Toward a Genealogy*, in Hent de Vries (ed.), *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, New York: Fordham University Press 2008, pp. 432–437; Casanova, José, "Secularization", in Neil J. Smelser/Paul B. Baltes, *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 20, Amsterdam/New York: Elsevier 2001, pp. 13,786–13,791.

16 I am indebted to Matteo Bortolini for this idea. It was he who pointed out to me that the correct way to summarize the issue I am trying to focus here is to point out that the deconstruction and the construction of the standard view of secularization are two parallel phenomena.

the metaphor, the idea is that, at least at the level of theory, there has been a sort of progressive ‘unpacking’ of the meta-claim of the decline or degeneration of religion, leading to an articulation in different local or ‘regional’ narratives and accounts of the macro-dialectics between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ in personal and social life.

In order to do justice to such a process of reflexive appropriation of a both existential and intellectual habitus, as I have already claimed above, we have to keep a constant eye both on theory and experience. In particular, the appeal to experience is indispensable to counteract the drive towards doctrinal simplification: there is nothing like reality’s challenges to prevent it from being completely supplanted by a bloodless simulacrum. The book, however, is in essence a meta-discourse, that is, a discourse on discourses, and, accordingly, the burden of explaining why, at this moment in time, first-order reflections are not enough and need to be framed in a meta-reflection is up to its author.

The first thing that I can say on my behalf is that the debate on secularization is not only very complex – a judgement that could probably be applied to any other socially relevant phenomenon being studied today – but also messy. In many cases it is not clear, in fact, what exactly is at stake, where are the most significant disagreements, even whether the basic premises are agreed upon or not. The need for order is therefore pressing. In such a context, drawing a map represents a significant theoretical contribution. Where debilitating confusion reigns, simplifying is never a theoretically neutral operation, as it presupposes interpretative choices that separate the centre from the margins of scientific discussion.¹⁷

The main simplification incorporated in the text has been foreshadowed in the previous pages, but it ought to be seen as an enabling condition for the reconstructive work undertaken in these pages as such. Let me explain. Thinking of the recent secularization debate in terms of a paradigm shift inevitably means assembling everything that came *before* the shift, levelling out some differences that do have their relevance, such as that between an ‘intransitive’ and a ‘transitive’ understanding of secularization. This point

17 An instructive example of the confusion that still affects today’s debate is offered by the failed attempt at simplification made in De Vriese, Herbert, “Secularization as a Category of Historical Entitlement”, in Stijn Latré/Walter van Herck/Guido Vanheeswijck (eds.), *Radical Secularization? An Inquiry into the Religious Roots of Secular Culture*, New York: Bloomsbury 2014, pp. 32–44. For an excellent presentation of the *status quaestionis* from a theological perspective see Dalferth, Ingolf U., *Transcendence and the Secular World: Life in Orientation to Ultimate Presence*, trans. by J. Bennett, second revised edition, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2018, pp. 1–52 (“Orientation by Distinctions. Christian faith and the secular world”).

needs to be clarified. When the concept is used intransitively, as I did myself when I sketched a myth-history of the transition from a magical world to a disenchanted world, the advocates of secularization merely take note of the progressive and irreversible decline of religion in human history: a measurable phenomenon that poses no special problems of interpretation for them. Change, in fact, can be detected even without explaining what actually happened to religion, whether an eclipse or just a displacement. Frequently, this happens because the inconsistency of religious beliefs is taken for granted from the outset. In this view, people's faith – just like any other false belief – simply dissolves into thin air once it has been proven false.

The concept of secularization, however, can also be used in a more sophisticated sense, assuming the existence of an original substance (the religious *forma mentis* or *forma vitae*) that can undergo a process of mundanization – the shift, that is, from a spiritual, transcendent or supernatural plane to the sensible and material world. The desire for personal immortality, for example, can be turned into an ardent desire to leave a mark on history. The aspiration to holiness into an exemplary dedication to the duties of daily life. The sense of belonging to the mystical body of the Church into a social imaginary centred on the idea of nationhood; etc. The possible interpretations of the meaning of these transfigurations are manifold. For mundanization can be read as a form of corruption or hybridization of the original content (as happens, for example, in Carl Schmitt or Karl Löwith); or as a teleologically oriented process through which the abstract is articulated, substantiated and becomes concrete (Hegel); or it can be hailed as a form of brave re-appropriation, disalienation and self-assertion of the human race (Feuerbach).

In the reconstruction of the new debate on secularization that I propose in this volume, however, the differences just mentioned are less important than they appeared before the paradigm shift occurred. Both the thesis of the evaporation of the religious and that of its *metabasis eis allo genos* are grouped here under the notion of the 'theorem' or, if you will, the 'theoroid' of secularization. The main features of this rickety theoretical construct are as follows: (a) religion is thought of in terms of origin, past, descent; (b) intentionally or not, Christianity and religion tend to become interchangeable terms; (c) modernity is conceived as a largely homogeneous phenomenon; (d) change is always interpreted in a *weltgeschichtlich* key, that is, in terms of universal history.

The gist of my cartographic endeavour is led by the conviction that, over the past fifty years, this "package", i.e. the epistemic imaginary that has oriented for three centuries the understanding of the trajectory of religion in human history, has been first challenged and then gradually deconstructed both from a

socio-historical and philosophical point of view (and, I suspect, also from a theological angle) to the point that, in the end, the burden of proof has shifted from the new to the old interpretative framework which, with hindsight, tends to appear apodictic, maximalist, and in some cases even proclamatory.

The just described simplification of the framework of analysis goes hand in hand with a thematic reduction of complexity, which takes place through the selection of some controversies and some authors that are considered helpful, if not crucial, to establish the coordinates of the recent debate. To begin with, a philosopher (Hans Blumenberg) and a *sui generis* sociologist (David Martin) are entrusted with the role of emblematic precursors of the paradigm shift.

Blumenberg, whose dispute with Karl Löwith marks the beginning of the change of atmosphere investigated in this book, is considered exemplary for three main reasons. The first is his critique of substantialist, antidiscontinuist views of history (i). The second is his take on modernity as a genuine cultural innovation, that is, as a historical advance not reducible to its antecedents (ii). The third, and last, is his stressing 'local' histories and changes (iii), which, among other things, underlies his inquiries into the emergence of the concept of progress from developments in astronomical knowledge and controversies about the superiority of modern art over the ancient one. It is on this terrain, moreover, that the crucial distinction between a maximalist use of Enlightenment philosophies of history and a non-ideological interest in macro-history or metahistory could flourish after the post-modern rejection of Grand Narratives.

Martin's crucial role in my account, on the other hand, is largely due to the consistency with which he tried over the years to inject a healthy dose of empiricism into the mythopoetic efforts of the classical theorists of secularization. The questions on which his path-breaking works are based are often naïve, but effective. Since his snappy entrance in the debate, he asked in a loud voice, for instance, to what extent the widespread claim of the modern decline of religion was actually confirmed by empirical evidence. Thus, once he detects macroscopic local differences, Martin immediately wonders whether the umbrella concept of secularization does not encompass uneven socio-historical phenomena that require different explanations, in particular contextual explanations based on detailed descriptions rather than sweeping interpretative schemes. From this systematic use of circumstantial doubt comes his suggestion to replace the standard image of a unitary process of secularization with that of a series of local patterns of change that can be explained in the light of historically contingent variables (e.g., alliance between throne and altar; religious pluralism; mono-confessionality; etc.).

To cut a long story short, my main claim thereafter is that the transformation inaugurated and advocated in an exemplary manner by Blumenberg and Martin in the 1960s and 1970s from a minority position comes to completion – and thus becomes fully recognizable – in Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007). The immediate and global success of this work, despite its complex, even Byzantine architecture, can only be explained if due weight is given to its ability to synthesize decades of criticism of the secularization theorem, without, however, neglecting the need to make sense of the unquestionable relevance of the Great Modern Transformation for the difficult-to-define phenomenon of religious faith. Indeed, *A Secular Age* is a book that sets itself an at first sight paradoxical goal: to interpret secularization also, if not primarily, in the light of the impact it has had on modern *spiritual* life – how it has transformed, that is, what the Canadian philosopher calls the modern conditions of belief.

Taylor’s contribution to the new secularization debate could be summed up in the following terms. Unlike Martin, Taylor wants (1) to make room for synoptic reconstructions, in particular he aims to tell a coherent story about the rise of the modern (Western) identity. He does so, however, by renouncing any mythopoetic intent. In other words, he disposes of any philosophy of history drawn from a zenithal angle and replace them with contingent stories that retain their refigurative force while being narrated from the point of view of the participants, i.e. the concrete historical agents. But, in detail, how do you keep meaning and historical contingency together? From a methodological point of view, the key notion here is the idea of an affirmative genealogy. That is, Taylor is betting on the fact (2) that it may be possible to unearth the contingent genesis of a cultural construct in order to reasonably assess its claim to truth (or, to evoke Blumenberg, “legitimacy”) and not just to cast suspicion on it. This means, more concretely, (3) explaining the origin of the secular option, without setting aside its innovative character. Modern secularity is the historical product of the creative responses of flesh-and-blood people to epochal practical and theoretical challenges (among others: the legacy of the Axial turn; disenchantment; transformations of subjectivity; emergence of new social imaginaries; etc.). Finally, (4) the main novelty of a ‘secular’ age such as the western-modern one consists, on the side of mentality, in the rise of exclusive humanism and, on the side of social practices, in the making of the Immanent Frame, that is, of a way of being in the world that can (though it does not necessarily have to) ignore any reference to something overstepping the worldly domain of physical or psychological causes. Thanks to both, new ways of being a person and new modes of believing (deep reflexivity; ‘second naïveté’; fragilization; pluralism; neo-fundamentalism; etc.) become possible.

The interpretative framework developed independently by Blumenberg, Martin and Taylor is a mixed explanatory model, which does not exclude circumscribed and circumstantial uses of the category of secularization (both in its transitive and intransitive guise). In this sense, it is open to discordant theoretical appropriations. Indirect proof of this are, on the one hand, Hans Joas and, on the other, Talal Asad, who in the book exemplify, respectively, a modest, heuristic, even deflationary use of the concept of secularization – carefully distinguished from the related and no less abused notions of modernity or modernization – and its polemical, political, anti-idealistic and anti-eurocentric exploitation.

The second part of the book shifts the focus of the discussion from the deconstructors to the maintainers of the classical thesis. The investigated authors, too, belong in their own right to the *nouvelle vague*. For, in scientific disciplines with a relatively weak epistemological status such as the socio-historical sciences, paradigm shifts, when they occur, never put the obsolescent theoretical framework completely out of action. Rather, they exert a slight but constant pressure to updating it simply by shifting the burden of proof. Even if the canonical interpretation of the concept of secularization has lost its status as a parascientific factual truth over the last fifty years and has been replaced by a theoretical constellation in which divergent insights into the non-linearity, complexity and cultural-historical relativity of the phenomenon prevail, this does not mean that the previous explanatory model has melted into the air. Rather, its proponents have adapted to the new situation by refining their interpretative tools.

In the final three chapters of the book, the focus of the analysis moves therefore to three exemplary attempts to revise the standard view. Each of them uses one of its strengths – its capacity for simplification, its inclusiveness and its recursive logic, respectively – to renovate the theoretical machinery supporting it and to nuance its claim to truth. Thanks to the pugnacity and intellectual creativity of influential thinkers such as Marcel Gauchet, Jürgen Habermas and Gianni Vattimo, the paradigm shift mapped out in this volume has not only produced intellectual conformism, but a robust debate whose theoretical outcome remains uncertain even today.

Finally, the concluding short chapter is given the (onerous) task of pulling the threads together. Its aim is not so much to draw up a definitive balance sheet of the debate, a detailed map of real gains and residual mental cramps, or a forecast of future scenarios. Rather, the point of adding it to the previous charting is to discuss the residual usefulness of the category of secularization after its theoretical domestication, that is, after its historicization, articulation,

and demythologization scrutinized in the book. In fact, my investigation should prompt the reader to ask, first of all, whether what we need today is not, in fact, a more inclusive vocabulary less conditioned by the special European trajectory.

The work I am handing over to the reader, to conclude my preliminary remarks, has an amphibious nature. I mean, it is half reconstructive and half theoretical. On the one hand, it is a fact that, given the scope of bibliographic sources, the most that an elucidatory work such as the one undertaken in this volume can aspire to today is a sort of non-encyclopedic mapping of the territory. This cannot be carried out, that is, from a bird's-eye view, but only from the standpoint of an agent who urgently needs to orient herself in an only partially familiar environment. Given these premises, my book resembles a personal, but not idiosyncratic mental map in which, starting from certain privileged points of observation, theoretically homogeneous and relatively well-demarkated spaces are identified and profiled, which have the suitable requisites to act as markers of meaningful directions.

In this sense, as I have already stressed, a reconstructive effort is not antithetical to the theoretical impulse. The uncompromising commitment to scientific virtues such as reliability and impartiality is not to be confused with a declaration of indifference. The possibility of a theoretical spin-off is far from excluded in principle. Rather than upstream, in the form of an original theoretical synthesis, however, it is bound to emerge downstream, in the negative guise of a problematization of the two semantic poles around which the secularization debate has been structured from the outset: religion and secularism, heaven and earth, God and world. Today, moreover, it would be, if not impossible, at least incongruous, to presume to be able to discuss secularization without taking a stand on one of the crucial questions of contemporary political debate: how special – or, to put it bluntly, how especially worrying – is 'religion' today for the future of common goods such as democracy, respect for human rights, freedom, economic progress, women's emancipation, equality, distributive justice or environmental protection?

After all, this has been the practical-theoretical stake of the secularization tale since the beginnings. It was precisely its urgency, its being first and foremost a response to a condition of general disorientation, that transformed it along the way into a sort of founding myth of modern identity. Significantly, the revisionist impulse underpinning the efforts of all the protagonists of the debate at the centre of this book went in the direction, if not of a demythologizing, at least of a substantial downsizing of the meta-theoretical value of the claim of the decline of religion. From this point of view, the main goal of

those who are still grappling with the subject nowadays is to offer an informative and plausible description of the work of deconstruction and reformulation, in order to finally arrive with the necessary detachment at the question of whether we still need the concept of secularization at all to meaningfully think about our time.

PART I

Deconstruction

A Strange Dispute at the Deathbed of Religion: Blumenberg and Löwith Cross Swords

The Background

The intellectual trajectory that this book aims to reconstruct has not been linear and, as I suggested in the introduction, contains some unexpected turns that it is useful to bring to the surface as soon as possible. It makes sense, therefore, to proceed obliquely and to open this chapter devoted to the beginnings of the philosophical dismantling of the theorem of secularization by going back to a world that no longer exists and that is even hard to conjure up today.

We are in the autumn of 1962, in Münster, in what was then West Germany, where the Seventh German Congress of Philosophy is being held. The main theme of the conference is “philosophy and the question of progress”.¹ The choice of the subject was timely. Less than twenty years after the end of the bloodiest war in the history of humankind, the world is experiencing the dawn of a brief but unforgettable spring. We are in the midst of a European economic boom. There is optimism everywhere: the Beatles have just recorded their first record; John Fitzgerald Kennedy is President of the United States and, on 11 October, Pope John XXIII officially declares the Second Vatican Council open.

But 1962 was also the year of Marilyn Monroe's suicide and the Cuban Missile Crisis, which pushed the two atomic superpowers of the time, USA and USSR, to the brink of nuclear apocalypse. The symposium, skilfully orchestrated by its grey eminence, Joachim Ritter,² is a faithful mirror of the ambivalence

1 The materials of the conference were collected and published in a volume edited by Kuhn, Helmut/Wiedmann, Franz (eds.), *Die Philosophie und die Frage nach dem Fortschritt*, Munich: Anton Pustet 1964. Apart from this collection of essays and reports of the discussion, there are – as far as I know – no other textual or visual testimonies of the event.

2 Cf. Lübke, Hermann, *Zustimmungsfähige Modernität. Gründe einer marginal verbliebenen Rezeption Eric Voegelins*, Occasional papers (XXXIV), Eric-Voegelin-Archiv Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich 2003, p. 30 (http://www.gsi.uni-muenchen.de/forschung/forsch_zentr/voegelin/publikationen/papers/op_34.pdf, date of last access: 11.04.2022); Lübke, Hermann, *Die Religion und die Legitimität der Neuzeit. Modernisierungsphilosophie bei Eric Voegelin, bei Hans Blumenberg und in der Ritter-Schule*, in Hermann Lübke, *Modernisierungsgewinner. Religion, Geschichtssinn, Direkte Demokratie und Moral*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2004, p. 72.

with which the rising confidence in progress was regarded by the members of an elitist fraternity such as the *Allgemeine Gesellschaft für Philosophie in Deutschland* was before the watershed of 1968. The names of the two thinkers invited to open up the conference with their *Hauptvorträge*, Karl Löwith and Theodor W. Adorno, are sufficient to certify this undecided attitude. The latter is the author, together with Max Horkheimer, of perhaps the most caustic work against progressive ideology ever written by a member of the left-wing intelligentsia: *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*.³ The former, on the other hand, opted for a not accidentally oxymoronic title for his paper: *Das Verhängnis des Fortschritts* (The Fatality of Progress).⁴

Given the aims of this chapter, let us narrow our focus on Löwith. The recognition bestowed on him in Münster is not only a late reward for his exemplary story as a German Jew persecuted for racial reasons and expatriated first to Italy, then to Japan and finally to the USA. The author of *From Hegel to Nietzsche*,⁵ I mean, does not take the floor as a victim and direct witness of the European catastrophe, but presents himself as one of the most implacable diagnosticians of the bankruptcy of modern philosophical discourse. In his most renowned work, *Meaning in History*, he set himself the objective of unmasking the ultimately “theological” or pseudo-religious character of unconditional faith in the progressive destiny of humanity.⁶ What Habermas recently described as one of the most influential books of his generation⁷ had indeed succeeded in transforming a paradoxical and iconoclastic thesis into a kind of intellectual common sense within a few years. And it was with the self-confidence of one who is convinced of having said the final word on the

3 Cf. Horkheimer, Max/Adorno, Theodor W., *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by E. Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002.

4 Cf. Löwith, Karl, “Das Verhängnis des Fortschritts”, in Helmut Kuhn / Franz Wiedmann (eds.), *Die Philosophie und die Frage nach dem Fortschritt*, pp. 15–29 (an English translation of the essay appeared as “Progress: A Fatality”, in: Helen S. Hogg (ed.), *Man and His World/Terres des Hommes: The Noranda Lectures*, Expo 67/les Conférences Noranda/L’expo 67, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1968, pp. 83–94).

5 Cf. Löwith, Karl, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, transl. by D.E. Green, New York: Columbia 1991 (revised edition).

6 Cf. Löwith, Karl, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 1970 (the German edition, published under the title *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*, saw the light of day only in 1953).

7 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Religion and Postmetaphysical Thinking: A Reply”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II: Essays and Replies*, trans. by C. Cronin, Cambridge: Polity Press 2017, p. 88. The generational impact of *Meaning in History* is also emphasized by Joas, Hans in “The Contingency of Secularization: Reflections on the Problem of Secularization in the Work of Reinhart Koselleck”, in: Hans Joas/Barbro Klein (eds.), *The Benefit of Broad Horizons. Intellectual and Institutional Preconditions for a Global Social Science*, Leiden: Brill 2010, p. 94.

subject that Löwith presented himself before his colleagues: a stellar audience that included, among others, scholars of the stature of Arnold Gehlen, Eric Voegelin, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, Hans Blumenberg, Odo Marquard, Dieter Henrich, Éric Weil, Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, Ludwig Landgrebe.

Meaning in History

How can one explain with hindsight the planetary and enduring success of a work that is anything but subversive or magniloquent? A down-to-earth explanation would call into question external factors. In particular, I would stress the occasional synergy between the need for sense-making that prevailed among the survivors of the historical cataclysm of totalitarianism – the need, that is, to make intelligible a catastrophe so gigantic that it made any linear correlation of cause and effect implausible⁸ – and an intellectual intuition so simple and powerful that it could be applied to the most disparate, even antithetical, purposes and agendas. From this point of view, *Meaning in History* was an ideal product, since it reiterated the theoretical radicalism of post-Hegelian philosophy within a sober, whispered, almost apathetic argumentative framework. The book's main claim was simple, essential, bordering on reductionism – so blatant that it could be offered to readers in a form that was more illustrative than explanatory: “the irreligion of progress is still a sort of religion, derived from Christian faith in a future goal, though substituting an indefinite and immanent *eschaton* for a definite and transcendent one”.⁹

We can detect the Humean-Weberian assumption about the primacy of passions and delusions over lucidity and reason in human existence at the

8 For a methodological reflection on the problems connected to understanding totalitarianism, cf. Arendt, Hannah, “Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)” and “On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding”, both in Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954*, edited by J. Kohn, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company 1994, pp. 307–360.

9 Cf. Löwith, Karl, *Meaning in History*, p. 114. See also Donaggio, Enrico, *Una sobria inquietudine. Karl Löwith e la filosofia*, Milan: Feltrinelli 2004, p. 118: “In one of the most celebrated achievements of Western awareness Löwith saw a devious form of self-deception. In the philosophical distillation of the modern attitude towards the course of events he did not see the victory of a disenchanted reason, but rather the mask behind which religious illusion continued to thrive within the confines of a knowledge that boasted of having banned it. In the cult of the absolute relevance of what is relative par excellence – the course of human events –, he saw the ‘last religion’ of men, whose scepticism was too weak to give up any form of faith”.

heart of Löwith's argument. This realization is then translated theoretically into a meticulous search for traces of these primordial, demonic forces, even within apparently rationalist systems of thought, such as the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophies of history. At the origin of Löwith's investigative attitude, therefore, lies the suspicion that religion constitutes a special propulsive force in the sphere of ideas and that it is precisely its persistence even within an apparently de-Christianized civilization such as the modern one that explains the latter's tendency to degenerate, that is, to produce results contrary to the intentions of its protagonists.

Given these premises, what follows is almost self-evident. Löwith's historical account starts from the idea that the decisive caesura for understanding the present is not the break dividing the medieval times from the modern age, but the gap between the ancient/classical world and the world shaped by Christianity. Hence, the real alternative in terms of world images is to be sought in this spiritual quantum leap: therein lies the source from which even the modern secular mentality continues to draw, without realizing it. Specifically, the fundamental insight that separates the two stages of human development is the historicization of the concepts of truth and nature: the replacement, that is, of a cyclical vision of time with a chronic linear imaginary, oriented towards a historically unprecedented future. The problem is that, despite its being powerful and vital, this *Lebensanschauung* is, for Löwith, banally false: that is, it can be absorbed fideistically as the content of a revelation, but cannot be justified rationally. In this sense, the faith in progress, activism and optimism of the modern spirit are the fruit of a sacrifice of the intellect no smaller than the one made by the first Christian apologists in the name of their granitic faith in the divine nature and salvific power of Jesus Christ. The only difference lies in the tacit and unconscious process of transfiguration that he does not hesitate to identify with the phenomenon, taken for granted, of 'secularization' (*Säkularisierung*, *Säkularisation*, *Verweltlichung*), with the transposition, that is, of the *eschaton* into profane time.¹⁰

Observed from this perspective, then, the anthropological and cultural vitality of universal religions – in this case Christianity – shows (with the benefit of hindsight) its destructive potential especially when its illusory content is (unwittingly) tried out under the guise of a worldly, rather than otherworldly, emancipatory force. Once unmasked as religions or theologies in disguise, the modern philosophies of history are pressed to reckon with the degenerative and destructive dangers of illegitimate filiation, that is of a variety of cultural

10 Cf. the "Conclusion" in Löwith, Karl, *Meaning in History*, pp. 191–203. For an accurate reconstruction of Löwith's viewpoint see Donaggio, Enrico, *Una sobria inquietudine*, pp. 117–123.

hybridization that unleashes on earth the motivational force inherent in any boundless expectation of personal redemption.

Once again, it is worth stressing the radicality of an argumentative move whose ultimate outcome is the reversal of the self-understanding of modern consciousness. While the latter sees itself as a subjectivity emancipated from a previous condition of spiritual submission and open to an indeterminate future, the secularization tale forces it to become aware of the non-original, derivative, parasitic character of its cult of freedom, of scientific, moral, political progress and of the search for individual and earthly happiness. This is no small claim, indeed. Evidently, only the trauma caused by the exorbitant proportions of the intellectual and civil shipwreck of post-Enlightenment European civilization could make plausible the task of unmasking the burden that the religious past has put on humanity's unfinished process of self-clarification and mundanization, of which Marx, with his materialistic (or pseudo-materialistic) millenarianism was only the most striking example.¹¹

In light of this background, it is easy to see how Löwith could experience his own intellectual operation as a basic exercise of self-reflection that, albeit being historically sophisticated, was at the end of the day banal. All the more so since his interpretation of the results of his deconstructive work did not push him either in the direction of a sterile lament on the decline of humanity or towards a sort of (impossible) farewell to the modern form of life and a mere return to the old.¹² On the contrary, the main aim of his efforts to derive a meaningful pattern from the two-thousand-year history of Christian Europe was to reach a more complete and true form of secularization, which in the end amounted to a sceptical and stoic resistance to any form of consolation or religious or para-religious escape from intellectual responsibility.

The Unexpected Backlash

It does not take a great effort of imagination to figure out Löwith's difficulty in coming to terms with the impatience towards this *weltanschaulich* (political-cultural)¹³ use of the category of secularization shown by two leading figures of the new generation of German philosophers such as Hermann Lübbe and,

11 Cf. Löwith, Karl, *Meaning in History*, p. 45: "Historical materialism is essentially, though secretly, a history of fulfilment and salvation in terms of social economy".

12 Cf. Donaggio, Enrico, *Una sobria inquietudine*, p. 122; Fazio, Giorgio, *Il tempo della secolarizzazione. Karl Löwith e la modernità*, Milano/Udine: Mimesis 2015, p. 229.

13 On this aspect of Löwith's take on the topic, see Barash, Jeffrey A., "The Sense of History: On the Political Implications of Karl Löwith's Concept of Secularization", in: *History and Theory* (37/1998), pp. 69–82.

above all, Hans Blumenberg.¹⁴ From both their responses to Löwith emerges their dissatisfaction with the reductive, simplistic and “dogmatic” character of the meta-narrative of secularization, which understands the modern age as Christianity’s shadow, the evanescent reflection of the religious substance to which the history of the West after the fall of the ancient world is improperly reduced.¹⁵ In particular, the tacit accusation of having lent himself to a superficially ideological and non-scientific operation hurt the pride of Heidegger’s rebellious pupil. It is not surprising, therefore, that a feeling of both indignation and bewilderment suffuses the review of *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* that Löwith wrote at Gadamer’s request a few years after the Münster conference.¹⁶ The essay, as Blumenberg bitterly observes,¹⁷ more than a *Besprechung* actually is a late and yet still piqued reaction to his 1962 paper, and its tone, at times

-
- 14 Lübbe is the author of one of the most influential study on the concept of secularization (mentioned above in note 4), whose core claims were presented at the Münster conference. Cf. Lübbe, Hermann, “Säkularisierung als geschichtsphilosophische Kategorie”, in Kuhn, Helmut/Wiedmann, Franz (eds.), *Die Philosophie und die Frage nach dem Fortschritt*, pp. 221–239. A detailed reconstruction of the theoretical and personal querelle between Löwith and Blumenberg is contained in Joe Paul Kroll’s still unpublished doctoral dissertation, *A Human End to History? Hans Blumenberg, Karl Löwith and Carl Schmitt on Secularization and Modernity*, Princeton 2010, chapter 3. On this topic, see also Wallace, Robert M., “Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate”, in: *New German Critique* (22/1981), pp. 63–79; Monod, Jean-Claude, *La querelle de la sécularisation*, part. III; Brient, Elizabeth, *The Immanence of the Infinite: Hans Blumenberg and the Threshold to Modernity*, Washington (DC): The Catholic University of America Press 2002, pp. 13–38; Svenungsson, Jayne, “A Secular Utopia: Remarks on the Löwith-Blumenberg Debate”, in Elena Namli/ Jayne Svenungsson/Alana Vincent (eds.), *Jewish Thought, Utopia and Revolution*, Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi 2014, pp. 69–84.
- 15 Cf. Blumenberg, Hans, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. by R.M. Wallace, Cambridge (MA): MIT Press 1985, p. 27. In his writings on the subject, the concept or theorem of secularization is presented by Blumenberg now as a “commonplace” that has become “fashionable” (see “Rudolf Bultmann: ‘Geschichte und Eschatologie’. Rezension”, in: *Gnomon* (31/1959), p. 165), now as a phenomenon that has taken on the “features of a natural event” (“Säkularisation’: Kritik einer Kategorie historischer Illegitimität”, in: Helmut Kuhn/Franz Wiedmann (eds.), *Die Philosophie und die Frage nach dem Fortschritt*, p. 240: “Einkleidung eines Naturereignisses”), now as a “dogma” (“On a Lineage of the Idea of Progress”, in: *Social Research* (41/1974), p. 5).
- 16 Cf. Löwith, Karl, “Besprechung des Buches *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* von Hans Blumenberg”, in: *Philosophische Rundschau* (15/1968), pp. 195–201 (now in Karl Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. II: *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*, Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler 1983, pp. 452–459).
- 17 In a letter to Gadamer of 3 October 1968 cited in Joe Paul Kroll, *A Human End to History?*, p. 149. See also Blumenberg’s letter to Carl Schmitt of 7 August 1975, in Blumenberg, Hans/Schmitt, Carl, *Briefwechsel 1971–1978 und weitere Materialien*, edited by A. Schmitz/M. Lepper, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2007, p. 134 et seq.

defensive, at times indignant, half conciliatory, half contemptuous, represents an exemplary testimony of a passage in time. Even on a superficial reading, it is evident that the real issue at stake in the dispute was who should get the burden of proof with respect to an interpretative scheme or grand narrative that aspired to become the doxastic core of a diagnosis of the present time.

How, then, does Blumenberg's view differ from Löwith's?

As a matter of fact, neither in his *Vortrag* at the German Congress of Philosophy, nor in the first part of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (which would merge, suitably reworked, into a more manageable volume, *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung*, in 1974),¹⁸ does Blumenberg dare to challenge the factual core of the secularization thesis, which, in his vocabulary, becomes the “descriptive” and “intransitive” side of the theorem.¹⁹ What also remains undeniable for him is the fact, attested to by experience, that in the course of the last few centuries there has been a contraction, a perceptible decrease (the German term used by Blumenberg is *Schwund*) in the weight of religion, or transcendence, or otherworldly references, in people's daily lives:

Everyone is familiar with this designation for a long-term process by which a disappearance of religious ties, attitudes to transcendence, expectations of an after-life, ritual performances, and firmly established turns of speech (*Wendungen*) is driven onward in both private and daily public life.²⁰

In this narrower sense, the modern world is to all intents and purposes a more secular world than its predecessor, with which it tends to identify itself contrastively. What is less obvious is how this difference should be framed theoretically, in other words how it should be conceived and explained. Here the theoretical divergence with Löwith becomes apparent. For Blumenberg, modernity should not be thought of only in terms of a negative genealogy – i.e., as something that is “unthinkable without” something else²¹ – but under the umbrella of an affirmative one. This, in particular, should be capable of detecting and describing the original solutions that the modern mind was able to devise in response to a momentous intellectual challenge. For at stake at the end of the middle ages was no less than the margin of initiative granted to human beings in the midst of a creation that, after the collapse of the

18 Cf. Blumenberg, Hans, *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1974.

19 Cf. Blumenberg, Hans, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 4 and p. 23.

20 Cf. Blumenberg, Hans, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 3. On the intricate biographical and intellectual itinerary that led Blumenberg to the “recognition of the death of God” see Kroll, Joe Paul, *A Human End to History?*, pp. 57–64.

21 Cf. Blumenberg, Hans, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 30.

theological voluntarism of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, appeared boundless and hopelessly opaque.

So, to sum up, for Blumenberg too one of the legitimate ways of describing the modern age is in terms of its distance from religion. But this disengagement is to be understood neither as an inexplicable phenomenon (a sort of quantum leap or sudden reversal of polarity between the 'sacred' and the 'secular') nor as the superficial metamorphosis (*Umsetzung*) of an immutable substance. It is, rather, a complicated and original process of reoccupation and reworking (*Umbesetzung*) of the available range of solutions to dilemmas partly inherited and partly exasperated by Christian theology, in the wake of the *sine die* postponement of the Parousia.²² For the latter had not only brought about an overall reassessment of the role of the worldly sphere in the history of salvation, but had also exacerbated the need to tame the taxing theoretical riddles inherent in any creaturely vision of the relationship between an infinite source of life – God – and the imperfect reality arising from such absolute power.

Thus, for Blumenberg, the chief problem is not how to assess the historical relevance or the civilizing scope of the process of emancipation of individuals from ecclesiastical control over their intimate, social, political and intellectual lives, but rather how to interpret the deeper meaning of the intellectual turning point that, on the one hand, made this revolution possible and, on the other hand, laid the foundations for the rise of an original and self-sufficient form of life. Within this theoretical horizon, the legitimacy of the secular age is defended by the prolific German author in an articulate, sophisticated, non-Manichean manner. The process of secularization, once its existence in the above minimal sense is recognized, is described as an interweaving of many stories in which one has to disjointedly track ups and downs, steps forward and steps back – local progress, challenges tackled intelligently or obtusely, badly posed questions, real innovations, etc. – and where there is room for a conspicuous dose of contingency and for eccentric trajectories with respect to the standard patterns of development.

22 On the conceptual dyad, *Umsetzung* and *Umbesetzung*, see Greisch, Jean, "Umbesetzung versus Umsetzung: Les ambiguïtés du théorème de la sécularisation d'après Hans Blumenberg", in: *Archives de Philosophie* (67/2004), pp. 279–297. The topos of "reoccupation" (*Stelle besetzen*), in relation to the theme of progress, had already cropped out in the Bultmann review cited in note 32. Kroll (*A Human End to History?*, pp. 46 et seq., 69) traces the birth of the idea back to an essay on Kafka published in 1952: "Der absolute Vater", in: *Hochland* (45/1952), pp. 282–284.

New Scenarios

If we were to schematically summarize Blumenberg's complex argumentative strategy, we could distinguish at least six layers of reasoning.

At the base (1), there is the contestation of any reductionist or "genealogically destructive" interpretations²³ of the modern age, which are rejected as the expression of a substantialist or essentialist view of history that is untenable both in general theoretical terms and in detailed historical accounts. Aside from the allusive power of an explanatory scheme that gratifies the reader's ideological expectations, there actually is no plausible reason to attribute an oversized causal role to the "religious element", i.e., to the "belief in being created in the image of a Creator-God, the hope in a future Kingdom of God, and the Christian command to spread the gospel to all the nations for the sake of salvation".²⁴

In lieu of such breakdown of secular confidence in progress into its supposed theological presuppositions, an alternative style of historical research is suggested (2). This procedure aims at reconstructing a thick web of different, local, sectorial histories, in which a progressive view of history does not spring from a generic salvific expectation, but (i) from specific experiences of epistemic success (for example in the field of astronomy), (ii) from the claim to creative freedom in the arts (as happened in the famous *querelle des anciens et des modernes*) or (iii) from the steady transformation of curiosity from vice to virtue in the modern bourgeois mentality.²⁵

These local histories, in turn, (3) converge in a grand narrative based on a different form of pattern-recognition than the negative genealogy favoured by Löwith. For the horizon that encompasses and relates the different cultural developments does not consist in the metamorphosis of a "powerful and influential tradition", but in the radicality of the intellectual challenge bequeathed to Christian theology by the Gnostic heresy and made even more aporetic by the theoretical choices of Duns Scotus' and Ockham's theological voluntarism.²⁶

The founders of modern culture (4) responded to the uncertainty deriving from a higher sense of contingency and from the intensified opaqueness of the universe in an activist key, inventing a new way of being a person under the

23 Cf. Donaggio, Enrico, *Una sobria inquietudine*, p. 131.

24 Cf. Löwith, Karl, *Meaning in History*, p. 202 et seq. (in the German edition, the word *Ferment*, not *Element*, is employed; cf. Löwith, Karl, "Die theologische Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie", in Karl Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften II*, p. 217).

25 Cf. Blumenberg, Hans, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, part 3.

26 Cf. Löwith, Karl, "Besprechung", p. 454 ("wirkungsmächtigen Tradition").

mark of self-assertion, not of humility or resignation. The blatantly undetermined, in many ways unpredictable character of the modern solution to the crisis of confidence in the human capacity of getting in tune with the inscrutable will of a radically *absconditus* God clarifies to what extent Blumenberg's understanding of historical change relies on a conceptual constellation dominated by metaphors of disequilibrium, uncertainty, contingency, openness, even structural imperfection.

In this type of historical transition, however, the promoters of change (5) are always exposed to the risk of becoming entangled in the bridge questions from which they had sought to emancipate themselves. Thus, the modern champions of progress, instead of settling for the pragmatic attitude of people who have once and for all discarded the search for the absolute, often succumbed to the allure of the promises of redemption of the great universal religions and ended up demanding from human self-affirmation the same level of self-fulfilment without side effects propagated by eschatological myths.²⁷

This risk of regression, however, does not exhaust the range of attitudes that moderns have taken towards their historical antecedents. In addition to cultural subservience (which justifies the narrower and restrained uses of the concept of 'secularization'), oblique or ironic allusions to religious models are also frequent (6), in which it is reasonable to spot a sign of the independence of the secular mentality rather than evidence of its derivative character. For Blumenberg what prevails both in the case of the rhetorical reference to a prototype of self-presentation (Rousseau's *Confessions*) and in the appropriation of a paradigmatic episode of liberation (the biblical exodus) is not the "objective cultural debt", but the extent of the rearrangement. Once we have adopted this inverted interpretative key, we cannot fail to be struck by the audacity with which moderns have related to Christianity as a historical religion and as a symbolic repertoire functional to purposes that change according to circumstances: challenge, self-clarification, quotation out of context, expressive need, ironic reversal, purely verbal homage, etc.²⁸

In short, with his overall reconfiguration of the research field, Blumenberg was able to defuse the explanatory power of the secularization theorem by unmasking its doxastic rather than epistemic nature. As is often the case with common sense statements, its apparent matter-of-factness dissolves into thin

27 Cf. Brient, Elizabeth, *The Immanence of the Infinite*, pp. 30–37.

28 Cf. Blumenberg, Hans, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 114. A clear formulation of the question is already present in the first reflection on the "explanatory value of the concept of *secularization*" developed in his review of Bultmann's book on history and eschatology. See Blumenberg, Hans, "Rudolf Bultmann: 'Geschichte und Eschatologie'. Rezension", p. 165 et seq.

air when the spokespersons of the alleged truism are pressed to explain its truth content analytically. In light of this, it is not surprising that the rebuttal strategy adopted by the author of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* was largely indirect, and made its ultimate success perhaps less evident than it actually was.²⁹ The result, however, does not change. The general tenor of the discussion had been reversed and the ground was now set for another kind of discussion in which the acknowledgement of a critical historical change could go hand in hand with a substantial dose of uncertainty about its true meaning and the most reliable interpretations of its origin, nature and future.

29 In his "Review Essay on *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*" (in: *History & Theory* (24/1985), pp. 183–195), Martin Jay bluntly argued, though, that Blumenberg "dealt a death blow to the [secularization] thesis in its strong form" (p. 192).

A Work of Demolition and Reconstruction: David Martin Defies the Establishment

An Unlikely Sociologist

Whilst Blumenberg was duelling with Löwith in Münster, on the other side of the Channel, David Martin, a maverick sociologist nine years younger than the philosopher from Lübeck, began his quixotic battle against the misuses of the concept of secularization. In the end, he was able to produce a theoretical model destined to exert a lasting influence on those who have since looked with distrust and scepticism at interpretations of the modern age based on the image of a zero-sum game between religion and unbelief.¹ Martin's contribution to the new secularization debate, though underestimated and sometimes blatantly ignored, should be measured according to the metrics of paradigm shifts. After him, in fact, the doubt about the framing and not just intraparadigmatic quality of the classical thesis of secularization – in other words, about its status of scientific doxa – has emerged from the penumbra, in which ideological conflicts and the proselytism of converts usually proliferate, to take on the profile of a fully-fledged scientific diatribe. Just as Blumenberg, in his erudite advocacy of the legitimacy of the modern age, was able to change the tone of the discussion by adopting unusual interpretative angles and a non-linear narrative style that made the theorem of secularization appear as a sort of aetiological myth – a 'just so story' – so Martin, with his scholarly rebellion against the sociological common sense of the age, broke down the apparently simple question of the decline of religion as light entering a kaleidoscope, inducing in the reader a state of mind of disorientation conducive to the reformulation of the investigated issue.

However, shedding light on this axis shift in the debate is no easy task. To make my work easier and allow the readers to fully appreciate Martin's intellectual trajectory, some biographical information is in order. As J.S. Reed remarked with a mixture of irony and admiration in one of the rare reviews of his insightful autobiography, "they don't make sociologists like David Martin

1 Cf. Cox, Jeffrey, "Secularization and Other Master Narratives of Religion in Modern Europe", in: *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* (14/2001), pp. 24–35.

any more – but they never did. The man is a one-off.”² If theoretical originality is enabled also by unusual life experiences, fortune granted Martin the ideal conditions to become an unconventional sociologist of religion by providing him with a privileged and eccentric point of view on his own time.

Born in London in 1929, Martin grew up in a humble family (his mom was a maid, his dad a chauffeur), dominated by the personality of the father: a man with an ardent Christian faith, follower of a Pentecostal Protestantism where the emphasis on the action of the Holy Spirit, dedication to Christ and the universal mandate of believers are notoriously the cornerstones of a militant devotion. His primary socialization within a minority (nonconformist, in fact) religious denomination is a crucial factor in understanding Martin’s attitude towards secularization. As he proudly avows in his autobiography, it was precisely his Bible-embedded upbringing that schooled him in doubt and inoculated him “against the shibboleths of the university”.³

As it was the case for Blumenberg, the key to Martin’s uniqueness is to be sought in the point of view of the outsider. Although growing up in a social environment that today would be called “fundamentalist”, Martin developed during his childhood and adolescence a passion for art (music, above all, but also poetry, painting and architecture) and, more generally, for culture, which was at the basis of his choice to continue his studies and become an elementary school teacher. In the second half of the 1950s, with two years of civilian service in the *Non-Combatant Corps*⁴ behind him, a son, a failed marriage and a dream of a degree in English Literature thwarted by his lack of knowledge of Latin, Martin began to study sociology by correspondence at the suggestion of a colleague. After graduating with top marks at the unusual age of thirty, he began his career as a researcher at the London School of Economics, where he remained until moving to Texas in 1986. Martin’s outstanding and lifelong scientific productivity is partially contingent on the short-circuit produced by

2 Cf. Reed, John S., “Review of *The Education of David Martin: The Making of an Unlikely Sociologist*”, in: *Society* (52/2015), p. 513.

3 Cf. Martin, David, *The Education of David Martin: The Making of an Unlikely Sociologist*, London: SPCK 2013, p. 232.

4 Martin’s interest in pacifism and, more generally, in the question of violence dates back to this crucial personal choice. He dealt with the theme throughout his scholarly career, all the way from his doctoral thesis (*Pacifism: A Historical and Sociological Study*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1965) to the recent *Ruin and Restoration: On Violence, Liturgy and Reconciliation*, London: Routledge 2016.

the collision of the tenacious son of a Methodist preacher with the radically secular environment of the LSE.⁵

In addition to his background, Martin's intellectual originality is the result of the breadth of his interests and the inventiveness of his theoretical tools, which make him a sociologist *sui generis*. In some respects, his thematic agenda is more akin to that of a theologian than a sociologist – the most suitable disciplinary label for his work is no less idiosyncratic than his academic itinerary: 'socio-theology' – and his concern for the religious dimension of experience is also attested to by his parallel liturgical experience that led him to the priesthood. David Martin was a Methodist preacher from 1953 to 1977, when he converted to the Anglican Church. In 1983 he attended Wescott House Theological College in Cambridge, becoming a deacon the same year and a priest the following year. Since then he served as Honorary Assistant Priest at Guildford Cathedral (Surrey).⁶

Martin's theoretical non-conformism can be to some extent accounted for by his double religious non-conformism. On the one hand, he had direct experience of Christian faith, not as a rearguard historical phenomenon, but as a powerful factor of personal and social mobilization and renewal, in his home environment. In other words, for him religion was something entirely modern. On the other hand, his passion for sociology was sustained by the conviction that the study of human society represents a crucial element in a dialectical theological outlook focused on the factual, not merely psychological, obstacles with which Christian communities have had to contend throughout their

5 On Martin's scientific standing see Künkler, Mirjam, "David Martin In Memoriam (1929–2019)", in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (58/2019), pp. 905–912. One of the latest fruits of Martin's labour is a retrospective look at the secularization debate entitled *Secularization, Pentecostalism and Violence: Receptions, Rediscoveries and Rebuttals in the Sociology of Religion*, London: Routledge 2017, part 1.

6 On the socio-theological nature of Martin's thinking see Davie, Grace, *The Sociology of Religion*, London: Sage 2007, p. 65, note 8: "Quite apart from his writing in the social sciences, Martin is an accomplished theologian. Increasingly, his work is best described as a form of socio-theology". The label is accepted by the author himself; see Martin, David, "The Essence of an Accidental Sociologist: An Appreciation of Peter Berger", in: *Society* (49/2012), p. 168: "I first read Peter Berger browsing through new books in the London School of Economics library and drawn by a title that promised something different, *The Precarious Vision*, published in 1961. It was in a genre I have myself practised from time to time which I call socio-theology". Cf. also Martin, David, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2005, p. 7: "the distinctive character of my approach lies in the intimate correlation between the theological and sociological accounts, so that faith is understood in terms of its social incarnations and in its dialectic relation to nature as observed in action".

history in order to translate the essence of the Gospel message into practice. “I had never imagined”, he wrote in his autobiography

there could be an academic discipline that dealt with the questions I asked and provided some of the answers I sought. Here was a subject corresponding to my commitments. Opinion and indignation could be fortified by arguments and evidence. I was a natural for sociology.⁷

In Martin’s sociological reflection, a personal concern is thus turned into a powerful epistemic interest that focuses his investigation and demands a systematic empirical control: a sort of compelling urge to fact-checking that is the distinctive feature of the work of the English sociologist and of his unusual combination of hermeneutics and empiricism.⁸

In short, Martin’s outsider status, coupled with an intellectual vocation rooted in history and personal identity, made him sensitive to the tendency of the irreligious nonconformity of the ‘learned’ to inadvertently spill over into a refined form of conformism destined to hinder the exercise of dispassionate and evaluative judgement in the investigation of religious phenomena. And it is thanks to the strength of this insight, reinforced by a typically youthful recklessness and naivety, that in the mid-1960s Martin set himself the at first sight ill-advised task of settling the score with the concept of secularization once and for all.

Breaking up Secularization

I wish to draw attention, now, to an apparent contradiction, often pinpointed by his readers, between the deconstructive and constructive intentions animating the work of David Martin.⁹ He is, after all, the author of a fundamental triptych on the topic of secularization, at the centre of which stands out the

7 Cf. Martin, David, *The Education of David Martin*, p. 99; see also p. 227: “My Evangelical childhood pushed me to undertake a very different kind of personal schooling, motivated by the need to get straight what was still ‘true’ about Christianity once you had worked your way through modern critical thinking about the Bible and modern science”.

8 Charles Taylor speaks of Martin’s “hermeneutic turn” in the secularization debate in his preface to Martin, David, *On Secularization*, p. ix. The “empiricist” or realist impulse depends instead on the desire to come to terms with what Wittgenstein would have pictured as the bedrock against which the spade (of theory) is turned: namely, the ‘brute’ (in the most literal sense of the term) facts of the human condition. On this point see Christiano, Kevin J., “Clio Goes to Church: Revisiting and Revitalizing Historical Thinking in the Sociology of Religion”, in: *Sociology of Religion* (69/2008), pp. 19–21.

9 Cf. Tschannen, Olivier, *Les théories de la sécularisation*, p. 292 et seq.; Cox, Jeffrey, “Secularization and Other Master Narratives”, p. 27.

1978 volume, *A General Theory of Secularization* (conceived in broad outline at the end of the 1960s). This book was preceded by the pioneering *The Religious and the Secular* (1969) and followed by *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*, a collection of essays appeared in 2005.¹⁰ Underlying the trilogy, however, is a short essay that Martin was commissioned to write for a sociological anthology edited by his former colleague Julius Gould and published by Penguin Books in 1965. The article was unabashedly entitled “Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization” and began with a statement that left no doubt as to its iconoclastic intent: “This is a work of ‘demolition’”.¹¹

Mixing an outsider’s bravado with a Biblical and Baconian impulse, Martin accounts for the blatant empirical underdetermination of the classical thesis of secularization by tracing it to its being an idol at once *tribus, specus, fori, theatri* – of the (sociological) tribe, of individual and collective anti-religious prejudices, of ideology. Once the background is set up, the dismantling proceeds in four stages. To begin with, (a) the concept of secularization, understood as the “decline of institutions labelled ‘religious’”, is described as an obstacle to the progress of the sociology of religion, since (b) it is interpreted as the expression of an ideological dogma rather than a healthy induction from experience. More precisely, its ideological aspect consists in (c) arbitrarily identifying its polemical target – usually a caricatured and one-dimensional view of faith and religious institutions – with religion ‘in itself’. In short, it is rebuffed as an equivalent of the puppet argument in logic. The ideologies (d) that Martin calls into question as hidden engines of the secularization thesis are, finally, rationalism, Marxism and existentialism.

Martin is aware that he is on a collision course with scholarly common sense and that his work of demolition will appear pointless to those who – and they are an overwhelming majority in his field of study – consider the decline of religion in modern societies as a process so obvious “that it hardly requires serious sociological attention”.¹² To counterbalance this *sensus communis*, however, there is a *sensus rerum* based on the following observation. The supporters of the secularization theorem have a suspicious tendency to close their eyes to case studies (such as that of the United States) that disprove the equation between modernization and the decline of religious vitality. They

10 Cf. Martin, David, *A General Theory of Secularization*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1978; Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular: Studies in Secularization*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1969; Martin, David, *On Secularization*.

11 Cf. Martin, David, “Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization”, in Julius Gould (ed.), *Penguin Survey of the Social Sciences*, London: Penguin Books 1965, pp. 169–182, here p. 169.

12 Cf. Martin, David, “Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization”, p. 169; see also Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 9.

do this, moreover, by means of a questionable escape route: i.e., by resorting to a stipulative definition of what characterizes a true religion as opposed to a fictitious religion on its way to extinction.

As an example of such a stipulation, which reduces the complexity of the phenomenon in order to make it fit more easily into one's own theoretical-ideological mould, Martin discusses the semantic stratifications contained in the binary opposition between the mundane and the ultra-mundane (internal or external transcendence, present or future, spiritual or material), from which a multiplicity of criteria can be deduced with which to measure the level of secularization of a society: investment in this world or in the afterlife, in life's goods or spiritual goods, in present happiness or future goods, and so on. On closer inspection, however, this plurality of criteria for establishing the level of secularity of an age is more likely to be arranged horizontally in constellations than in a linear distribution ordered according to the oppositional polarities of the religious and the secular. After all, to take a classic example, the biblical prophets were concerned above all with the holiness of Israel *hic et nunc* and not with its improbable afterlife projection. Of course, the criteria for measuring such holiness were not worldly, but their effects were primarily earthly.

Martin's conclusion in this regard is that, "if there are no exclusive associations between one polar alternative and any related set of alternatives, no sets of criteria can be utilized to distinguish between the religious and the secular".¹³ And even a dynamization of the opposition along an evolutionary trajectory cannot be a solution, because the various stages of development do not allow for a disjunctive division between the purely religious and the purely secular.

No less unsatisfactory for Martin is a total identification of religion with a single side of the dichotomy (e.g. the ultra-worldly), since even the most spiritual religions are forced to operate in the beyond through worldly institutions. Such an analytical simplification is therefore bound to lead to notorious paradoxes, such as the need to rubricate a large part of the history of a religious movement under the label of secularization (one example for all: the history of the Catholic Church). It is in keeping with this commonsensical consideration that Martin proposes as a rule of thumb for scientific inquiry in this field the principle that "analytic definitions should not constitute so gross a violation of conventional usage as to arouse constant misunderstanding".¹⁴

13 Cf. Martin, David, "Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization", pp. 172; see also Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 13.

14 Cf. Martin, David, "Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization", p. 173; see also Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 13.

Hence the urge to base the study of religion today on an empirical definition of religion centred on the role played in society by institutions that are usually identified as 'religious'. But it is precisely the rapprochement with experience that ends up making the concept of secularization empty. In fact, if one selectively applies it to a single religious experience, it will end up becoming superfluous, since its meaning will not differ from the generic meaning of decline. If, on the contrary, one applies it to a whole class of phenomena one falls into the problem indicated above.

At this point, Martin hastens to specify that such a terminological doggedness is not an end in itself, but serves to "clarify some wider issues".¹⁵ The first is the realization that there is no "unitary process called 'secularization' arising in reaction to a set of characteristics labelled 'religious'".¹⁶ The process does not exist because religious institutions flourish and decline for a variety of reasons that cannot be traced back to a single lowest common denominator arbitrarily identified as religious. In short, there is nothing essential in the decline of the various religions that can be brought under a single all-encompassing category (i.e. "secularization").

Secondly, "since there is no unitary process of secularization one cannot talk in a unitary way about the causes of secularization".¹⁷ The causes of secularization are often not impersonal causes at all, but deliberate influences of collective agents guided by precise ideological goals. In this sense, the thesis of secularization is often a self-fulfilling prophecy.¹⁸ To support this interpretative hypothesis, Martin concludes the essay with a review of the three major secular ideologies of the time: optimistic rationalism, Marxism and existentialism. All three, in fact, convey in different ways the thesis of the inevitable demise of religion. Rationalism considers the decline inescapable because it sees religions as false theories. Martin opposes this tacit claim with the common-sense remark that "believers are not failed rationalists but human beings. Faith provides relatively little information about the world, and such as it does provide is incidental".¹⁹ And, apart from that, all societies, in order to survive, need ideological systems ('myths' in the pejorative sense of the term) rather than

15 Cf. Martin, David, "Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization", p. 176; see also Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 16.

16 Cf. Martin, David, "Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization", p. 176; see also Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 16.

17 Cf. Martin, David, "Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization", p. 176; see also Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 16.

18 On this topic see De Vriese, Herbert, "The Charm of Disenchantment".

19 Cf. Martin, David, "Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization", p. 178; see also Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 18.

truths, which “depend upon the constant production of distortions, upon incoherence and downright false images of how the social system operates”.²⁰ In addition, human beings, along with punctual truths, need a “mythical framework [in the positive sense] which is more than the nonsense to which it is indissolubly wedded, since it can set all the major and minor events of life within a profoundly coherent framework of meaning”.²¹

Marxism, in turn, explains the inevitability of religion’s decline by tracing it back to its ideological function of supporting existing class domination. But this is only one of the functions performed historically by religions. In other words, only a deterministic view of history can rule out the possibility that the conditions for the flourishing of religion will not also be present within a fully socialist society.

Finally, the existentialist’s endorsement of the thesis of secularization rests on a different premise: i.e., the rejection of the prepersonal, institutional, sacramental, and communitarian dimension of religion. The latter is interpreted as a relict of the past so as to obtain a positional advantage that would be difficult to achieve if one examined the question *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, as the expression of “an ageless tension between the experimental and the formalized, the objective and the personal, the individual and the institutional”.²²

The conclusion of Martin’s essay sounds like an appeal to the common sense of unprejudiced scholars:

the vastly varied religious situation needs to be studied apart from the pressure to illustrate a philosophical position. Values doubtless intrude into every sociological formulation, but the more egregious versions of ideological distortion can be avoided. The word secularization is too closely linked to such distortions to be retained. Its very use encourages us to avoid studies of the impact, for example, of geographic and social mobility on religious practice, in favour of cloudy generalizations. Secularization should be erased from the sociological dictionary.²³

20 Cf. Martin, David, “Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization”, p. 178; see also Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 19.

21 Cf. Martin, David, “Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization”, p. 179; see also Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 19.

22 Cf. Martin, David, “Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization”, p. 181; see also Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 21.

23 Cf. Martin, David, “Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization”, p. 182; see also Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 22.

The Mirage of a General Theory

As I noted above, this pledge was ignored by Martin himself only a few years later.²⁴ Why? For the banal reason that, scepticism aside, there was still something important to be understood about what happened to religious aspirations, mentalities and practices in the life forms that emerged along with the modern revolutions.²⁵

The theoretical framework within which he intended to make the iconoclastic move he had almost accidentally performed in the decade of the apparent triumph of secularization emerges with special clarity in the introduction to the volume where Martin re-proposed (only four years later) his 1965 article. Here, the standard thesis is contested with self-confident detachment as an aprioristic intellectual operation that starts from an ideological conviction disguised as a simple observation (“God is dead”) and builds on this premise a fallacious transcendental argument: “therefore secularization must be occurring: therefore, secularization is a coherent notion”.²⁶

For Martin, however, the theory of secularization is not consistent because it is made up of separate elements, not easily amalgamated except in the deceptively systematic nature of an umbrella theory:

The concept of secularization [includes] a large number of discrete, separate elements, loosely put together in an intellectual hold-all. These discrete elements are not *necessarily* associated together in any positive empirical relationship although some obviously may be in given circumstances.²⁷

The point, then, is not to aim for an unachievable absolute coherence or exhaustiveness, but, in the absence of certainty, to at least bring out the complexity of the issue by multiplying critical angles and standpoints. This means, in short, denying legitimacy to the idea that, as far as human religious attitudes are concerned, there is a “sociological master-trend which is not ultimately as

24 “One of the most gloriously mistitled works in our field” is the caustic judgment with which Kevin Christiano dismisses *A General Theory of Secularization* in Christiano, Kevin, “Clio Goes to Church”, p. 20.

25 Peter Berger’s both admiring and perplexed reaction to reading Martin’s 1965 essay pointed in the same direction. Cf. Martin, David, “The Essence of an Accidental Sociologist”, cit. p. 168: “Something major had changed since the seventeenth-century (let’s say), and if we were to abandon the catch-all notion of secularization then we needed to formulate what that change was”. See also Martin, David, *The Education of David Martin*, p. 133.

26 Cf. Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 1.

27 Cf. Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 2.

well as temporally and locally reversible”.²⁸ The invitation, in other words, is to make room for a view of history that is contingent and without a predetermined end.

Behind this “work of demolition”, one can see, first, the critique of modern philosophies of history’s unjustified faith “in the blind and inexorable laws of historical development” articulated by Karl Popper in *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957). Second, what stands out is Martin’s aversion to philosophical schools that unilaterally stress the freedom and will of the individual to the detriment of belonging to suprapersonal bodies such as traditions or faith communities (which are unilaterally pictured as merely oppressive realities).²⁹ Third, another important element is the refusal to equate the religious/secular dichotomy with the antithesis between belief and unbelief. Drawing on an argument destined to become a topos in the criticism of the secularization myths, Martin shrewdly shows how the concept of “secularity” is indebted to the Christian worldview and “often embodies in reverse the contradictions of the image it mirrors”.³⁰ The view, happily embraced by Löwith, of secularization as a metamorphosis within Christianity is recovered in this perspective, though its use is circumscribed and put at the service of a dialectical account of history “which brings out the complex interrelation of the religious and the secular rather than utilizing any notion of *the* transition to the secular”.³¹ Metaphorically speaking, one could say that, similarly to what S.J. Gould did with respect to human evolution, Martin favored the tangled picture of a “bush” over the linear image of the “ladder” of evolution, reiterating, if need be, his hostility to any staged view of history: “There is no clear sequence here although there is a history of changes, and of variations in balances and emphases”.³²

This also means that linear developments in human history are restricted to very specific domains (e.g. the realm of knowledge, monopolized by scientific

28 Cf. Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 2.

29 Cf. Popper, Karl R., *The Poverty of Historicism*, London: Routledge 1957, p. 50. Martin has recognized the importance of this book for his intellectual development on several occasions. See, for example, Martin, David, *The Education of David Martin*, p. 104: “[Around 1957] I read Karl Popper and as I paused to pick up a coffee, I realized I did not have to believe certain things, especially about the inevitable course of history. I was free to make up my own mind rather than to replicate whatever was currently prescribed in the right-thinking world.” See also, in the same book, p. 128; Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 2; Martin, David, *On Secularization*, p. 19.

30 Cf. Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 3.

31 Cf. Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 4.

32 Cf. Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 5; Gould, Stephen J., “Ladders, Bushes, and Human Evolution”, in: *Natural History* (85/1976), pp. 24–31.

elites and shielded from the wider population). But religion is not one of these. Religion can be tentatively described, if you will, as a more or less coherent orientation towards the world that generally involves “a transcendent vision of man, society and nature”.³³ Now, for Martin, these orientations not only are not “cognitive in the same way as empirical science is cognitive”, but they are also structurally intertwined with scientific notions, cultural models and political institutions that are by their nature obsolescent.³⁴ This means that

alternatives remain open, they are not eroded as ‘rationality’ disenchant the world, but remain as the permanent structure of options. The history of these options is not linear anymore than it is cyclic, neither a chute nor a roundabout, nor is it random. But it is immensely complicated, and the trouble with the concept of secularization is that it attempts to simplify that complexity in the interests of ideology or of an over-neat intellectual economy.³⁵

But, provided that there is no point in telling a simple, linear, systematic story about secularization, what routes remain open to those who are nonetheless exercised by the fate of religion in modernity and aspire to produce the best possible account of this socio-historical phenomenon? Martin’s answer, exemplary for its laboriousness, is contained in *A General Theory of Secularization*. The theory presented in broad outline in this book presupposes the preliminary work of conceptual cleansing carried out almost a decade earlier, whose aim was to clear the ground of the most simplistic or ideological approaches and make it possible a sideways-on view of history from which patterns or generalizations of different range could emerge.³⁶

Pattern is the key term here. For Martin’s goal is precisely to map an extremely complex territory. The ambition of the undertaking is such that it confronts him with the famous Borgesian paradox of the map of the empire.³⁷ How detailed must the map be if it is to stay faithful to the phenomenon it strives to make sense of? The strategy adopted by Martin in his tentative general theory relies upon a fruitful dialectical tension between epistemic ambition and humility. On the one hand, a definition of religion is advanced that is broad enough to avoid the common fallacy of elevating a particular historical

33 Cf. Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 5.

34 Cf. Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 5.

35 Cf. Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 6.

36 Cf. Martin, David, “Notes for a General Theory of Secularization”, in: *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie/Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie* (10/1969), pp. 192–201.

37 Cf. Borges, Jorge L., “On Exactitude in Science”, in Jorge L. Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. by A. Hurley, London: Penguin Books 1998, p. 325.

case (e.g. an idealized image of mediaeval Christianity) to a universal model. This characterization, though, has to be sufficiently definite to allow the reader to grasp secularization as a specific historical process situated in time and space.

“By ‘religious’”, Martin argues, “I mean an acceptance of a level of reality beyond the observable world known to science, to which are ascribed meanings and purposes completing and transcending those of the purely human realm”.³⁸ The definition, in short, identifies an “area of concern” within which the object of study is more precisely delimited: the loss of influence of religious institutions and the transformation of the conditions of belief in industrial society. What is secularized in different patterns is therefore not ‘religion’ as such, but the combination of institutions and religious beliefs. The theory, therefore, albeit based on refined methodological premises, is essentially empirical: that is, it aims to photograph a change that must to some extent be visible, recordable and measurable. This means that ‘religion’ quickly acquires a name (Christianity in its various forms: Protestant, sectarian, Catholic, Orthodox) and the generic reference to ‘history’ is qualified in terms of distinctive historical circumstances.

In brief, what the theory aims to establish are typological correlations between long-term trends and particular historical configurations.³⁹ The problem is that macro-trends are idealtypes (differentiation, urbanization, disenchantment, dynamization) that never occur in their pure form, i.e. without a (contingent and responsive) context affecting the linear relation between cause and effect (given a , b and c , then x , y and z). Although Martin’s account does aspire to produce nomothetic knowledge, since the facts to be correlated can never be isolated in a pure form, it ends up zigzagging towards a form of idiographic knowledge in which the emphasis constantly falls on complexity. In such perspective, the dialectical tension between the epistemic polarities finds a precarious balance point in the identification of what we might call “mesopatterns”, i.e. historically contingent models of the relationship between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ embodying an unresolved, non-static type of connection between reality and its schematic theoretical representations.

Thus, in the modern age, the systemic thrust towards a redefinition of the social role of religious institutions and the content of personal beliefs had different consequences depending on whether it took place in a context of: **(a)** a denominational monopoly or quasi-monopoly (the “Latin” or “French” model); **(b)** a moderate or high denominational pluralism (the “British” and

38 Cf. Martin, David, *A General Theory of Secularization*, p. 12.

39 Cf. Martin, David, *A General Theory of Secularization*, p. 10.

“American” models); (c) a rigid separation or blending of civil and religious power, (d) national success or marginality, etc. But even intermediate or local patterns must in turn come to terms with historical contingencies and accidents (wars, revolutions, natural disasters, the presence or absence of charismatic individuals), which often have a decisive impact on the political, social and cultural evolution of a community.⁴⁰ This theoretical complexity is then reflected in a narrative entanglement where the plurality of angles and the overwhelming profusion of details can have a disorienting effect on the reader and frustrate the author’s explanatory intent, which is contingent on the possibility of significantly reducing the complexity of the *explanandum*. This is precisely the paradox illuminated by Borges’s parable, and which is apparent in the structural tension in Martin’s writings between the double urge for fact-checking and sense-making, between empiricism and a taste for enlightening historical contextualizations.⁴¹ In this regard, the English sociologist was well aware of the risk of lapsing “from explanation to description and from generalization to tautology”.⁴²

Historical Ebbs and Flows

To sum up: Martin’s approach to secularization can be described as a multi-layered account that combines a preliminary work of conceptual cleansing, a causal explanation and an interpretative contextualization of causal links. At the preliminary level, we have meticulous descriptions of exemplary cases which, combined with a scrupulous conceptual critique, demand the assumption of a cautiously sceptical attitude motivated by the problematic nature of any universal assertion.⁴³ A further key step in the process leading to the

40 Cf. David, Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization*, ch. 2.

41 For a more extensive discussion of this aspect of Martin’s thought see Costa, Paolo, “The One and the Many Stories: How to Reconcile Sense-Making and Fact-Checking in the Secularization Narrative”, in Hans Joas (ed.), *David Martin and the Sociology of Religion*, London: Routledge 2018, pp. 50–66. On his personal need for *sense-making*, see Martin, David, *The Education of David Martin*, p. 4: “My academic colleagues might well be very sharp, but they sometimes lacked focus. I was focused. I just had to make sense of the role of religion in society and the nature of power and politics, especially sincerity and violence”.

42 Cf. Martin, David, *A General Theory of Secularization*, p. 14.

43 Cf. Martin, David, “The Secularization Issue: Prospect and Retrospect”, in: *The British Journal of Sociology* (42/1991), pp. 465–474, especially p. 468. See also Martin, David, “Secularization: An International Debate from a British Perspective”, in: *Sociology* (51/2014), pp. 464–471, especially p. 467: “All this was part of my original critique of

explanation of a controversial historical transition is the recognition of general patterns, i.e. the frames that set the limits within which “subsequent events persistently move”.⁴⁴ These frames, in turn, are purely ideal constructs insofar as they indicate how events “tend to occur other things being equal”. But, as Martin wittily observes, things “are [never] the same”.⁴⁵

The story told by the English sociologist is accordingly at the antipodes of the modern metaphor of the train of progress proceeding towards its final station and leaving behind a plethora of negligible intermediate stops. It presumes, on the contrary, an open ending and a trail “full of cunning alleyways, and the future prone to turn whimsical or unexpected”.⁴⁶ The human odyssey, as he was fond of saying, is a matter of “ebbs and flows”.⁴⁷ Like Blumenberg, Martin therefore meant to replace a simple narrative with a complex, multi-layered one that does not impart a single lesson. To this end, he made use of a Judoka-like argumentative move – i.e., the opponent is knocked down using her own impetus – which aims to expose the opponent’s claim of embracing a matter-of-factly mentality, denouncing it (at best) as a pious illusion. When examined in detail, the secularization theorem is in fact anything but uncontested empirical evidence: “Who is to say what is and is not the ‘natural’ direction of history, with respect to religion or indeed anything else?”⁴⁸

There is an ironic side to this refutation, and Martin was more than willing to admit of the paradoxicality of the situation. His primary goal, after all, had always been to reverse the charge of dogmatism against mainstream secularization theorists. “I prepared my critique of secularization by making a series of moves”, he noted tongue-in-cheek in his autobiography. The first

secularization theory in the decade from the mid-sixties to the mid seventies. I was worried by constant recourse to what I regarded as steamroller concepts obliterating complex realities in order to clear the way for an assured future, and many of these steamroller concepts are what I call ‘nouns of process’, like secularization, modernization, rationalization, privatization”.

44 Cf. Martin, David, *A General Theory of Secularization*, p. 15.

45 Cf. Martin, David, *A General Theory of Secularization*, p. 3.

46 Cf. Martin, David, *On Secularization*, p. 138. In this sense, the most emblematic event for Martin is, not accidentally, that of the expansion of Pentecostalism. Here personal history and world history end up intersecting significantly. Cf. Martin, David, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*, Oxford: Blackwell 1990; Martin, David, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish*, Oxford: Blackwell 2001.

47 A good example of ebb and flow is the oscillation between science and superstition in the modern world, see Martin, David, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 116.

48 See Martin, David, *The Education of David Martin*, p. 127.

“used the sceptical tools of sociology against its dogmatic assumptions. We prided ourselves on being brave nonconformists against something called ‘the Establishment’ when we were ourselves an establishment demanding conformity on pain of excommunication”.⁴⁹ And he himself was living proof of the reliability of this diagnosis.

Another efficient refutative technique, honed over the years, aimed to revive the sense of contingency and historical complexity in order to promote a “mode of understanding circumscribed by humility”.⁵⁰ This meant, first of all, combining the *esprit de finesse* of historians with the *esprit géométrique* of sociologists. “I had a strong sense of the contingent in history”, Martin observes in his autobiography, and he was confident that “mankind is not condemned by fate nor forced to proceed helplessly along predetermined tracks. I had therefore to expose the illegitimate transfer of a theological telos or immanent direction into the domain of social science. So much sociology is over-organized history”.

His goal, on the whole, was to “unsettle the sociology of religion itself, in particular by investigating everyday religious practice in the past as well as now, and not taking some arbitrary point in the past as normative, whether Victorian piety or the faith of the High Middle Ages”.⁵¹ The truth is that there is no secular destiny with “ringing grooves of change” (Tennyson).⁵² Thus, the habit of selecting “a given period as normative for what ‘religion’ essentially meant” is itself suspicious, because, from such premises it follows all too easily that any change implies religious decline. “I was not arguing secularization was impossible”, so ends Martin’s self-interpretation, “but interrogating what counted as real religion and a truly religious period”.⁵³

With the benefit of hindsight, then, the outcome of Martin’s work of demolition, begun almost by accident several decades before the tide change, turned out to be not only constructive, but a real breakthrough: the beginning of a new era. It is this unintended consequence, more than anything else, that warrants the use of the image of the paradigm shift:

49 Cf. Martin, David, *The Education of David Martin*, p. 128.

50 Cf. Martin, David, *The Education of David Martin*, p. 102.

51 Cf. Martin, David, *The Education of David Martin*, p. 128.

52 Quoted in Martin, David, *On Secularization*, p. 138.

53 Cf. Martin, David, *The Education of David Martin*, p. 129.

I had nothing to lose, and invented the kind of relatively modest and contingent secularization theory I believed would not fall foul of my critique of the Great Transition. I sketched out a historically *contingent* theory of secularization [...] It was amazing no one had combined these various elements before, and much later Charles Taylor marvelled something so patently true had so long evaded notice. Paradigms are powerful, as Thomas Kuhn noted in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*: another truism that evaded notice until someone said it. It was my good luck to live when 'the obvious' could seem a baleful metaphysical revelation. [...] only a Nonconformist born and bred dared defend it.⁵⁴

54 Cf. Martin, David, *The Education of David Martin*, pp. 133–136.

In Search of a New Grand Narrative: Charles Taylor's Secularity

The Background of a Secular Age

It took more than forty years for the multilayered account of secularization developed independently by Blumenberg and Martin to bear its best fruits in the study of religion. From this point of view, Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* – the most influential work on the subject of the last twenty years – can be seen as the realization of the philosophical and socio-historical-theological premises laid out by the authors of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* and *The Religious and the Secular* in a condition of relative intellectual isolation. Explaining what this means in detail is the main goal of this chapter.

When Taylor wrote and published *A Secular Age* in 2007, his reputation as a scholar was solid, but his notoriety outside the boundaries of the academic world was modest.¹ It was this doorstopper of a book, which despite its size (874 pages) sold 60,000 copies in its first year alone, that brought him to the centre of the global conversation. Taylor, born in Montreal in 1931, read PPE at Oxford and taught at the university where he obtained his doctorate, as well as at various prestigious North American universities (McGill, Northwestern, New

1 For an overview of Taylor's work see Rosa, Hartmut, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis: Politische Philosophie nach Charles Taylor*, Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus Verlag 1998; Abbey, Ruth, *Charles Taylor*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2000; Costa, Paolo, *Verso un'ontologia dell'umano. Filosofia politica e antropologia filosofica in Charles Taylor*, Milan: Unicopli 2001; Smith, Nicholas H., *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2002; Laitinen, Arto, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources. On Charles Taylor's Philosophical Anthropology and Ethics*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2007. Excellent collections of essays on his work are: Tully, James (ed.), *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism. The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994; Abbey, Ruth (ed.), *Charles Taylor*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004; Laforest, Guy/de Lara, Philippe (eds.), *Charles Taylor et l'interprétation de l'identité moderne*, Sainte-Foy/Paris: Presses de l'Université Laval and Éditions du Cerf 1998; Kühnlein, Michael/Lutz-Bachmann, Matthias (eds.), *Unerfüllte Moderne? Neue Perspektiven auf das Werk von Charles Taylor*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 2011; Taussig, Sylvie (ed.), *Charles Taylor. Religion et sécularisation*, Paris: CNRS Éditions 2014; Taylor, Charles, *Modernità al bivio: l'eredità della ragione romantica*, edited by P. Costa and with contributions by R. Abbey/R. Beiner/R. Bhargava/N. Kompridis/A. Laitinen/J. Maclure/D. McPherson/M. Meijer/H. Rosa/J.K.A. Smith/N.H. Smith, Bologna: Marietti 2021.

School, among others). Despite some typical traits of the outsider (peripheral geographical origin and non-standard cultural background), his profile is that of a mainstream philosopher who went through all the steps of the more classic academic *cursus honorum*. After getting a Rhodes scholarship that opened to him the doors of All Souls College, he published a solid doctoral thesis (1964), wrote an impeccable monograph on Hegel (1975) and collected a number of influential essays in his *Philosophical Papers* (1985). He was then able to produce a classic of twentieth-century philosophy such as *Sources of the Self* (1989), after which came the international recognition as an authority on multiculturalism and the ethics of authenticity.² The research project that will lead to *A Secular Age* coincided thus with the peak of his career.³

The book – a dense work, generous almost to a fault, based on a non-linear, sometimes even haphazard, expository strategy – took the author ten years to complete (1997–2006), but its layout was in some ways already foreshadowed in the last chapter of *Sources the Self*. In those pages, Taylor capped his reconstruction of the fractured horizons of modern moral identity by alluding to the non-residual vitality of the theistic option, indeed to its incomparably greater potential with respect to other modern moral sources (nature, human dignity, rational freedom, universal justice).⁴ In doing so, he not only reiterated the claim, advanced several times in the book, that the Christian vision of Christ's self-denying love remains a crucial asset for many people even today, but also hinted between the lines that agape is the only moral source really equal to the philanthropic effort required of ordinary people in the age of Amnesty International

2 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *The Explanation of Behaviour*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1964 (new edition with a new preface by the author and a foreword by Alva Noë: 2021); Taylor, Charles, *Hegel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975; Taylor, Charles, *Philosophical Papers I: Human Agency and Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985; Taylor, Charles, *Philosophical Papers II: Philosophy and The Human Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985; Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 1989; Taylor, Charles, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 1992; Taylor, Charles, "The Politics of Recognition", in Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 1995, pp. 225–256.

3 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2007. For an in-depth examination of the book see Smith, James K.A., *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, Grand Rapids (MI): Eerdmans 2014; Warner, Michael/Vanantwerpen, Jonathan/Calhoun, Craig (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2010; Leask, Ian (ed.), *The Taylor Effect. Responding to a Secular Age*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2010; and symposia published in: *Modern Theology* (26/2010) and *New Blackfriars* (91/2010), with responses by the author. On Taylor's contribution to the field of religious studies see also Costa, Paolo, "Charles Taylor ha 90 anni: il suo contributo agli studi religiosi", in: *Annali di Studi Religiosi* (23/2022).

4 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self*, p. 518.

and global campaigns against human rights violations. Faced with the scepticism of many of his readers towards this reliance on the promise implicit in Judaeo-Christian theism of “a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided”,⁵ Taylor was left with no choice but to confront the view of those who believe that the final refutation of religion has been conclusively pronounced by the court of history and that its name is “secularization”.

Overcoming the Secularization Theorem

How does Taylor address the thesis of the inevitable decline of religion in modernity? For brevity's sake, we could describe his approach as a strategy of ‘circumvention’. His aim, in fact, is not so much to demarcate it, fix it in a stable image, zoom in on it and reject it with a knock-down argument, as to reconfigure it through a recursive exercise of historical contextualization. His mode of refutation, in other words, is the standard method of immanent critique that takes the thesis of the opponent as a given and explores its shortcomings and inconsistencies from an internal standpoint. The result is a spiral sequence of converging narratives arranged along an axis of substantial theoretical issues.

The main effect of this thematic recursiveness is the wearing down of any static representation of the historical phenomenon under investigation. What we are given, in the end, is something similar to an interpretive refraction in which the concept of secularity is first assumed as a given – that is, it is taken for granted that something has actually happened to “religion” in recent centuries – and immediately problematized, through the articulation of three different meanings of secularization:

- (a) the religious neutralization (*laïcisation*) of the political sphere;
- (b) the decline in religious belief and practice;
- (c) the revolution of the conditions of personal religious experience and the resulting transformation of devotional forms and agencies.⁶

The same applies to the secular/religious dichotomy, which is first borrowed from modern common sense and then dialectically destabilized in a

5 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self*, p. 521. For a frontal attack on Taylor's claim, see Skinner, Quentin, “Who are ‘We’? Ambiguities of the Modern Self”, in: *Inquiry* (34/1991), pp. 133–153; Skinner, Quentin, “Modernity and Disenchantment: Some Historical Reflections”, in James Tully (ed.), *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism*, pp. 37–48.

6 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, pp. 1–4.

historically broadened perspective. Finally, a similar treatment is reserved for classic sociological categories such as disenchantment or rationalization, whose ideal-type character is mitigated by continuous reference to non-depersonalized life contexts.

The classical thesis of secularization, in short, is infused with a dialectical impulse through a reiteration of a demand for sensemaking. In Taylor's crypto-Hegelian perspective, this means, on the one hand, insisting that the seemingly "familiar" become "known" and, on the other hand, to use *A Secular Age's* terminology, bringing to the surface the "unthought" of the secularization theorem, that is, the web of unthematized certainties and prejudices that tacitly channels the analytical efforts of the theorem's champions by narrowing their theoretical imagination.⁷

The general aim of Taylor's investigation is thus to make the tacit background of the classical thesis less predictable than it appears at first sight. And since 'secularization' is a noun of process and, in addition, conveys the idea of a completed transition, and with it the reference to a definitively overcome past, a genealogical look is indispensable. Put otherwise, since a *métarécit* cannot be dispensed with, storytelling becomes the key problem. Accordingly, Taylor makes his polemical objective explicit beforehand. And he does so by expressly contrasting his account with what he calls "subtraction stories": that is, narratives that picture the origin of secularity as an obvious, unsurprising event.⁸ From a 'subtractive' point of view, the real problem, if anything, is to understand what first prevented and then delayed the rise of a disenchanted form of life. Hence the emphasis on the stages of the liberation process that would lead to the entrenchment of the most natural condition for the human race: unbelief. In this type of meta-narrative, therefore, there is no sense of astonishment at the historical transition investigated, which in the eyes of the storyteller appears rather as a thrust towards emancipation that has been active since the dawn of time against obstacles that have themselves been at work since time immemorial. When only the hard core of human nature matters, secularity cannot be interpreted as an innovative construct, but only as a liberation from the chains of prejudice: the escape from a condition of self-deception or intellectual minority.

Taylor takes a different route in *A Secular Age*. He tells a series of interlinked stories that, instead of concentrating on what has disappeared, hunt down

7 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 427 et seq.

8 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, pp. 22 and 26. See also Taylor, Charles, "Afterword: Apologia pro Libro Suo", in Michael Warner/Jonathan Vanantwerpen/Craig Calhoun (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, pp. 300–304.

what has been discovered, invented, constructed, in a word *added* to the past repertoire of practices and knowledge thanks to human creativity, imagination and initiative. In order to see one's own age – the 'here' from which the storyteller's retrospective gaze departs – as something new, something that cannot be taken for granted, you have to look at it with different eyes, possibly with the passionate gaze of an explorer. Significantly, in an essay that predated *The Secular Age* by ten years, Taylor described his own investigation of modern secularity as a Matteo "Ricci-like journey into the present", i.e., as an ethnography of the modern world, whose value lies in enabling the reader to detect the strange in the familiar, the alien in the known.⁹ And since the inquiry's end goal is to discern what is authentically new and what is less new than it seems, the main risk facing the explorer is that of not being sufficiently "bewildered".¹⁰

Taylor's reference to the seventeenth-century controversy over Chinese rites serves as an invitation not to settle too fast for the first impression. Taking it for granted that there is an ahistorical and a-contextual opposition between *the* religious and *the* secular and that this is destined to trigger a series of local zero-sum conflicts, from which only one of the two sides can emerge victorious, risks precluding a different understanding of the historical genesis of today's spiritual polyphony. For the latter deserves to be read not only as the product of a condition of intellectual confusion, but as a reasonable response to the diversity of competing goods in the modern West.

Living in the Immanent Frame

To sum up: Taylor bases his genealogical investigation on the idea that the correct attitude toward modern secularity is a form of philosophical astonishment at the historical novelty represented by a society in which religious beliefs and practices have become both a fragment of social life and the object of individual choice: in short, an optional component of personal existence. The correct response to this bafflement is, on the one hand, a problematizing re-description of contemporaneity and its context, and on the other hand, a genealogical reconstruction with a positive and not only unmasking intent. In other words,

9 Cf. Taylor, Charles, "A Catholic Modernity?" (1999), in Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2011, pp. 167–187, here p. 186.

10 Cf. Taylor, Charles, "A Catholic Modernity?", pp. 169 and 186. On the pros and cons of the "Ricci lens", see also Taylor, Charles, "A Catholic Modernity – 25 Years On", in Anthony J. Carroll/Staf Hellemans (eds.), *Modernity and Transcendence: A Dialogue with Charles Taylor*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2021, pp. 180–205.

it is vital to recount the genesis of modern secularity with a narrative style that is simultaneously inclusive and disruptive. A historic tale, that is, which can both “successfully integrate the valid insights contained in most competing genealogical accounts” and disarrange the ideological alignments inherited from the past and expand the hypotheses under discussion.¹¹

This is why Taylor begins his ethnographic journey by asking what it means to live in a secular age, what changes in mentality and sensibility it entails. The point is to understand how it was possible and what consequences it had on people’s lives to cast off a society in which political and religious power were intertwined, where religion was everywhere and participating in devotional or apotropaic rituals was the natural way of being in the world, and to move to a society in which religious faith is in principle problematic because it implies a decision and a justification that cannot be taken for granted. From this point of view, the decline of religion essentially means the rise of a web of practices, institutions, imaginaries, theories and arts that made the universal human attitude of not being satisfied with what is simply ‘at hand’ more fragile and problematic.¹² According to Taylor’s picture, this non-accepting way of being in the world is characterized by a mixed stance of desire and belief that “this can’t be all there is” that the ghost of a fuller, more authentic life hovers in the shadows of our experience, with the “meaning of meaning” of existence at stake.¹³ One of the less conspicuous consequences of the spread of a secular mentality is that this reasonable desire for another life takes on a more volatile, problematic, subjective form. To get to the heart of the matter, in a secular age people find it hard to make sense of the vocabulary that has traditionally been used to refer to a meta-biological ideal of life: transcendence, immortality, bliss, salvation, etc.

11 Cf. Casanova, José, “A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight?”, in Michael Warner/Jonathan Vanantwerpen/Craig Calhoun (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, p. 267.

12 Cf. “2007 Templeton Prize Press Conference Statement by Prof. Charles Taylor” (<https://www.templetonprize.org/laureate-sub/taylor-press-conference-statement/>, date of last access: 11.04.2022): “Human beings, whether they admit it or not, live in a space of questions, very deep questions. What is the meaning of life, what is a higher mode of life, a lower mode of life, what is really worthwhile, what is the basis of the dignity that I’m trying to define for myself, the hunger to be really on the side of the good and the right, in popular terms to be part of the solution and not part of the problem, [...] Everybody exists in this space of questions whether they recognize it or not. They may not think they’ve been posing or solving the question of the meaning of life, but, being a human being, that has to get to you at some level and you have to be living an answer to that, whether you recognize it or not”.

13 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 677.

What the reader is invited to come to terms with in *A Secular Age* is a non-linear macro-narrative, an interweaving of concatenated stories whose connection is strong enough to make the change intelligible, but not so stringent as to make it appear inevitable, deterministic. In other words, there must remain a sufficiently wide area of causal looseness so as not to deny the ultimately contingent, creative and constructive character of human action in history. "We can set the stage as well as we can", Taylor admitted with his usual theoretical humbleness, "we can never fully explain the rise of exclusive humanism; certainly not if explanation means: showing its inevitability, given certain conditions. Like all striking human achievements, there is something in it which resists reduction to these enabling conditions".¹⁴ This hesitancy introduces a caution that is both epistemic and moral, and which carries even greater weight here because it concerns the explanation of a turning point in the cultural evolution of humankind.

So far, in describing Taylor's approach to the secularization theorem, the emphasis has been on the impulse to make the image conveyed by the thesis of the decline of religion more articulate. In comparison to Blumenberg's injection of complexity, however, a further step is taken.¹⁵ For in Taylor's account human creativity is fired up not by a single challenge, moreover an *intellectual* challenge, but by a range of challenges, some of which, as will become clear later, are intra-religious. Alongside this thrust towards complexification, however, a complementary need is fulfilled in *A Secular Age*: the need to have a synoptic explanatory framework and meet a radical urge for sensemaking. The urgency to understand what general lessons are incapsulated in the epochal shift "from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others" is thus fully recognized.¹⁶ It is precisely the desire to fulfil this demand that prompts Taylor to tell a story whose protagonists are not only flesh and blood men and women, but also strange entities such as imaginaries, frames, contexts of understanding, types of subjectivity, etc.

The recursive local narratives that give *A Secular Age* its characteristic density are actually embedded in a broader narrative framework whose main function is to open a glimpse into the religious evolution of humanity over the last

14 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 258.

15 On the 'aborted' dialogue between Taylor and Blumenberg, see Monod, Jean-Claude, "Une si brève discussion: Blumenberg dans *L'Âge séculier*", and Bouchindhomme, Christian, "Remarques sur le non-dialogue avec Blumenberg (et quelques autres). En annexe à la 'Note' sur ce même non-dialogue de Jean-Claude Monod", both in Sylvie Taussig (ed.), *Charles Taylor. Religion et sécularisation*, pp. 155–179.

16 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 3.

2500 years (from the so-called Axial revolution to the Protestant Reformation). The rise of modern secularity cannot be adequately understood without the sense of historical discontinuity granted by a long-term historical outlook. From this point of view, modern secularity appears as the offspring of the growth and convergence of new practices, new social, cosmic and anthropological imaginaries, and new forms of subjectivity that propagated, first inside and then outside the narrow circle of intellectual elites, the stance which Taylor calls “exclusive humanism”. This historically unprecedented lifeworld represents for him a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the global success of Western modern civilization.

In short, secularization is the complex, disorderly, karstic, but ultimately unitary historical process culminating in the rise of the ‘Immanent Frame’. The latter is to be seen as a constellation of practices and “idées-forces” from which trends, lines of development, ratchet effects, privileged possibilities, in short, ‘vectors’ emerge that give the Western modern landscape its distinctive aspect.¹⁷ Taylor’s grand narrative of secularization is the explanatory context that integrates large-scale developments such as disenchantment, the transition from a ‘porous’ to a ‘buffered’ self, the autonomization first of nature and then of society as impersonal orders, i.e., an array of historical-cultural processes that not only possess a spiritual relevance, but have a genealogical link with the evolution of Christianity understood as the late fruit, together with Islam, of the Axial revolution (800–300 BCE).¹⁸

In this sense, secularization is also the product of a ‘rage’ for self-reform arisen and pursued to the extreme consequences within Latin Christianity. This explains why “secularization went along with an intensification of religious

17 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self*, p. 204.

18 On what Karl Jaspers called the “Axial age” see Bellah, Robert N., *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2011; Joas, Hans, *Was ist die Achsenzeit? Eine wissenschaftliche Debatte als Diskurs über Transzendenz*, Basel: Schwabe Verlag 2014; Bellah, Robert N./Joas, Hans (eds.), *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2012; Taylor, Charles, “What Was the Axial Revolution?”, in Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, pp. 367–379. Taylor’s articulated take on ‘disenchantment’ can be found in Taylor, Charles, “Disenchantment-Reenchantment”, in Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, pp. 287–302; Meijer, Michiel/Taylor, Charles, “What Is Reenchantment? An Interview with Charles Taylor”, in Michiel Meijer/Herbert De Vriese (eds.), *The Philosophy of Reenchantment*, London: Routledge 2021, pp. 17–37; Taylor, Charles, “Drei Arten von Entzauberung”, in Magnus Schlette/Bettina Hollstein/Matthias Jung/Wolfgang Knöbl (eds.), *Idealbildung, Sakralisierung, Religion. Beiträge zu Hans Joas’ ‘Die Macht des Heiligen’*, Frankfurt/New York: Campus 2022, pp. 255–270.

faith” and why modern secularists and believers have more in common than they imagine.¹⁹ Indeed, as Taylor observes,

the narrative history of the rise of unbelief does not merely relate an irrelevant past, an optional extra for history buffs. Rather, all present issues around secularism and belief are affected by a double historicity, a two-tiered perfect-tensedness. On the one hand, unbelief and exclusive humanism defined itself in relation to earlier modes of belief, both orthodox theism and enchanted understandings of the world; and this definition remains inseparable from unbelief today. On the other hand, later-arising forms of unbelief, as well as all attempts to redefine and recover belief, define themselves in relation to this first path-breaking humanism of freedom, discipline, and order.²⁰

The Vector of Reform

Viewed from sideways on, Taylor’s grand narrative tells a main story that branches off into several subplots.²¹ Leaving aside the *détours*, the macro-story can be summarized as follows. The starting point is Latin Christendom. This is presented by Taylor as the result of a compromise between, for one thing, the need to proclaim and preserve the unbridgeable gap dividing heaven and earth, infinite and finite, the extra-worldly and the mundane, and, for the other, the self-reforming impulse to raise the standards of individual faith to the point of extending them to the entire human race, without distinction between élites and popular masses. The mediaeval *complexio oppositorum* is described in *A Secular Age* as

an equilibrium in tension between two kinds of goals. On one hand, the Christian faith pointed towards a self-transcendence, a turning of life towards something beyond ordinary human flourishing [...]. On the other, the institutions and practices of mediaeval society, as with all human societies, were at least partly attuned to foster some human flourishing. This sets up a tension, between the demands of the total transformation which the faith calls to, and the requirements of ordinary ongoing human life.²²

19 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 143.

20 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 269.

21 Cf. Taylor’s reply to Kieran Flanagan in the symposium published in *New Blackfriars* quoted in note 103: “I am treating secularity as something which is pathdependent. But this path is immensely complex, more an interlocking skein of highways and byways than a single giant autobahn. My book treats only a small and idiosyncratic collection of byways” (“Charles Taylor Replies”, in: *New Blackfriars* (91/2010), p. 721).

22 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 44.

The examples of contrast between the counsels of perfection and the demands of daily life are well known and range from the vocation to celibacy as a precondition for a total orientation of the heart towards God to the self-enhancing uses of sacraments, not to mention the clash between the ethics of honour and rank and the Gospel message. The (precarious) pre-modern way out of the deadlock revolved around the idea of a “hierarchical complementarity”: the division of roles and functions between those who pray, those who fight and those who produce; the periodic inversion of the relationship between structure and anti-structure (Carnival, the feasts of misrule, etc.); interaction between sacred (kairotic) and profane (homogeneous and empty) time; etc.

The emergence of a secular mentality is one of the unforeseen side effects of this (self)criticism of popular religion (of pre-axial origin) joining forces with the disciplinary self made possible and pursued by modern states. Between the starting point (a society so shored up by religious belief as to make disbelief – which should not be confused with lukewarm faith – an almost heroic option) and the point of arrival (a secular age) there is a series of intermediate stages. These include:

- (a) the process of demagification described by Max Weber (i.e., the breakdown and replacement of the cosmic, social and psychological bulwarks of belief);
- (b) the genesis of a new form of ‘buffered’ and disciplined self (a different way of being a person that will culminate in the prototype of the bourgeois gentleman);
- (c) the polarization of the transcendent/immanent dyad (which in the end would lead to an impersonal and self-contained conception of the natural and the socio-moral orders);
- (d) all the above, then, went together with a depersonalization of God in the modern religious imagination, whose peak was reached with eighteenth-century Deism.

The early-modern civilizing process studied by Norbert Elias, the beginnings of the disciplinary society described by Foucault, the “polite society” and the modern art of sociability, are different embodiments of the overlap of the religious impulse towards self-reform and the systemic demands of the new nation-states and the nascent market economy, which paved the way for the historically unprecedented affirmation of a form of exclusive humanism, a vision of life “accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing”.²³

23 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 18.

The secular age, to put it in a nutshell, is the result of a sea-change of the practices and imaginaries underlying European civilization. Speaking in general, such a shift can be likened to the rise of an Immanent Frame, i.e. of a way of molding everyday experience that does not rely on a transcendent, metaphysical or mysterious plan of existence. In a society shaped by the Immanent Frame, human dealings with the world can dispense with magic, the explanation of natural phenomena can omit any appeal to non-natural causes, social relations can take place on a purely horizontal plane, and people's moral order increasingly revolves around the pursuit of personal happiness. The individual who feels at ease in this context is the 'secular gentleman' whose main character qualities could be described in idealtypical terms as follows:

- (i) irony and sovereign detachment;
- (ii) rejection of any religious enthusiasm or aspiration to go beyond the human realm (replaced by intellectual curiosity);
- (iii) ability to take up the point of view of the impersonal spectator;
- (iv) nerve for putting themselves on an equal footing with God (hence the fixation on theodicy);
- (v) assumption of human desire's innocence;
- (vi) firmness in the face of evil (sin is not a taint, but a wrong and correctable behaviour);
- (vii) penchant for internal and immanent moral sources (rational will, detached reason, visceral moral feelings such as sympathy);
- (viii) inclination to benevolence.

But if the rise of the Immanent Frame does not coincide with the disappearance of religion, what does it mean to live within it for those who do not wholeheartedly embrace exclusive humanism?

To begin with, it means, to use Taylor's turn of phrase, to pass

from an era in which religious life was more 'embodied', where the presence of the sacred could be enacted in ritual, or seen, felt, touched, walked towards (in pilgrimage), into one which is more 'in the mind', where the link with God passes more through our endorsing contested interpretations – for instance, of our political identity as religiously defined, or of God as the authority and moral source underpinning our ethical life.²⁴

If, as it is the case with Taylor, one thinks that the aspiration to fullness or "désir d'éternité"²⁵ continues to act as an independent motivational force even within the Immanent Frame, religions cease to look like the sacrificial victims of the

²⁴ Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 554.

²⁵ Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 530.

process of secularization. As a result, historical contingent circumstances take on a decisive importance in explaining the different outcomes of the historical events under investigation. In the picture of the “spiritual shape of the present age”²⁶ proposed by the Canadian philosopher, the identification of transversal patterns of historical development go together with the recognition of local trajectories produced by the interaction between these vectors of change and the specific conditions in which historical agents lead their lives in different geographical and cultural contexts.

One of the global patterns of belief in the secular age is ‘mobilization’. By it Taylor means the external and internal conditions that induce individuals to experience the social order as a contested option that needs to be realized constructively. In his words, the age of mobilization

designates a process whereby people are persuaded, pushed, dragooned, or bullied into new forms of society, church, association. This generally means that they are induced, through the actions of governments, church hierarchies, and/or other élites, not only to adopt new structures, but also to some extent to alter their social imaginaries, and sense of legitimacy, as well as their sense of what is crucially important in their lives or society.²⁷

It is the same transition described elsewhere as the transition from a paleo-Durkheimian (*ancien régime*) model, in which “a sense of the ontic dependence of the state on God and higher times is still alive”, to a neo-Durkheimian one, where the problem of political identity takes on crucial importance.²⁸ That is, God can still be instrumental to understanding the foundations of the social order even after the end of the *ancien régime*, as long as people imagine themselves as members and founders of a society that explicitly follows and tries to realize God’s Plan (i.e., the Modern Moral Order).

Examples of this neo-Durkheimian solution linking the sacred and the nation are, on the side of the winners, the perception that many Americans still have today of their country’s special mission, and, on the side of the losers, the reinforcing circuit between political and confessional identity that may happen in oppressed peoples (Poland, Ireland, etc.). More generally, this activism is bound to produce different consequences depending on whether the historical context is, for example, marked by the traditional alliance between throne and altar – and its aim is thus the preservation or occupation of the decision-making centre – or is instead characterized by the competition or

26 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 539.

27 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 445.

28 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 455.

collaboration of a plurality of actors within civil society rather than in or around the state.

The second transversal pattern indispensable for understanding religion today is the ethics of authenticity. This is, for Taylor, “a cultural revolution [...] an individuating revolution”, which, although it became a mass phenomenon only after the 1960s, has its direct antecedent in romantic expressivism.²⁹ In short, in societies dominated by this type of ethics, the social bond (like all other external constraints on the realization of one’s original exemplar of humanity) loses its sacred nature to the person – the ‘sacred’ self – which is seen as the only reality endowed with intrinsic value. In such societies, everything, including religion, turns around the individual, his desire for expressive self-realization and his freedom of choice. The cornerstones of the moral ideal arising from this “real value shift”³⁰ are:

- (1) primacy of the search for personal happiness as self-expression in new spaces of “mutual display”;³¹
- (2) respect for personal choices, i.e. a “soft relativism [...] predicated on a firm ethical base”, according to which it is self-evident that the values of others should never be criticized, because everyone has the right to live her own life in complete freedom and the only intolerable sin is intolerance;³²
- (3) a generalized criticism of authority as a suprapersonal instance that stifles creativity, individuality and imagination;
- (4) a systematic rejection of any institutional mediation.

From this last element derives the tendency to interpret religious experience in terms of an inner spirituality capable of dispensing with doctrines, collective rites and churches. “The injunction would seem to be: let everyone follow his/her own path of spiritual inspiration. Don’t be led off yours by the allegation that it doesn’t fit with some orthodoxy”.³³

Fractured Horizons

The modern spiritual landscape forged by this twofold revolution in customs and mentality is a field of powerful and conflicting forces: an age of tension, of fractured horizons, of spiritual uncertainty and creativity, of risk, hope and

29 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 473. See also Taylor, Charles, *Modernità al bivio*.

30 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 480.

31 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 481.

32 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 484.

33 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 489.

conflict. To quote Taylor: “The pattern of modern religious life under ‘secularization’ is one of destabilization and recomposition: a process which can be repeated many times”.³⁴ The result is a dynamism that is unprecedented in history. The exclusive humanist option itself is not a static reality, but a substantial source of dynamism. Modern humanism, in spite of its colonizing impetus, is in fact nourished by an unquenchable aspiration to change, a spirit that is not only progressive, but revolutionary. While placing obstacles for vertical transcendence, it is animated by a powerful thrust towards horizontal transcendence, self-improvement.³⁵ This tension is the main driving force behind the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, the first incarnation of which is the Romantic polemic against the rationalism, moralism and utilitarianism of the Enlightenment mindset.³⁶

Exclusive humanism must therefore not only face the opposition of traditional faith, but also respond to the internal challenge of alternative interpretations of the true meaning of the secularization process. This produces the notorious ‘malaises’ of modernity, the search for ‘third ways’, cyclical generational conflicts and, above all, a proliferation of cross-pressures and an unprecedented space for carving out niches or oases of uncertainty and suspension of ontological, religious, political commitments and allegiances.

To summarize the spiritual consequences of secularity, it is worth quoting in full a significant passage from *A Secular Age*. The first phase, for Taylor, is the appearance of

an exclusive humanist alternative to the Christian faith. The second phase sees a further diversification. The multiple critiques levelled at orthodox religion, Deism, and the new humanism, and their cross-polemics, end up generating a number of new positions, including modes of unbelief which have broken out of the humanism of freedom and mutual benefit (e.g., Nietzsche and his followers) – and lots else beside. So that our present predicament offers a gamut of possible positions which extend way beyond the options available in the late eighteenth century. It’s as though the original duality, the positing of a viable humanist alternative, set in train a dynamic, something like a nova effect, spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond. This phase continues to this day. The third, overlapping with the second, is relatively recent. The fractured culture of the nova, which was originally that of élites only, becomes generalized to whole societies. This reaches its culmination in the latter half of the twentieth century.

34 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 461.

35 On the history of the ascetic impulse, see Sloterdijk, Peter, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, trans. by W. Hoban, Cambridge: Polity Press 2013.

36 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *Hegel and Modern Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979, chapter 1.

And along with this, and integral to it, there arises in Western societies a generalized culture of ‘authenticity’, or expressive individualism, in which people are encouraged to find their own way, discover their own fulfillment, ‘do their own thing’.³⁷

This shattering of people’s moral horizons has had an enormous impact on the conditions of belief in a secular age primarily because it shifted “the place of the spiritual in human life, at least as lived by many”.³⁸ As a result, “the connection between pursuing a moral or spiritual path and belonging to larger groups – state, church, even denominations – has been further loosened and [...] the nova effect has been intensified. We are now living in a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane”.³⁹

The picture of religion emerging from Taylor’s account is therefore marked by ambivalence. To use a vocabulary first appeared in *Varieties of Religion Today* (2002), his claim is not that

our present day is unambiguously post-Durkhemian, as say, mediaeval France was unquestionably paleo-Durkhemian, and say, the nineteenth-century U.S.A. was neo-Durkhemian. Rather there is a struggle going on between these two dispensations. But it is just this, the availability of a post-Durkheimian dispensation, which destabilizes us and provokes the conflict.⁴⁰

This means, to conclude, that

the religious life of Western societies is much more fragmented than ever before, and also much more unstable, as people change their positions during a lifetime, or between generations, to a greater degree than ever before. The salient feature of Western societies is not so much a decline of religious faith and practice, though there has been lots of that, more in some societies than in others, but rather a mutual fragilization of different religious positions, as well as of the outlooks both of belief and unbelief. The whole culture experiences cross-pressures, between the draw of the narratives of closed immanence on one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other, strengthened by encounter with existing milieux of religious practice, or just by some intimations of the transcendent. The cross-pressures are experienced more acutely by some people and in some milieux than others, but over the whole culture, we can see them reflected in a number of middle positions, which have drawn from both sides.⁴¹

37 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 299.

38 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 299.

39 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 299 et seq.

40 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 488.

41 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 594 et seq.

Secularisms

So far, Taylor's view has been discussed by focusing on what he calls the third meaning of secularity, namely the change of the conditions of belief in a secular age. As I said above, from a perspective that emphasizes discontinuity over continuity, ours appears as an age shaped by the rise of a historically unprecedented Immanent Frame. There are, however, opposing ways of interpreting and experiencing the anthropological, social and cosmological imaginaries that delimit the boundaries of the Immanent Frame. For a 'frame', in Taylor's non-deterministic historical outlook, is not a steel cage. Rather, it is a mobile and discontinuous frontier that both excludes and opens up possibilities. More specifically, the Immanent Frame "is something that permits closure, without demanding it".⁴² In other words, it too is at the centre of a conflict of interpretations that cannot be solved by taking on a neutral point of view or by setting up an a priori argument. The most reasonable option, then, would be to keep the conversation alive among the various ideological and spiritual families that inhabit modern secular societies.⁴³

Two insidious obstacles, however, may hinder the unfolding of such an open-ended dialogue. The first is the stigmatization among the European educated classes of 'religion' as a potentially disruptive psychological, intellectual and social phenomenon that must be continually tamed. This distrust is partly a consequence of the trauma of the religious wars that broke out in Europe after the schisms in Christianity occurred in the sixteenth-century. More generally, however, the sacred as such is an object not easy to classify and situate for the 'buffered self'. It is for this reason that its natural location – that is, the realm in which, instead of fomenting chaos, it can operate as a bringer of order and discipline – is shifted in modernity from the outside world into people's intimate lives or, at most, is exiled into an ineffable ulteriority positioned beyond space and time.

From this point of view, the decline in the intensity of religious belief and practice, i.e. a growing detachment and indifference towards the sacred – at

42 Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 544.

43 Cf. Taylor, Charles, "Afterword: Apologia pro Libro Suo", p. 320; Taylor, Charles, "Après *L'Âge séculier*", in Sylvie Taussig (ed.), *Charles Taylor: Religion et sécularisation*, p. 9: "My book [...] is for me like a beginning. A beginning of a conversation"; Taylor, Charles, "Replik", in Michael Kühnlein/Matthias Lutz-Bachmann (eds.), *Unerfüllte Moderne*, pp. 850–858 ("Vernunft und Beweiskraft"); Taylor, Charles, "John Main and the Changing Religious Consciousness of Our Time", in Laurence Freeman/Stefan Reynolds (eds.), *John Main: The Expanding Vision*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009, p. 14 et seq. (for the replacement of the idea of progress with that of a "constant conversation with the past").

least towards the traditional ‘wild’ sacred – which is seen as a distinctive feature of secularization in the classical view, appears as a cure-all. Thus, self-restraint, in particular the self-limitation of claims to truth or absoluteness, ends up playing here the same function as the impulse control necessary for leading a civilized, peaceful, ordered way of life. The risk, however, for Taylor, is to introject this model of subjectivity as an accomplished, mature, self-satisfied ideal, instead of experiencing it as a compromise formation. In other words, even today’s descendants of the secular ‘gentleman’ may be tempted to see themselves as the transposition into everyday life of Kant’s bare reason, unable to acknowledge any commonality with those who, following Dostoevsky, could be called the men and women of the ‘Underground’.

The second obstacle to a non-shielded interpretation of the Immanent Frame is the all-out defence of the principle of secularism in contemporary political discourse.⁴⁴ This generally goes hand in hand with a tendency to conceive of the issue of state neutrality as a legal problem, which admits a single, conclusive, exclusionary solution. Underlying this geometric spirit is the conviction that such disputes can be resolved through an ironclad separation between ‘religion’ – understood as a subjective preference that cannot be publicly justified – and what is by its nature rational, impartial, non-partisan.

While this principle is presented by its supporters as an objective truth – the discovery of a golden rule that only asks to be applied consistently – Taylor uses his own constructive genealogical account to show how this unwarranted belief cannot hold unless one overlooks the historical background responsible for the particular and untransplantable (at least *sic et simpliciter*) character of the institutional devices designed by European modern states after centuries of partial successes and missteps (which continue to this day).

Here again, Taylor’s argumentative strategy has a crucial goal: to weaken the secularists’ claim to absoluteness by contextualizing and relativizing it. With respect to the alleged antithesis between religion and secularity, provincializing Europe means identifying a plausible alternative to the polarizing, contrastive, idealized model that prevailed in the former Latin Christendom and that made possible the supremacy of the well-known dichotomies between faith and reason, immanent and transcendent, enchantment and disenchantment, etc. The metaphor of the ‘Wall of Separation’ between the secular and the religious actually presupposes a three-stage (non-consequential) historical evolution in which the distinction between Church and State makes way to

44 For an overview of the entangled stories of liberal political philosophy and religion, see Laborde, Cécile/Bardon, Aurélie (eds.), *Religion in Liberal Political Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017.

their legal separation and, finally, to the marginalization (after privatization or stigmatization) of religion with respect to public life.⁴⁵ In its maximalist variant (best exemplified by the French *laïcité*) this “polemical assertion of secularity”⁴⁶ based on the idea of its self-sufficiency is the product of a particular trajectory within a local parable. As Taylor notes, “the clear”, one might say dualistic, “separation of an immanent order from a transcendent order is one of the inventions [...] of Latin Christendom. The new understanding of the secular [...] builds on this separation. It affirms, in effect, that the ‘lower’ – immanent or secular – order is all that there is and that the higher – or transcendent – is a human invention. Obviously, the prior invention of a clear-cut distinction between these levels” – which was initially not exclusionary, but complementary – “prepared the ground for the ‘declaration of independence’ of the immanent”.⁴⁷

An outline of the history of the invented dualism between religion and secularity has been already given in the previous pages. The polarization of the immanent/transcendent dyad by Deism and some Christian theological currents, often indebted to Ockham’s voluntarism, plays a crucial role here. The political side of this very European story was at the centre of Taylor’s interests even before he systematically devoted himself to the critique of the secularization theorem. Since the influential essay “Modes of Secularism” (1998), Taylor has identified and described two idealtypical solutions in modern political thought to the dramatic challenge posed by the religious wars of the seventeenth-century. The first one is what he calls the “common ground” strategy, the aim of which was to identify a set of principles and doctrines that could be agreed upon by all denominations and confessions (initially Christian, but the *consensus gentium* was potentially extendable to a much wider spectrum of related spiritual positions). In this case, the settlement of differences did not require the exclusion of the religious dimension from public life, but only an effort to mitigate potential sources of doctrinal conflict. As Taylor notes:

Here the goal is not to make religion less relevant to public life and policy, in the name of an independent ethic, but rather to prevent the state from backing one confession rather than another. The goal is a state which is even-handed between religious communities, equidistant from them, as it were, rather than one where religious reasons play no overt role.⁴⁸

45 Cf. Taylor, Charles, “What Does Secularism Mean?”, in Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, p. 308.

46 Cf. Taylor, Charles, “What Does Secularism Mean?”, p. 306.

47 Cf. Taylor, Charles, “What Does Secularism Mean?”, p. 305.

48 Cf. Taylor, Charles, “Modes of Secularism”, in Rajeev Bhargava (ed.), *Secularism and its Critics*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1998, p. 35.

Needless to say, such an objective is all the easier to achieve the more the various worldviews share a common history, vocabulary and symbolic repertoire.

Taylor calls “independent political ethics” the second historical example of mediation of religious differences. Here the aim (pursued in exemplary fashion by Grotius) is rather to define a political ethics untied of all religious beliefs, and which can be binding even in the (originally purely theoretical) hypothesis of the non-existence of God. Citizens, especially believers, are thus required to disregard their deepest convictions whenever they are to deliberate on matters of general interest – a claim that is far from obvious outside the narrow circle of the learned. A corollary of this ground of peaceful coexistence is a privatized view of religious faith that ends up relegating it to “optional accessories, which often disturb the course of this-worldly life”.⁴⁹ In addition, the higher the number of people who experience this independent ethic not as a mere *experimentum mentis* – an intellectual artifice indispensable to temper religious conflicts and allow people to live in peace – but, to use John Rawls’s vocabulary, as a ‘comprehensive doctrine’, the higher the number of those who see it “as a gratuitous extrusion of religion in the name of a rival metaphysical belief”, and not as a “necessary policing of the boundary of a common independent public sphere”.⁵⁰

The two competing models are still recognizable today behind the two main styles of secularity adopted by Western democracies: the American (tacitly dependent upon a civil religion) and the French (consecrated to an independent morality). The lesson Taylor draws from the historical contextualization of the problematic relationship between liberal politics and religion, however, aims to go beyond these models by adopting a variant of secularism that is more hospitable to deep diversity. Given the level of pluralism characterizing contemporary societies, “the only thing we can hope to share is [for him] a purely political ethic, not its embedding in some religious view”.⁵¹ In short, the most realistic goal is an overlapping consensus on a set of political principles which, although broadly shared, will be justified and accepted on the basis of even radically different ‘metaphysical’ justifications. This idea of secularism may also be viewed as a stance that relies on the complementarity of

49 Cf. Taylor, Charles, “What Does Secularism Mean?”, p. 306.

50 Cf. Taylor, Charles, “Modes of Secularism”, p. 36; Taylor, Charles, “What Does Secularism Mean?”, p. 307.

51 Cf. Taylor, Charles, “Modes of Secularism”, p. 37.

particularities and does not gloss over the limitations inherent in any aspiration to universality:

in the political arena we have to operate on the assumption that disagreement will continue [...] and this means that we will have to live with compromises between two or more such views. That is, this will have to be understood as not an abnormal, scandalous, and hopefully temporary shift, but as the normal state of affairs for the indefinite future.⁵²

For Taylor, only this variety of secularism can legitimately aspire to be re-appropriated, or rather ‘reinvented’ in very different cultural contexts.⁵³

Obviously, the balancing act between consensus on principles and disagreement on moral sources is far from being a simple goal which is ensured upstream. On the contrary, peaceful but vigorous conflict in the interpretation and implementation of the tables of values and rights will be the rule rather than the exception in the life of even the most solid democracies. The principle of state secularity, then again, is not an undemanding requirement, since the goods pursued through it are at least three, according to Taylor:

- (a) freedom of conscience and expression (i.e. the liberty to believe or not to believe);
- (b) equality among different religions or worldviews (granted by the neutrality of the state);
- (c) genuine accord among citizens even in spite of radical diversity of opinions (and this good is inseparable from confidence in the fact that each will be guaranteed the right to contribute meaningfully to the political identity of a community and to the choice of the means through which it is realized in history).

Such complexity is a source of dynamism, because the ways to achieve the ends change according to the context, and the negotiation between the various spiritual families will always be intense in any non-authoritarian regime. But the key point, for Taylor, is that state secularity has more to do with the (suitable) response to deep diversity rather than with the relationship between faith and reason. This means that “there is no reason to single out religion, as against nonreligious, ‘secular’ (in another widely used sense), or atheist viewpoints. Indeed, the point of state neutrality is precisely to avoid favouring or disfavouring not just religious positions but any basic position, religious or nonreligious”.⁵⁴

52 Cf. Taylor, Charles, “Modes of Secularism”, p. 51.

53 Cf. Taylor, Charles, “Modes of Secularism”, p. 38.

54 Cf. Taylor, Charles, “The Meaning of Secularism”, in: *The Hedgehog Review* (12/2010), p. 25; Taylor, Charles, “Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism”, in Eduardo

The fetishization of the institutional means that characterizes today's Western public debates on the future of secularism is a delusion that can at least partly be explained as a side-effect of the primacy of instrumental reason in the modern mindset. But this overconfidence in the power of procedures holds something more. Religious people's activism hits a nerve in modern democracies. Since they are communities built on people's self-determination or the sovereign will of the nation, democracies have a permanent need to shore up their collective identity, ritually reaffirming the existence of a 'we' that, under extreme circumstances, can speak with one voice and act accordingly. It is this functional requirement that gives rise to the alarming thrust towards democratic exclusion and the tendency to sacralize certain non-negotiable aspects of liberal political identity, for example state secularity or the primacy of the individual over the community.

Modern democracies, however, are not just a collection of cooperating individuals. Their *raison d'être* essentially resides in providing an inclusive space for continuous negotiation between identities that feel a sense of commonality in spite of diversity. It is no coincidence that liberal democracies are embodied by a special form of government, where the centre can only be occupied temporarily. Revealingly, only the non-monopolizability of the seat of sovereign power can hold together a society of free and equal individuals. Those who are able to appreciate the unprecedented potential of such self-limitation of political sovereignty can understand why the impartiality of the democratic state vis-à-vis the various comprehensive doctrines is better seen as a means for maximizing the fundamental goods of freedom, equality and solidarity and not as an infallible institutional trick. Since, however, there is no optimal model of maximization, we have to accept that these "principles can be realized in a number of different ways, and can never be applied neutrally without some confronting of the substantive religious-ethnic-cultural differences in societies [...] Solutions have to be tailored to particular situations".⁵⁵

As in other areas of human life, the most sensible solution when you are dealing with a scenario that is by definition uncertain is to favour openness

Mendieta/Jonathan Vanantwerpen (eds.), *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, with contributions by J. Habermas, C. Taylor, J. Butler and C. West, New York: Columbia University Press 2011, p. 37; Maclure, Jocelyn/Taylor, Charles, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, trans. by J.M. Todd, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2011, ch. 1.

55 See Taylor, Charles, "Democratic Exclusion (and Its Remedies?)", in Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, p. 144. For a defence of the principle of religious neutrality of the state that takes seriously Taylor's concerns, see Laborde, Cécile, *Liberalism's Religion*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2017.

rather than closure, avoiding conversation-stoppers as much as possible.⁵⁶ This is no easy task, though. The diversity of goods that a democratic community has to pursue is bound to periodically saddle citizens with heavy burdens. As a result, the temptation to rely on decision-making devices that make it possible to circumvent the difficult negotiations aimed at an uncertain maximization of equally important goods is destined to reemerge incessantly. The religious-ideological neutrality of the state is one of such pragmatic expedients always at risk of becoming a fetish, a mantra. It is not surprising, then, that the dream of neutralizing uncertainty went hand in hand with another lure: that of telling a story that made the value of state religious neutrality depend on a historical evolution that did not need further justification, confusing along the way “*political* secularization (*laïcisation*) and *social* secularization (*sécularisation*)”.⁵⁷ It is also in this way that secularization has become one of the founding myths of modern Western rationalism.⁵⁸

56 Cf. Taylor, Charles, “Afterword: Apologia pro Libro Suo”, p. 318: “What makes me impatient are the positions that are put forward as conversation-stoppers”.

57 Cf. Maclure, Jocelyn/Taylor, Charles, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, p. 15.

58 Cf. Taylor, Charles, “Die bloße Vernunft” and “What Does Secularism Mean?”, both in Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, pp. 303–346.

Working within a New Paradigm: Hans Joas's Convergent Trajectory

Changing Atmosphere

In the debates that followed the publication of *A Secular Age*, Taylor himself insisted on the fact that his book was not in any sense a (presumptuous) attempt at theoretical closure, but was written with the intent of entering an (inclusive) field of inquiry into the relations between humanity's religious past and the multiple modernities under construction today in the different corners of the globe. In a recent collection of essays, the Canadian philosopher reiterated the point by describing *A Secular Age* "as a first attempt to sketch out the issues and very much in need of amendment and complementation".¹

The spirit in which his mild synoptic view is offered to his readers is thus simultaneously ambitious and humble. The ambition comes from the awareness that what is at stake here is nothing less than a paradigm shift. The modesty, on the contrary, comes from experiencing such disclosure as a preliminary scouting of the field, made possible by an assiduous work of undermining and, if necessary, dismantling certain intellectual prejudices and historiographic clichés.

To sum up, the field of investigation opened up in an independent but convergent manner by authors with different agendas such as Hans Blumenberg, David Martin and Charles Taylor is characterized *ex negativo* by a distancing from any one-dimensional narrative which, in order to tell a story about the modern transition, follows the trail of a trans-historical substance, whose destiny is either to undergo a chain of metamorphoses or to emerge after having been repressed for millennia, depending on the circumstances.

All these stories of transmutation or enfranchisement of universal powers (Religion, Human nature or whatever) take for granted the dualism between an immanent and an otherworldly side of human life that compete for a scarce good – individual flourishing – by mortgaging it in one direction or another. In one case, it may happen, for example, that, after the breakthrough, hope in the next world appears in the newfangled garb of an unlimited progress towards

1 Cf. Taylor, Charles, "A Secular Age outside Latin Christendom: Charles Taylor Responds", in Akeel Bilgrami (ed.), *Beyond the Secular West: Religion, Culture, and Public Life*, New York: Columbia University Press 2016, p. 249.

the best. In the opposite scenario, it may happen that rituals that for centuries have helped to propitiate personal prosperity melt in the air overnight making room for unrivalled technical domination over nature. In both cases, the logic at work remains that of a zero-sum game: nothing (substantial) is created, nothing is destroyed. Secularization is accomplished by following its own internal dynamic: if religion is insubstantial, its dissolution is only a matter of time; if, on the other hand, it is seen as an irreplaceable source of meaning or purpose, its secular avatars will always end up being defective.

In the new horizon, in contrast, the overlapping images of a historical constellation or of a non-teleological process supplant the binary logic of zero-sum game in making sense of human development. From this point of view, the rise of secularity looks compatible with local advances and declines, genuine innovations and no less genuine breakdowns, ingenious or instrumental transpositions of the old into the new, etc. This innovative understanding of secularization has an impact on the scholarly debate comparable to an overall reconfiguration of the view of the problematic relationship between religion and modernity, the results of which are difficult to weigh up today. Once the continuist and subtractive views have been undermined, what remains is first of all a disaggregation and redistribution of the positions in the field.

The second part of the book will focus on those thinkers who, having settled on the belief that the damage inflicted by the deconstructionists on the classical thesis is insufficient to decree the end of an outlook that has shaped the philosophical understanding of the alleged Christianity's decline since the Enlightenment, devoted themselves to an ingenious work of maintenance of the old paradigm. In this chapter and the next, my goal is to see what it may mean to investigate religion in the wake of the change of atmosphere outlined so far. The task is not easy because we are obviously still in a nascent state and my report will have to rely on clues rather than on evidence, on experimentations rather than on habits. What is certain – at least reasonably certain – is that anyone who shares the puzzlements and argumentative moves underlying the paradigm shift promoted independently by Blumenberg, Martin and Taylor, have to meet a series of challenges that are tantamount to as many axes around which alternative research programmes may revolve.

To begin with, I list three of them.

(1) Even when there is general agreement on the obsolescence of the standard view, there may remain circumstantial disagreement on the actual historical importance of what is left of the secularization process. Once it has been established that it is primarily a European, indeed a North Atlantic

phenomenon, how much does this exceptionality count when assessed from a global point of view? In other words, can the interest in secularity survive the provincialization of Europe that results from taking a larger and non-stadial perspective on human history?²

(2) Second, the difference of opinion may concern the deeper causes of 'secularization', irrespective of the specific meaning given to the term. When we introduce abstract concepts such as 'religion' or 'secularism', are we dealing only with ideal cultural constructs or with real asymmetrical power structures whose effects on people's lives are material all the way down? In other words, to what extent has European colonialism turned the secular/religious dyad into an ideological and political machinery functional to conceiving and managing social life? What arguments can be deployed to contend that the secularization debate concerns something more than mere questions of power, hegemony and subordination?

(3) Third, there may be more circumscribed and qualified disagreements about the distribution, ratio, and interplay of the various elements that make up the background against which the contingent and local rise of the secular option is grasped under the new paradigm. Do all the mosaic pieces count the same? How many of them have been left in the shadows or given too much importance? And what logic should govern their treatment? Do only compelling reasons and empirical evidence matter, or do the images and metaphors used in orchestrating them also count, and to what extent?

Around the last questions revolves the intra-paradigmatic research work *stricto sensu*, i.e. the constructive phase to be expected after a successful deconstruction campaign. The development of this fine-tuning of the new paradigm is difficult to predict in the current state of discussion. It is impossible, in other words, to establish a priori whether the reflections of Blumenberg, Martin, Taylor, etc., will give rise to a solid research tradition and, if so, how great, lasting and fruitful that tradition will be. There are signs that something like a school of thought is already taking shape. In any case, the positive outcome seems to depend more on the actual relevance of the object under study (secularization or European modernization) than on the quality (difficult to dispute) of the overall theoretical operation. Everything depends, in other words, on whether in the future there will still be an urgent need to discuss the supposed decline of what we now agree to call 'religion'.

² Cf. Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference – New Edition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2008.

Pragmatism and Creativity

One of the thinkers who best exemplifies an attitude of critical endorsement of the emerging new paradigm is the German philosopher and sociologist Hans Joas. His intellectual trajectory is interesting in many regards.³ For generational reasons, Joas, who was born in 1948 in Munich, contributed tangentially to the deconstruction of the secularization ‘theoroid’ as a privileged interlocutor of David Martin and Charles Taylor. However, the richness and originality of his scientific production go far beyond this subsidiary contribution and make it relevant in its own right.⁴

The most salient feature of Joas’s intellectual profile is the consistency of his thought, which has steadily unfolded around a philosophical core that has remained substantially unchanged since the 1970s. This theoretical axis has a name: pragmatism, and it gives the German sociologist’s reasoning style an unmistakable down-to-earth and affirmative flavor. In Joas’s neo-pragmatist perspective, human history appears as an open-ended experiment, where action processes always prevail over substance. Human beings are seen, that is, as embodied beings, always situated in specific contexts of action, who are never purely spontaneous or utterly helpless (except in extreme cases of destruction of the minimal conditions for personal dignity). It is against these circumstances that the effectiveness and value of human creativity may stand out.⁵ The latter always exceeds the repertoire of habitual actions since, in response to specific challenges, it simultaneously relies upon and encourages an increased prospective reflexivity, which is expedient to reconfigure the perception of the context of action and expand the list of the agent’s skills and motor abilities.

3 For a bio-bibliographical portrait of Joas, cf. Kloppenber, James T., “Signs of the Sacred”, in: *Commonweal* (2/2022); see also my introduction to Joas, Hans, *La fede come opzione. Possibilità di futuro per il cristianesimo*, edited by Paolo Costa, Brescia: Queriniana 2013, pp. 5–12.

4 Of the large body of texts that make up Joas’s bibliography only those writings which more or less directly touch on the subject of this book will be examined here. For a general introduction to Joas’s work see Sabine Schößler, *Der Neopragmatismus von Hans Joas. Handeln, Glaube und Erfahrung*, Münster: LIT 2011. An overview of his own itinerary is given by the author himself in Hans Joas, *Valori, società, religione*, edited by Ugo Perone, Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier 2014 and in his recent reply to the authors: Joas, Hans, “Kritik der ‘Entzauberung’ und Theorie der Sakralisierung: Voraussetzungen und Konsequenzen”, in Magnus Schlette/Bettina Hollstein/Matthias Jung/Wolfgang Knöbl (eds.), *Idealbildung, Sakralisierung, Religion. Beiträge zu Hans Joas’ ‘Die Macht des Heiligen’*, pp. 493–514.

5 Cf. Joas, Hans, *The Creativity of Action*, trans. by J. Ganes/P. Keast, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996.

From a pragmatist point of view, the agent is able to produce something new not in spite of, but in virtue of its situatedness. This outcome is not teleologically guaranteed. On the contrary, it is structurally contingent, as it is the result of an experimentation and reorganization of the epistemic field stimulated by an environmental pressure that is never affectively neutral. The underlying model is that of a habitual behaviour that got stuck. The hold-up causes a condition of discomfort, to which the agent may respond creatively or uncreatively. The creative response involves an extension of the capacity for action enabled by a structural transformation of the intentional environment. Examples may range from interrupting a habitual itinerary to dealing with a misunderstanding in an emotional or professional relationship. In all cases, routine behaviour loses its fluidity and only a true innovation can re-establish a condition of aproblematic spontaneity.⁶

Joas's fifty years of outstandingly productive research have been boosted by this guiding image of a recursive cycle of situated innovation and systematic reality check.⁷ The way in which, on a case-by-case basis, he interprets the phenomena that arouse his curiosity never disavows the pragmatist archetype of an agent endowed with (not infinite, but real) resources who always retains a margin of initiative even against the systemic forces governing human societies or the long-term trends on which historical grand narratives are based. This explains the incessant references to the concreteness of the context of action that punctuate Joas's reasoning on general issues such as the future of Christianity or the relationship between violence and religion.⁸

The Fact of the Formation of Ideals: Norms and Values

This empiricist pathos is not to be confused, however, with a positivistic devaluation of the non-material and non-instrumental dimensions of experience. On the contrary, in the German sociologist's view, values and ideals, as well as their genesis or formation, are a basic fact of the human condition. To put it concisely, people have experienced their collective existence as an intertwining of

6 Cf. Joas's reply to Hermann Deuser in Schäfer, Heinrich Wilhelm (ed.), *Hans Joas in der Diskussion: Kreativität – Selbsttranszendenz – Gewalt*, Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag 2012, p. 53: "Im klassischen Pragmatismus [...] geht es dagegen um das Wechselspiel kreativer Innovation und realstüchtiger Bewährung" (at the core of classical pragmatism is the interplay between creative innovation and reality check).

7 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Valori, società, religione*, p. 21: "I have the impression that I have been developing for forty years a thought that I grasped back then in an intuitive way".

8 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Faith as an Option: Possible Futures for Christianity*, trans. by A. Skinner, Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press, ch. 8 and 9.

factuality and ideality since the dawn of time. Human social practices, after all, are regulated ways of doing things that, besides being instrumental for action coordination, convey an idealized image of what the community at its best should be. As Durkheim observed in the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*: “The ideal society is not outside the real society; it is part of it”.⁹ This is precisely “das Faktum der Idealbildung” – the fact, that is, that “new ideals are always being born in the course of history, breaking with the old ones and giving new directions to actions”.¹⁰

Joas’s main goal, however, is not so much to endorse the role played by duties and norms in orienting people’s choices, as to elaborate a portrait of the human condition that rejects the image of an unbridgeable gap between the genesis of strong evaluations (i.e. the concrete situations in which moral agents operate) and their validity (which can never be totally independent of the recognition on the side of the people involved). The concept of *Wertbindung* (value bindingness or commitment) fulfils this bridging function in Joas’s argument. Values have and cannot but have an inherent relationship with flesh and blood people, even when they are experienced as objectively self-evident. In other words, they are (partly) perspectival goods or, to invoke a renowned expression of Max Scheler’s, they are “goods-in-itself-for-me”: goods whose desirability does not depend *entirely* on the fact of being desired, but which cease to be motivating once they are conceived as mere ideal contents detached from any relationship with the agent who relies on them. To evoke a formula used by Joas in a crucial passage of the *Sacredness of the Person*: “Werten ohne Bindungen nur Behauptungen sind aber nicht wie bloße Behauptungen behandelt werden können” – “values without commitment are mere assertions, but values with commitment cannot be dealt with in the same way as pure assertions”.¹¹ In other words, the ability to ‘seize’ the agent, to offer itself as an intimate appeal, is part and parcel of the nature of value.

9 Cf. Durkheim, Émile, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. by C. Cosman, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001, p. 317 (quoted in Hans Joas, *Valori, società, religione*, p. 141).

10 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Valori, società, religione*, p. 140. See also Joas, Hans, *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights*, trans. by A. Skinner, Washington (D.C.): Georgetown University Press 2013, pp. 102–108; Joas, Hans, “Gefährliche Prozessbegriffe. Eine Warnung vor der Rede von Differenzierung, Rationalisierung und Modernisierung”, in Karl Gabriel/Christel Gärtner/Detlef Pollack (eds.), *Umstrittene Säkularisierung. Soziologische und historische Analyse zur Differenzierung von Religion und Politik*, Berlin: Berlin University Press 2012, pp. 603–622; cf. now also Joas, Hans, *The Power of the Sacred: An Alternative to the Narrative of Disenchantment*, trans. by A. Skinner, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2021, ch. 6.

11 Cf. Joas, Hans, *The Sacredness of the Person*, p. 176.

This personal and experiential linkage, however, does not play the same role for norms, the other guise under which the *sui generis* force of moral demands manifests itself in human affairs. In short, people's ethical life, observed "from the actor's perspective", can be described as a *Wechselspiel*, an interplay, of desires, norms and values.¹² Desires are *prima facie* reasons for action, which, in a social context of latent clash between conflicting aspirations, are normally bounded by external dictates that restrict the individual's behavior on the basis of external, suprapersonal, possibly impartial compelling reasons.¹³ My (subjectively motivating) desire to have a life full of pleasures and satisfactions is sooner or later destined to collide with social rules and prescriptions that impose, among other things, respect for the body, property, and dignity of others and restrict individual freedom in the name of a higher general interest.

But the agent's ethical life does not stop at the friction between rules and first-order desires. People view some of their own goals as particularly worthy of being pursued, i.e., as goods of a higher order. These are precisely the values, on which people rely in their hard choices and which depend on 'strong', contrastive evaluations, not on mere subjective weighing or preferences, which, when the chips are down, are little more than matter of indifference for them.¹⁴ One may understandably want to spend a quiet afternoon and much prefer it to a day spent shopping in a mall, but this desire is simply bound to vanish into thin air when faced with an unexpected visit from a loved one or a desperate plea for help from a family member. The motivating force of the two goods (cushy life and unconditional love) responds in fact to profoundly different psychological dynamics. In the second case, that exercises Joas the most, the urgency of volition is magnified by the disclosure of an ideal space that positions the first-order desire in a non-homogeneous horizon of higher values and meanings. In this sense, observes Joas, "values are necessarily reflective – they

12 Cf. Joas, Hans, "Combining Value Pluralism and Moral Universalism: Isaiah Berlin and Beyond", in: *The Responsive Community* (9/1999), pp. 24 and 26.

13 On the intricate interlocking of desires, norms and values in human moral life, see Lutz Wingert, "Wertbindung ohne Relativismusfalle?" and Joas's reply, both in Heinrich Wilhelm Schäfer (ed.), *Hans Joas in der Diskussion*, pp. 89–117. For a helpful overview, see Joas, Hans, "Wie entstehen Werte? Wertebildung und Wertevermittlung in pluralistischen Gesellschaften", a lecture delivered on 15 September 2006 (http://www.forschungsnetzwerk.at/downloadpub/2006_Vortrag_Joas_authorized_06101x.pdf, date of last access: 11.04.2022).

14 On how values and value commitments arise, see the introductory chapter in Joas, Hans, *The Genesis of Values*, trans. G. Moore, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2000, pp. 1–19.

are emotionally laden standards for the reflective evaluation of our standards” of judgement.¹⁵

The ideals which impose themselves in people's lives with subjective evidence and emotional intensity are not, strictly speaking, ‘chosen’. Rather, they ‘burst’ into daily life: they are encountered, that is, with a clarity and force which is never affectively neutral. Using a most apt neologism, one could say that people have access to values in ‘axiophanic’ experiences. In other words, values open up to people, and their manifestation involves both a sense of being ‘seized’ and a life-changing breakthrough for those who undergo such epiphanies.¹⁶

The association with first-person experience is crucial here. The binding tie with value cannot be established in a condition of detachment or disengagement. For Joas, values do not ‘convince’ people. That is, they do not merely win their reasoned assent, but function as life's axles, as veritable centres of existential gravity. In particular, personal ideals give substance to the self as a principle of action, anchoring it to a dimension of experience that makes it something more than a minded junction of physical causes. Only in this way does that special form of moral creativity that characterizes human beings at their best become possible. Viewed in this light, the *Idealbildung*, the formation of the ideal, can also be thought of as the source of authentic experiences of self-transcendence.¹⁷

Hierophanies and Axiophanies

“Self-transcendence” is the key concept for understanding what Joas has in mind when he talks about the special quality of human creativity. The heart of the matter should be clear by now. First-order desires, or subjective preferences, are simple, self-contained mental phenomena. Norms, in turn, albeit relying on ideal force, do not go beyond an external limitation of individual behaviour and volition. They are accordingly unable to disclose a new field of action and judgement to the regulated subjects. Such space becomes accessible only by means of axiophanic experiences, thanks to which agents establish

15 Cf. Joas, Hans, “Combining Value Pluralism and Moral Universalism”, p. 22.

16 I discussed the epiphanic nature of moral experience in a dialogue with Stefano Cardini focused on *The Sacredness of the Person*. Cf. Costa, Paolo/Cardini, Stefano, “Genealogia dell'*Homo sacer*”, in: *La società degli individui* (3/2016), pp. 155–164.

17 On the experience of “self-transcendence” (*Selbsttranszendenz*), see Joas, Hans, *Do We Need Religion? On the Experience of Self-transcendence*, trans. by A. Skinner, Abingdon: Routledge 2016, ch. 1.

personally binding commitments with sources of value that act as ideal forces capable of deeply transforming the identity of persons, giving them an unprecedented capacity for action and choice.

With the genesis of new *Wertbindungen* people can actually have the impression of being pulled beyond themselves. They thus come into contact (individually or communally) with a good (or an evil) whose import, anomaly and intensity produces a rupture with the daily routine, arousing that feeling of being seized and driven by an unknown and unusual force that is typical of the experiences of the sacred (the “fundamental anthropological phenomenon”, according to Joas).¹⁸ In such uncommon circumstances, which at the same time absorb, destabilize and move the people involved, something is impressed on their senses, memory and imagination, leaving behind a trace, or rather a ‘pattern’ that is not immediately comprehensible and provides much food for thought (better: for articulation).

Axiophanic experiences, just like hierophanies, are neither self-interpreting nor self-authenticating. Since they are semantically and hermeneutically opaque, they are always susceptible to an individual and collective work of interpretation, which takes place not only through (theological or moral) doctrines and theories, but just as often in myths, sagas, ceremonies, rituals, mimetic performances, collective practices, cosmic and anthropological imageries. Together all these vehicles for articulation convey the power of an ideal, which is not easy to invoke and arouse in social life.

Religions and ethics are thus ways of giving a recognizable, figurative and propositional form to the characteristically human experience of strong evaluation. By this I mean the personal impact with ‘value’ in its distinctive ability to disclose worlds by sacralizing or desacralizing objects, places, people or action realms. Over the last few centuries, for example, the sacralization of (flesh and blood) people and their (ordinary) lives, in lieu of impersonal powers such as nation, clan, land, ancestors, has had a huge impact on the legal sphere (human rights), the political sphere (liberal democracy), the social sphere (individualistic egalitarianism), the existential sphere (the ethics of authenticity), etc., in the West. Anyone interested in explaining and establishing the meaning and worth of such changes must first of all shed light on their historical genesis. In other words, he or she has to understand how the relevant innovation was produced and by what kind of problems the moral creativity of people was inspired. Such accounts do not necessarily presuppose an unmasking intent. That is, they do not demand the reduction of a claim to (timeless) validity to its

18 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Valori, società, religione*, p. 138.

tangible and contingent foundation. Put otherwise, there can be an “affirmative genealogy” of values and axiophanies.¹⁹

Secularization as a Historical Innovation

Now, given the above, how does this theoretical framework shape Joas’s interpretation of a salient historical transition – or one whose salience has long been assumed – such as secularization? How can his contribution to the understanding of religion’s recent developments and future prospects be condensed in an account that, in spite of its conciseness, does justice to its originality?

From now on, to make my argument more tight-knit, I will base my account on the umbrella question to which the German sociologist seeks to give a persuasive answer: to what extent can secularization be regarded as a significant historical *innovation*?

Broadly speaking, the first goal of Joas’s argumentative strategy is that of rendering epistemologically plausible and operationally explicable what is left of the concept of secularization after the deconstruction of the classical thesis carried out convergently by historians, philosophers, sociologists and theologians over the last fifty years.

The major obstacle to this project is the semantic vagueness of the term. If ‘secularity’ does represent a novelty in modern history, we must be able to indicate precisely what happens (or what can be expected to happen) when something or someone becomes secularized. The word, however, notoriously has an intricate origin. It originally had a juridical meaning, denoting the passage of a person or property from an ecclesiastical jurisdiction to a worldly one (or worldlier than the former, as in the change of a cleric from regular to diocesan clergy). Only later, it takes on a double metaphorical value. Secularization then becomes synonymous, on the one hand, with the decline of the ‘transcendent’ in favour of the ‘mundane’ or, alternatively, with the reconciliation of the transcendent with the mundane, for example under the form of the end of God’s estrangement from human history. In both cases, however, the meaning of such decadence and sublation remains vague. What exactly is it that declines? The quality or quantity of belief? The participation in rituals? The social influence of religion? The claim to universality and self-sufficiency of the ‘higher’

19 Cf. Joas, Hans, “The Emergence of Universalism. An Affirmative Genealogy”, in Peter Hedström/Björn Wittrock (eds.), *Frontiers of Sociology*, Leiden: Brill 2009, pp. 15–24; see also Joas, Hans, *The Sacredness of the Person*, ch. 4.

religions?²⁰ And, on the other hand, what is the nature of the substance that transforms itself in the sublation process? By what name should we call it: by the appellation originally given to it (e.g., Providence) or by the one earned with the benefit of hindsight (e.g., Progress)?

Since each of these questions raises controversial methodological issues and cannot count upon unequivocal empirical support (just think of the differences between Europe and America and between them and the Middle East or Africa), the lesson Joas draws from the impasse is a plea to inductive caution and theoretical parsimony. Nothing in reality and in what we know about it guarantees that secularization is a well-demarcated and unambiguous historical phenomenon. This is why Joas includes it among the “gefährliche Prozessbegriffe” – the insidious concepts of process that can “lead sociologists astray whenever they try to use them to place their analysis of the contemporary world on a historical foundation”.²¹

Caution, however, does not justify an underestimation of the family resemblance between the uses of the concept that have been made since its introduction without fanfare during the sixteenth-century. This is an important point and the German sociologist is adamant about it: “it is crucial that the weakening of the secularization thesis does not cause us to lose sight of the phenomenon of secularization. [...] So overcoming the thesis of secularization does not mean ignoring secularization. It means grasping its diverse forms”.²² To put it otherwise, there is a specific historical experience behind the weakening or cross-pressuredness of religious mentality and practice in some crucial areas of the planet during the last three centuries. What remains to be elucidated is how the distinctive but non-homogeneous character of this historical novelty should be understood.²³

Let me get straight to the point: what might be the “innovation” that distinguishes a secularized condition from a non-secularized one? If, according to common usage, the adjective ‘secular’ is taken to be meaning the property of an object or event that is experienced as near or familiar (or, if you will, as

20 Cf. Joas, Hans, “Society, State and Religion: Their Relationship from the Perspective of the World Religions: An Introduction”, in Hans Joas/Klaus Wiegandt (eds.), *Secularization and the World Religions*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2009, p. 6 et seq.; Joas, Hans, *Faith as an Option*, ch. 1.

21 Cf. Joas, Hans, “Gefährliche Prozessbegriffe”, p. 603; Hans Joas, *The Power of the Sacred*, p. 195.

22 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Faith as an Option*, p. 39.

23 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Faith as an Option*, p. 39: “It is important to point out here that all secularized societies, to modify Tolstoy’s famous phrase at the beginning of *Anna Karenina*, are secularized ‘in their own way’”.

mundane, ordinary), then the novelty brought about by a secularization process is essentially the result of a subtraction effect. Secularization, from this point of view, is above all re-appropriation and, by extension, liberation, emancipation, relief from a condition of external dependence suffered by those undergoing it. More specifically, it indicates redemption from subordination to a both historical and supra-historical power over which the actors were unable to exercise any form of control. Secularization, in a nutshell, appears then first and foremost as de-sectation, dis-enchantment, de-mystification.

It must be remarked, however, that such profanation acts are not noteworthy historical innovations as such. After all, the loss of sacredness of a place, practice or institution may be a temporary diversion or mark an intermediate stage in a religious tradition. Indeed, it makes little sense to speak of merely negative or subtractive changes in the case of modern disenchantment. For the aforementioned profanation acts do not take place within an axiological field that remains unchanged. If, for example, the role of the Goddess of fortune in shaping human destiny is deflated, new stories have to be told and theories concocted about the actual causes of personal flourishing and bad luck. Stretching out the metaphor a little bit farther, we could say that the poles orienting the value gradients are reversed alongside the tentative drives towards desacralization. High and low, heaven and earth, invisible and visible, to cut a long story short, invert accordingly their function in orienting people's life plans.

Ideally, in order to be a genuine historical innovation, secularization must hence also include the genesis of something new, in particular new values and, parallelly, new subjective experiences of the sacred with the related collective efforts to mark out areas or aspects of life previously regarded as ordinary. From this point of view, the best way to describe secularization is in terms of the emergence of a historically unprecedented spiritual opportunity: the "secular option".²⁴

Waves of Secularization

The rise of the secular option is indeed a novelty, and this novelty consists primarily, as Blumenberg had foreseen in the 1960s, in the massive spread of a claim to human self-assertion (and self-sufficiency) without precedent in

24 Cf. Joas, Hans, "Die säkulare Option. Ihr Aufstieg und ihre Folgen", in: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* (57/2009), pp. 293–300; now also in an expanded and slightly revised version in Joas, Hans, *Im Bannkreis der Freiheit. Religionstheorie nach Hegel und Nietzsche*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2020, pp. 250–271.

history. In the new spiritual landscape, the psychologically mature, responsible subject, whose self-determination is accomplished by resisting both the inertial force of the emotions and the lurking temptation to intellectual submission, is acclaimed and propagated as a universal model to be imitated. And this “deep cultural transformation” is the result of the emergence of new sources of values, new secular goods-in-itself-for-me (nature, reason, authentic self, progress – depending on the situation) that reorient people’s moral topography, their sense of self as agents who are not at the mercy of the world.²⁵

For Joas, however, bringing to light this moral background is not enough to solve the riddle of secularization. As he remarks in his meditation on the ‘waves’ of secularization,

there are two different explanatory issues that must be clearly separated from one another. First, we must explain how the secular option became available, and, second, we must explain why this option, as soon as it became available, proved so attractive to some and so repugnant to others – why in other words, this option was embraced to such different degrees by different national or regional milieus, social strata, genders, and generations.²⁶

To wrap up, secularization is a real historical phenomenon, the precondition for which is a major cultural change (the rise of the secular option). As a matter of fact, however, there is no ‘secularization’ as such, but individual episodes of secularization, the quality and intensity of which depend on a series of (economic, political, social, intellectual, etc.) factors that act as fields of tension which systematically interpose themselves between the causes (e.g., urbanization or the Scientific Revolution) and the effects (e.g., de-Christianization). It is within these fields that the various (secularizing or counter-secularizing) agents operate, with their more or less rich material and spiritual resources, which can meet the context, alternately, either as a challenge that can be won or as a game lost from the start.

This is why it is crucial, in Joas’s view, to describe secularization as a *historical* innovation. In fact, from his point of view, it is futile to try to understand the fluctuating destiny of religion in recent centuries disregarding the local socio-political-cultural constellations and their contingent and open-ended nature. In this sense, fetish concepts such as ‘modernization’ or ‘modernity’ are not helpful, and may even prove detrimental to the correct interpretation of

25 Cf. Joas, Hans, “Schiavitù e tortura in una prospettiva globale. I diritti umani e la tradizione occidentale”, trans. by D. Biondi, in: *Vivens Homo* (26/2015), p. 338: “A cultural transformation, in the full sense of the term, occurs when new values become subjectively self-evident and affectively intense for human beings”. On the same topic, see Joas, Hans, *Sind die Menschenrechte westlich?*, Munich: Kösel Verlag 2015.

26 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Faith as an Option*, p. 41.

the actual processes of secularization.²⁷ They are, in fact, “polemical concepts, into which normative contents are surreptitiously introduced [...] in order to be able, at the end of the day, to affirm the historical overcoming of what is being fought”. The real alternative to this way of reasoning steeped in finalism and not immune to the allure of suprapersonal forces is to “describe the processes of social change [...] without losing sight of contingency”.²⁸

Joas’s polemic against teleological or processual views of history goes so far as to recommend an overall reorganization of the repertoire of metaphors with which scholars have tried to focus on the various patterns that emerge from a long-run bumpy historical shift such as secularization. Thus, distancing himself from the images of the ‘vector’ or the ‘nova effect’ favoured by Taylor, Joas suggests conceiving the non-random contingency of this complex phenomenon in terms of ‘waves’ which, despite their undeniable impact on the morphology of a society or an entire era, are never the last word, but are constantly followed by ebbs and flows, i.e. by “a massive movement in the opposite direction, a revitalization of faith, a modernization of doctrine and/or organizational structures, sometimes even a return to tradition, which generally make it difficult to perceive their innovative character”.²⁹ As seen above, even the spontaneous cadence of the situated creativity of human agents resembles the swinging of a pendulum.

The Secular Option and the Axial Revolution

In conclusion, one question remains to be answered. Having established that there are compelling reasons to see secularization as a two-sided (i.e., both episodic and framing) historical innovation, how legitimate is to describe it as a *major* innovation?

If by ‘major’ one means ‘epochal’ or even ‘universal’, Joas’s answer appears to be conspicuously cautious. On the one hand, secularization is not a *de facto* universal historical phenomenon. Not all the nations of the world, in fact, are as secularized as some European countries are (e.g. Great Britain, France, Spain, the Czech Republic or the Scandinavian countries). This being said, however,

27 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Valori, società, religione*, p. 128.

28 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Valori, società, religione*, p. 31. Contingency, *ça va sans dire*, is a key word in a philosophical view centered on the creativity of agents. Wrapping up the issue, Joas has significantly argued that “a theory of contingency is the macrosociological pendant to a theory of action focused on creativity” (cf. Joas, Hans, *Valori, società, religione*, p. 134).

29 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Valori, società, religione*, p. 92.

it cannot be excluded that secularity, understood as an unprecedented spiritual opportunity, constitutes a ‘universalizable’ historical achievement, that is, an innovation that can be appropriated in contexts even profoundly different from the original one. In this regard, the German sociologist seems to lean towards a suspension of judgement.

A comparison with another momentous historical change examined on several occasions by Joas can help to clarify the point I would like to make. The so-called ‘Axial turn’, if one agrees with his opinion, is a crucial episode in the evolution not only of religions, but of humankind as such. The Axial age, for Karl Jaspers, who first brought it to the attention of the educated public after World War II, and if we have to rely on the opinion of that group of sociologists who since the 1970s has tried to bring it down from the heights of philosophy of history to the empirical level of historical sociology, is the era of the discovery of transcendence.³⁰ In a relatively short period of time (the mid centuries of the first millennium BCE), the “Mythical age” came to an end as founders of new cults and lifestyles such as Socrates, Confucius, Buddha or the biblical prophets reconsidered and re-imagined through an ordering effort of titanic proportions the gap between Gods and humans, the divine and the earthly, the celestial and the mundane. As a result, a chasm opened up in human life that was as huge as that which separates the infinite from the finite. “According to the new perspective – remarks Joas – the crucial point is that, during this age, the divine is transformed into the Real, into the True, into the totally Other, compared to which what is earthly cannot but appear deficient, lacking”.³¹

This “articulation of a tension without historical precedent between the ideal and the real” is revolutionary in that it constitutes the precondition for launching an in principle endless campaign of desacralization of all worldly powers which proclaim themselves of sacred origin and for a repositioning of the source of sacredness that problematizes it at the root, making it ‘reflexive’ and, consequently, fostering an unequalled dynamism.³² The latter is mainly

30 On this topic see Jaspers, Karl, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. by M. Bullock, Abingdon: Routledge 2021; Bellah, Robert N. /Joas, Hans (eds.), *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2011; Costa, Paolo, “La sfida teorica dell’assialità”, in: *Politica & Società* (4/2015), pp. 169–190.

31 Cf. Joas, Hans, “Come coniugare Talcott Parsons e Paul Tillich. Robert Bellah teorico dell’epoca assiale”, trans. by P. Costa, in: *Politica e società* (2/2015), p. 214; Joas, Hans, *Was ist die Achsenzeit? Eine wissenschaftliche Debatte als Diskurs über Transzendenz*, Basel: Schwabe 2014, p. 6.

32 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Valori, società, religione*, p. 146.

the product of the injection of a universalist impulse into the all too human tendency to pursue parochial goals. As Joas says:

with the innovations of the Axial age came a potential for the desacralization of political power that has never been quelled or eradicated since then. Hence, from the Axial period onwards, the history of the relationship between religion and politics becomes a story of endless tensions – tensions that we must reconstruct and weigh up without prejudice, taking into account all the traditions of the Axial period, but also the particularistic limitations of such developments.³³

The history of human civilizations after the Axial revolution – the prototype, in Joas's eyes, of a historical innovation of universal scope – is therefore characterized by the wavering between thrusts towards desacralization (especially of parochial claims to absolute domination) and (more or less reflexive) resacralization. In particular, after the advent of universal religions, the development of the culture of human rights represents for the German sociologist “the second great historical wave of a radical desacralization of power”.³⁴ And this is systematically intertwined with the rise of the secular option. Modern secularity as such does not put religion out of action – that is, it does not represent the end of the Axial turn and the beginning of a new spiritual revolution of similar magnitude – but it does involve a restructuring of the field of ideal forces within which the creativity of human action unfolds. The main symptom of this change is the growing awareness that faith and religion – unlike the experience of the sacred – are not anthropological universals, but significant options offered to individual and collective initiative.

Neither religion nor irreligion represent, therefore, the destiny of humanity. What is really at stake in the new horizon disclosed by the rise and rapid success of the secular option is the effectiveness and intensity of possible antidotes to the absolutization of particularisms. From this point of view, neither post-axial religions such as Christianity nor secular ethics such as, for instance, utilitarianism offer infallible guarantees against the periodic return of barbarism in human history. Hence, for Joas,

the most important front running through moral and political disputes today is not that between believers and nonbelievers but that between universalists and anti-universalists, and both of these groups include both religious and nonreligious people. [...] What worries me is not that secularization may destroy morality as such, but that a weakening of Christianity undermines one of the pillars

33 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Valori, società, religione*, p. 149.

34 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Valori, società, religione*, p. 152.

of moral and legal universalism. If this universalism came into the world historically in association with notions of transcendence, as asserted in Karl Jaspers's Axial age thesis, it is not certain that it will ultimately survive the loss of their original basis. But a concern is not the same as a battle cry.³⁵

Resisting Disenchantment

To wrap up my argument, I would say that the most reliable evidence that Joas is operating within a new paradigm – apart from his recurring references to the obsolescence of the classical thesis of secularization³⁶ – are the time and energy he devotes to the maintenance of the new framework of understanding through, depending on the circumstances, clarification of concepts and vocabulary, identification of exemplary case studies and systematic empirical check on some crucial sociological diagnoses (fragilization of beliefs, increase in the rate of conversions over a lifetime, hyperpluralism, etc.).

In the background, shoring up the solidity of the theoretical edifice and the validity of the investigative effort, lies a neo-pragmatist view of human history where the emphasis falls on the creativity of flesh and blood actors and on the contingency (not to be confused with randomness or arbitrariness) of historical events. This is all the more true when it comes to explaining a heterogeneous social and spiritual phenomenon such as the rise of the secular option and the waves of secularization regularly happened over the last 250 years. The main effect of this historical breakthrough was a drive to marking out and positioning 'religion', which ended up stripping it of the natural and universal character that had been attributed to it for centuries. Faith thus becomes an option by default and in the broadest sense of the term. Put succinctly, after the rise and mass spread of the secular option, even those with a strong faith are brought to recognize that religious belief is not the 'normal' form of human life and that "it has in principle become possible not to believe".³⁷

Belief and unbelief are both ideal options that call for human initiative and creativity. They are not etched in the rock of Horeb or in the biological evolution of the human race. The deeper meaning of Joas's influential work

35 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Faith as an Option*, p. 36. On the both empirical and normative question of the generalization of the values underlying the culture, practice and institutionalization of human rights, see Joas, Hans, *The Sacredness of the Person*, ch. 6.

36 Cf., among the many examples that could be given, Joas, Hans, *Faith as an Option*, p. 3; Joas, Hans, *Valori, società, religione*, p. 123; Joas, Hans, "Society, State and Religion", p. 4; Joas, Hans, *Do We Need Religion?*, p. 6.

37 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Faith as an Option*, p. xii.

resides precisely in his successful attempt to purify from any residual finalism the grand narratives which are still instrumental to describing the prehistory, rise and consequences of modern secularity. As he himself summed up the issue in clear-cut terms: “the break with teleological and evolutionist conceptual schemas does not [...] excuse us from narrating a comprehensive history and relating it to the genesis and fate of our ideals”.³⁸ With explicit reference to Max Weber, Joas has singled out the historiographic paradigm based on the idea of a progressive process of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) or rationalization as the main sociological idol to overthrow.³⁹ It is not surprising that a thinker who attributes a decisive role to hierophanies and axiophanies has no patience for a view of history and of the human mind that has gone so far as to dismiss the “glorious pathos of the Christian ethic” as an obstacle to the manly duty of looking “the fate of the age full in the face”.⁴⁰ Resisting the allure of disenchantment is a motto that aptly summarizes Joas’s contribution to the deconstruction of the theorem of secularization.

38 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Faith as an Option*, p. 77.

39 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Valori, società, religione*, p. 131: “*Die Macht des Heiligen* aims to offer an alternative to a historiographic model based on the idea of disenchantment. I believe that today it is important not so much to criticize the theory of secularization, which is now outdated, as to dismantle the theory of disenchantment in order to elaborate a valid alternative. Weber’s theories do not add up to a theory of secularization, but to something much more complex”. See in this regard Joas, Hans, *The Power of the Sacred*, p. 1: “This book is an attempt to divest of its enduring enchantment (*entzaubern*) one of the concepts central to the way in which modernity understands itself, namely that of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*)”.

40 Cf. Weber, Max, “Science as a Vocation”, in Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures: “Science as a Vocation” “Politics as a Vocation”*, trans. by R. Livingstone, Indianapolis (IN): Hackett Publishing 2004, p. 24.

Standing on the Edges of the New Paradigm: A Postcolonial Point of View

Avoiding the Trap of Ethnocentrism

Toward the end of *Faith as an option*, Hans Joas suggested looking outside Europe to see what the future of Christianity may be in a world which is now fully globalized. “If we are to analyze religion in the present day”, he claimed without hesitation, “it is vital to adopt a global, that is, non-Eurocentric perspective”.¹

The suggestion may seem innocuous, but it is not. Shifting the focus from the Western world to the rest of the planet does not only modify our assessment of the actual (I mean, numerical) dimensions of the secularization process in the light of the demographic dynamics taking place on a planetary level, but also deeply affects the understanding of its social, historical, and cultural meaning. Here we enter familiar territory, especially for anthropologists. Breaking out of the cage of ethnocentrism, making “strange all those things that are so familiar to us, [forcing] us to think about the assumptions on which they are built”, is a traditional goal of ethnographic research.² The ultimate aim of this endeavour is to increase ‘cultural reflexivity’. Tolerating for as long as possible the discomfort caused by a classic expedient of anthropological practice, the *déplacement* of common sense through confrontation with an alterity that arouses scandal, prompts us to sharpen our gaze by abandoning the deceptive sense of intimacy and comfort resulting from consonance between the immediate experience of the world and a hegemonic cultural design.³ From this point of view, criticizing the obvious – a typical task of any investigative work worthy of the name – implies first and foremost multiplying the access points to an empirical realm

1 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Faith as an Option*, p. 121.

2 Cf. Scott, David, “The Trouble of Thinking – An Interview with Talal Asad”, in David Scott/ Charles Hirschkind (eds.), *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press 2006, p. 275. See also Bardawil, Fadi A., “The Solitary Analyst of Doxas: An Interview with Talal Asad”, in: *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* (36/2016), p. 158: “I think of my work as making myself – not deliberately but as time opens up – repeatedly uncomfortable”.

3 On this topic, see the introduction to Herzfeld, Michael (ed.), *Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society*, Oxford: Blackwell 2001, ch. 1, pp. 1–6 (“Anthropology: A critique of common sense”).

that is presumed to be familiar in order to destabilize the categorial constructs that have settled over time. The systematic shifting of the perspective and the refusal to endorse prefabricated ideas result, then, in a view of social reality that is acute and dynamic rather than panoramic and comprehensive, giving priority to the reasons of density (and proximity) over those of simplification (and distance).

In this way, the observer is transformed from a detached scholar into an expositor of hypocrisies and a disillusioned chronicler of a conflict between multiple and conflicting interests. In keeping with Foucault's lesson, the analyst of human affairs is above all a genealogist, that is, an investigator of the traces inscribed by history on the bodies of men and women. All of this leads in the same humiliating direction: the realization that "at the root of what we know and what we are does not lie truth or being, but the exteriority of accidents".⁴ Such emphasis on the practical and impure character of anthropology can also be interpreted as a step towards greater reflexivity, provided that such reflexivity is not understood as a self-examination for its own sake, but as a questioning of the ethnographer's own assumptions with the aim to invigorate empirical analysis. As Talal Asad once remarked, the point is not just to unmask or subvert common sense, but to "complicate descriptive categories", problematizing both the overly sharp distinctions and the overly hasty analogies with which we believe we can account for complex historical phenomena.⁵

If, as we have seen in the previous chapters, what is distinctive about the paradigm shift in the recent secularization debate is, on the one hand, the multiplication of approaches to an only seemingly simple event in modern history and, on the other hand, an updating of the way in which it has been accounted, framed, and classified from the outset, an overview of the positions in the field cannot fail to include an appraisal of the specific contribution that postcolonial studies has made to the deconstruction of the secularization theorem.

The contribution is significant, but not easy to focus on, not least because of the difficulty in isolating the authentic voice of the 'subalterns' in a conversation that has taken on such breadth, variety and vigour over the years as to discourage any attempt at synthesis. Generally speaking, the originality of this voice undoubtedly has to do with the radicalization of the critical gesture, which depends both on an antagonistic intensification of the genealogical effort and on shifting the point of view to the margins of official history.

4 Cf. Foucault, Michel, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, New York: Pantheon Books 1984, pp. 76–100, here p. 81.

5 Cf. Scott, David, "The Trouble of Thinking – An Interview with Talal Asad", in David Scott/Charles Hirschkind (eds.), *Powers of the Secular Modern*, p. 284.

However, the outcome of this approach, suspended between contrasting impulses to particularization and hybridization, is not a foregone conclusion, as I trust will become clear at the end of the chapter. In any case, the relevance of the postcolonial outlook in the debate mapped in this book is undisputed.

That being said, what do secularization, secularity and secularism look like from the standpoint of those who have had them imposed on them compulsorily by invaders? And what happens to the protagonists of the story at the centre of this volume – religious faith, unbelief, the secular state, modernity, waves of secularization, religious revivals – once they are observed from a perspective that is neither Eurocentric nor North Atlantic-centric? What is left, finally, of the robust intuition of those who see the domestication of religion, if not as the axis, at least as a crucial junction in the evolution of the human race?

The Postcolonial Horizon

In order to sketch out an answer to these difficult but crucial questions, I must first clarify what is meant by ‘postcolonial thought’. The label is notoriously vague, as it encompasses very diverse theoretical and political-ideological stances, and is, moreover, subject to constant contestation and reinterpretation within its own discursive field.⁶ As is the case with related categories such as postmodernism and poststructuralism, we are dealing here with a practical-theoretical attitude rather than with “a theory in the scientific sense, that is a coherently elaborated set of principles that can predict the outcome of a given set of phenomena”.⁷ But despite its kaleidoscopic character, this posture includes some recurrent and recognizable elements,

The first element is a polemical and critical-deconstructive impulse. The ‘post’ in postcolonial, just like the ‘post’ in postmodern, does not merely have a descriptive function. That is, it does not simply denote the overcoming of

6 For an introduction to postcolonial thought see do Mar Castro Varela, María/Dhawan, Nikita, *Postkoloniale Theorie. Eine kritische Einführung*, transcript Verlag, Bielefeld 2015²; Young, Robert J.C., *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003; Gandhi, Leela, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, New York: Columbia University Press 1998; Fornari, Emanuela, *Linee di confine. Filosofia e postcolonialismo*, Turin: Bollati Boringhieri 2011; Mellino, Miguel, *La critica postcoloniale: decolonizzazione, capitalismo e cosmopolitismo nei postcolonial studies*, Rome: Meltemi 2005; Mezzadra, Sandro, *La condizione postcoloniale. Storia e politica nel presente globale*, Verona: ombre corte 2008. In writing this chapter, I greatly benefited from reading Ulrike Spohn’s book, *Den säkularen Staat neu denken. Politik und Religion bei Charles Taylor*, Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus Verlag 2016, especially ch. 4.

7 Cf. Young, Robert J.C., *Introduction to Postcolonialism*, p. 6.

a cultural configuration whose historical trajectory is proclaimed to be completed. In fact, 'post' both affirms and challenges the centrality of what has been surpassed. Colonialism is thus elevated to a key event in modern history in that it is seen as the both material and ideal point at which the asymmetrical process of discursive constitution of an accomplished, disciplined and overpowering identity (the West), on the one hand, and an exotic, static and submissive otherness (the East), on the other hand, coalesces.⁸ From this standpoint, the West and the Rest take shape in tandem, both symbolically and in terms of power relations. The latter, in particular, unfolded through modern geographical explorations, the imperial expansion of European nation states and the intricate itinerary of decolonization that led first, during the Cold War, to the birth of the umbrella concept of the 'Third World' and finally, after the fall of the Wall, to that of the 'Global South'.⁹ And it is precisely the legitimacy of this unbalanced distribution of roles that is contested in practice and theory by postcolonial thinkers.

Postcolonialism thus reflects a (relative) shift in power relations both at the geopolitical level and in the way in which the asymmetry between the modern West and its global Other has been experienced and imagined in the various corners of the planet. The main symptom of this upheaval of historical and geographical common sense is the progressive convergence of scholars from the North and the South towards the goal of 'provincializing Europe', i.e. to stop automatically considering it as the symbolic centre and vanguard of human history. This endeavour, as the inventor of the slogan himself, the Bengali historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, has lucidly recognized, can only be dialectical. That is, it must proceed towards the end goal through an immanent critique that problematizes from within the claim to autarky and epistemological neutrality of the categorical constructions elaborated in Europe since the seventeenth-century and exported from there all over the world with the support of the critique of weapons as well as of the weapon of critique. "What historically enables a project such as that of 'provincializing Europe'", noted Chakrabarty in a self-reflexive attitude,

8 The reference book on the subject is of course Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin 2003 (reprinted with a new Preface).

9 For an excellent examination of the subject see Hall, Stuart, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power", in Stuart Hall/Bram Gieben (eds.), *Formations of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1992, ch. 6.

is the experience of political modernity in a country like India. European thought has a contradictory relationship to such an instance of political modernity. It is both *indispensable* and *inadequate* in helping us to think through the various life practices that constitute the political and the historical in India.¹⁰

It is also from the judgement of the inadequacy and ideological selectivity of the European epistemic imaginary that the postcolonial concern for the margins and the repressed of official history, for the concrete (e.g. the body), the details (as opposed to essentializing extrapolations) and, more generally, for the “plural or conjoined” genealogical background of the present state of affairs, especially when the latter is conceived as a telos and a yardstick of human development, draws its impetus.¹¹ Microhistory and macrohistory intersect in public and private everyday practices, incorporating in varying degrees knowledge and power, mentality and physiology, ideas and habits, to which the postcolonial theorist’s critical thinking is assiduously applied.

The emphasis on the two joint political events of colonialism, with its non-contingent misdeeds of racism, imperialism and slavery, and decolonization, marked by lightning successes, humanitarian cataclysms and more or less voluntary retreats, is counterbalanced by a special focus on power dynamics and the systematic use of physical or symbolic violence in handling the projective relationship that the colonizer establishes with an otherness that is both coveted and despised. From a post-colonial perspective, in other words, the interweaving of violence and idealism represents an original fact that needs to be investigated in depth if the ultimate aim is to “to displace a hyperreal Europe from the center toward which all historical imagination currently gravitates”.¹² From this point of view, the epistemic violence with which the subaltern is reified is even more crucial than the physical violence that usually accompanies it. As María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan noted,

colonial discourse essentially rests on a fixation of meaning that comes to expression in the construction and determination of the other without exception. The violent representation of the other as absolutely different was a necessary component of the construction of a sovereign, dominant European self.¹³

10 Cf. Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 6 (italics mine).

11 Cf. Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 20.

12 Cf. Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 45.

13 Cf. do Varela Mar Castro, María/Dhawan, Nikita, *Postkoloniale Theorie*, p. 22.

Wrapping up the discussion so far, four things can be expected from a postcolonial account of the rise of a secular form of life:

- (a) A polemical and deconstructive stance towards historicist narratives.
- (b) An impulse to provincialize Europe through a web of interlinked genealogies.
- (c) The belief that, from the margins and for the margins, a renewal of critique can and should take place, which was only selectively realized in the intellectual tradition of the European Enlightenment.
- (d) A special focus on the dynamics of power and the role of violence in the momentous epistemic transformations that preceded and accompanied the colonial adventure of the West up to its imperialist outcomes.

Multiple Secularities

As I said above, a key element in the deconstruction of the secularization theorem investigated in the previous chapters is the effort at historical recontextualization. If the classical thesis asserts the inexorable decline of religion in modernity or, on the contrary, its substantial permanence in secular disguise, the critics of the theorem, for their part, retell the same story in detail, trying to resist the persuasive force of an evocative intuition or an exemplary tale that has the defect of undermining theoretical imagination. Along the way, a stylized historical process is turned into one of those thick (and intricate) descriptions favoured by anthropologists and historians.

In these disquieting narratives – genealogical tales that do not flatter the reader's ears – contingency and singularity reign supreme. It is no coincidence that Charles Taylor's *magnum opus* is entitled *A Secular Age*, where the indeterminate article, suggests that there can or could exist other 'secular ages' besides the one arisen in the bosom of Latin Christianity.¹⁴ But if secularities are by definition (at least potentially) multiple, their geographical location in

14 Although his narrow approach to (former) Latin Christianity has often been decried even in the most benign discussions of *A Secular Age* (see, for example, Warner, Michael/Vanantwerpen, Jonathan/Calhoun, Craig (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, pp. 25–27), Taylor had eloquently defended his choice of making his investigation proceed according to concentric circles in the book's introduction. Cf. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, pp. 21 et seq. and 780 (note 21); and, more recently, Taylor, Charles, "Après L'Âge séculier", in Sylvie Taussig (ed.), *Charles Taylor. Religion et sécularisation*, pp. 9–13; Taylor, Charles, "Comments on the Contributors", in Anthony J. Carroll/Staf Hellemans (eds.), *Modernity and Transcendence*, pp. 163–179. For a reasoned attempt to extend the search for other 'secular ages' to the past as well, see Bhargava, Rajeev, "An Ancient Indian Secular Age?", in Akeel Bilgrami (ed.), *Beyond the Secular West: Religion, Culture, and Public Life*, New York: Columbia University Press 2016, pp. 188–214.

a civilizational site – that is, in a specific cultural context – is essential to properly identify and understand each of them *singulatim*.¹⁵ This is a staple of post-colonial discourse. The discriminating point, however, is what characteristics such an exercise in contextualization should possess.

A first option is to tell the story of a form of life or a social structure from an internal standpoint, interpreting its development in the light of endogenous elements, e.g. (material and ideal) challenges, resources or impediments that are within the space of action of the participants, namely of the members of these collective bodies. Of course, to be successful, such a reading must preserve a sense of differences and alternative possibilities, and the latter cannot be separated from an orientation that is at least tacitly comparative. In other words, it cannot be overlooked the fact that the challenges, resources and impediments that the internalist account focuses on define the framework of a cultural identity that is different from other identities that have flourished around a discordant web of conceptions of self, society and nature. The substance, however, does not change. Understanding a specific cultural configuration is first and foremost a hermeneutic act: one must understand, in other words, why that particular web of public and private practices made sense (or stopped making sense at some point) from the perspective of the agents. In line with these premises, the emergence in European history of an unprecedented secular mentality and political organization can be explained – as Taylor does in *A Secular Age* – by calling into question, in turn, spiritual dynamics or theological discussions within Christianity, transformations in the social, scientific and artistic imaginary of European elites, creative responses to structural and often traumatic changes in the local economy, politics and technology, etc. Although each of these explanatory factors always carries with it an element of contingency and chance, it also has its own internal logic that arouses the curiosity and perspicacity of the interpreter, not to mention her considered judgement.

From a postcolonial perspective, this is important, but it is not enough.¹⁶ Particularizing secularism, uncovering its Christian roots, is insufficient, especially when the focus of the investigation is a civilization that, from a certain

15 On multiple secularities see Burchardt, Marian/Wohlrab-Sahr, Monika/Middell, Matthias (eds.), *Multiple Secularities Beyond the West: Religion and Modernity in the Global Age*, Boston/Berlin/München: Walter de Gruyter 2015.

16 For an eloquent expression of dissatisfaction with direct reference to Taylor's work, see Mahmood, Saba, "Can Secularism Be Other-wise?", in Michael Warner/Jonathan Vanantwerpen/Craig Calhoun (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, pp. 282–299; Talel Asad, "Thinking about Religion, Belief, and Politics", in Robert A. Orsi (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012, pp. 36–57.

point onwards in its history, has not only understood itself as the pinnacle of human evolution, but has done its utmost to bring human cultural variety into line with its normative ideal of scientific, moral, political and aesthetic progress. Besides scraping off the veneer of those ‘acultural’ theories of modernity that understand modernization as a backgroundless cognitive progress,¹⁷ shifting the focus of analysis to a global horizon primarily intensifies the estrangement-effect that always results from attempts to divert attention from the foreground to the background of one’s own identity – to what has made us who we are. In fact, when they dig this deep, genealogies end up problematizing even the wider interpretative framework within which the recontextualization takes place, spreading the sense of uncertainty like wildfire. Specifically, in the case at hand, the postcolonial radicalization of the interpretative effort has had as its main consequence the questioning of grammatically basic concepts such as religion, secularity, belief, and modernity, provoking an epistemologically healthy disorientation from a comparative perspective.

But what tangible effects will this psychological condition of bewilderment and generalized perplexity have? I would point out two. The first can be described as the blurring of the boundaries that delimit the categories with which reality is put into perspective. In a nutshell, by recounting the rise of the Immanent Frame in North Atlantic societies from a different point of view, we do not simply contemplate the possible existence of a multiplicity of forms of secularity, but place these variants in an ‘interactional’ or ‘entangled history’, i.e. in a never-optimal story of encounters/clashes between civilizations and cultures, where what is at stake is always (also) hegemony and power over people’s bodies. This is how the Dutch anthropologist Peter van der Veer summed up the nub of the matter:

The project of European modernity should be understood as part of what I have called ‘interactional history’. That is to say that the project of modernity, with all of its revolutionary ideas of nation, equality, citizenship, democracy, and rights, is developed not only in Atlantic interactions between the United States and Europe but also in interactions with Asian and African societies that are coming within the orbit of imperial expansion. Instead of the oft-assumed *universalism* of the Enlightenment, I would propose to look at the *universalization* of ideas that emerge from a history of interactions. Enlightened notions of rationality

17 On the important distinction between ‘cultural’ and ‘acultural’ theories of modernity, see Taylor, Charles, “Two Theories of Modernity”, in: *Hastings Center Report* (25/1995), pp. 24–33.

and progress are not simply invented in Europe and accepted elsewhere but are both produced and universally spread in the expansion of European power.¹⁸

Viewed from a non-Eurocentric perspective, the space of historical interaction between cultures is thus both a place of entanglement, where intellectual influences become entwined, often producing a shared imaginary of modernity, and a field of strategic action, conflict, shifting alliances, sometimes even sheer terror.¹⁹ Secularization, as van der Veer himself has pointed out, is not only a *process*, but also a historical *project*, in which the secularist critique of religion has often operated as a self-fulfilling prophecy supported by states and social movements involved in colonial adventures.²⁰ In this sense, it is justified to say that “the process by which Latin Christendom got to be secular was in large part the same as the process by which it got to be colonial”.²¹ Through encountering and governing non-Christian peoples, Europeans have in fact transformed not only their understanding of the functions of the state, of the distinction between civilization and barbarism, of the rule of law, but also and above all their conception of religion, of the specific weight of beliefs and rituals in local cults and in the refined modern ideal of spirituality, of the relationship between peoples’ religious history and human progress. And this change has never been painless, both because the transition to modernity is by its very nature violent and because, since secularism is a project that defines its field of action and its objectives in a process-oriented way, incompleteness is its natural condition.²² And incompleteness is notoriously fertile ground for adventurism, extremism, despotism, but also for experimentation and hybridization of old, new and sometimes simply imaginary models.

18 Cf. van der Veer, Peter, “Smash Temples, Burn Books: Comparing Secularist Projects in India and China”, in Craig Calhoun/Mark Juergensmeyer/Jonathan Vanantwerpen (eds.), *Rethinking Secularism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011, p. 270 et seq. By the same author see also *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2001.

19 To get an idea of the historiographic concept of ‘entangled history’ see Conrad, Sebastian/Randeria, Shalini (eds.), *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus: postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus 2002.

20 Cf. van der Veer, Peter, *Smash Temples*, p. 271. For an argument in defence of the idea that the most influential process in determining the place of religion in society is state building, see van der Veer, Peter, “The Secular Production of Religion”, in: *Ethnofoor* (8/1995, 2), pp. 5–14, here p. 6.

21 Cf. Warner, Michael/Vanantwerpen, Jonathan/Calhoun, Craig, “Editors’ Introduction”, in Michael Warner/Jonathan Vanantwerpen/Craig Calhoun (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, p. 27.

22 Cf. van der Veer, Peter, “Smash Temples”, p. 280 et seq.

Insofar as it is the hegemonic project of a civilization committed to building a sphere of influence based on the distinction between centre and periphery, secularism, from a postcolonial perspective, must be investigated as a mixture of knowledge and power. The Foucauldian lesson is decisive here.²³ To think of the world in terms of the 'West' and the 'Rest' (i.e. what remains outside of an identity that sees itself as self-sufficient) means having one's feet firmly planted in a web of practices that provide a special position for a subject capable of relating to the other as something residual. Against this fusion of meaning and effectiveness, the appeal to a superordinate truth counts for very little. More effective is a genealogical excavation capable of bringing to light the impure nature of such mixture in its most surprising and contingent details so as to demonstrate *in re* that the world and its regime of truth – in our case: the *secular* regime of truth – could have been different from what it has become and that the future will not necessarily be a photocopy of the present.

Such a broadening of both the horizon of expectation and of the space of experience is the main contribution of postcolonial theorists to the recent secularization debate.

(Anti-Orientalist) Genealogies of the Secular: Talal Asad

If one takes an interactional perspective on the political-religious history of the last centuries, some case studies stand out for their relevance.

First of all, there is the Indian example, which presents a unique constellation of religious vitality, hyperpluralism and encounter/clash of civilizations. Starting in the eighteenth-century, British colonialism in India – the imperial rule of the leading economic and cultural power of the time – was grafted onto a millenary history of coexistence between large and small cults, thanks to which an extraordinary tangle of community allegiances and soteriological beliefs and practices flourished over the centuries, giving rise to the Orientalist myth of Asia as the cradle of human spirituality. The ordering impulse of modern culture and statehood has acted on this deep diversity, fostering creative processes of adaptation that have resulted in, among others, both the inclusive nationalism of Gandhi, Nehru and Tagore and the exclusionary Hindu nationalism embodied today by the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party). It is no coincidence that, in the last twenty years, the origin and prospects of that original institutional experiment in the search for unity in diversity known as

23 Cf. Foucault, Michel, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality* 1, trans. by R. Hurley, Harmondsworth: Penguin 2006, part 4, ch. 2.

'Indian secularism' have become a subject of animated discussion in the circle of scholars interested in the transformations of the role of religion in contemporary society.²⁴

A second significant example of collision between different experiences and conceptions of the religious/secular dyad is offered by China. Here the focus of interest is the peculiar trajectory of Chinese civilization. For its relative international isolation before the crisis of the Qing dynasty in the nineteenth-century enabled the rise of an autarkic cultural constellation – what Peter van der Veer has usefully described as a “syntagmatic chain of religion-magic-secularity-spirituality” – which does not admit of the distinction, canonical in the West, between immanent and transcendent or natural and supernatural.²⁵ It is this cultural specificity that generally renders the discussions about the more or less secular character of contemporary China blurred and mercurial.²⁶

Although India and China are two illuminating historical instantiations of how wide the range of options generated by the tension between a regime of political secularism, some form of visceral suspicion of religions as worldly institutions, and the background of “social/cultural/political conditions that structure the question of religious adherence in ways not usually present to consciousness”²⁷ can be, the case of Islam and its alleged imperviousness even

24 The reference text for the debate on Indian secularism is Rajeev Bhargava (ed.), *Secularism and its Critics*, parts 3 and 4. On its present crisis see Needham, Anuradha Dingwaney/Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder (eds.), *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, Durham: Duke University Press 2007. The most intelligent defender of the virtues of the “distinctively Indian and differentially modern variant of secularism” is Rajeev Bhargava. Among his many contributions see Bhargava, Rajeev, “The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism”, in Thirukodikaval Nilakanta Srinivasan (ed.), *The Future of Secularism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007, pp. 20–53; Bhargava, Rajeev, *The Promise of India's Secular Democracy*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press 2010.

25 Cf. van der Veer, Peter, *The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2013, p. 9. A synoptic study on the more or less ‘axial’ character of the ethical-spiritual reform promoted by Confucius can be found in Bellah, Robert N., *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2011, ch. 8. An attempt to interpret Confucian spirituality outside of a dualistic framework is made in Fingarette, Herbert, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, Long Grove (IL): Waveland Press 1972.

26 Cf. Szonyi, Michael, “Secularization Theories and the Study of Chinese Religions”, in: *Social Compass* (56/2009), pp. 312–327; Dobbelaere, Karel, “China Challenges Secularization Theory”, *Social Compass* (56/2009), pp. 362–370; van der Veer, Peter, “Smash Temples”, p. 275 et seq. For an overview of the issue from a non-academic point of view see Pisu, Renata, *Né Dio né legge. La Cina e il caos armonioso*, Rome/Bari: Laterza 2013.

27 On the useful distinction between political secularism, ethical secularism and secularity see Warner, Michael, “Was Antebellum America Secular?” in: *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, 2 October 2012 (<https://tif.ssrc.org/2012/10/02/>)

to the contextual model, proposed by Rajeev Bhargava,²⁸ of a “principled distance” between state and religion is the most interesting case study in light of this book’s reconstructive intent. The Muslim revival of the last decades is in fact both empirical denial, intellectual challenge and scandal for those who took for granted the inevitable decline of religion in modernity. (More or less) anguished curiosity about the riddle of Islam has thus become one of the leitmotifs of public debate in the West today. Why is it that – one constantly hears people asking on TV, radio or social media – all attempts to secularize Islamic societies have failed? What is there in the Quran that prevents what the Bible did not prevent? How much longer do we have to wait for a Muslim enlightenment?

There is probably no better guide for investigating secularization from the point of view of the encounter/clash of the Islamic world with the secularizing thrust of Western colonialism than Talal Asad, an American anthropologist of Saudi origin, son of Leopold Weiss, an Austrian Jew who converted to Islam at the age of 26 and known, under the Arabic name of Muhammad Asad, as one of the major Muslim personalities of the twentieth-century.²⁹ Why does Asad have what it takes to exemplify, in the map that I am drawing in these pages, the position of the postcolonial participant observer in the recent debate on the crisis of secularism and the alleged return of religion in the contemporary world?

The first reason is biographical. Asad, who was born in Saudi Arabia in 1932 and spent his early years between Pakistan and India, experienced at first hand both a fascination with European rationalism and a painful disillusionment with the discrepancy between liberal ideals and the reality of the Western way of life. “When I was young”, he confessed to David Scott in a lengthy interview published in 2006,

from at least the age of fourteen, I developed an enormous admiration for the West – or rather, for a certain idea of the enlightened West. I was very much imbued with the idea that the West was where one would find Reason, where one would find Freedom, where one would find all the wonderful things which were lacking in Pakistan. And my experience in Britain and then here in the

was-antebellum-america-secular/, date of last access: 11.04.2022). See also Casanova, José, “The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms”, in Craig Calhoun/Mark Juergensmeyer/Jonathan Vanantwerpen (eds.), *Rethinking Secularism*, pp. 54–74.

28 Cf. Bhargava, Rajeev, “Rehabilitating Secularism”, in Craig Calhoun/Mark Juergensmeyer/Jonathan Vanantwerpen (eds.), *Rethinking Secularism*, pp. 105–109.

29 For an interesting posthumous dialogue with his father on the meaning and prospects of an Islamic state, see Asad, Talal, “Muhammad Asad between Religion and Politics”, in: *Insan ve Toplum* (1/2011), pp. 155–165.

U.S.—and now I speak of a long *durée* in my life – was one of a slow *disabusement*. [...] Put simply, I began to realize how *saturated* with prejudice people in England were. You might say I was terribly naïve to think otherwise. And I certainly was naïve, but I had to *learn* to see my naïveté. This seemed to me an incredible discovery, that I had failed for so long to see people in England as prejudiced, as *soaked* in prejudice.³⁰

Asad's view of the West and its role in human history thus reflects the point of view of an outsider who has had to work hard to reconcile his idealizing expectations with the prosaic nature of a world that is not only suboptimal, but filled with false consciousness and double truths. On balance, however, it was precisely his biographical location between two cultures with profoundly different memories, sensibilities and persuasive styles that enabled him to develop a broad, one might even say stereoscopic, perspective on contemporary crises. Asad's non-nominalistic anti-essentialism and his taste for subtle distinctions, for atypical historical contextualization, for sceptical but not unmasking genealogies; his refusal of avalutativity or ethical neutrality, tempered by a theoretical and political self-restraint uncommon in a thinker undoubtedly attracted by radical interpretative moves; and, last but not least, what has been aptly described as his "tragic sensibility" (which he, more bluntly, describes as pessimism about the future of humanity) are intellectual gifts that help explain the incisiveness, sophistication and, in some respects, even obscurity of the angle chosen by Asad to explore the historical-discursive constellation produced by the triad secularity-secularism-secularization.³¹

In short, for Asad the practical-theoretical knot that has to be untied is political liberalism as the supposed crowning achievement of Western civilization

30 Cf. Scott, David, "The Trouble of Thinking – An Interview with Talal Asad", p. 249; Bardawil, Fadi A., "The Solitary Analyst of Doxas: An Interview with Talal Asad", p. 155. On the construction of Islam as an "otherness incompatible with liberal values", see Asad's two interventions on the Rushdie case in Asad, Talal, *Genealogies of Religion*, Baltimore (MD): The John Hopkins University Press 1993, ch. 7–8. To get an idea of the path that led Asad to develop an anti-Orientalist anthropology of Islam see Asad, Talal (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, London: Ithaca Press 1973; Asad, Talal, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (1986), in: *Qui Parle* (17/2009) pp. 1–30; and also his review of Edward Said's *Orientalism* published in: *English Historical Review* (45/1980), p. 648 et seq.

31 Cf. Scott, David, "The Tragic Sensibility of Talal Asad", in David Scott/Charles Hirschkind (eds.), *Powers of the Secular Modern*, pp. 134–153; Bardawil, Fadi A., "The Solitary Analyst of Doxas: An Interview with Talal Asad", p. 156; Scott, David, "The Trouble of Thinking – An Interview with Talal Asad", p. 296; and the closing lines of Ahmad, Irfan, "Talal Asad Interviewed by Irfan Ahmad", in: *Public Culture* (27/2015), pp. 259–279. For a concise but illuminating portrait of Asad, see also Michael Herzfeld's review of his *Genealogies of Religion*, published in: *The International Journal of Middle East Studies* (26/1994), pp. 693–695.

or as the last developmental stage of the human species (at least in the eyes of its most ardent apologists). The problem, in other words, is the Enlightenment myth of modernity as a fusion of knowledge and power that enables its members to know and simultaneously dominate the forms of life that still elude those disciplines of subjectification that have made the polarization of the world into the West and the Rest possible. The aim of the Saudi-American anthropologist, however, is not so much to unmask the prejudices and hidden intentions of the defenders of the civilizing mission of Western liberalism, but rather to ‘unpack’ and bring to light the tacit assumptions on which the only apparently slender legal framework of the modern, secular nation-state is based.³²

Here the meticulous effort of the sceptical genealogist who is sensitive to the reasons of the subalterns becomes essential. For Asad, to argue that liberalism is not an ingenious invention of the human mind – “a rational solution to the political problem of living amicably together in a plural, modern society”³³ – but a contingent historical construction, is first of all to suggest that it has as much to do with people’s bodies, feelings and habits as those hiero- or theocentric and anti-individualist discursive traditions that, from a certain point in European history, have been grouped under the homogenizing label of ‘religion’. But, if it makes sense to understand liberalism as a form of life that brings together practices, concepts and sensibilities by establishing boundaries that, being on the one hand canonized as ‘modern’ and, on the other hand, welded and guarded by the force of the state and its laws, define the profile of an unasimilable otherness (the ‘barbarian’, the uncivilized, the retrograde), there is then an urgent need to investigate this life form in detail, exploiting its margins to bring into focus aspects that usually escape the self-understanding of Western ‘natives’, including the members of the academic community. To this end, Asad has opened up a new field of research, the anthropology of secularism, where – with his non-linear investigative style – he set out to shed light on a concept that has long remained in the shadows even within anthropological thought: “the idea of the secular”.³⁴

32 Cf. Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press 2003, p. 15 et seq. and ch. 7 (especially p. 236).

33 Cf. Asad, Talal, “Response to Chatterjee”, in David Scott/Charles Hirschkind (eds.), *Powers of the Secular Modern*, p. 219; Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 5: “Secularism is not simply an intellectual answer to a question about enduring social peace and toleration. It is an enactment by which a *political medium* (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion. In contrast, the process of mediation enacted in ‘premodern’ societies includes ways in which the state mediates local identities without aiming at transcendence”.

34 Cf. Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 22.

What interests Asad the most is the process of historical constitution of the secular/religious dyad and, with it, of the binary codifications that “pervade modern secular discourse” and that oppose, in turn, “*belief and knowledge, reason and imagination, history and fiction, symbol and allegory, natural and supernatural, sacred and profane*”.³⁵ These codifications are infused with an emphasis on immanence, on the agentiveness of subjects and their responsibility to contribute to the progress of humanity within the horizon of an exclusively profane time. It is such suspicion towards everything that transcends life and limits personal autonomy from the outside that constitutes a point of rupture also with respect to the Christian background of modern liberal civilization and it is the “moral landscape” that, in spite of its undeniable internal diversity, shapes the “single face” that the West presents abroad.³⁶ In this sense, modernity is first and foremost a political project pursued by flesh and blood people in a logic of *Machtpolitik*. “The project”, Asad points out,

aims at institutionalizing a number of (sometimes conflicting, often evolving) principles: constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, freedom of the market – and secularism. It employs proliferating technologies [...] The notion that these experiences constitute “disenchantment” – implying a direct access to reality, a stripping away of myth, magic, and the sacred – is a salient feature of the modern epoch. [...] What interests me particularly is the attempt to construct categories of the secular and the religious in terms of which modern living is required to take place, and non-modern peoples are invited to assess their adequacy. For representations of ‘the secular’ and ‘the religious’ in modern and modernizing states mediate people’s identities, help shape their sensibilities, and guarantee their experiences.³⁷

The contrast between the secular and the religious is crucial within a liberal horizon because it acts as the heart, and therefore also as a litmus test, of the grammar of an entire form of life. Consistently with this assumption,

35 Cf. Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 23.

36 Cf. Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 13. See also Asad, Talal, “Response to Casanova”, in David Scott/Charles Hirschkind (eds.), *Powers of the Secular Modern*, p. 209 et seq.: “Liberalism is obviously a complex tradition [...] As a space of values, however, liberalism today provides its proponents with a common political and moral language (whose ambiguities and aporias allow it to evolve) in which to identify problems and with which to polemicize. Ideas such as individual sovereignty, liberty, limits to state power, tolerance and secularism are central to that space, and remain so even when challenged”. The same concept is reiterated in Asad, Talal, “Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism”, in Talal Asad/Wendy Brown/Judith Butler/Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2009, p. 19 et seq. On secularism as a “new moral landscape” see Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 226.

37 Cf. Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 13.

the 'secular' is understood by Asad first of all as an "epistemological category" that establishes "what practices, concepts, and sensibilities are regarded as necessary for knowledge about reality".³⁸ And religions, in the modern sense of cultural elaborations of a universal form of experience rather than as particular products of specific disciplinary practices, are by definition not part of it. In keeping with this approach to the matter, Asad has on several occasions drawn attention to the historical intertwining of the secular and the religious. Sometimes, he has even suggested that the secular is inseparable from the religious, since its historical rise has simultaneously led to the hegemony of a narrow understanding of the religious.³⁹ From his perspective, however, this paradoxical claim has the sole critical function of shaking the complacent and self-aggrandizing certainties of liberal common sense.⁴⁰ In other words, blurring the boundary between the two is not tantamount to disavowing the gap between the "secular myth of liberalism" and the "redemptive myth of Christianity". On this point Asad expressed himself unequivocally:

The secular, I argue, is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred). [...] I take the view, as others have done, that the 'religious and the 'secular' are not essentially fixed categories. However, I do not claim that if one stripped appearances one would see that some apparently secular institutions were *really* religious. I assume, on the contrary, that there is nothing *essentially* religious, nor any universal essence that defines 'sacred language' or 'sacred experience'. But I also assume that there were breaks between Christian and secular life in which words and practices were rearranged, and new discursive grammars replaced previous ones. I suggest that the fuller implications of those shifts need to be explored. So I take up fragments of the history of a discourse that is often asserted to be an essential part of 'religion' – or at any rate, to have a close affinity with it – to show how the sacred and the secular depend on each other.⁴¹

38 Cf. Asad, Talal, "Response to Das", in David Scott /Charles Hirschkind (eds.), *Powers of the Secular Modern*, p. 228. See also Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 23.

39 On the modern construction of 'religion' as inner experience and private belief, see Asad, Talal, *Genealogies of Religion*, ch. 1; Asad, Talal, "Reading a Modern Classic: W.C. Smith's 'The Meaning and End of Religion'", in: *History of Religions* (40/2001), pp. 205–222.

40 Cf. Bardawil, Fadi A., "The Solitary Analyst of Doxas: An Interview with Talal Asad", p. 161. For a subtle comparative analysis of the idea of critical reason see Asad, Talal, *Genealogies of Religion*, ch. 6.

41 Cf. Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 25. For similar considerations see Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, pp. 61 and 189–191 (especially note 13, which contains a direct reference to the controversy between Blumenberg and Schmitt), and Ahmad, Irfan, "Talal Asad Interviewed by Irfan Ahmad", pp. 260–262.

But once the secular is thought of as the cradle or backdrop of liberal secularism, that is, as a tangled web of understandings, habituses and affections that have been contingently interwoven throughout history and finally consolidated into a form of life through their symbiosis with modern governmentality, does it still make sense to speak of secularization? And if so, in what terms?

To clarify this point, it is useful to dwell on the dialogue that Asad engaged in with one of the most prominent representatives of the sociological *nouvelle vague* in the secularization debate: José Casanova.⁴²

In chapter six of *Formations of the Secular*, exegetical inaccuracies aside, Asad criticizes the idea that an intricate and contingent historical phenomenon such as secularization is reducible either (1) to a formal requirement like the differentiation and autonomization of (social) spheres of action such as, for example, politics, economics and science from religious norms and institutions; or (2) to a linear translation/traduction of the 'theological' (or the 'religious', understood essentialistically) into the 'profane' (which is in turn conceived in an undifferentiated and ahistorical manner). What makes him suspicious, in both cases, is the fusion of descriptive and prescriptive registers in a teleological portrait of modernization that ends up, willy-nilly, attributing unity and logical coherence to a human phenomenon – the rise of 'secularism' – whose apparent cohesion must be deconstructed in order to bring out (upstream, not downstream) its true historical meaning (which has more to do with state power over people's lives than with religious control over their souls).

In his reply Casanova, while acknowledging the originality and usefulness of Asad's project of an anthropology of the secular, challenges the conclusion of his argument in two respects. On the one hand, the Spanish-American sociologist accuses Asad of being too much "indebted to the triumphalist self-genealogies of secularism he has so aptly exposed", when he interprets the secular as an exclusive and exclusionary form of life.⁴³ On the other hand, he defends the (conditional) usefulness of the category of secularization from a comparative perspective. Casanova's theoretical horizon here is that of multiple modernities or secularities. His idea, in short, is that, although the context of 'discovery' of the secular is the modern West (with its influential Christian theological background), the forced globalization of the modern nation-state

42 For what follows, see Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, ch. 6; Casanova, José, "Secularization Revisited: A Reply to Talal Asad", and Asad, Talal, "Response to Casanova", both in David Scott/Charles Hirschkind (eds.), *Powers of the Secular Modern*, pp. 12–30 and 207–210.

43 Cf. Casanova, José, "Secularization Revisited", p. 20.

through colonial expansion has driven other civilizations to respond to the challenge of liberal secularism and its stigmatization of traditional religiosity by drawing creatively and selectively on their own cultural resources, similarly to how the Catholic Church reacted to the new culture of human rights and, in particular, to the rise of the inviolable principle of freedom of conscience in the 1960s.⁴⁴

Unconvinced by Casanova's elucidations, Asad reiterated in his rejoinder both his distance from the theoretical framework embraced by the Spanish-American sociologist to distinguish what is alive and what is dead in the classical thesis of secularization and his belief that such a view retains a veiled teleological matrix.⁴⁵ Since the Saudi-American anthropologist has made a similar objection against another of his potential 'allies' – Hans Blumenberg – it is worth understanding what this divergence of opinion is based on, which, if we are to trust the interpretive stance adopted in this volume, should be regarded as an intra-paradigmatic disagreement.

Asad reproaches both authors with surreptitiously assuming an overly organic, and indeed normative, view of modernity. As a result, in his opinion, a linear and causally concatenated account of human development – a seamless narrative – is re-proposed, more or less consciously, whose hidden driving force can only be Reason.⁴⁶ Given such premises, the legitimizing effect is inescapable and, for Asad, harmful. The aim of his “sceptical investigations into secularism” is, in point of fact, exactly the opposite.⁴⁷ It is, to begin with, to strip the distinction between the secular and the religious of any supra-historical significance. Which is like saying that there is no definition of them that is independent of the contingent historical context. What is more, the secular, even though it is primarily an epistemological category (i.e. it establishes a priori what is accessible to human knowledge), has more to do with “the body, its senses, and its attitudes” than with reason, with feeling rather than with thought.⁴⁸ This is why many of Asad's investigations into the secular can be described as

44 Cf. Casanova, José, “Secularization Revisited”, pp. 24–29. On this topic see also Joas, Hans, *Sind die Menschenrechte westlich?*

45 For an (indirect) critique of the implicit finalism also inherent in the apparently non-Eurocentric perspective of multiple modernities, see Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 212 et seq. (especially p. 216 and note 29).

46 Cf. Ahmad, Irfan, “Talal Asad Interviewed by Irfan Ahmad”, p. 261. See also Asad, Talal, “Response to Casanova”, p. 210: “a genealogical investigation presupposes a more complicated web of connections and recursiveness than a causal chain”.

47 Cf. Asad, Talal, “Response to Casanova”, p. 207.

48 Cf. Asad, Talal, “Thinking about Religion, Belief, and Politics”, in Robert A. Orsi (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012, p. 50.

“ethnographies of the human body”.⁴⁹ And since “mistakes are made *only* at the level of thinking and interpreting, not at the level of feeling”,⁵⁰ the issue at stake in the historical transformations investigated in his genealogies of the secular cannot be truth or objective knowledge. In this sense, they are precisely *sceptical* investigations, in tune with their Nietzschean-Foucauldian matrix.

The unity of the phenomenon of secularization is therefore not endogenous, but exogenous in origin. Its usefulness for comparative purposes comes from the will to power embodied and globally staged by the modern nation-state and its need to set stable boundaries in order to govern the ‘social’. It does not arise then – as Casanova claims – from the fact that it represents an interpretation of the human condition that, in a cross-cultural horizon, can prompt imitation, selective appropriation or motivated rejection by other cultures or spiritualities. Accordingly, the slogan of multiple modernities or secularities sounds deceptive to Asad’s ears. Here, his reflection comes close to that of a classical political realist for whom it is an incontrovertible fact that “the nation-state is not a generous agent and its law does not deal in persuasion [...] its object is always to *regulate* violence” and never to eliminate violence”.⁵¹ Not even the democratic state is an exception to this rule, as it too is “jealous of its sovereignty [...] [and] fundamentally *exclusive*”.⁵²

The effect that this exercise of political power has on cultural traditions that grew up in the shadow of a less systematic and pervasive model of governmentality than the modern one is well exemplified by the case study investigated by Asad in the third part of *Formations of the Secular* significantly entitled “Secularization”.⁵³ Here he investigates, from the, to him, congenial perspective of conceptual analysis, the impact that the importation of European legal codes and the consequent gradual narrowing of the sharia’s jurisdictional power had, at the turn of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century, on the moral landscape and the institutional and discursive spaces of Egypt, back then a *de facto* British protectorate.

Asad’s aim is to show, by means of a concrete example, which paths the (exogenous and endogenous) impulse to legal-political secularization can take, irrespective of the intentions of the agents, in a context lacking the conditions for the development of a mass secular mentality. According to his genealogical account, the long-term consequences of this top-down impulse

49 Cf. Asad, Talal, “Thinking about Religion, Belief, and Politics”, p. 50.

50 Cf. Asad, Talal, “Thinking about Religion, Belief, and Politics”, p. 49 (*italics mine*).

51 Cf. Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 6 and p. 8.

52 Cf. Asad, Talal, “Thinking about Religion, Belief, and Politics”, p. 56.

53 Cf. Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, ch. 7 (“Reconfigurations of Law and Ethics in Colonial Egypt”).

towards secularization do not only concern the sphere of interpersonal relations regulated by law, but extend to the domains of morality, religion, customs, and spirituality. The main effect of the incorporation of sharia into a modernizing state is the systematic articulation of distinct spheres of action (family, religion, ethics, market, art, etc.) and the production of new subjectivities to which the local customary tradition is forced to adapt, succumbing to the primacy of the new form of state sovereignty.⁵⁴

What we are witnessing, therefore, is not only a narrowing of the scope of the sharia, but its transmutation [...] into a subdivision of legal norms (*fiqh*) that are authorized and maintained by the centralizing state. [...] The sharia thus defined is precisely a secular formula for privatizing 'religion' and preparing the ground for the self-governing subject.⁵⁵

In this way, dissociated from the body and its specific disciplines and entrusted to the inner jurisdiction of conscience, religion ends up assuming the form most suitable for the unfolding of the special dynamism of modern nation-states and capitalist markets.⁵⁶ Once measured against its effects in an allogenic cultural context, and not against an alleged atemporal struggle between the 'religious' as such and the 'secular' as such, secularization then appears as the theatre of a "revolutionary change" which, albeit being beyond the control of its own promoters, does in fact produce an imperialist outcome, as the new moral landscape and "the languages, behaviors, and institutions it makes possible come to resemble those that obtain in the West European nation-states".⁵⁷ Secularization, in short, is the authoritarian change of the grammar

54 Cf. Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, pp. 226 and 228: "the reordering of social life (a new moral landscape) presented certain priorities to Islamic discursive tradition – a reordering that included a new significance being given to the family, a new distinction being drawn between law and morality, and new subjects being formed". On the role of the state's jurisdictional power in this alteration of the grammar of a form of life, see Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, pp. 215 and 256: "the function of law is not merely to reflect social life but also to reconstruct it – if necessary by force and against all opposition. [...] For the law always facilitates or obstructs different forms of life by force, responds to different kinds of sensibility, and authorizes different patterns of pain and suffering".

55 Cf. Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 227.

56 Cf. Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 201: "The space that religion may properly occupy in society has to be continually redefined by the law because the reproduction of secular life within and beyond the nation-state continually affects the discursive clarity of that space. The unceasing pursuit of the new in productive effort, aesthetic experience, and claims to knowledge, as well as the unending struggle to extend individual self-creation, undermines the stability of established boundaries [required by the nation-state]".

57 Cf. Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 217.

of a traditional form of life that secures “the power of a *particular* kind of state, by pronouncing the *illegitimacy* of certain kinds of citizen-subject who are thought to be incompatible with it because they do not share fundamental national values”.⁵⁸ As a result, on the basis of an essentialist interpretation of the secular, the subalterns are denied a priori the right to explore varieties of secularity that do not involve the privatization of religion and morality and, above all, do not rely on the governmental mechanism ensured by the modern state and its ordering impulse.

For Asad, this is the face of secularization as it appears from the Middle Eastern margins of European colonial history.

An Open-ended Path: Secularization between Particularism and Evanescence

The complexity and density of Talal Asad's arguments depend among other things on the seriousness with which he has analytically taken on the tensions, contradictions, sometimes even paradoxes inherent in the postcolonial view of secularization. From what one can gather from his writings, the main intention of the Saudi-American anthropologist is to lead the reader to spontaneously acknowledge that, for the purposes of understanding, it is not useful to think of such a multifaceted cultural phenomenon in terms of the head-on clash between supra-historical powers (secularism versus fideism, reason versus prejudice, innovation versus tradition). Instead of this stereotypical picture, we should favor the antithetical image of a multiplicity of fracture lines, whose irregular profile does not allow a unilateral exit from the controversy (since we are never dealing here with a zero-sum game).

What one is being trained in, then, can be more aptly described as the competition between heterogeneous glimpses of the same historical event that, although they may produce illumination effects, are not overseable from the disembodied standpoint of a superordinate truth that transcends contingency. Here, the constitutive blending of knowledge and power excludes in principle the possibility of embracing without hesitation a disinterested judgement on disputed issues. The aforementioned case study of secularization of the administration of justice in Egypt is an excellent example of the kind of practical and conceptual opacity that Asad has sought to do justice to in his writings.

⁵⁸ Cf. Asad, Talal, “Response to Chatterjee”, p. 219.

If we read the contribution of postcolonial studies to the recent debate on secularization as the product of a radicalization and enlargement of the new paradigm, it might then be broken down in five points:

- (a) Its main result is an increase in complexity in the description of the *explanans* (i.e. the *perceived* decline of religion) which derives from the attention paid to marginal details and the estrangement effect typical of ethnographic investigations.
- (b) The insistence on the genealogical background of the apparently neutral and acultural institutional and conceptual apparatuses that govern people's lives in the West creates, then, the conditions for a greater sensitivity to historical discontinuities.
- (c) Such demystification of ideality is accompanied, in turn, by a fluidification of the categories with which religion has been understood since the beginning of the Modern Age, or – drawing on a phenomenological vocabulary – by a sceptical weakening of regional ontologies linked more or less directly to religious discourse.
- (d) The pragmatic sensitivity to the structural interconnection between knowledge and power also produces a general effect of disillusionment with overly organic or cryptotelological portrayals of the civilizing process.
- (e) Finally, against the backdrop of genealogical deconstructions and the rejection of ideological simplifications, appear the germs of a principled defence of human cultural variety as the main intellectual means of defending the subalterns against the hegemonic intents, disguised as claims to truth, of imperial and neo-colonial powers.

The general historical lesson that postcolonial thinkers draw from the crisis of the secularization theorem is that it is not only erroneous, but naïve, to understand the binary codification of the 'secular' and the 'religious' in terms of a head-on clash between modern and traditional societies. In reality, the dividing line is jagged. There are many actors in the field, and upstream intentions count for less than the effects of subjectification downstream in the process. This subjectivation, furthermore, affect bodies and feelings sooner (and more) than the minds of the individuals involved. If you will, such lesson is a tragic one: any value-free effort at sensemaking is in principle futile. Not only is there no neutral space of discussion from which to make objective judgments about the events under investigation, but there is also no vantage point on historical processes that authorizes inoffensive uses of such an equivocal category as secularization. As Michael Warner rightly noticed, there is a huge gap between the procedural secularism of liberal political theorists and the ethical secularism of a modern prophet like Walt Whitman. In order to bridge the gap, a concept

of secularity must be worked out that allows us to conceive of the changes in the imaginaries that have made possible the rise of a form of subjectivity confident in the capacity of individuals for self-governance and self-fashioning.⁵⁹

However, behind the reasonable aim to destabilize, denaturalize and defamiliarize Eurocentric perspectives on the modernization process, there lies a risk of an essentialist backlash. Put otherwise, one can fall into the temptation of neglecting the internal differences in the history leading to the emergence of the variety of secularities that became established in the West during the last centuries.⁶⁰ This is a drawback resulting from the interpretation of secularism as an impersonal power-knowledge apparatus, through which whoever holds the levers of command finds himself, willingly or unwillingly, in a position to shape otherness in his own image and likeness.

More precisely, the risk is twofold.⁶¹ On the one hand, there is the trap of particularism. The attempt to historicize secularism, stripping it of the veneer of a gradual discovery by human reason, may in fact result in a theoretical operation that flattens the emergence of secularity by identifying it with a form of imperialist Christianity or Christian imperialism.⁶² There is a clear affinity here with the theses of the theorists of the clash of civilizations. What they share is a non-dialectical conception of the relationship between identity and otherness, on which an anti-idealist alliance between realism and particularism can easily take root.⁶³ From this point of view, the only plausible aim of theory is that of deconstructing, subverting and dismantling the interpretative and conceptual frames functional to a given power structure, which is all the more illegitimate the more pervasive and violent it is.

59 Cf. Warner, Michael, "Was Antebellum America Secular?."

60 For a successful elaboration of this point see Weir, Todd H., "Germany and the New Global History of Secularism: Questioning the Postcolonial Genealogy", in: *The Germanic Review* (95/2015), pp. 6–20.

61 The critical point I am about to make about the post-colonial outlook is well brought into focus in Spohn, Ulrike, *Den säkularen Staat neu denken*, pp. 126–132.

62 Cf., in this regard, the use of the expression "Christian secularism" in Mahmood, Saba, "Can Secularism Be Other-wise?", pp. 292 and 299. For a liberal contestation of the equation between secularism and Christianity see Cohen, Jean L., "On the Genealogy and Legitimacy of Politically Liberal Secular Polity: Böckenförde and the Asadians", in: *Constellations* (25/2018), pp. 207–224; and, with a less confrontational attitude, Laborde, Cécile, *Liberalism's Religion*.

63 Cf. the definition of 'civilization' offered in Huntington, Samuel P., *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, London: Penguin 1997, p. 43: "Civilizations are the biggest 'we' within which we feel culturally at home as distinguished from all the other 'thems' out there".

On the other side, the alternative to this unmasking move, whose main goal is to bring to the surface the dark side of ideality, is a form of epistemological heraclitism. Given that every historical phenomenon is immersed in a continuous flux of change and hybridization, no one can claim paternity or monopoly of anything, and consequently there is very little room left for the noble art of distinction and judgement. After all, with what legitimacy can one draw the boundaries of the West if in its cultural foundations (Hellenicity, Latinity, Christianity) there is nothing exclusively 'Western'? If you think about it, even in Hegel's master-servant dialectic, the master is nothing outside the power relationship that defines him as a dominant subjectivity. But if this is true in general, what remains of the 'West' without the 'Rest'?

In the first scenario, the secularization debate is confined within a horizon where the meaning of the historical transition under study is shaped by a subpersonal apparatus that is independent of the intentions and claims to validity of the subjects involved. Hegemony, including cultural hegemony, means nothing beyond itself and, in this sense, its focus offers no alternative to the dualism between complicity and resistance. In the second scenario, conversely, the emphasis on the incessant interaction between cultures prevents any precise distinction of historical actors and the identification of vectors of change. Neither upstream nor downstream, therefore, is there any trace of non-hybridized models, and the negotiation of identity is the condition for grasping a phenomenon that, despite good intentions, ultimately risks melting into air due to a lack of consistency.

Asad's titanic efforts to maintain a precarious balance between the two divergent drives towards a particularization of the 'secular' and the critique of any essentialization of it are both admirable and problematic. Regardless of how we assess their success or failure, the most relevant doubts concern the impact that this rage for explicitness has, has had or may have in the future on the semantic resilience of the concept of secularization. If, depending on the circumstances, 'secularization' can mean both the contestation and the fulfilment of religion – its erosion and its global diffusion – the question arises as to what denotative function, what grip on reality may retain a concept which is so inclusive that it risks losing any contrasting relationship with similar notions. When 'secularity' becomes the proper name for a form of life and this form of life cannot be a symbol of anything except its contingent sameness, 'secularization' also ceases to be a significant phenomenon, except for the will to power of which it can become a sign.

The eminently polemical and practical-political concern of postcolonial advocates exposes them by default to the risk of theoretical implosion. Nevertheless, it is precisely the radicality of their approach that has made such

studies an ideal environment for the revival of a discussion – that about the role of religion in human evolution – which has never in its long history been merely an unflustered scientific debate. Like many other human phenomena, I would venture to say, secularization takes on a more recognizable profile when observed from the periphery rather than the centre of the empire.

PART II

Maintenance

A Probe into Deep Time: Marcel Gauchet and the Problematic Exit from Religion

Conquering the Magic Mountain: The Weber Case

As I claimed in the introduction, the ease and speed with which the classical thesis of secularization has been transformed over time from an original, if not transgressive, interpretation of human history into a kind of tacit common sense depends on its tendency to merge with a narrative of change that has emerged (and spread like wildfire) to render intelligible a vague, but crucial, transition in the self-understanding of modern individuals. Such a staged transition has two essential characteristics: it is experienced by the subjects, first, as a revolutionary break with the past and, secondly, as an event that produces a liberating effect comparable to the experience of the end of a spell.

Such a narrative of breakthrough can only be successful in making sense of the perceived evolutionary leap if there is a prior consensus on a polarized portrait of the starting point and the end point of the changeover. Thus moderns have often succeeded in coming to terms with such (etymologically) 'catastrophic' change by understanding it, for example, as the shift from a communitarian form of life to one centred on individual rights, or from heteronomy to autonomy, from theocentrism to anthropocentrism, from enchantment to disenchantment, and so on.

Thus far we have seen how the linearity and terseness of the classical thesis provided the deconstructionists of the secularization theorem with a particularly favourable point of attack. Simplicity has also always been the major strength of the standard explanatory model. The latter, in fact, was able to make immediately intelligible a change that has been experienced by a qualified majority of European opinion makers as a both autobiographical and historiographical evidence in the last three centuries. From the new secular perspective, the 'present' is automatically diagnosed as a time shaped by worldly forces and causes, such as the market or technology, which are in principle devoid of mystery and ambiguity, while the 'past' appears as the dim background from which the new has emerged by subtraction.

From this angle, the concept of secularization has everything it takes to make regally sense of the drastic change of life and mentality insofar as it grasps it

as the irreversible transition from a religious to a non-religious stage of human development. The force of this drive towards global recontextualization is recognizable even in an undisputed champion of sobriety, prudence and methodological refinement like Max Weber. In spite of his strong belief that “the fate of an epoch which has eaten of the tree of knowledge is that it must know that we cannot learn the *meaning* of the world from the results of its analysis, be it ever so perfect”, even the most sophisticated advocate of what Jean-Claude Monod has aptly described as a “sociological neutralization of the category of secularization” could not resist in the final stage of his career to frame his comparative research on the great religions within the meta-narrative of the *Entzauberung der Welt* – the disenchantment of the world.¹

Despite the critical vigilance against any too hasty axiologization of the polarity between an ‘enchanted’ and a ‘disenchanted’ condition, which Weber tries as far as possible to keep separate from the insidious pair ‘rationality/irrationality’, the retroactive effect that the gloomy diagnosis of the times espoused by the German sociologist in the last years of his life has on the results of his comparative investigations into humanity’s religious past is evident in his writings after the First World War (I am thinking particularly of the two Munich lectures and the new edition of *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*). Such a drift stands out, for example, in the increasing emphasis on the, far from obvious, spiritual continuity between the rejection of the magical mentality in Jewish prophets and the anti-sacramental polemic typical of Calvinist Protestantism.

In these passages of Weber’s argument – which is often presented in the robes of an a posteriori stock taking – the contrast between being “stuck fast in a primitive sea of magic” and the effort of ethical rationalization of the great religions takes on tones that are anything but dispassionate.² A demagified religion is for him, significantly, a spiritualized and disinterested religion, devoted to interiority and asceticism, rather than to an animistic and stereotypical understanding of natural phenomena and a utilitarianism focused on

1 Cf. Weber, Max, “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy”, trans. by E.A. Shils/H.A. Finch, in Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, Glencoe (IL): Free Press 1949, p. 57; Monod, Jean-Claude, *La querelle de la sécularisation*, ch. 2. A meticulous reconstruction/deconstruction of Weber’s uses of the concept of disenchantment can be found in Joas, Hans, *The Power of the Sacred*, pp. 110–153, and chapter 6. On the Protestant matrix of Weber’s meta-narrative see Carroll, Anthony J., “Disenchantment, Rationality and the Modernity of Max Weber”, in: *Philosophical Forum* (16/2011), pp. 117–137; Carroll, Anthony J., “The Importance of Protestantism in Max Weber’s Theory of Secularisation”, in: *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie* (50/2009), pp. 61–95.

2 Cf. Weber, Max, “Introduction to The Economic Ethics of the Great Religions”, in Weber, Max, *The Essential Weber: A Reader*, edited by Sam Whimster, London: Routledge 2004, p. 65.

immediate needs. In Weber's imagination, it should not be forgotten, renunciation (be it of "Faustian universality" or of a "religious, cosmic, or mystical" sense of community) is the necessary condition for professional success in modern society, where the "full and beautiful humanity" that was and can no longer be has no place.³ There can be no genuine alternative for those condemned to live in the shadow of a "nature shorn of the divine" – the "entgötterte Natur" deplored by Schiller – who are prisoners of the "tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order", which "today determine[s] the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism [...] with irresistible force".⁴

It is no coincidence that this gloomy view of the present and future corresponds, in the late writings of the German sociologist, to a certain image of the morally straight personality, whose main endowment is the ability to "endure the fate of the [disenchanted] age like a man" and not retreat in the face of a "a polar night of icy darkness and harshness".⁵ The silhouette drawn in these famous passages is that of a man who takes leave of "childhood" illusions and accepts to cope with the "experience of the irrationality of the universe", thanks to a "trained ability to scrutinize the realities of life ruthlessly, to withstand them and to measure up to them inwardly".⁶ The tone is well summed up in that page of the biography written by his wife Marianne in which Weber's ideal of intellectual probity (*intellektuelle Redlichkeit*) is described in memorable words:

One day, when Weber was asked what his scholarship meant to him, he replied: "I want to see how much I can stand" (*ich will sehen, wieviel ich aushalten kann*). What did he mean by that? Perhaps that he regarded it as his task to endure the *antinomies* of existence and, further, to exert to the utmost his *freedom from illusions* and yet to keep his ideals inviolate and preserve his ability to devote himself to them.⁷

3 Cf. Weber, Max, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by T. Parsons, New York: Scribner 1930, p. 180; Weber, Max, "Science as a Vocation", p. 30.

4 Cf. Weber, Max, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 181. On Schiller's lament see Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, p. 316 et seq.

5 Cf. Weber, Max, "Science as a Vocation", p. 30; Weber, Max, "Politics as a Vocation", in Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures: "Science as a Vocation" "Politics as a Vocation"*, p. 93.

6 Cf. Weber, Max, "Politics as a Vocation", pp. 86 and 118.

7 Cf. Weber, Marianne, *Max Weber: A Biography*, trans. by Harry Zohn, New Brunswick (NJ): Transaction Publishers 1988, p. 678. See also Mommsen, Wolfgang J., "Universalgeschichtliches und politisches Denken bei Max Weber", in: *Historische Zeitschrift* (201/1965), p. 575; Mommsen, Wolfgang J., "Die antinomische Struktur des politischen Denkens Max Webers", in: *Historische Zeitschrift* (233/1981), p. 39. Mommsen is particularly good at bringing out the specific combination of reasonableness andchutzpah that characterizes Weber's thinking and at reconstructing the intellectual background of his "ethics of decision-making responsibility"

The attempt of religious ethics to rationalize the world in an “ethical-practical sense” has a noteworthy paradoxical outcome in Weber’s account. For it assumes the form of a detached, shielded and methodical conception of experience that ends up relegating religion, prophecy and enthusiasm to the “abstract realm of mystical life” (*das hinterweltliche Reich mystischen Lebens*), that is, to the sphere of those life choices that demand, in one way or another, a “sacrifice of the intellect”.⁸ Ultimately, Weber’s meta-narrative is, to use Charles Taylor’s jargon, the story of a subtraction (the “de-magification” of the world) whose product is a form of life (the proverbial “iron cage”) that appears unlivable or, at most, bearable in full consciousness only by virtue of a superhuman effort. In fact, the umbrella concept of disenchantment ends up encompassing both the overcoming of the magical mentality (the belief, that is, that one can influence the invisible powers that determine the destinies of people by casting spells), and the secularizing rationalization favoured by the religious rejection of the world and discussed in the famous *Zwischenbetrachtung*, as well as, finally, the more general loss of sense deriving from the primacy of the new forms of bureaucratic, economic and intellectual (*primarily* scientific) rationalization.⁹ In this way, however, disenchantment and disengagement, the disenchanted attitude and the detached, objectivizing stance, end up overlapping, and both fall under the master image of a general disembedding, i.e. the dis-encapsulation from traditional forms of life, which have been negatively selected in the relentless struggle of the ‘higher’ human civilizations (and the religious traditions underlying them) for global economic and political supremacy.

This also explains the centrality in Weber’s sociological investigations of the question about the historical primacy of Western civilization, which the most thoughtful among the children of modern European culture are sooner or later bound to ask themselves. “To what combination of circumstances”, Weber inquires in the introduction to his essays on the sociology of religion,

and of his “heroic pessimism” reformulated in a rationalistic key (cf. Mommsen, Wolfgang J., “Universalgeschichtliches und politisches Denken”, p. 568; Mommsen, Wolfgang J., “Die anti-nomische Struktur des politischen Denkens Max Webers”, p. 39).

8 Cf. Weber, Max, “Intermediate Reflection on the Economic Ethics of World Religions”, in Max Weber, *The Essential Weber: A Reader*, p. 244; Weber, Max, “On Some Categories of Interpretive Sociology” (1913), in Max Weber, *Collected Methodological Writings*, trans. by H.H. Bruun, London: Routledge 2012, p. 277; Weber, Max, “Science as a Vocation”, p. 30 et seq.

9 On this stratification of Weber’s account cf. Joas, Hans, *The Power of the Sacred*, pp. 133–153.

the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having *universal* significance and value?¹⁰

The source of this question is not only the theoretical curiosity of a giant of modern thought. Rather, it is the Nietzschean doubt about the potential harmfulness of intellectualism for life. This personal bug justifies the persistence, even in the post-Kantian theoretical framework embraced by Weber, of slippery nouns of process such as ‘disenchantment’ and ‘secularization’ that systematically overstep the boundaries of value freedom. In spite of the effort to preserve the empirical results of his comparative research from the damaging influence of worldviews and subjective value endorsements, the alluring cumulative effect provided by the meta-narrative of the disenchantment of the world pushed even a champion of theoretical avolutativity like Weber to re-enchant the thesis of disenchantment, making it the centre of a sense-making performance against which the recursive logic of cognitive disenchantment eventually capitulates, although, at least in theory, it should always aim at reaching the zero degree of personal involvement. With the benefit of hindsight, then, the lure of the metahistorical glance appears no less strong than the skeptical attitude of the *Fachmenschen ohne Geist* – the specialists in professorial minutiae, willing to give up the spirit of intellectual adventure in exchange for an academic equivalent of bourgeois decorum and reliability.

Marcel Gauchet as a Theorist of the Primacy of Politics

Keeping this exemplary theoretical trajectory in mind, one can read a classic of the contemporary debate on secularization such as Marcel Gauchet’s *Le désenchantement du monde*, as an attempt to openly come to terms with the scientific legacy and methodological aporias of Weber’s approach.¹¹

Faithful to his view of philosophy as a discipline allergic to disciplinary frontiers, Gauchet, one of the most influential contemporary French thinkers, has

10 Cf. Weber, Max, “Author’s Introduction”, in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 13.

11 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. by O. Burge, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press 1997. The best introduction to Gauchet’s thought was produced by the author himself in the form of articulated response to François Azouvi’s and Sylvain Piron’s questions in *La condition historique*, Paris: Gallimard 2005. An excellent overview of Gauchet’s trajectory is offered in Bergeron, Patrice, *La sortie de la religion. Brève introduction à la pensée de Marcel Gauchet*, Outremont (Québec): Athéna 2009 and in Lingua, Graziano, *Esiti della secolarizzazione*, ch. 3.

tackled in his work the antinomies afflicting the modern trust in the unlimited potentialities of scientific investigation: unity or fragmentation of knowledge, situatedness or neutrality, essentialism or anti-essentialism, etc.¹² His is, in essence, a deliberate and mammoth exercise in simplification, the aim of which is to expose the structure of historical becoming, that is, the processual logic and the “déterminisme de l'essence” on which the “événementialité foncière” (basic factuality) of the concatenation of historical events and the “liberté de l'existence” expressed in them are based.¹³ The term “post-Weberian Hegelianism” has rightly been used in his regard.¹⁴ This hybrid blend of modesty and intellectual ambition – “outrecuidance modeste” as the author once called it¹⁵ – is motivated by the belief that it is impossible to escape the risk of simplification and that, in the end, “this does not mean we should yield to the lures of speculation, but that we should respond critically to the need for meaning whose main victims are precisely those who naively believe they have freed themselves from that need”.¹⁶

Put otherwise, Gauchet does not shy away from telling a macro-story with the benefit of hindsight and a non-naive teleological shape. The driving force behind this myth-history, which is more concerned about the patterns of historical change than about its digressions, is a diagnosis of the present with a

12 To get an idea of the methodological awareness (and coherence) with which Gauchet has developed over the years his project of a philosophy of history innervated by a transcendental anthropo-sociology, see Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, pp. 39–42; Gauchet, Marcel, *Un monde désenchanté?*, Paris: Les Éditions de l'Atelier/Éditions Ouvrières 2004, ch. 2; Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition politique*, Paris: Gallimard 2005, ch. 3; Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, pp. 85–87; Gauchet, Marcel, “Vers une anthropologie transcendentale”, in Jacques Arènes *et alii*, *L'anthropologie de Marcel Gauchet: analyse et débats*, Lethielleux: Collège des Bernardins 2012, pp. 219–236; Patrice Bergeron, *La sortie de la religion*, pp. 24–36.

13 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 166. To fully appreciate the intricated dialectic between the ‘fundamental’ and the ‘historical’, see the engrossing dialogue between Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor in Laforest, Guy/de Lara, Philippe (eds.), *Charles Taylor et l'interprétation de l'identité moderne*, pp. 19–49.

14 The formula was exploited by Jean Greisch in a multi-voice debate published in Gauchet, Marcel, *Un monde désenchanté?*, p. 83. Hans Joas quoted it with approval in *The Power of the Sacred*, p. 183. Carlo Augusto Viano also spotted a “Hegelian tendency to see under the facts the weave of general concepts, which interact by contrasting and distorting themselves” in his preface to Gauchet, Marcel, *La religione nella democrazia*, trans. by D. Frontini, Bari: Dedalo 2009, p. 14.

15 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition politique*, p. 185.

16 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 41. The value of Gauchet's synoptic effort has been stressed by Charles Taylor in his foreword to the English translation of *Le désenchantement du monde*. See Taylor, Charles, “Foreword”, in Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. IX.

frankly political intent. Following the example of his teacher Claude Lefort, the advent of modern democracy is for him the phenomenon to be explained genealogically: the end goal, that is, which accounts for – in an anthropo-socio-transcendental perspective – a series of crucial and enigmatic historical discontinuities. Modern democracy represents, in particular, a revolution in the nature of social space. In brief, it is the triumph of the ideal of autonomy and self-determination or, in other words, “the consecration of the power of men to govern themselves”.¹⁷ It is not, however, a triumph without shadows. “What seemed to be the solution”, Gauchet recently observed, “has turned out to be the problem”. The end of the modern journey “is not really an end, nor could it have been”.¹⁸

But why does the democratic revolution deserve to be elevated to the status of key event of modernity and crux of Western originality? To answer this question, it is necessary to bring to light the foundations of Gauchet’s theory: the attribution, that is, of a “constitutive character to the political shaping of human communities” or, put differently, the proclamation of the anthropological primacy of politics, which may sound anachronistic in an era of increasing depoliticization.¹⁹ It is the political condition that brings us closer to our ancestors and defines our common humanity. But what exactly does this *condition politique* consist of?

In order to understand the gist of Gauchet’s argument, we have to fully assimilate the premise of his discourse. Politics, in his view, is not an accessory appendage of society. It is rather “one of [its] transcendental conditions”.²⁰ It is the capacity of human communities to act on their own (factual) conditions of existence and, therefore, as the expression of an instituting power. The main *political* corollary of human freedom – that is, of the impossibility of humans “to entrench themselves and settle down, and steadfastly condemning them to a transformative nonacceptance of things”²¹ – is the looming over every

17 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *La révolution moderne. L'avènement de la démocratie I*, Paris: Gallimard 2007, p. 9.

18 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *Le nouveau monde. L'avènement de la démocratie IV*, Paris: Gallimard 2017, p. 635. On the crisis of contemporary democracies as a “tendency towards the dissolution of politics”, see Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, pp. 399–407.

19 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition politique*, p. 10. For an excellent reconstruction of the biographical and thematic background of Gauchet’s political thought, see Davide Frontini’s afterword to Gauchet, Marcel, *Un mondo disincantato? Tra laicismo e riflusso clericale*, trans. by D. Frontini, Bari: Dedalo 2009, pp. 203–241.

20 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *Un monde désenchanté?*, p. 97.

21 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 46.

human consortium of the spectre of division, and therefore of disorder and endemic conflict, as the “logical virtuality” of social life.²²

Politics offers itself as “the structural objectification of the conditions of possibility of being together” by countering this structural threat to the ordered and meaningful coexistence of individuals.²³ Since human societies are neither a fact of nature nor an artificial device under the full control of its creators, the power they exert over themselves occurs through a process of abstraction, self-transcendence, or rather “externalization”. For the French philosopher, “humanity is what it is precisely because of its capacity to establish a *relationship of exteriority* with itself”.²⁴ Politics, in short, is a continuous exercise of mediation that shifts the internal structural dissent that represents a natural condition for human beings to the plane of ordinary life and that, on the level of society, manifests itself in the guise of a dialectical tension between being-self and being-together. As Gauchet observes:

Man is endowed with a *self* (humanity is composed of *persons*) because he lives in society, because his existence is unimaginable outside the social element. [...] Man is the most social animal there is, and it is precisely this that identifies him psychically, that is, that pushes him beyond animality. The independence that makes him a person capable of self-determination is the basis of primordial sociality. Man is this social being who carries his society in the depths of his self, and it is for this reason that he can detach himself from it.²⁵

Politics, in its minimal sense, is therefore the both internal (*unity in plurality*) and external (*separateness in diversity*) condition for the possibility of a common future.

The Religion of the Savages as an Escape from Freedom

Granting a transcendental status to the political condition means, in point of fact, that there can be no societies without politics. If this is true, then how do we explain the existence of what the French anthropologist Pierre Clastres described, with a memorable definition, as “societies *against* the state”?²⁶

22 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *Un monde désenchanté?*, p. 97.

23 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, “Vers une anthroposociologie transcendente”, p. 229.

24 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, “Vers une anthroposociologie transcendente”, p. 229.

25 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, “Vers une anthroposociologie transcendente”, p. 224 et seq.

26 Cf. Clastres, Pierre, *Society against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, trans. by R. Hurley/A. Stein, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press 2020. On the decisive role played by Clastres’s ethnographic investigations in getting Gauchet’s theoretical project

Given that political action has a privileged relationship with power, hierarchy, and status distinctions, and that the state is the way in which the authority differentials of its members have traditionally been institutionalized and crystallized through force, the existence of human communities that have realized (at least implicitly) their political nature in opposition to statehood is a phenomenon that demands explanation. The stumbling block here is the elucidation of the deep structure of a form of life to which the human species has adapted over a very long period of its history. Given that it is not simply a question of society *without* the state, but of society *against* the state, the origin and logic of such systematic resistance to political division and its dynamic potential (without which, in Gauchet's perspective, human communities are precluded from 'entering' history) has to be investigated in depth.

The simplifying intuition behind Gauchet's grand narrative stems from this basic perplexity. After all, modern democracy is an egalitarian political system based on regulated competition for power between individuals who do not exist as a function of society, but who take it for granted that the only compelling reason for forming a social bond is some kind of personal gain. In primitive or savage societies, on the contrary, horizontal solidarity between members is made possible by a generalized renunciation of the exercise of sovereignty. Where does such a bifurcation come from and how can it be explained? Gauchet's concise (and full of implications) answer is as follows: *it all depends on religion*. In other words, if politics goes underground in primitive societies, "it is because its place has been occupied and neutralized by the religious".²⁷ Substantiating this claim, however, is no easy task. In order to do so, it is necessary to probe into the deep history of humanity, up to the threshold dividing the process of hominization from the cultural evolution of *homo sapiens*.²⁸ In so doing, one comes across the decisive role played by religion, that 'thing' which is difficult to define but equally difficult to disregard, in giving shape and order to the human social world. The savages' 'choice' to trade an almost universal condition of (personal) dispossession typical of state political domination for a more drastic (impersonal) dispossession on behalf

off the ground, see Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition politique*, pp. 11–16; Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, ch. 3 ("La leçon de l'ethnologie").

27 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition politique*, p. 13.

28 For a similar attempt to re-read the deep history of humankind in the light of its religious evolution, see Bellah, Robert N., *Religion in Human Evolution*. A comparison between the parallel theoretical trajectories of Bellah and Gauchet is sketched in Latré, Stijn, "The Axial Age and the Dynamics of Transcendence", in Stijn Latré/Walter Van Herck/Guido Vanheeswijck (eds.), *Radical Secularization? An Inquiry into the Religious Roots of Secular Culture*, New York: Bloomsbury 2014, pp. 190–206.

of an inaccessible otherness that admits no exceptions whatsoever actually depends on it.

This elementary conjecture is at the root of Gauchet's daring decision to draw up "a political history of religion" – i.e., the myth-history fleshed out by the French philosopher in *The Disenchantment of the World* – in which a millennial vector trajectory from the birth in the mists of time of archetype religion to its exit in the modern West is painted with broad strokes. It is a story, as I said above, told retrospectively, which aims to explain a contemporary condition that, albeit unreconciled, is clear in its world-historical pattern. The condition in question is the emancipation from that form of heteronomous life that has characterized human history since the dawn of time. "We can best observe", Gauchet claims in the first short chapter of *Le désenchantement du monde*,

the same twofold affirmation, as varied in expressions as it is unvaried in content, in the remnants of societies existing prior to the State. We can see in all of them both a radical dispossession of humans in relation to what determines their existence and an inviolable permanence in the order bringing them together. The underlying belief is that we owe everything we have, our way of living, our rules, our customs, and what we know, to beings of a different nature – to Ancestors, Heroes, or Gods. All we can do is follow, imitate, and repeat what they have taught us. In other words, everything governing our "works and days" was *handed down to us* [...] In short, the real kernel of religious attitudes and thought lies in accepting *the external as the originating source and the unchangeable as law*.²⁹

Gauchet's grand narrative's starting point is thus a paradoxical but effective way of reacting to the nagging presence of otherness in the human experience of the world. Rather than delegating the burden of alterity to individuals in their everyday lives, stateless societies lighten the (anthropological) burden of intra- and interpersonal divisions, by reducing them in the light of the infinitely higher (religious) chasm that separates the invisible foundation of the immutable order of things from visible realities. In this way, by delegating to an inaccessible and opaque otherness the instituting power that in principle belongs to politics, entry into history is indefinitely deferred. By this Gauchet means deferral of the access to that space of common action where the possibility of self-determination of one's own destiny is at stake. In a word: freedom.³⁰

29 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, pp. 49 and 56.

30 On the idea of a "society that is produced in time, as a totality", see Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, p. 307.

The Rise of the State and the Axial Turn

This is the opening scene of Gauchet's *grand récit*. From here on, the story that is told is essentially the internal history of religion, the gradual departure from its original matrix through "a transformation that produces radical novelties while proceeding along the lines of the previous organization, which it overturns point by point".³¹ The end goal, however, is not at hand and is preceded by a series of capital events whose sequence describes a zigzag trajectory that, although bounded from the outside by the range of possibilities opened up by the transcendental structure of human sociality, ultimately depends on the contingent actions of historical flesh-and-blood agents.

The first stage of this road to disenchantment is "the discontinuity par excellence of the human journey", "the event that severs history in two", namely the birth of the state.³² Gauchet's choice of such a historical breakthrough is at first sight startling. Only apparently, however. If religion makes its appearance on the stage of history as a kind of structural alternative to politics – or at least as an ersatz of the more destabilizing aspects of the political condition – it is only from politics that the spiritual change can begin. This innovation puts an end to the primordial dispossession of savage peoples in a short amount of time if measured against humanity's deep history. But while its beginning remains causally inexplicable – the only thing that can be said is that at some point in human history the change *happens*, in the same unexpected way that "catastrophic mutations"³³ do – the general sense and scope of the political-religious transformation are clear. Gauchet sums them up effectively when he speaks of a "*réduction pratique de l'altérité du fondement*" (practical reduction of the foundation's otherness).³⁴ That is, with the rise of the state, "the religious Other actually returns to the human sphere".³⁵ In particular, the gods (or the numinous) are "entangled" in history not so much as a result of new beliefs, but rather (1) through power devices, such as hierarchy and domination, which radically change social relations, and (2) through the unleashing of the expansive and assimilating logic of the will to power and the resultant

31 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, "Sécularisation ou sortie de la religion?", in: *Droits* (14/2014), pp. 3–10, here p. 6.

32 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, p. 107; Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 64.

33 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, p. 107.

34 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 63 (translation modified).

35 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 26.

upheaval made possible by the historically unprecedented practice of war of conquest.³⁶

The state, therefore, ‘secularizes’, i.e. it makes the religious more mundane and less enchanting, simply by releasing the instituting otherness from its condition of absolute opacity and indeterminacy. By anchoring religion in a systematic manner to ordinary social relations – that is, not to extra-daily events like rituals – the state opens up a channel of communication with the divine that lays the foundations for its localization, subjectivization and, no less important, its methodical thinkability (rationalization). Only in this way can the historical or “major” religions be born, which for a long time have been (at least, according to Gauchet) wrongly seen as

the true beginnings of a religious history leading to a more sophisticated representation of the divine, while the diffuse paganism of primitive peoples was simply regarded as a useful testimony to the universal nature of religious feelings in a rudimentary or undifferentiated state.³⁷

The historical discontinuity produced by the appearance of the state – this “intrinsically religion-producing enterprise”³⁸ – could be summarized differently by saying that it creates, in the archaic world, the conditions for an ‘Axial’ turn in the understanding and management of the sacred (i.e. invisible and separate) dimension of experience *within profane time*.³⁹ And, in fact, this (potential) revolution is physically realized in different forms in the Mediterranean civilization, or in Persia, India, China, in the fateful first millennium BCE: in the centuries, that is, of the “total radical transformation of the religious under the sign of transcendence and of the care for the true world against this world”.⁴⁰ The aspect of the dynamics of post-axial transcendence that attracts Gauchet’s attention is the structural tension between the dualism shared by the new worldviews that flourished almost simultaneously in Eurasia along the Silk Road and the existential urge to find a point of balance, if not synthesis, between the worldly and otherworldly poles of human experience from which derives the recurrent impulse to a monological recomposition (both in a theoretical and practical sense) of the Axial turn. The “*économie de l’Un ontologique*” (the economy of the ontological One), as the

36 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 67–76.

37 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 62 (translation modified).

38 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 79.

39 Gauchet speaks in this regard of a “latent possibility”; cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, p. 120.

40 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 78 (translation modified).

French philosopher calls it,⁴¹ is a form of resistance to the innovative potential of the Axial breakthrough that constantly resurfaces in the tangled history of attempts to institutionalize, in both secular and religious spheres, the new outlook based on the divide between the “here below” (*ici-bas*) and the beyond.

If, in the socio-political-anthropological perspective adopted by Gauchet, religion in its purest form is conceivable as a form of radical dispossession of the original instituting power of individuals on behalf of an otherness that is completely removed from human control, the departure from this condition of standstill must go through a process of determination or specification of the relationship between the visible and the invisible. In the history of the West, the transition from the order of things ‘in-itself’ typical of savage societies to modern constructivism takes place, for the author of *Le désenchantement du monde*, through the mediation of an unprecedented vision of the otherworldly which, among other things, personalizes the divinity, contrasting it with everyday reality as a supreme principle of activity that is no longer in-itself, but is for-itself.⁴² Just like in Weber, it is the historically astonishing emergence in the land of Israel of Jahvist monotheism that represents the decisive shift in the human theological imagination vis-à-vis the future disenchantment of the world. The genealogy is clear: modern Westerners are the fortunate and creative “heirs” of “Christian contradictions”.⁴³ Christianity, in turn, is integrally inscribed in the history of Judaism, composing “a single and identical trajectory to be treated in a rigorous *continuum*”.⁴⁴ Finally, Jewish monotheism stands out in the Axial nebula as a very special experiment with epochal consequences.

Given the conditions under which it took place, the rise of Jahvist monotheism confronts interpreters with “the enigma of a radical improbability”.⁴⁵ Few basic facts are enough to be convinced of this. A small oppressed people, relegated to the margins of history, launches a project, at first sight unreasonable, to “dominate *spiritually* those who dominate them *politically*”.⁴⁶ To this end, they construct the image of a unique God, supernatural and infinitely superior to any other divinity, who nevertheless establishes a privileged link with the nation of Israel, recognizing it as the chosen people – a partner in

41 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, pp. 116 and 102 (translation modified); Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, pp. 168–172, 287; Gauchet, Marcel, *Un monde désenchanté?*, p. 163.

42 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, pp. 281–291.

43 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *Un monde désenchanté?*, p. 186.

44 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, p. 131.

45 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 167; Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, pp. 121–125.

46 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, p. 122 (italics mine).

a covenant. The crux of the matter here is clearly the rigorous affirmation of an ontological duality from which an unprecedented metaphysical and ethical tension results, that is well illustrated by the enigmatic idea of the “*presence of the transcendent*” in history, ascertainable only in the form of signs and traces.⁴⁷

Between the ‘for-itself’ (God) and the ‘in-itself’ (world) lies the human being, who has access to both. The point is to choose who or what to serve. The urgency of deciding one way or the other places the people of Israel before the burden of an unprecedented and in many ways unheard of responsibility. Promise and threat overlap in the relationship of absolute dependence that the individual establishes with his creator. The outcome is politically and spiritually ambiguous. In one respect, as Gauchet observes,

it increased human dependency since it encouraged embracing and internalizing the decrees of a living will. [...] But in another respect, the all-powerful God became the one whose essence and aims will forever remain unfathomable. This in turn justified, if not demanded, our questioning the gap separating human achievements from his true will. This god opened up the infinite possibility of personal questioning, of inner dissent and spiritual challenge.⁴⁸

The Western Bifurcation

Measured according to the binary logic of the loss or recovery of the instituting power of humankind, Jahvist monotheism thus appears singularly enigmatic. On the one hand, God’s absolute transcendence opens up a potentially infinite space of action for human beings. On the other hand, however, divine omnipotence is so disproportionate from an earthly perspective that the relations that creatures can establish with the creator only seem to admit of unconditional subordination and, given the inexplicable particularism of the covenant, even arbitrary and unjustifiable subordination.

It is in this non-peaceful, non-stabilized spiritual horizon that Christian messianism offers itself as a promising way out of the contradiction that obstructed the Axial turn of Judaism. The impasse, as Gauchet remarks, depends on

resolutely maintaining a religion of oneness where the prospect of a religion of duality appeared together with the divine uniqueness. By having chosen his people, the unique and separated god remained intimately tied to this world. His loss of immanence to the world does not matter since his indissoluble union

47 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 173.

48 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 180.

with Israel kept him fundamentally connected to the human sphere and to the things of the *ici-bas*.⁴⁹

If the problem is the mediation between the here below and the beyond, the answer of that “Jewish heresy” which Christianity originally is can be summed up in one word, ‘incarnation’, and in one name, ‘Jesus of Nazareth’.⁵⁰

Reducing a very intricate issue to a slogan, one could say that in Gauchet’s view “Jesus maximizes the effects of the monotheistic rupture”, creating the conditions for the rise of an unprecedented civilization.⁵¹ This claim is not immediately comprehensible and has provoked much debate.⁵² In short, the French philosopher reads the Christian dogma of the incarnation as a theological device that, instead of mitigating the disjunction between the two orders of reality, the *ici-bas* and the beyond, brings the split to its extreme consequences. His key idea, in essence, is as follows. By becoming incarnate in a flesh-and-blood individual, God simultaneously affirms his own absolute otherness: it is as if he admitted that in order to reveal himself in history he is forced to take on a fully human form. The mediation between the visible and the invisible thus becomes a singular, unrepeatable event, which is offered to the human race as a whole as a dynamic factor: as an opportunity, that is, for a radical transformation of its conditions of existence. The redemption takes place, however, in a paradoxical and unexpected way. By means of his embodiment in an ordinary man, destined to suffer the disgrace of crucifixion, Jesus disrupts the traditional messianic imagery. The promised salvation is transformed into an indecipherable riddle. On the one hand, the events narrated in the Gospels are there to demonstrate that redemption is not an affair of this world. On the other hand, however, the very fact that God chose to subvert worldly hierarchies by exalting humility and poverty to the detriment of power and luxury, opens up unprecedented possibilities for human action and a hitherto inconceivable sense of history: “Who would ever have believed”, Gauchet sharply asks himself, “that powerlessness could be the source of true power?”⁵³

The Christian breakthrough is therefore to be sought in the inversion of the logic of Jewish messianism that results in a theological and spiritual

49 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 182 (translation modified).

50 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, p. 124.

51 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *Un monde désenchanté?*, p. 44.

52 Two of the most debated topics since the publication of *The Disenchantment of the World* are Gauchet’s original Christology and his theological underestimation of the Trinitarian doctrine. In this regard see Gauchet, Marcel, *Un monde désenchanté?*, ch. 1, and, for an overview of the discussion, Bergeron, Patrice, *La sortie de la religion*, pp. 69–74.

53 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, p. 132.

conundrum that also operates as a propeller of the social imaginary. The key to the riddle lies in the dynamism of the new economy of salvation. There are many thoughts to articulate here. First, there is the mystery of a transcendent God who takes on a human form – the infinite concentrated in a finite existence. This short-circuit of incommensurable magnitudes is simultaneously epic and tragic, but it also conceals an ordinary, familiar, prosaic side. The idea of the Word becoming flesh assumes an entirely new meaning in the light of the episodes narrated in the Gospels, suggesting the paradoxical theological figure of a downward transcendence. Being an event of profane history, the incarnation then immediately launches the challenge of the custody of a supernatural gift through ritual and personal forms of reiteration. This is a task entrusted as much to individuals in their interiority as to the community of believers, in its more or less organized forms. Thus began the history of the Christian churches as institutions invested with the mission of stabilizing the mediating action between the two orders of existence. It is, of course, a history full of pitfalls, punctuated by compromises with the everre-emerging economy of the ontological One, but at a certain point, around the year one thousand, it takes a particular turn in the West. This shift marks the beginning of the long and winding process that would lead to the “new world” – the fully disenchanting world – whose puzzle we struggle to solve today.

There is not enough space here for a detailed presentation of the story told many times and from different angles by Gauchet in his writings since *The Disenchantment of the World*. Here it is sufficient to list the main stages of this surprising trajectory that made Latin Christianity the religion of the definitive exit from the primordial religion or, restating the same idea in a positive key, of the reappropriation by humanity of its instituting power, in a word, of its *autonomy*. The ultimate meaning of the story is quite simple. Human freedom can only assert itself if the logic of ontological oneness does not prevail, if the “for-itself” is not flattened by the “in-itself”, or, put otherwise, if otherness enters into a dialectical relationship with identity.⁵⁴ From a religious perspective, therefore, the affirmation of ontological duality is an inescapable condition for the legitimation and enhancement of *ici-bas*. And this is the direction in which, according to Gauchet, Christianity in Europe moved after the gradual crumbling of the Carolingian synthesis, developing in an original way a potentiality inherent in the Axial turn. From the point of view of the history of the church, the crucial junction of this “western bifurcation” was the

54 Stijn Latré has rightly stressed the affinity between this cornerstone of Gauchet's thought and Sartre's existentialism in “The Axial Age and the Dynamics of Transcendence”, p. 191.

investiture controversy.⁵⁵ Gregory VII's political-ecclesiastical programme in fact initiated a long-term reform process that would have two main outcomes. On the political front, it would lead to the rise of the modern nation-state and the definition of a new concept of political sovereignty, independent of any source of external (even religious) legitimation. On the spiritual side, it was the Protestant Reformation that took the decisive step towards the definitive break with the economy of the ontological One through the iconic claim of the five "*solae*" (*sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus, soli Deo gloria*) and the simultaneous sanctification of ordinary life.⁵⁶

In *La condition historique*, Gauchet recapitulated the great modern transformation that led to the reabsorption of religious otherness in the "ici-bas", dividing it into three ideal-type stages: the theological-political moment (ca. 1500–1650), the theological-legal moment (ca. 1650–1800) and, finally, the "passage to conscious and deliberate historicity"⁵⁷. The first stage consists of the political revolution leading to the recognition of states (in the plural) as the ultimate instance responsible for the existence and welfare of the community. In the new perspective, the primary function of the state is no longer to embody a transcendent principle of order, but to represent the vital interests of the individuals who have established it by contract.⁵⁸ The second moment, on the other hand, has to do with the emergence, firstly, of legal culture and, subsequently, of the civilization of individual rights. The novelty represented by the triumph of the idea that society is in essence an aggregate of independent individuals goes hand in hand with the claim of the primacy of civil society over politics, now conceived as a social subsystem characterized by well-defined functions and purposes. This claim of independence of society against the state is, in turn, a symptom of a historically unprecedented confidence in the possibility of determining one's own destiny, which pushes moderns to prioritize orientation towards the future above all else. It is thanks to this faith in human perfectibility that modern historical consciousness is born. Not surprisingly, it is the ideologies and philosophies of progressive history that shape the public discourse and self-understanding of post-Enlightenment societies. This faith in humankind's ability to self-determine in profane time has in some cases – think only of twentieth-century totalitarianisms – gone

55 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, ch. 6.

56 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *Réforme et modernité*, in Marcel Gauchet, *Un monde désenchanté?*, pp. 161–182.

57 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, p. 293.

58 For a clear formulation of the epoch-making significance of this transition see Gauchet, Marcel, *De la théocratie à la démocratie*, in Marcel Gauchet, *Un monde désenchanté?*, pp. 143–160.

so far as to arouse in the masses the dream of an escape from the ceaseless dynamism of modern sociality to restore, in a completely different historical landscape, the economy of the ontological One.

A Non-triumphalist Farewell to Religion

This phase too, however, has come to an end and the world around us is, for Gauchet, a world in which the shift from heteronomy to autonomy, from religion to irreligion, has been definitively accomplished. “From a precise moment in the 1970s”, as we read in *La religion dans la démocratie* (1998),

without us even realizing it, that force of attraction which, even from afar, continued to keep us in the orbit of the divine, has disappeared. None of us can any longer see ourselves, as citizens, as being bound to the beyond. The City of Man is the work of man, to such an extent that it is blasphemous, even in the eyes of the most zealous of our believers, to mix the idea of God with the order that binds us and the disorder that divides us. To sum up the concept in one sentence, we have become *metaphysically democratic*.⁵⁹

“Metaphysically democratic” is an odd expression. The concept, however, is clear. With *la sortie de la religion*, otherness (and its seemingly insoluble conundrum) has shifted from outside to inside, from high to low, from the metaphysical to the anthropological plane of existence. If the bewilderment by which the human condition is constitutively afflicted was once projected into an extra-quotidian domain, in the modern West otherness has installed itself in everyday life: in the drama of knowledge (distinction between appearance and reality), in the theatre of social relations (the other as a condition of belonging to a community of affection or destiny), in the comedy of personal identity (the other who inhabits us and makes our relationship with ourselves painful). This permanence of the invisible in the visible also explains the survival of the ‘religious’ after the departure from religion as a mode of organization of collective existence.

Gauchet has dwelled on this aspect of the question both in the epilogue to *Le désenchantement du monde* and in the long and articulated debate sparked by its publication.⁶⁰ Particularly illustrative is a passage from his dialogue

59 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *La religion dans la démocratie. Parcours de la laïcité*, Paris: Gallimard 1998, p. 10 (italics mine).

60 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, pp. 309–320; Gauchet, Marcel, *La condition historique*, pp. 394–398; Gauchet, Marcel, *Un monde désenchanté?*, ch. 8 and 10; Gauchet, Marcel, *La démocratie contre elle-même*, Paris: Gallimard 2002, ch. 2; Debray,

with Luc Ferry, author of the best-seller *L'Homme-Dieu ou le sens de la vie*.⁶¹ The paragraph deserves to be quoted in its entirety because it clarifies the distinctive blend of history and anthropology on which Gauchet's *Zeitdiagnose* is based. "Even if we reject the idea of a religious nature of man or of a natural disposition to metaphysics", begins Gauchet's argument,

there must be something like an anthropological substratum from which human experience can be established and defined under the sign of religion. No political or social logic can explain how religion, that is, *the human investment in the invisible*, will unfold. What in man gives meaning to that diversion through the other? Because the cardinal phenomenon consists in this: it lies in those dimensions of invisibility and otherness that inhabit us constitutively. Man is a being who, in every case, is turned towards the invisible or claimed by otherness. These are axes of which he has an original and irreducible experience. He is not driven by the need for knowledge or rational understanding of natural phenomena, as a certain enlightened explanation of religion would have it. It is not the effect of a causal investigation that would commit the spirit to going back to the first causes beyond the visible ones. It is an immediate 'given' of consciousness, I dare say. Man speaks and encounters the invisible in his words. He tests himself, irreducibly, under the sign of the invisible. He cannot but think that there is more to him than what he sees, touches and feels. He imagines and immediately his thought is projected beyond what is accessible to him; and he presents himself to thought. What is more, he relates to himself and does so in order to discover that he can dispose of himself with a view to something other than himself. It is with this primordial material that religions are built. They are not produced automatically and linearly. They need something else entirely to define them. But this material makes them possible. There is, otherwise said, an anthropological structure that ensures that man *may* be a religious being (*qui fait que l'homme peut être un être de religion*). He is not necessarily so. He has been able to be so historically, for the longest part of his journey. He may cease to be so, but even in that case, that potential for religiosity is destined to remain.⁶²

The "ineliminable subjective stratum underlying the religious phenomenon" manifests itself in the form of a (living, rather than fossil) "remnant" in almost every corner of contemporary human experience. And it is, so to speak, continually solicited by the malaises afflicting late-modern societies, particularly

Régis/Gauchet, Marcel, "Du religieux, de sa permanence et de la possibilité d'en sortir", in: *Le Débat* (24/2003), pp. 3–17.

61 Cf. Ferry, Luc/Gauchet, Marcel, *Le religieux après la religion*, Grasset: Paris 2004; Ferry, Luc, *L'Homme-Dieu ou le sens de la vie*, Paris: Grasset 1996.

62 Cf. Ferry, Luc/Gauchet, Marcel, *Le religieux après la religion*, pp. 60–62. Reducing Gauchet's argument to a slogan, one could say that, after *la sortie de la religion*, we "can believe in the afterlife without having to obey it" or, in a slightly different key, that our world "is not without God but only outside his grasp" (cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *Un monde désenchanté?*, pp. 215 and 170).

those arising from the culture of narcissism, denounced by Christopher Lasch in an influential book.⁶³ Think only of the disagreements caused by references to truth or a common history in today's public discourse. Or consider the almost idolatrous relationship that many people have with artistic experience these days, and how this cult is intertwined with a profound confusion about the nature and meaning of personal identity. No less relevant is the structural fragility of moral resources when people are publicly or privately called upon to decide one way or the other in the face of dilemmas that test their inclination to adopt a detached or ironic stance. These kinds of ordinary experiences led Gauchet to acknowledge, perhaps reluctantly, that "even if we assume that the age of religions has been definitively closed, we should not doubt that, between private religious practices and substitutes for religious experience, we will probably never completely finish with the religious".⁶⁴

Beyond Secularization

At this point we have everything we need to assess the quality of Gauchet's effort to revise and maintain the standard thesis of secularization. On the one hand, the inspirational core of the classical theory remains essentially unchanged even in the new perspective. Modernity is in fact understood in the simplified terms of the transition from a condition of expropriating hegemony dictated by the religious (*heteronomy*) to its subversion in favour of a historically unprecedented primacy of the *ici-bas* (*autonomy*). However, continuity of inspiration is not enough to attribute to Gauchet an endorsement in the strict sense of the 'theorem' of secularization. In fact, significant theoretical innovations derive, on the one hand, from his efforts at explicating the content of the classical thesis and, on the other hand, from his careful reflection on its implications of method and merit. Discontinuity manifests itself in at least three different ways: as terminological caution (1); as an impulse to complexify the theoretical framework (2); as prudence in the diagnosis of the present time (3).

In this way Gauchet can distance himself from the overly offhand uses of both the term 'secularization' (or *laïcisation*) and the less popular but still vague notion of 'disenchantment', preferring what he sees as the more precise

63 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 309; Lasch, Christopher, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York: W.W. Norton 1979.

64 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *The Disenchantment of the World*, p. 309 et seq.

concept of the “departure or exit from religion” (*sortie de la religion*).⁶⁵ What worries him in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the two concepts is the inability to “intelligibly articulate the continuity and discontinuity at work simultaneously in this crucial process”.⁶⁶ To do justice to this basic intuition of a discontinuist metamorphosis of the religious – “neither *laïcisation* nor secularization, but metabolization in a new form of what previously passed through religion: this is the truth of our world”⁶⁷ – requires a more sophisticated theory and narrative than those employed by classical secularization theorists. This constraint explains both the methodological originality of the meta-narrative set up by Gauchet in *The Disenchantment of the World* and his endeavor to combine historical reconstruction with a reflection on the transcendental conditions of human subjectivity and sociality. Such theoretical complexity also accounts for the open character of the diagnosis of the times espoused by the French philosopher. The departure from religion is in fact an ambiguous, both liberating and aleatory, in some respects even alarming, historical event. As far as can be deduced from the overall tenor of Gauchet’s grand narrative, the real risk for humanity does not lie so much in religion, but in the expropriating and paralyzing effect of the economy of the ontological One. Human history’s conundrum, hence, is how to live with the ultimately unhealable schism that characterizes human beings’ experience of themselves, society and nature, without paying too high a price in terms of loss of autonomy or, on the contrary, narcissistic complacency and renunciation of any possible existential centre of gravity.

65 In the debate that followed the publication of *Le désenchantement du monde* Gauchet was, from the outset, explicit and consistent in expressing his distrust of the category of secularization. Several claims along this line can be found at different stages of Gauchet’s thought. See in this regard Gauchet, Marcel/Manent, Pierre, “Le christianisme et la cité modern”, in: *Esprit* (55/1986), p. 97 (“‘laïcisation’ ou ‘sécularisation’ – catégories que je rejette absolument”); Gauchet, Marcel, *Un monde désenchanté?*, p. 165 (“As far as I am concerned, I avoid the terms secularization, *laïcisation* and even disenchantment, a term I do not even use in the book which does contain it in its title and which I chose only because of its poetic force and relative neutrality”) and p. 73 (“‘secularization’ or ‘*laïcisation*’, to say nothing of ‘de-Christianization’, all categories which, incidentally, I do not appreciate very much”); Gauchet, Marcel, “Sécularisation ou sortie de la religion?”, p. 3 et seq. (“The concept of secularization has the advantage of having entered the scientific vocabulary. It is convenient, it has sufficient descriptive pertinence to enable agreement on the global phenomenon to which it refers. Its comprehensive scope, on the other hand, leaves something to be desired. It does not, it seems to me, allow one to grasp the intimate nature and real scope of the phenomenon it designates. [...] As soon as one delves beneath its uses, its limitations emerge. It is plagued by an insurmountable misunderstanding”).

66 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, “Sécularisation ou sortie de la religion?”, p. 4 et seq.

67 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, *Un monde désenchanté?*, p. 47.

As it was the case with Weber, the disenchantment of the world is for Gauchet a historical process that is both reasonable and ambivalent. That is, the process follows its own internal logic, but this logic neither denies historical contingency nor saturates the task of justification (I mean, it is not 'rational' in every possible sense of the term). It is this awareness of the uncertain character of what Adam Seligman famously called 'modernity's wager' that led the French philosopher to take the transversal (and recursive) path of a 'secularization' of the secularization thesis.⁶⁸ On balance, his ideal theoretical option looks like a sophisticated explanatory monism that aims to remedy "the inadequacy of the concept of secularization with respect to the breadth and depth of a process whose surface appearance is all it understands".⁶⁹ "Je ne suis pas un *Aufklärer* naïf", Gauchet declared a few years ago, duelling with Régis Debray.⁷⁰ And what he had in mind by proposing this miniature self-portrait he made quite clear once faced with Charles Taylor's rival position:

Far from the emancipation announced and hoped for by the Enlightenment, which should have enabled humanity to be reconciled with itself by overcoming religious alienation, the world that has emerged from religion has turned out to be more problematic than ever. One could speak in this regard of a "disenchantment of disenchantment".⁷¹

68 Cf. Seligman, Adam, *Modernity's Wager: Authority, the Self, and Transcendence*, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press 2000.

69 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, "Sécularisation ou sortie de la religion?", p. 10.

70 Cf. Debray, Régis/Gauchet, Marcel, "Du religieux, de sa permanence et de la possibilité d'en sortir", p. 7.

71 Cf. Gauchet, Marcel, "Le désenchantement désenchanté", in Sylvie Taussig (ed.), *Charles Taylor. Religion et sécularisation*, p. 82.

The Fragile Supremacy of Reason: Jürgen Habermas and the Concept of Post-Secularity

Faith and Knowledge: Duel at Ground Zero

When, a little over a month after the spectacular collapse of the Twin Towers, Jürgen Habermas, taking everyone by surprise, announced in Frankfurt's Paulskirche, before an audience eager to hear the opinion of one of Europe's most influential intellectuals, that secularization was “derailing” and that the time had come to interpret its unfinished dialectic within a post-secular horizon, even the most cautious observers had to take note and recognize that something had indeed changed in the general perception of the relationship between religion and modernity in the West.¹ The public gesture of the German philosopher – the champion of Enlightenment ideals, who had defended with all his intellectual energy the vitality of the modern project even during the short-lived but virulent postmodern wave that followed the crisis of Marxism in the late 1970s – has come to embody better than any book or scholarly article the change in intellectual atmosphere investigated in this book.

Since then, the true meaning of the words pronounced on that solemn occasion has been at the centre of a worldwide debate, in which sociologists, theologians, political scientists, jurists and, of course, philosophers of all persuasions have spoken.² Habermas himself, who had begun his speech by confiding his

-
- 1 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Faith and Knowledge”, in Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, trans. by H. Beister/M. Pinsky/W. Rehg, Cambridge: Polity Press 2003, p. 103 (“secularization miscarrying”). The expression “entgleisenden Säkularisierung der Gesellschaft” also occurs in Habermas, Jürgen, “Vorpolitische Grundlagen des demokratischen Rechtsstaates?”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion: Philosophische Aufsätze*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2005, p. 106 (translated as “uncontrolled’ secularization” by Ciaran Cronin in Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2008, p. 102). Detailed information about the context of Habermas’s lecture can be found in Müller Doohm, Stefan, *Habermas: A Biography*, trans. by D. Steuer, Cambridge: Polity Press 2016, pp. 327–329, and in Gordon, Peter, “What Hope Remains?”, in: *The New Republic* (14 December 2011), <https://newrepublic.com/article/98567/jurgen-habermas-religion-philosophy> (date of last access: 31.03.2022).
 - 2 For a comprehensive discussion of Habermas’s religious thought see Cunico, Gerardo, *Lettura di Habermas. Filosofia e religione nella società post-secolare*, Brescia: Queriniana 2009; Mendieta, Eduardo, “Introduction”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2002, pp. 1–36; Mendieta, Eduardo,

reluctance to “compete with the John Waynes among us intellectuals to see who is the fastest shot”, placidly admitted a few years later that his position was “not yet sufficiently developed”.³ This curious indecision is not only explained by Habermas’s argumentative style, which requires an ongoing dialogue with other thinkers and competing philosophical perspectives, but is more generally the symptom of an intricate and unresolved relationship with ‘religion’.

On the one hand, Habermas has never hidden his own sense of alienation from the experience of faith. Using an image made famous by Max Weber, he usually describes himself as *religiös unmusikalisch* – a person without religious sensitivity.⁴ This distinctive type of tone-deafness to the doctrinal contents and ritual practices of the various creeds and cults has its intellectual counterpart

-
- “Rationalization, Modernity and Secularization”, in Barbara Fultner (ed.), *Jürgen Habermas: Key Concepts*, London: Acumen Press, 2011, pp. 222–238; Mendieta, Eduardo, “Appendix: Religion in Habermas’s Work”, in Craig Calhoun/Eduardo Mendieta/Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds.), *Habermas and Religion*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2013, pp. 391–407; Maly, Sebastian, “Die Rolle der Religion in der postsäkularen Gesellschaft. Zur Religionsphilosophie von Jürgen Habermas”, in: *Theologie und Philosophie* (80/2005), pp. 546–65; Reder, Michael/Schmidt, Josef, “Introduction”, in Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Postsecular Age*, trans. by C. Cronin, Cambridge: Polity Press 2010, pp. 1–8; Arens, Edmund, “Theologie nach Habermas. Eine Einführung”, in Edmund Arens (ed.), *Habermas und die Theologie: Beiträge zur theologischen Rezeption, Diskussion und Kritik der Theorie Kommunikativen Handelns*, Düsseldorf: Patmos 1989, pp. 9–38; Junker-Kenny, Maureen, *Habermas and Theology*, London: T&T Clark 2011.
- 3 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Faith and Knowledge”, p. 101; Habermas, Jürgen, “Religion and Postmetaphysical Thinking. A Reply”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II: Essays and Replies*, trans. by C. Cronin, Cambridge: Polity Press 2017, p. 77. Habermas may have changed his mind now that his magnum opus on religion has seen the light of day. Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*. Band I: *Die okzidentale Konstellation von Glauben und Wissen*, and Band II: *Vernünftige Freiheit. Spuren des Diskurses über Glauben und Wissen*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2019. To get an idea of the arguments of those who claim that the book represents only a fine-tuning of Habermas’s position see the reviews by Ingolf U. Dalferth, Hans Joas and Vittorio Hösle respectively in *Theologische Literaturzeitung* (March 2020), pp. 231–238, *Theory, Culture & Society* (37/2020), pp. 47–52, and *Philosophische Rundschau* (68/2021), pp. 164–207.
- 4 Cf., for example, Habermas, Jürgen, “Faith and Knowledge”, p. 114 (“tone-deaf to religious connotations”); Habermas, Jürgen, “Pre-political Foundations of the Constitutional State?”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, p. 112. See also the translation of the same essay in Habermas, Jürgen/Ratzinger, Joseph, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, trans. by B. McNeil, San Francisco (CA): Ignatius Press 2006, p. 50 (“‘unmusical’ in religious matters”). There is no standard English translation of the evocative German expression. On its multiple meanings see Thaidigsmann, Edgar, “‘Religiös unmusikalisch’. Aspekte einer hermeneutischen Problematik”, in: *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* (108/2011), pp. 490–509; Kaesler, Dirk, “‘Religiös unmusikalisch’. Anmerkungen zum Verhältnis von Jürgen Habermas zu Max Weber”, in *literaturkritik.de* (6/2009): <http://literaturkritik.de/id/13142> (date of last access: 31.03.2022); Costa, Paolo, “Reenchantment as

in a non-polemical form of atheism or methodological agnosticism. In other respects, however, 'religion', elegantly escorted off the premises, reenters, as it were, through the window in Habermas's work. As the leading living member of the Frankfurt School and an advocate of an updated (if weakened) variety of critical theory of society, Habermas has always remained faithful to two constitutive elements of this school of thought: rejection of quietism and antipositivism. In other words, like any committed intellectual worthy of the name, even a postmetaphysical critical theorist cannot give up the belief that what is de facto – the current state of affairs – is not "all there is" – the awareness, that is, that "something is missing" – and the hope that the last word in judging what is there does not fall to the most outrageous, pathological, even horrible aspects of the present.⁵ It is no accident that religiously resonant terms have always been part of the vocabulary of social criticism since the beginning. Extending the analogy as far as possible, one could say that the *trait d'union* between a modern critical theorist and the prophets of the great religions is precisely the aspiration to judge the world against a truer, fairer and more beautiful mirror. What separates them is the former's desire to bring back to earth the horizon of redemption or transcendence, entrusting men and women with the task and responsibility of bridging the gap dividing the existent in its desolating facticity from its ideal term of comparison.

The coexistence in a single person and in a single system of thought of the two contrasting drives towards disenchantment and hope has made Habermas's view of the relationship between faith and knowledge unstable and dynamic. For a thinker who is fond of 'third ways' and committed – like the Kantian spider cursed by Nietzsche in a furious anathema of the *Antichrist*⁶ – to weaving a web capable of encompassing all the compelling reasons surfacing in the experience of modern individuals, it has not been easy to harmonize the departure from a cumbersome and yet inalienable cultural legacy such as that of the great religions with its selective and actualizing custody over the years. In order to achieve this ambitious goal, Habermas has ingeniously combined

Resonance', in Michiel Meijer/Herbert De Vriese (eds.), *The Philosophy of Reenchantment*, pp. 143–148 ("Religious Unmusicality in Light of Disenchantment").

- 5 On the Adornian and Blochian theme of "*Etwas fehlt*", cf. Brieskorn, Norbert, "On the Attempt to Recall a Relationship", in Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing*, pp. 24–35; see also Reder, Michael/Schmidt, Josef, "Habermas and Religion", in Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing*, p. 14 (note 5).
- 6 Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Anti-Christ*, trans. by H.L. Mencken, New York: A. Knopf 1924, p. 55 (§ 11): "This calamitous spinner of cobwebs passed for the *German* philosopher – still passes today!" [Dies Verhängnis von Spinne galt als der *deutsche* Philosoph – gilt es noch!]. In earlier texts, Nietzsche had already compared other rationalist philosophers such as Socrates and Spinoza to spiders.

Kant's respect for the limits and irretrievable 'fissures' of the modern form of life with a thoroughly Hegelian taste for a genealogy of reason aimed at a creative re-appropriation of figures of the human mind that have become obsolete but not insignificant.

Since the 1970s – a decade marked by the subsequently discarded project of reconstructing historical materialism – a stadial view of human development has been the cornerstone of Habermas's thought about religion.⁷ For the changes in the religious mind more easily appear as a decisive junction in the process of rationalization leading to the modern world if observed from an evolutionary point of view. It is important to observe right away that what fosters Habermas's reflection and motivates his reconstructive project is the opacity and inconsistency of 'modernization'. The key point, for a historically determined consciousness, is to understand how (i.e. through which intermediate stages) humanity could have arrived *here* from a radically different condition. And since 'today' is characterized by the high level of specialization and intellectualization of the varied spheres of action, 'yesterday' stands out in mirror image for its undifferentiated and rigid character. It is evidently no coincidence that the metaphor of "fluidification" (*Verflüssigung*) recurs so frequently in Habermas's reasoning. Like for many other modern apologists before him, modernization means above all the unpacking of an originally homogeneous complex, which has an empowering and emancipating impact on its hidden potentialities.

Specifically, Habermas's genealogy of reason is an affirmative genealogy in a strong sense, since it is based on a conception of human development as a teleological process of differentiation, which is describable also as a learning process. In other words, modern scientific, social, moral and aesthetic rationality has a non-extrinsic relationship with its own history – hence, a mistaken identification may result from neglecting its vast temporal horizon. But this history, in turn, incorporates a vector showing, in a para-Hegelian fashion, a growth of reflexivity or rather – to be faithful to the linguistic turn enthusiastically embraced by Habermas in the second phase of his career – the progressive unfolding of potentialities inherent in speech (the very medium of mutual understanding) on which the only real moments of (weak) unconditionality at work in historical contingency depend.

7 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. by T. McCarthy, Cambridge: Polity Press 1991, ch. 3; Habermas, Jürgen, "A Genealogical Analysis of the Cognitive Content of Morality", in Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, trans. by C. Cronin, Cambridge: Polity Press 2005, pp. 3–46, especially section 2.

Communicative Reason and the Unfinished Project of Modernity

In order to fully understand the importance of this evolutionary account of the dialectical nexus between religion and modernity, it may be useful to sketch out the complex architecture of Habermas's thought.⁸ The cornerstone is the idea of rational critique, that is of the duty to justify and the right to see justified with good arguments the claims to validity that are continually raised, more or less explicitly, in everyday interactions between individuals or between individuals and the institutions on which society is built. Habermas is a staunch defender of the modern form of life precisely because he believes that the essence of cultural modernity lies in the recognition of rational critique as the only legitimate source of authority. Ideally, in a modern *Lebenswelt*, justifications based solely on reference to texts considered infallible or customs handed down authoritatively should give way to rigorous arguments, to which individuals can freely give or withhold their reasoned assent.

Unlike the most prominent figures of the first generation of Critical Theorists, however, Habermas is persuaded that this kind of criticism lies at the heart of modern democracies and that the process of economic and bureaucratic rationalization has not completely inhibited the power of good arguments. For such a capability to be possible, though, there must be ideal – i.e. normative – standards that not only counterfactually transcend everyday reality, but are at least partly already at work in ordinary activities and relationships. Habermas is a rationalist not only because he regards reason as a *sui generis* power, endowed with its own unique persuasive force that cannot be reduced to other coercive forms of influence, but also because he is convinced that it is already at work in daily life. This is not to deny that our lives could be much more rational than they are today. The world is far from perfect. Its flaws, however, only prove that modernity, with its ideals of autonomy, authenticity, freedom, rationality, represents an unfinished project that needs to be continually updated, not dismissed on the spur of the moment, with flippant gestures that are as emphatic as they are unthoughtful.

For Habermas, therefore, the main challenge is to reconstruct the enabling conditions of social criticism. To this aim, the German philosopher has over the years built up a complex theory of speech acts and, on this basis, an

8 For an overview of Habermas's theoretical system see Cunico, Gerardo, *Lettura di Habermas*, part 1; Fultner, Barbara (ed.), *Jürgen Habermas: Key Concepts*; Ingram, David, *Habermas: Introduction and Analysis*, Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press 2010; Outhwaite, William, *Habermas: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press, second edition, 2009; Petrucciani, Stefano, *Introduzione a Habermas*, Rome/Bari: Laterza 2000.

understanding of human rationality in which the full development of a communicative competence appears as the bedrock of cultural evolution, something like a primary anthropological endowment rooted in humans' linguisticity, which only in modern living conditions would unfold its full potential.

Following Weber, Habermas interprets the slow historical development leading to cultural modernity as a process of rationalization and disenchantment of the mythical images of the world in which a holistic mindset unable to keep the three value spheres (cognitive, moral, expressive) clearly separate made way to a more rigorous grasp of the differences between the various claims to validity (truth, rightness, authenticity). This evolutionary transition rendered the life conditions of moderns deeper and thicker, increasing exponentially the need and the ability to control and manage both natural processes and interpersonal dynamics. Hence, the process of rationalization is also seen by Habermas as the collective emancipation from forms of life that were inadequate because insufficiently differentiated and, in Kantian terms, as a process of maturation analogous to that experienced by individuals in the course of their lives when they go through a decentralizing shift from 'I-' and 'we-centered' perspectives.

From the beginnings of his career, Habermas has sought in the communicative competence of speakers – in interaction, in linguistic practice – rather than in the minds of individuals or in the instrumental efficacy of their actions, the cognitive resources that have made such an evolutionary leap possible. The intuition around which his "linguistic Kantianism" revolves⁹ is that human communication has a telos, an ideal purpose: agreement (*Einverständnis*). That is, when human beings communicate to coordinate their actions, they cannot help but assume that the ultimate goal of their linguistic exchanges is a 'rational' (i.e. determined solely by free conviction) accord. Needless to say, Habermas is not naïve and is well aware that people most often use language not to understand each other, but to surreptitiously induce others to do things that will benefit them. However, these uses of language that he calls strategic presuppose, in his view, communicative uses and are parasitic with respect to them. There is therefore a so-called 'formal-pragmatic' (that is, attestable through a formal analysis of speech acts) preeminence of communicative rationality over instrumental rationality, even when the latter assumes the very effectual guise of domination.

9 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, *Truth and Justification*, trans. by B. Fultner, Cambridge: Polity Press 2003, p. 7.

To sum up, for Habermas human beings are rational animals not by nature, but because they are beings endowed with language, and language is a medium of communication with the inherent telos of undistorted (domination-free) understanding. This goal is pursued by speakers by making justifiable claims to validity and by redeeming them discursively. The unforced coercion of the best argument that counterfactually orients human communication is, in its own way, a 'natural' and therefore potentially universal endowment of our species that has found in the scientific community and in modern democracies two significant institutional embodiments. Since human societies reproduce themselves – i.e., they maintain order and coordinate actions – also thanks to language, the communicative dimension of social practice contains potentials for criticism that can be relied upon by all those who want to improve and advance things within society. In modernity, individuals who criticize their societies are thus never powerless or lacking in reasons: it is the very way in which they are socialized that provides them with tons of them. Reasons are everywhere you look, so to speak.

This does not mean that Habermas's diagnosis of modernity is all sunshine and rainbows. On the contrary, Habermas believes that the modern process of rationalization is irrationally skewed in favour of instrumental rationality and that it underutilizes communicative reason. Specifically, this means that the functional logics of the capitalist market and the bureaucratic state prevail in modern society. The steering media of money and power, that is, bypass the communicative logic of understanding and tend to colonize the lifeworld, where horizontal and not vertical, personal and not anonymous forms of integration should instead at least offset them. The pathological drift of capitalist modernization consists precisely in the growing gap between the *Lebenswelt* and the subsystems of the market economy and state power. Habermas's social theory thus fulfils its critical function primarily through the denunciation of this imbalance and the description and vindication of an integral model of rationality that is not confined to the heaven of good intentions, but is already at work in the daily routine of agents who cooperate and establish bonds of solidarity among themselves.

Postsecularity and Postsecularism

In a systematic manner in the *Theory of Communicative Action*, but in later writings as well, Habermas has thus investigated the historical background of European civilization from a specific understanding of the communicative competence of speakers and the imperfect realization of the conditions for its

institutional embedding in the modern world (which is, precisely, an *unvollendetes Projekt* – a project that is still waiting to be accomplished).¹⁰ The genealogy of modern reason proceeds in his work in parallel with, on the one hand, a critical reading of the present situation and, on the other hand, an increasingly precise characterization of the nature and limits of reason itself. This explains why his *soziologische Zeitdiagnose* clashes head-on with the postmodern farewell to modern ideals and instead joins forces with a postmetaphysical view of reason, which he interprets as a justified internal development of its concept and historical embodiments, in other words as a growth in reflexivity.

But what about ‘postsecularity’? What kind of progress does it represent in human history? What form of learning lies behind the recognition of the limits of the theorem of secularization? How does (or should) our view of reason, its potentialities and its genealogical background, change in the light of the recontextualization attested to by the assent given to the use of the prefix ‘post’ in this regard?

When Habermas describes today’s societies as postsecular, he has two different things in mind.¹¹ Firstly, he wants to signal his endorsement of the new sociological doxa which, starting from the empirical observation of the non-residual vitality of religious communities and convictions around the world – particularly the more “orthodox and conservative” ones, and this, as we shall see below, is a crucial detail for him – has encouraged a revision of the standard secularization thesis.¹² The persistence in modern consciousness of semantic

10 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Die Moderne – ein unvollendetes Projekt” (1980), in Jürgen Habermas, *Kleine Politische Schriften I–IV*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1981, pp. 444–464 (an English translation by Sheila Benhabib entitled “Modernity – an Incomplete Project” can be found in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, London: Pluto 1985, pp. 3–16). Habermas’s point of view is only sketched out in this occasional paper (it was the speech given by Habermas at the award ceremony of the Adorno Prize). For the fully developed argument see Habermas, Jürgen, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. by F.G. Lawrence, Cambridge (MA): MIT Press 1990.

11 For a self-interpretation by the selfsame author see “The New Philosophical Interest in Religion. A Conversation with Eduardo Mendieta”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, pp. 62–64.

12 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “The Resurgence of Religion. A Challenge for a Secular Self-Interpretation of Modernity”, in: *Diánoia* (53/2008), p. 4; Habermas, Jürgen, “Religion in the Public Sphere of ‘Post-Secular’ Society”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, p. 212; Habermas, Jürgen, “An Awareness of What Is Missing”, in Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing*, p. 19. The major novelty represented by the introduction of the sociological predicate ‘post-secular’ in Habermas’s account of contemporary society is precisely the realization that “religious groups will continue to exist and that the different religious traditions will remain relevant, even if the societies themselves are largely secularized” (cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “The New Philosophical Interest

potentials of religious origin which, while remaining opaque, cannot be dismissed as mere “relics of the Axial age”,¹³ brings to light a structural deficit of the former mainstream view and calls for an updating of all staged visions of human history, including his own. The main shortcomings of these theories, apart from their vectorial nature, are, on the one hand, the hasty way in which they conceive of human evolution and, on the other hand, the inadequate representation of the relationship between religiosity and secularity as a zero-sum game.¹⁴ “Philosophy cannot fail to be disconcerted by this contemporaneity of religion”, Habermas frankly admitted in the preface to *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*,

because a relationship of parity between philosophy and religion would profoundly alter the constellation that became established in the eighteenth-century. Since that time, philosophy, in an alliance with the sciences, had either treated religion as an obscure object in need of explanation (as did Hume, for example) or subsumed it under its own concepts as a past but transparent intellectual formation (as from Kant to Hegel). But now, by contrast, philosophy encounters religion not as a past but as a present-day formation, however opaque. What does this mean for philosophy’s self-understanding?¹⁵

Habermas’s self-criticism has certainly not gone unnoticed, but it has been seen by some members of the *nouvelle vague* as a late and opportunistic move. David Martin, for example, dismissed the turn as a manoeuvre that was “at least as sociologically naive as it is philosophically sophisticated”.¹⁶ The point, as Hans Joas has pointed out, is that “the term ‘post-secular’, if it is to be meaningful, must refer to a change vis-à-vis an earlier phase. But it is not clear when

in Religion. A Conversation with Eduardo Mendieta”, p. 63). In essays dating back to the beginning of the 1970s, one can find instead sporadic references to the “collapse of religious consciousness”, to the “mass phenomenon [of] the loss of hope in redemption and the expectation of grace”, to a “mass atheism [in which] even the utopian contents of tradition have been lost”. Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Does Philosophy still Have a Purpose?” (1971) and “Walter Benjamin: Consciousness Raising or Rescuing Critique” (1972), both in Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, transl. by F.G. Lawrence, Cambridge (MA): MIT Press 1983, pp. 17 et seq. and 141.

13 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “A Symposium on Faith and Knowledge: Reply to Objections, Response to Suggestions”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, p. 124.

14 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Linguistification of the Sacred. In Place of a Preface”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, p. xiv; Habermas, Jürgen, “A Symposium on Faith and Knowledge”, p. 149; Habermas, Jürgen, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 104; Habermas, Jürgen, “Religion and Postmetaphysical Thinking: A Reply”, p. 78.

15 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Linguistification of the Sacred. In Place of a Preface”, p. ix.

16 Cf. Martin, David, *The Future of Christianity: Reflections on Violence and Democracy, Religion and Secularization*, Farnham: Ashgate 2011, pp. 149–152.

this previous 'secular' society is supposed to have existed, and what is really meant by the term".¹⁷ It is precisely the suddenness of the diagnosis that raises the suspicion that behind the proclamation of historical novelty lies a familiar short-circuit between the autobiographical and world-historical planes. "As so often in his life", Joas observed with a hint of malice,

Habermas's sure instincts had enabled him to build a bridge between his systematic thought and current events. He not only managed to satisfy the general hunger for interpretation of a public stirred up by the events of September 11, 2001, he also offered a way out, particularly to all those liberally inclined intellectuals who had long harbored the happy notion that secularization is a quasi-automatic feature of modernization.¹⁸

Indeed, Habermas describes a double change of today's world. The most macroscopic one is the de-secularization of socio-political dynamics at a global level (the examples are well known and range from the Shiite revolution in Iran to the religious turn taken by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). From the point of view of a mentality shift, however, an indirect but not independent consequence of this unforeseen event is the erosion of the secularistic belief that "cultural and social modernization can advance only at the cost of the public influence and personal relevance of religion".¹⁹ The two data of reality end up intertwining and make the traditional link between modernization and the decline of religion progressively less obvious. But what are the most plausible theoretical implications of this empirical observation?

The question is more complex than it might appear at first sight as it brings into play a plurality of levels of explanation. Michael Warner hit the nail on the head when he noted that

the currently fashionable talk of the 'post-secular' [...] rests on a conflation of secularity with a specific program of political secularism; the latter may be in crisis, but there is no way of telling how deep that crisis is without understanding how political secularism is only one manifestation of secularity.²⁰

If, for example, one uncritically assumes the standard meaning of secularization as a process of dissolution without remains of the 'religious-in-history',

17 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Do We Need Religion?*, p. 106.

18 Cf. Joas, Hans, *Do We Need Religion?*, p. 135. Habermas's responsiveness to the spirit of the times is also underlined in Mendieta, Eduardo, "Introduction", p. 12; Mendieta, Eduardo, "Appendix: Religion in Habermas's Work", p. 403.

19 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Religion in the Public Sphere of 'Post-Secular' Society", p. 214.

20 Cf. Warner, Michael, "Was Antebellum America Secular?".

then post-secularity should be understood as the inexplicable reversal of a long-term historical development along the lines of the more polemical uses of the category of ‘post-modernism’ (a highly improbable event – and, in fact, Habermas himself hesitates to go that far).²¹ Put concisely, the change is there, but the discontinuity is not such as to justify the picture of a historical *revanche*. The surprising resilience of ‘religion’ even in a generally unfavourable context leads the German philosopher to place, with due caution, a ‘transitive’ interpretation of secularization alongside the ‘intransitive’ one. The former, as I pointed out in the introduction, understands secularization not as a mere decline or exhaustion of the religious form of life, but as a slow process of ‘translation’ (in the double meaning of the term) of a cultural substratum (“a legacy”) that, while undergoing significant alterations, remains “*substantially unchanged*” over time.²² Assuming that all of this in no way calls into question the legitimacy of the modern wager (which rests on the solid foundations of communicative rationality), how then do we explain the fact that the semantic potentials of the great religions have not dissolved into thin air? Is it just a matter of social function, or do they convey contents that cannot be apprehended autonomously by secular reason?

Habermas answers these questions by blending the acknowledgment of the vitality of religion and the signs of an impending crisis in secular culture with a judgement on the non-self-sufficient character of secular reason and

21 Cf., for example, Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere of ‘Post-Secular’ Society”, p. 289–290 et seq. If one reads Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* and Habermas’s *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* in parallel, one can detect a singular role playing by two key voices in the recent secularization debate. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor performs an operation analogous to that carried out by Habermas in his most significant contribution to the dispute between modernism and postmodernism. In short, the Canadian philosopher argues against an inadequate (because not sufficiently differentiated) understanding of secularity and tries to partly incorporate the antithesis between belief and unbelief within his framework, instead of hypostatizing it in a non-dialectical way. Simplifying the matter as much as possible, it could be said that just as one does not do justice to the modern age when this is portrayed as the cradle of an exclusively instrumental rationality, it is equally wrong to conceive of the secular age as an age without God. From the very beginning, after all, modernity has harbored a specific form of protest against rationalism. And, likewise, secularity has fostered the emergence of new forms of spirituality. For an astute comparison between the perspectives of the two authors see Spohn, Ulrike, “A Difference in Kind? Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor on Post-secularism”, in: *The European Legacy* (20/2015), pp. 120–135.

22 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “A Conversation about God and the World: *Interview with Eduardo Mendieta*”, trans. by M. Pensky, in Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, trans. by C. Cronin/E. Crump/P. Dews/P.P. Kenny/F.G. Lawrence/M. Pensky, edited by Eduardo Mendieta, Cambridge: Polity Press 2002, p. 148 (italics mine).

its dependence on experiences and orders of discourse that go beyond its sphere of competence. At this juncture, however, Habermas's thought process becomes tortuous and makes the interpreter's task more difficult, as we are forced to disentangle the various strands of a long argument that wavers between daily news and the deep history of mankind. On the one hand, as we have just seen, the term 'postsecular' designates a historical phase in which the long wave of the simultaneous processes of de-Christianization, confession-alization and pluralization triggered by the appearance of a radically secular type of humanism is running out. This is the historical phenomenon that falls under the heading of Taylor's 'Immanent Frame'. From this standpoint, post-secularity can be interpreted as a twist toward a less shielded variety of the 'Frame'. A postsecular society, strictly speaking, is not a society that has lost its secular, profane character. On the contrary, the word indicates a civilization that, although it has been profoundly shaped by exclusive humanism, is not without significant spiritual and religious dynamism.

Things are different, however, if by 'postsecular' we mean something like 'postsecularist'. Here we come across a different strand of Habermas's argument and his claim about postsecularity becomes almost a corollary of his diagnosis regarding the 'postmetaphysical' character of late modern thought. By changing the name, the theoretical background also changes, as does the field of positions in need of clarification which, in keeping with the architectural impulse that permeates Habermas's work, demand a recontextualization within a broader and more inclusive horizon. Here, the traditional aversion of critical theory to positivism and, more specifically, Habermas's dissatisfaction with the results of the radical secularization of contemporary *geistlichen* horizons made possible by the combination of an unrestrained global capitalism and a morally insensitive scientific naturalism, takes on decisive importance. This was also a key concern in *The Future of Human Nature*, one of the German philosopher's most audacious and controversial writings. Published just a few months before the speech from which this chapter took its cue, the book, with its extravagant appeal to "moralize human nature" against the risks of a liberal eugenics, understandably aroused a surge of interest in Catholic circles, to the annoyance of more liberal-minded readers.²³

23 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, *The Future of Human Nature*. For an in-depth discussion of Habermas's argument see Costa, Paolo "Che cosa significa moralizzare la natura umana? Una nota su *Il futuro della natura umana* di Jürgen Habermas", in: *Humanitas* (59/2004), pp. 55–62.

In his attempt to trace a third way between a reductionist naturalism that threatens to “reinforce a normatively hollowed-out human self-understanding”²⁴ and a fanaticism hostile to modernity as such, Habermas recognizes a potential ally not so much in religion per se as in the religious traditions descending from the Axial turn. There are two characteristics of the latter that he considers crucial from an evolutionary point of view. The first is the verticality of the reference to an absolute capable of relativizing every subjective claim as a point of view on the whole and thus disclosing the possibility of a true universal brotherhood. The second is the desacralization of all earthly powers. The latter, among other things, establishes the primacy of criticism over coercion or, if you like, upholds the (noumenal) power to demand compelling reasons for action in spite of the (factual) power to impose one’s own will regardless of any reasons that might oppose it. Habermas’s antipathy for all variants of neopaganism that advocate a return from logos to myth and are willing to disavow these valuable achievements of human mind is no less vehement than Moses’ anger against the worshippers of the golden calf.²⁵ However, the alliance with the great post-axial religious traditions does not occur on a level playing field. Although the secular philosopher inherits these precious gifts from the past, she can only use them *creatively*, by transposing them into her own intellectual environment after disencapsulating them from their original context of use. In short, she can only enhance them if she can translate them into a contemporary language.

How can one describe the new philosophical situation that Habermas presents as an irreversible epistemic gain, behind which, that is, it is no longer possible to recede deliberately and without catastrophic consequences? The term that best characterizes it, as I said above, is ‘postmetaphysical’. Unlike ‘post-modern’, however, ‘postmetaphysical’ does not indicate a departure from “the inconstant spirit of modernity, which is oriented toward innovation, experimentation, and acceleration”, but rather a further radicalization of it.²⁶ Indeed,

24 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “A Symposium on Faith and Knowledge”, p. 210.

25 For an eloquent example of the German philosopher’s aversion to the “small subcultural ersatz religions”, see Habermas, Jürgen, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 184: “In the mysticism of the New Paganism, the unbounded charisma of what is outside the everyday does not issue in something liberating, as it does with the aesthetic; nor in something renewing, as with the religious, it has at most the stimulus of charlatanry”. The topos of the “regression below the level of identity reached in communication with the one God” was already present in Habermas, Jürgen, “Does Philosophy still Have a Purpose?”, p. 18.

26 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “The Horizon of Modernity Is Shifting”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, trans. by W.M. Hohengarten, Cambridge: Polity Press 1992, p. 3.

it is thanks to it that the philosophical culture of the *Neuzeit* definitively frees itself of any residual links with the metaphysical mindset.

What does this departure entail, specifically? First of all, it means a fallibilist and procedural weakening of the claim of philosophical Reason to operate as the organ of the “Truth of the Whole” (Hegel). Such a privileged position in the field of knowledge is not within the reach of any disciplines that today would claim for themselves the old foundational and transcendental role of metaphysics. This also applies to philosophy, which “can no longer refer to the whole of the world, of nature, of history, of society, in the sense of a totalizing knowledge”.²⁷ This means that postmetaphysical thought has definitively cut its ties with “mythological thinking that focuses on origins” and gave up once and for all the hope of acting “as an equivalent for the unifying power of religion”.²⁸

From a theoretical point of view, this renunciation is tantamount to a de-transcendentalization of the cognitive enterprise. In other words, there is no longer a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem* of scientific investigation that can serve as a view from nowhere with respect to the empirical investigations of the *Einzelwissenschaften* (single disciplines). The postmetaphysical turn thus also implies the abandonment of the Cartesian dream of bringing the totality of experience back to consciousness as the ultimate foundation of all certainty. The knowing subject is replaced by language as the tangible context of understanding for individuals who interact in concrete communicative situations, agreeing on something in the objective, social or inner world. In this way “world-constitutive (*weltkonstituierenden*) accomplishments are transferred from transcendental subjectivity to grammatical structures. The reconstructive work of the linguist replaces a kind of introspection that cannot be readily checked on”.²⁹

From a practical point of view, however, the departure from any claim to totality and ultimate foundation takes the form, *first and foremost*, of a farewell to utopia and the Enlightenment dream of a complete emancipation of the human beings. This residue of salvific imagery must surrender to the idea that “neither social collectives nor society as a whole can be regarded as

27 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Volume 1: *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. by T. McCarthy, Cambridge: Polity Press 1984, p. 1.

28 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of its Voices”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, p. 117; Habermas, Jürgen, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 84.

29 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “The Horizon of Modernity Is Shifting”, p. 7.

a subject writ large”.³⁰ The renunciation of utopia also goes together with the recognition of the impossibility of realistically imagining the emergence from the condition of minority for which humanity must blame itself. “The concept of modernity”, Habermas admitted with a fatalism that has a close link with his religious tone-deafness, “no longer comes with a promise of happiness. But despite all the talk of postmodernity, there are no visible rational alternatives to this form of life”.³¹ In terms of political culture, finally, the abandonment of dreams of radical transformation of the existent amounts, in essence, to the recognition of the fact of pluralism and the endorsement of a variety of political liberalism that Habermas, with his usual love of subtle distinctions, labels as “Kantian republicanism”.³²

In short, Habermas sees postmetaphysical thought as a form of fallible, detranscendentalized, anti-foundationalist and anti-dogmatic knowledge. It is the product of a “skeptical”, “weak”, “profane, yet not defeatist” reason that “can contribute its best to a nonexclusive division of labor, namely, its persistent tenacity in posing questions universalistically”, only if it does not break its bond with common sense.³³ “Even if philosophy does find its niche in this way *within* the scientific system”, Habermas observes with sovereign detachment, “it need not by any means completely surrender the relationship to the whole that had distinguished metaphysics”.³⁴ The crucial difference is that, in a postmetaphysical context, the place of the whole is occupied by the life-world, that is, by “a totality (*Ganzheit*) that is unproblematized, nonobjectified, and pretheoretical”, what is called common sense in English. “In an awkward way, philosophy”, he points out,

30 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “What Theories Can Accomplish – And what they Can’t”, in Jürgen Habermas, *The Past as Future*, trans. by M. Pensky, Lincoln (NE): University of Nebraska Press 1994, p. 104. See also Habermas, Jürgen, “Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in the World”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, p. 154: “The proceduralist concept of rationality that I propose cannot sustain utopian projects for concrete forms of life as a whole”.

31 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “What Theories Can Accomplish – And what they Can’t”, p. 107.

32 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “‘Reasonable’ versus ‘True’, or the Morality of Worldviews”, in Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, p. 101: “Kantian republicanism, as I understand it, starts from a different intuition. Nobody can be free at the expense of somebody else’s freedom”.

33 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Prefazione”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Il pensiero post-metafisico*, trans. by M. Calloni, Laterza: Rome/Bari 1991, p. 3; Habermas, Jürgen, “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, p. 38; Habermas, Jürgen, “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of its Voices”, p. 142; Habermas, Jürgen, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 113.

34 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking”, p. 38; Habermas, Jürgen, “Faith and Knowledge”, pp. 108–111 (“Democratic Common Sense and Religion”).

has always been closely affiliated with the latter. Like it, philosophy moves within the vicinity of the lifeworld; its relation to the totality of this receding horizon of everyday knowledge is similar to that of common sense. And yet, through the subversive power of reflection and of illuminating, critical, and dissecting analysis, philosophy is completely opposed to common sense. By virtue of this intimate yet fractured relation to the lifeworld, philosophy is also well suited for a role on this side of the scientific system – for the role of an interpreter mediating between the expert cultures.³⁵

This Janus-face image of philosophy is captured by Habermas through the powerful mantra of the “unity of reason in the diversity of its voices”.³⁶

If secularism, just like the bald naturalism of scientists and unlike the soft naturalism advocated by Habermas, is seen as a form of dogmatic monism, which endorses an untenable ideal of epistemic self-sufficiency, then Habermas’s postsecularism appears as the offspring of a postmetaphysical mentality capable of recognizing its own limits and with them the need, if necessary, to rely on non-scientific and non-modern sources of knowledge. “Along with fundamental metaphysical concepts”, Habermas admitted as early as 1988, “a metaphysically affirmed atheism is also no longer tenable. [...] In our parts of the world, the grounds for a politically motivated atheism or, better, for a militant *laicism*, have also, by and large, fallen away”.³⁷ With the decline of secular religions, alliances can vary without becoming opportunistic. The main rivals of postmetaphysical reason, after all, are nowadays the opposite extremes of religious fundamentalism and scientific reductionism. It is in keeping with this pragmatic stance that in the *Future of Human Nature*, the German philosopher made his concern about the weakness of the postmetaphysical arguments in favour of the anti-utilitarian and anti-individualistic goal of stabilizing a form of life compatible with modern universalist morality prevail over the fight against religious fanaticism. In the face of such a deficit in modern procedural reason, it is not surprising that what Habermas often calls

35 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking”, p. 39.

36 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “The Horizon of Modernity Is Shifting”, p. 9, and “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of its Voices”.

37 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in the World”, p. 69. This is not the only possible interpretation of overcoming metaphysics. A more polemical view of the relationship between (postmetaphysical) philosophy and religion can be found in earlier essays. See Habermas, Jürgen, “Does Philosophy still Have a Purpose?”, p. 12: “Postmetaphysical thought does not dispute determinate theological affirmations; instead it affirms their meaninglessness. It means to prove that in the system of basic terms in which the Judeo-Christian tradition has been dogmatized (and thereby rationalized) theological meaningful affirmations cannot be set forth at all”.

the “un- or not yet exhausted semantic potentials” encapsulated in the great religions should gain in importance.³⁸

From the Sacred to the Logos

The idea that religious beliefs are beliefs of a special kind and that, in their pure form, they are incompatible with the modern form of life is an intuition that has accompanied Habermas's thought from the outset and was developed in detail in the second volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action*. The kindred metaphors of the ‘linguistification’ (*Versprachlichung*) or communicative fluidification (*Verflüssigung*) of the sacred are based on this insight, thanks to which the stadial view of history embraced by the German philosopher takes on a plastic form. Both suggest the image of something stiffened, crystallized, condensed: a bulk of undifferentiated contents that are interwoven into an organic totality and whose meaning depends crucially on such resistance to being broken down.

A key point in Habermas's argument is precisely the attribution of a *sui generis* status to the semantic contents coagulated in religious faiths and practices. From his point of view, if religion is to be understood as an independent and historically significant intellectual figure, its definition cannot be diluted to the point where any generic aspiration to a good or ‘full’ life is included in the ‘religious.’³⁹ Religion, in short, is something different from an existential project. In particular, its definition cannot fail to include a reference to myth and ritual as indispensable collective devices for coping with the contingencies

38 The expression “*noch nicht abgegoltene* or *noch nicht ausgeschöpfte semantische Potentiale*” recurs frequently in Habermas's thoughts about religion. Cf., for example, Habermas, Jürgen, “Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in the World”, p. 71; Habermas, Jürgen, “Linguistification of the Sacred. In Place of a Preface”, p. xii; Habermas, Jürgen, “A Symposium on Faith and Knowledge”, p. 147; Habermas, Jürgen, “Religion and Postmetaphysical Thinking: A Reply”, p. 83; Habermas, Jürgen, “Rawls's Political Liberalism. Reply to the Resumption of a Discussion”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, p. 203; Habermas, Jürgen, “Faith and Knowledge”, p. 111; Habermas, Jürgen, “An Awareness of What Is Missing”, p. 18.

39 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Religion and Postmetaphysical Thinking: A Reply”, p. 112: “A religion that had lost the capacity to organize the encounter with the sacred in the form of rituals and survived only in fleeting forms of religiosity would be indistinguishable from other ethical forms of life”. Cf. also Habermas, Jürgen, “A Reply”, in Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing*, p. 79: “Religions [...] raise a strict claim to truth not only for their moral principles but also for their theologically or cosmologically justified paths to salvation. They are not reducible to ‘ethical’ worldviews”.

of existence and justifying the pain and injustice distributed unequally and apparently at random among individuals. Hence, it is not surprising that in his writings on the subject Habermas often draws on the concept of religion developed by the sociologist Martin Riesebrodt, according to whom “religion is based on communication with superhuman powers and is concerned with warding off misfortune, coping with crises, and laying the foundation for salvation”.⁴⁰ The diversity that has enabled religions to resist the colonizing aims of secular agencies to this day precisely depends on the constitutive link with worship and propitiatory rites. It is the “archaic unity of myth and rites” together with the “aura of rapture and terror that emanates from the sacred” that suggests to “*profane* but *nondefeatist* reason [...] not to get too close to religion (*der Religion zu nahe treten*)”, respecting its substantial difference from other competing normative practices.⁴¹

Cults, rites, traffic with the supernatural and, later on, myths and world pictures constitute that “sacred complex” in which religious beliefs are embedded. Such indissoluble union with ritual practice is something arcane for secular reason, which it can only hope to illuminate by exploiting the analogy between the context in which religious beliefs are engrained and that “horizon of impenetrable and opaque experiences” within which even rational discourse continues to move.⁴² Similarities aside, however, a person moving within a postmetaphysical horizon will experience a characteristic sense of alienation when faced with the “strukturellen Einschränkungen der Kommunikation” (systemic restrictions placed on communication) which, in the case of Christianity, for example, originate from the amalgamation of “ontic, normative, and expressive aspects of validity, which must remain fused together in the conception of the creator and redeemer God, of theodicy, and of the event of salvation”.⁴³ In these cases, “faith is protected against radical

40 Cf. Riesebrodt, Martin, *The Promise of Salvation. A Theory of Religion*, trans. by S. Rendall, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2010, p. xii. See also p. 72: “In their liturgies, religions usually claim the ability to ward off misfortune, surmount crises, and provide blessings and salvation by communicating with superhuman powers” (this passage is appreciatively quoted by Habermas in “A Hypothesis Concerning the Evolutionary Meaning of Rites”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, p. 235, note 1).

41 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “A Hypothesis Concerning the Evolutionary Meaning of Rites”, p. 44; Habermas, Jürgen, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. by T. McCarthy, Cambridge: Polity Press 1987, p. 77; Habermas, Jürgen, “Faith and Knowledge”, p. 113 (translation modified).

42 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “The Lifeworld as a Space of Symbolically Embodied Reasons”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, p. 41.

43 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 2: Lifeworld and System*, p. 189; Habermas, Jürgen, “Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in the World”, p. 75.

problematization by its being rooted in cult”, and such a restriction of accessible reasons represents an unacceptable barrier for religiously unmusical people or, at least, for those of them unwilling to recognize external limits to the authority of discursive reason.⁴⁴

This is the specific “religious excess”⁴⁵ against which secular reason must measure itself when it sincerely renounces all autarchic aspirations and ceases to see the fluidification or sublimation of the sacred complex as an unremitting dismissal of an irremediably outdated life- and mind-form. The question of whether “we must take religion seriously in a philosophical sense as a *contemporary* intellectual formation (*Gestalt des Geistes*), where by ‘religion’ I understand religious observances (*Kultus*) in connection with conceptions of redemptive justice” must remain open in a genuinely postmetaphysical perspective.⁴⁶ Indeed, a philosophy that, while maintaining its role as a critical instance, draws its vigor from communicative reason, “is no longer in possession of an affirmative theory of the good life” and is aware of “the weakness of the motivational power of good reasons”.⁴⁷ Put simply, it has come down to earth, it has lost “its extraordinary status”.⁴⁸

This is the ground on which profane philosophy and religion are destined to meet in a post-secular age. And it is an indispensable encounter because, as Habermas maintains in an eloquent passage of *Postmetaphysical Thinking*,

even after this deflation, ordinary life, now fully profane, by no means becomes immune to the shattering and subversive intrusion of extraordinary events. Viewed from without, religion, which has largely been deprived of its world-view functions, is still indispensable in ordinary life for normalizing intercourse with the extraordinary. For this reason, even postmetaphysical thinking continues to coexist with religious practice – and not merely in the sense of the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous. This ongoing coexistence even throws light on a curious dependence of a philosophy that has forfeited its contact with the extraordinary. Philosophy, even in its postmetaphysical form, will be able neither to replace nor to repress religion as long as religious language is the bearer of a semantic content that is inspiring and even indispensable, for this content

44 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in the World”, p. 75. See also Habermas, Jürgen, “The Boundary between Faith and Knowledge: On the Reception and Contemporary Importance of Kant’s Philosophy of Religion”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, p. 245, where he speaks of the “*ratcheting effect of truths of revelation*” (*Sperrklinkeeffekt der Offenbarungswahrheiten*; italics mine).

45 Cf. Cunico, Gerardo, *Lettura di Habermas*, p. 161.

46 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “The Lifeworld as a Space of Symbolically Embodied Reasons”, p. 42.

47 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking”, p. 50; Habermas, Jürgen, “Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in the World”, p. 81.

48 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking”, p. 51.

eludes (for the time being?) the explanatory force of philosophical language and continues to resist translation into reasoning discourses.⁴⁹

The Urgency of an Asymmetrical Dialogue

All clear, then? Not at all. As I have already claimed at the beginning of the chapter, Habermas's thought about religion is characterized by a series of tensions and hesitations that reverberate on a theoretical synthesis which is redundant and, in some respects, unstable. From a sociological point of view, for example, there are in his writings (especially those going back to the 1970s, but not only) clear traces of a parafunctionalist reading of the social and evolutionary role of the sacred complex in human history. However, Habermas's long-standing interest in the semantic (and not just pragmatic) content of religious belief and practice suggests that one of the main motives for his hermeneutic efforts, and also for his attempts at a general framing of the subject, depends on and demands taking the participant's stance in a philosophical conversation that is becoming not only desirable, but increasingly urgent.

The especially problematic character of moral and legal normativity is the axis of this promising but not symmetrical dialogue between believers and unbelievers. For Habermas's urge to genealogically reconstruct the common source of faith and knowledge arises from a non-detached, indeed alarmed understanding of the *sui generis* nature of the "normative consensus (*Einverständnis*) about values and reciprocal behavioural expectations".⁵⁰ In short, his leading hypothesis is that claims to truth and authenticity, on the one hand, and normative rightness, on the other hand, emerge in the course of human evolution from two distinct processes of linguistification. The first is the direct product of our ancestors' need to understand each other about themselves and the world with a view to effective cooperation. Here, the modes of communication between co-specifics advance in a relatively linear fashion from gestures to propositionally articulated language within ordinary, pragmatically oriented mundane interactions. In the second case, instead, communicative fluidification proceeds from normative contents that are embedded in rituals, i.e., in extra-quotidian coordinated actions whose purpose is not prosaic at all. In this sphere, linguistification takes place in a less linear manner, and the traces of this long-term process through myth and the Axial religious traditions are still recognizable today. Philosophy, for example, inherits a range

49 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking", p. 51.

50 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Linguistification of the Sacred. In Place of a Preface", p. ix.

of global cognitive questions whose holistic and never fully clarified character reiterates, at a higher reflexive level, the same fluidification of semantic contents originally fulfilled through the mimetic force of collective rites and taken over by myth in the pre-axial age.

There is, therefore, a specific complexity and fragility of the claims to rightness/justice (*Richtigkeitsansprüche*) which can be traced back to their being exposed to a radical suspicion about the binding nature of the prescriptions they convey. "Motivationally binding claims to rightness", observes Habermas, "come into play only when speech acts are *embedded* in normative contexts that are already assumed to be obligatory or to be capable of justification".⁵¹ We are faced here with a circle that is always on the verge of becoming vicious. Consequently, an additional effort is required to preserve them from defeatist doubts as to their consistency, and this labor is basically a work of retrieval. That is, it is oriented towards a bottomless historical background, in the recesses of which lurk the sacred semantics buried under the myths and world images that have anciently first disenchanting them, then fluidified them and finally exposed them to discursive criticism and the acid of reflexivity. Herein lies the challenge that the non-residual vitality of religions poses to a postmetaphysical secular consciousness. It takes shape at the intersection of a conjectural genealogy of reason, a felt concern about the self-destructive tendencies of globalized modernity and the fragile counterfactual force of idealizations that arise spontaneously in people's daily practice.

The heart of the matter, in short, is the desirable but unlikely solution to the enigma of practical normativity, torn as it is between the urgency of strategic rationality, the need for coordination between individuals, and the impossibility of disregarding the boundless ideal horizons that the eccentric position opens up to human beings, granting them a plurality of accesses to the space of reasons. Habermas handles this conundrum modestly by distributing the normative burden weighing on the shoulders of modern individuals between: (1) a post-secularist secular state that respects in principle the plurality of (reasonable) worldviews of its citizens; (2) a moral universalism that recognizes its dependence on an ethical self-understanding of the species;⁵² and (3) a procedural interpretation of the relative superiority of postmetaphysical secular reason. The latter, however, demands of its followers a maturity that goes even further than the courage to think "without direction from another" urged by

51 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Linguistification of the Sacred. In Place of a Preface", p. xi.

52 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, *The Future of Human Nature*, p. 73: "a judgment which is part of the ethics of the species" (*ein gattungsethisches Urteil*).

Kant in his essay on the Enlightenment.⁵³ For secular reason must carry out the world-historical task of verbalizing the sacred complex while maintaining a sober abstention with respect to the ultimate question of who is really right in the long-standing dispute between those who have faith in the “powers of salvation and misfortune” and those who are satisfied with a disenchanting trust in “a weak but not defeatistic concept of linguistically embodied reason”.⁵⁴

The cognitive challenge posed by the irreducible opaqueness of religious beliefs is made all the more laborious by the fact that the gap dividing the conversation partners and rendering risky translation indispensable cannot be bridged by appealing to their emotional resources. Although moral feelings play an important role in the perception of moral phenomena, in the application of norms to individual cases, and even in ensuring access to the moral point of view, “in the final analysis”, as Habermas frankly admitted in an interview with Hviid Nielsen,

it is the moral judgments which bridge a gap which it is not possible to fill emotionally. In the end, we have to rely on moral insight if all of human kind is to have the right to enjoy moral protection. It is difficult enough to grasp the counterfactual idea that all men and women are brothers and sisters; even more fragile is the broad mindscape of mankind if it is to be filled with spontaneous feelings. [...] But they cannot be finally responsible for the judgment of the phenomena to which they introduce us.⁵⁵

On the other hand, it can hardly be the task of secular reason to reconcile opposites, let alone console us. For Habermas, postmetaphysical reason is not a unifying power, except in a very weak sense. With the paradigm shift from consciousness to communication philosophy has in fact abdicated that emphatic sense of the unconditioned that is still present in the Hegelian idea of the absolute Spirit. “With the modern separation of knowledge from

53 Cf. Kant, Immanuel, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?”, in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. by M.J. Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005, p. 17.

54 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “The Lifeworld as a Space of Symbolically Embodied Reasons”, p. 234 (note 19); Habermas, Jürgen, “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of its Voices”, p. 142.

55 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Morality, Society and Ethics: An Interview with Torben Hviid Nielsen”, in: *Acta Sociologica* (33/1990), p. 112. On the role of emotions in Habermas’s thought, see also the eloquent dialogue between the deaf aroused by John Milbank’s article, “What Lacks Is Feeling. Hume versus Kant and Habermas”, in Craig Calhoun/Eduardo Mendieta/Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds.), *Habermas and Religion*, pp. 322–346, 386 et seq. (Habermas’s laconic reply can also be found in “Religion and Postmetaphysical Thinking: A Reply”, p. 117 et seq.).

faith, philosophy renounced sacred knowledge (*Heilswissen*) once and for all".⁵⁶ It sets itself more modest goals by acting as a connector or lubricator in impoverished or stiffened communicative contexts. This is an enterprise of interminable maintenance in a world where something is always missing. "Postmetaphysical thought", wrote Habermas, gently arguing with his internal 'enemy' Max Horkheimer,

differs from religion in that it recovers the meaning of the unconditional without recourse to God or an Absolute. [...] The significance of unconditionality is not to be confused with an unconditional meaning that offers consolation. On the premises of postmetaphysical thought, philosophy cannot provide a substitute for consolation whereby religion invests unavoidable suffering and unrecompensed injustice, the contingencies of need, loneliness, sickness, and death, with new significance and teaches us to bear them. But even today philosophy can explicate the moral point of view from which we can judge something impartially as just or unjust; to this extent, communicative reason is by no means equally indifferent to morality and immorality.⁵⁷

Dialectics of Secularization

On the basis of this sophisticated theoretical arsenal, Habermas has worked hard, in a decade of extraordinary intellectual productivity, to get the train of secularization back on track, which, to general astonishment, began to derail just when it seemed to be speeding towards its final destination. If we are to believe what he says in *Glauben und Wissen*, the derailment is primarily the result of a crisis of the "the civilizing role of a democratically shaped and enlightened common sense that makes its way as a third party, so to speak, amid the *Kulturkampf* confusion of competing voices".⁵⁸ The remedy for the fault should therefore be sought in a middle path between the conversely excessive claims of a greedy naturalism and a blind religious devotion. But such a solution is only feasible if one is prepared to enter into variable alliances with the most reasonable exponents of both sides in order to preserve modern achievements.

This third way corresponds to a dialectical and non-sectarian view of the modern decline of religion, once weighed up against the recent secularization

56 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "A Symposium on Faith and Knowledge", p. 145.

57 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "To Seek to Salvage an Unconditional Meaning without God is a Futile Undertaking: Reflections on a Remark of Max Horkheimer", in Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, p. 108.

58 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Faith and Knowledge", p. 104.

debate. Not accidentally, Habermas has tried to do justice to a plurality of different intuitions, all equally plausible in his eyes, in his later work.

The first concerns the long-term historical process that Weber described alternatively as ‘rationalization’ or ‘disenchantment’. Here secularization is investigated from a disengaged standpoint and appears as a largely anonymous development. Habermas uses the term of art *Versprachlichung* – “linguistification” – to describe it. This is an open-ended process of communicative fluidification of archaic semantic potentials that are originally inhibited in their development by a systematic limitation of the critical use of reason that is functional to the preservation of a traditional form of life. Compared to Weber’s account, however, Habermas’s understanding of rationalization is significantly altered. For now it is speech, and more specifically language as the medium of understanding between individuals who depend on the structures of communication for their socialization, that constitutes the proper abode of reason. Even if religions, by their very substance, resist a total linguistification of popular devotional practices and their semantic contents, they too – particularly the great Axial religions – are ducts of secularization to the extent that they supplement myths and rituals with a systematic work of theological clarification and make therefore possible the preaching of religious *virtuosi* (prophets, bhikkhus, sages, etc.) who recursively use the normative instruments made available by faith communities to immanently criticize their own inadequacies and inconsistencies. The secular process of communicative fluidification is therefore not linear, even if it is vectorially oriented by the weak emancipatory pressure exerted from within human history by the counterfactual telos of an undistorted speech situation, which remains active even in a world where justice and truth certainly do not predominate.

Secondly, from Habermas’s perspective, secularization also consists in a process of non-impersonal metamorphosis of religion. In this regard, the semantic and alethic contents of the great religious traditions take on the opaque features of a ‘substance’ that endures beneath the cultural changes and is the object of a continuous creative re-appropriation and re-interpretation.⁵⁹

59 The image of religion as a substance that persists in history recurs frequently in Habermas’s writings. Apart from the closing pages of the “Conversation about God and the World” with Eduardo Mendieta mentioned above (note 354) see, for example, Habermas, Jürgen, “Gershom Scholem: The Torah in Disguise”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, p. 252 (the substance of religion and art salvaged by means of a radical supersession); Habermas, Jürgen, “Metaphysics after Kant”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, p. 15 (“I do not believe that we, as Europeans, can seriously understand concepts like morality and ethical life, person and individuality, or freedom and emancipation, without appropriating the *substance* of the Judeo-Christian understanding of history in

Besides being a prelude to the elaboration of an essentialist definition of religion (which plays a significant role in Habermas's argument), this substantialist conception fulfils two complementary tasks. The first is to explain the persistence of religion as "a *contemporary* intellectual formation (*Gestalt des Geistes*)" against the background of a long and not yet concluded "process of translating essential religious contents into the language of philosophy". Concepts such as "person and individuality, freedom and justice, solidarity and community, emancipation, history and crisis" constitute semantic potentials that are appropriated in a secular context as the legacy of a "discourse that at its core remains inaccessible".⁶⁰ From this point of view, faith presents itself to the eyes of reason as "an uncomprehended other" (*unbegriffenen Fremden*) that fuels a self-critical examination.⁶¹ I have already noted above that this irreducible otherness stems from

the very solidarity-founding element of a communal practice of religious worship that sets it apart from all other figures of the modern spirit (*Gestalten des Geistes*). A religion that had lost the capacity to organize the encounter with the sacred (*den Umgang mit Mächten des Heils und des Unheils*) in the form of rituals and survived only in fleeting forms of religiosity would be indistinguishable from other ethical forms of life.⁶²

Given these premises, the religious substance with which secular translators grapple seems also interpretable as a motivational resource for societies in constant, if not growing, legitimation crisis. If this were true, the criticism of those who have blamed Habermas for using religion as a "stopgap" for his own theoretical system, worn out by the tension between endorsement of a form of postmetaphysical proceduralism and the inability to ditch the Enlightenment ideal of personal and collective self-determination, would be amply justified.⁶³

terms of salvation"); Habermas, Jürgen, "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in the World", p. 68 (Hegel's only partially successful sublation of the *substance* of Christian piety); Habermas, Jürgen, "The Boundary between Faith and Knowledge", p. 245 (sublation of the *Substanz des Glaubens* into the philosophical concept); Habermas, Jürgen, "Religion and Postmetaphysical Thinking: A Reply" (impact of individualization on the "evaporation of the religious substance"). Finally, Habermas's exchange with Christian Danz is illuminating in this regard. See Habermas, Jürgen, "A Symposium on Faith and Knowledge", pp. 124–127.

60 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "A Symposium on Faith and Knowledge", p. 63 et seq.

61 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "A Symposium on Faith and Knowledge", p. 84.

62 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Religion and Postmetaphysical Thinking: A Reply", p. 90 et seq.

63 For an intelligent discussion of this 'Bonhoefferian' concern, see Bianchin, Matteo, *È possibile un cristianesimo non religioso?* in Matteo Bianchin, *Ragioni e interpretazioni. Fenomenologia, società, politica*, Rome: Meltemi 2006, pp. 157–175.

The acknowledgment of modernism's multiple dependencies on Christian or, more generally, Axial religious 'substance' does not, however, lead the German philosopher to question either its legitimacy or its deeply innovative character. Reflecting with the benefit of hindsight on the debate between Blumenberg, Löwith and Carl Schmitt, Habermas rightly described it as an outdated debate ("today, this dividing line (*Frontstellung*) has completely lost its relevance [...] that is why, when translating semantic contents from religious traditions into secular ideas, the question doesn't even arise whether the secular side makes itself dependent on the theological side when it raises claims to validity"), while glossing over the fact that his substantialist interpretation of 'religion' is nevertheless exposed to Blumenberg's criticism, regardless of the futility of judgments about the superiority of one age over another.⁶⁴

The third aspect of secularization to which Habermas seeks to do justice in his theoretical synthesis is what he calls the "hard core" of *Säkularisierung*, namely state's secularism.⁶⁵ From the standpoint of the variety of political liberalism embraced by the German philosopher, the normative foundations of the democratic constitutional state do not require any 'external' justification of a metaphysical-religious kind because they respond to the entirely 'internal' logic of a political process of self-determination in which democracy and human rights are intertwined from the start. As he has reiterated on several occasions, "the constitution of the liberal state can satisfy its own need for legitimacy in a self-sufficient manner, that is, on the basis of the cognitive elements of a stock of arguments that are independent of religious and metaphysical traditions".⁶⁶ Compared to the Rawlsian model, the emphasis on the inclusive character of secular reasons – which, as Habermas noted in an instructive dialogue with Charles Taylor, "do not expand the perspective of one's own community, but push for mutual perspective taking so that different communities can develop a more inclusive perspective by transcending their own universe of discourse"⁶⁷ – is counterbalanced by the importance accorded to a *positive* conception of freedom in his Kantian republicanism. The latter requires citizens not only to obey the laws of a state that is legitimate in the first place because it is impartial, but also "to make active use of their rights to communication and to participation [...] with an orientation to the common

64 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Religion and Postmetaphysical Thinking: A Reply", p. 90.

65 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "The New Philosophical Interest in Religion", p. 60.

66 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?", in Jürgen Habermas/Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization*, p. 29.

67 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen/Taylor, Charles, "Dialogue", in Eduardo Mendieta/Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds.), *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, New York: Columbia University Press 2011, p. 66.

good". That is, they have to feel themselves as co-authors of the rules established to regulate their lives in a fair manner.⁶⁸

The linguistic fluidification of the sacred complex takes place in the most egalitarian and horizontal way possible in the public sphere. For here believing and non-believing citizens have the right and duty to make use of any reason that they consider in their full autonomy relevant for public deliberation, including those that, out of respect for the principle of neutrality, must remain beyond the threshold separating the contexts of informal discussion from the institutional ones. At least from the point of view of the normative self-sufficiency of the secular state, therefore, secularization appears to be an accomplished historical, intellectual and moral process. In principle, a liberal-democratic state should be able to count on the willingness of its citizens to actively support it even in the absence of unconditional religious or ideological commitments. Procedures that unite in a virtuous circle legality, legitimacy and the emotional resources encapsulated in modern constitutional patriotism, which has supplanted the old, exclusionary nationalism of the nineteenth-century, are sufficient for this purpose. This, however, does not mean that liberal-democratic political culture does not suffer from specific pathologies that weaken its effectiveness and worth in the eyes of citizens. Typical malaises of modern liberal democracies are, for example, the sense of impotence and uselessness instilled by the colonization of all spheres of life by the logic of the economic subsystem or the "tendency to depoliticize the citizens".⁶⁹ Here, indeed, the pre-modern symbolic resources of Axial religions – particularly Christianity – constitute a repository of fundamental ethical intuitions, especially in the area of solidarity and civic self-sacrifice.

As it was the case with modernization, the outcome of the secularization process is also ambiguous, for its apparent accomplishment goes hand in hand with the emergence of new risks, dysfunctions and challenges. This unreconciled condition gives rise to a dialectic, which is at the same time a 'dialogic', of secularization. The failure of modern rationalization is in fact immediately

68 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?", p. 30. The subtle differences between Rawls's political liberalism and Habermas's Kantian republicanism were directly discussed by the two thinkers in a dialogue published in the *Journal of Philosophy* in 1995. Habermas's contributions to the debate have been reprinted in Habermas, Jürgen, *The Inclusion of the Other*, part 2. The exchange continued even after the death of the American philosopher, in particular with Habermas's preface to the German translation of John Rawls, *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2009. See Habermas, Jürgen, "Rawls's Political Liberalism".

69 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?", p. 36.

translated into a cognitive challenge for those who are not deaf to the malaises of modern civilization. From this point of view, the public discussion organized by the Catholic Academy of Munich in January 2004 between Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, at the time Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and main candidate to the succession of Pope John Paul II, appears as an exemplary episode. To begin with, it is a dialogue between *essentially* different perspectives. The critical theorist is not accidentally eager to belabor the point:

a philosophy that is aware of its fallibility and of its fragile position within the differentiated structures of modern society will insist on the generic distinction (which is not at all meant in a pejorative sense) between the secular discourse that claims to be accessible to all men and the religious discourse that is dependent upon the truths of revelation.⁷⁰

Faith constitutes, that is, the Other of Reason, to which, however, Reason is *genealogically* related. There is a distance between the two, but it is not unbridgeable. This is an ideal precondition for a demanding cognitive challenge to materialize.⁷¹

From Habermas's point of view, the dialogue is in any case asymmetrical. On the one hand, the "determining authority of secular reason over cognitive worth" is an argumentative bedrock that, even in a condition of reasonable disagreement, allows it to occupy a privileged position from which it can, for example, exercise the right to condescendingly grant religious beliefs "an epistemological status that is not purely and simply irrational".⁷² On the other hand, however, religion has the advantage over postmetaphysical secular reason of having preserved

something that has been lost elsewhere and that cannot be restored by the professional knowledge of experts alone. I am referring to adequately differentiated possibilities of expression and to sensitivities with regard to lives that have gone astray (*Sensibilitäten für verfehltes Leben*), with regard to societal pathologies, with regard to the failure of individuals' plans for their lives, and with regard

70 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?", p. 41 et seq.

71 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "A Symposium on Faith and Knowledge", p. 125: "Postmetaphysical thinking cannot form an adequate understanding of itself as long as it fails to clarify its relationship to religion *as an external element* in terms of a genealogy of reason".

72 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Religion and Postmetaphysical Thinking: A Reply", p. 97; Habermas, Jürgen, "Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?", p. 50.

to the deformation and disfigurement of the lives that people share with one another.⁷³

Making use of the theoretical framework laid out by Habermas in *The Future of Human Nature*, the question could be summed up by saying that, if compared to the ethical abstentionism of postmetaphysical thought, religious traditions have the advantage of being able to satisfy the need for an ethical self-understanding at the level of the entire human species and to do so with a symbolic and affective power that is now inaccessible to secular reason.

The intuition behind Habermas's account of the mutual asymmetry between faith and reason is similar to the one that led, for example, Charles Taylor and Peter Berger to talk about the mutual fragilization of different value systems typical of modern hyperpluralism. The difference, though, lies in the fact that, for Habermas, the "complementary learning process" of secular and religious mentalities does not exclude an essentially paternalistic understanding of the relation between believers and unbelievers, given that the medium in which the reconciliation between faith and knowledge may take place is basically a product of modern rationality.⁷⁴ In his dialogue with Ratzinger, Habermas, following Benjamin, purposely speaks at one point of a *rettende Übersetzung* – a "translation that salvages the substance of a term".⁷⁵ The experience evoked by this pathos-rich expression is the "assimilation (*Aneignung*) by philosophy of genuinely Christian contents" thanks to which fundamental ethical intuitions are sedimented "in normative conceptual clusters with a heavy weight of meaning" (*normativ beladenen Begriffsnetzen*). And the goal is achieved "without emptying them through a process of deflation and exhaustion".⁷⁶

It is precisely at this point, however, that one wonders whether the victory of the neo-Enlightenment thinker is not a Pyrrhic victory after all. The doubt arises after noticing how in his speech Ratzinger succeeds in leveraging the difficult coexistence between the two pillars of Habermas's

73 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?", p. 43.

74 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?", p. 42 et seq.

75 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?", p. 45.

76 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?", p. 44 et seq. Habermas speaks of *eine säkularisierende und zugleich rettende Dekonstruktion* (a secularizing, but at the same time salvaging, deconstruction) and of a *neutralisierende Übersetzung* (neutralizing translation) of religious truths, respectively, in Habermas, Jürgen, "Faith and Knowledge", p. 110, and Habermas, Jürgen, "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in the World", p. 75.

post-secularism – postmetaphysical ethical abstinence and a genuine moral impulse of Kantian scope – to overturn the overall sense of his skilful theoretical operation. The appeal to the “responsibility of philosophy” as a discipline devoted to “keeping open our awareness of the totality”, the ingenious recourse to the intellectual tradition of natural law as an intermediate ground between secular reason and *intellectus fidei*, the rhetorical question about the possibility of justifying within a procedural horizon the normative fact that “man *qua* man, thanks simply to his membership in the species ‘man’, is the subject of rights and that his being bears within itself values and norms that must be discovered – but not invented”, are all expedient arguments functional to the proposal of a renewed alliance between Athens and Jerusalem against the old and new threats endangering the future of the human race.⁷⁷ In Ratzinger’s Eurocentric perspective, “what holds the world together” is the “essential complementarity of reason and faith”, that is, the readiness of the Christian tradition and western secular rationality to learn from each other and limit one another.⁷⁸ This complementarity is not only true, but also sensible, given that neither of the two is capable today of transferring its claimed universalism from a *de jure* to a *de facto* condition. “In other words”, is the simultaneously desolate and combative conclusion of the future Pope Benedict XVI, “the rational or ethical or religious formula that would embrace the whole world and unite all persons does not exist; or, at least, it is unattainable at the present moment. This is why the so-called ‘world ethos’ remains an abstraction”.⁷⁹ Although Ratzinger refers here tacitly to Hans Küng’s project of a *Weltethos*, what he actually has in mind is European secularization as “an exceptional development [...] that needs to be corrected”.⁸⁰

Conclusion: Virtues and Flaws of Inclusive Secularization

If we ponder the core of Habermas’s decades-long reflection on the nexus between religion and modernity, the precariousness of a theoretical synthesis born with the aim of providing arguments “for the ‘self-maintenance of reason’ (*Selbsterhaltung der Vernunft*) through a critical appropriation of the religious heritage” stands out plain as day. At the end of the journey, Habermas

77 Cf. Ratzinger, Joseph, “What Holds the World Together”, in Jürgen Habermas/Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization*, pp. 57 and 71.

78 Cf. Ratzinger, Joseph, “What Holds the World Together”, p. 79.

79 Cf. Ratzinger, Joseph, “What Holds the World Together”, p. 75.

80 Cf. Ratzinger, Joseph, “What Holds the World Together”, p. 76.

has found himself in mid-stream, poised between an affirmative genealogy of the modern charisma of reason and the counterfactual telos of an “egalitarian-individualist universalism of Kantian provenance”.⁸¹ Since the publication of *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) Habermas has defended a “Janus faced” understanding of modernity.⁸² And if a realist-optimist *Stimmung* prevailed at the outset – with his gradual departure from any intellectual aspiration to totality and the endorsement of an idea of society that combined in a precarious balance Luhmann’s systemic positivism and the humanism of communicative reason – from *The Future of Human Nature* (2000) onwards, Habermas’s concern about the results of a profanation of the modern ethos, accelerated by the marriage of an unbridled global capitalism and a scientific naturalism devoid of any moral scruples, has grown exponentially.⁸³ Against this drift, and disregarding at least partially his previous plea for intellectual modesty, Habermas endorsed in that controversial book an ethically charged concept of species identity (*Gattungsidentität*). Since then, in a number of writings devoted to the unfinished dialectics of secularization, he has denied that a complete departure from ‘religion’ is really possible and desirable.

On balance, however, this diagnosis, which certainly shrinks the impulse to self-sufficiency of his early secularism, did not affect Habermas’s considered judgement on the superiority of secular reason over any religious comprehensive doctrines. This supremacy is attested to first of all by its ability to act as a kind of universal translator. Put otherwise, such proficiency is the evidence of a higher inclusiveness that can be explained in terms of the evolutionary primacy of postmetaphysical secular reason. From this perspective, post-secularity can appear as a self-reflective type of secularization. For Habermas, secular (postmetaphysical) reason has sufficient epistemic and moral resources to do justice even to the truth claims of religious otherness, by including it in its own discourse without distorting it. On the other side, however, in a spirit of fallibilism, reason is invited to take note of its non-self-sufficiency and acknowledge the need to join forces with ethical intuitions

81 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “A Symposium on Faith and Knowledge”, p. 168.

82 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Faith and Knowledge”, p. 102.

83 On this change of atmosphere, cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “A Symposium on Faith and Knowledge”, p. 192: “I must say, as far as I am concerned, that the shift in emphasis is not really due to a different evaluation of the religious phenomenon – all the more so if we think of the political abuse of fundamentalism in both East and West. Rather, it is due to a more sceptical assessment of modernity. I am no longer so sure that the spiritual potentials and social dynamics of globalized modernity have sufficient force in themselves to arrest its self-destructive tendencies (starting with the erosion of its own normative substance)”.

capable of balancing the fundamentalist or naturalistic drifts of a mentality that is all too often deaf to the reasons of the victims of injustice. 'Post-secular' are therefore first and foremost the necessary revisions of the theorem of secularization, which however never challenge the belief that modern secularism is the only cultural horizon within which a post-conventional self can flourish.

The sense of the oddity of this zigzag path is well summed up by a thought that Habermas developed after evoking, in a mood of deep puzzlement, his personal recollection of Max Frisch's secular funeral, held in St Peter's Reformed Church in Zurich, even though the Swiss writer was religiously *unmusikalisch* no less, and perhaps even more so, than the author at the centre of this chapter. "The philosophically enlightened self-understanding of modernity", Habermas argued at the time, "stands in a peculiar dialectical relationship to the theological self-understanding of the major world religions, which intrude into this modernity as *the most awkward element from its past*".⁸⁴

If I may violate the golden rule of scientific sobriety for a moment, I would say that in order to grasp the deeper meaning of Habermas's tangled relationship with humanity's religious past, there is perhaps no better way than to indulge in a paronomasia of the motto that so well embodies the modern spirit of utopia. The result, it seems to me, is a catchphrase that accurately describes the mood of critical theorists in post-secular times: the *awkwardness* of what is missing.

84 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, "An Awareness of What Is Missing", p. 16 (italics mine). The German original reads as follows: "Es besteht eine eigentümliche Dialektik zwischen dem philosophisch aufgeklärten Selbstverständnis der Moderne und dem theologischen Selbstverständnis der grossen Weltreligionen, die als das sperrigste Element aus der Vergangenheit in diese Moderne hineinragen".

After the Death of God: Nietzsche's Long Shadow

A Fateful Statement

So far, we have not yet mentioned the words that, more than any other sentence ever uttered before, captures the ultimate meaning of the personal and collective event known as 'secularization'. These three words – “Gott ist tot” – became the metonymic equivalent of a fateful diagnosis of the modern age after Nietzsche put them at the centre of a highly evocative allegorical tale. The atmosphere enfolding Nietzsche's parable is reminiscent of the pathos with which classical tragedies are suffused. Something enormous has happened despite the harmless intentions of those involved, but the event can only be experienced as an act for which they are fully responsible. “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!” proclaims aphorism 125 of *The Gay Science*,

How shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murderers? [...] Is not the magnitude of this deed too great for us? Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it? There never was a greater event, and on account of it, all who are born after us belong to a higher history than any history hitherto!

And again, a little further on: “Lightning and thunder need time, the light of the stars needs time, deeds need time, even after they are done, to be seen and heard. This deed is as yet further away from them than the furthest stars, *and yet they have done it!*¹

The meaning of this prophecy was explained by Nietzsche himself in the rumination opening book five of *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, which he added in the second edition of the work, published in 1887, five years after the first. The death of God, according to his interpretation, is “the most important of more recent events”, even if few are truly able to contemplate its spectacle. The event is in fact “far too great, too remote, too much beyond most people's power of apprehension, for one to suppose that so much as the report of it could have *reached* them”. Indeed, it is a catastrophic event that far exceeds any natural cataclysm. The foundations of an entire civilization have collapsed – “for

1 Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, trans. by T. Common, Mineola (NY): Dover, 1986, p. 90 et seq.

example, our entire European morality” – and what we are now facing is “a lengthy, vast and uninterrupted process of crumbling, destruction, ruin and overthrow which is now imminent”. And although Nietzsche hastens to point out that, for those who are “posted ’twixt to-day and to-morrow”, the shadows cast by *Gottes Tod* are the prelude to a “new dawn” – the “great noontide” announced by Zarathustra – what the sentence leaves in its wake is on the whole a sense of bewilderment in the face of the enormity of the change.²

The influence of Nietzsche’s grand narrative of the “death of God” is enormous, impossible to measure. In the 1950s and 1960s, it inspired a current of theologians, mostly Protestant, whose radicalism in heralding the accomplished secularization and the need to revolutionize the vocabulary and conceptual repertoire of Christian theology aroused the curiosity of *Time* magazine, which on 8 April 1966 hit the newsstands with a red-on-black headline asking brutally its readers: “Is God Dead?”. Print runs skyrocketed.³

In his essay “Nietzsches Wort ‘Gott ist tot’, Martin Heidegger interpreted Nietzsche’s words within the non-evenemential horizon of his anonymous *History of Being*.⁴ For him, Nietzsche’s preaching is both the fulfilment of the millennial history of Western philosophy and the unveiling of its deeper meaning: “nihilism”. The ‘nothingness’ that asserts itself in this epoch-making destination is ambiguous like any twilight phenomenon worthy of the name, but for Heidegger it has mainly to do with the oblivion of being, that is, with the impossibility of thinking through ontological difference within the coordinates established by Western metaphysics since Plato. The flattening down of Being on mere presence-at-hand, on being usable, manipulable, valorizable, is the distinctive trait of the modern world which, thanks to technology, literally ‘grasps’ and makes natural processes infinitely available. Mechanized nature, furthermore, is a nature without gods (*entgottert*), in which Christianity is

2 Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, p. 155 et seq.; see also Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. by T. Common, Ware: Wordsworth Classics 1997, p. 75.

3 Cf. Caputo, John D./Vattimo, Gianni, *After the Death of God*, edited by Jeffrey W. Robbins, New York: Columbia University Press 2007, p. 1.

4 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, “Nietzsche’s Word: ‘God is Dead’”, in Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. by J. Young/K. Haynes, pp. 157–199. See also Heidegger, Martin, *Nietzsche*, 4 vols., trans. by D.F. Krell/F.A. Capuzzi/J. Stambaugh, New York: Harper & Row 1979–1987, especially volume 4: *Nihilism*, trans. by F.A. Capuzzi, New York: Harper & Row 1982, pp. 99–101, where Heidegger engages in a ruthless deconstruction of the theorem of secularization. On Heidegger’s dismissive judgement see Monod, Jean-Claude, *La querelle de la sécularisation*, pp. 9–16.

reduced to one worldview among others and where the relation to the divine is subjectivized or, put another way, “transformed into religious experience”.⁵

Hence, metaphysics counts much more than religion in Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s words. For the author of *Sein und Zeit*, it is silly to claim that secularization or disenchantment are the two main traits of modern civilization. Rather, modern civilization is characterized by the affirmation of a new ideal of freedom hinged on the self-discovery and self-valorization of the subject, which now becomes *fundamentum absolutum inconcussum veritatis* – the absolute, uncontested foundation of truth. To argue otherwise is to remain at a superficial level of understanding. “Within the history of the modern age, and as the history of modern mankind”, Heidegger argues,

man universally and always independently attempts to establish himself as mid-point and measure in a position of dominance; that is, to pursue the securing of such dominance. To that end, it is necessary that he assures himself more and more of his own capacity for and means of dominance, and that he continually places these at the disposal of an absolute serviceability. The history of modern mankind (*Menschentum*), the inner workings (*Gesetzlichkeit*) of which only in the twentieth-century emerged into the full and open space of something incontrovertible and consciously comprehensible, was *mediately* prepared by Christian man, who was oriented toward the *certitude* of salvation. Thus one can interpret certain phenomena of the modern age as ‘secularization’ of Christianity (*Säkularisierung des Christentums*). In most decisive respects such talk of ‘secularization’ is a thoughtless deception; because a world toward which and in which one is made worldly already belongs to ‘secularization’ and ‘becoming worldly’ (*Verweltlichung*). The ‘*saeculum*’, the ‘world’ through which something is ‘secularized’ in the celebrated ‘secularization’, does not exist in itself or in such a way that it can be realized simply by stepping out of the Christian world.⁶

In brief, in order for Christianity to be secularized or the world de-Christianized, the conditions must first be created for the displacement of its values from ‘up there’ to ‘down here’, from heaven to earth, and such a quantum leap can only take place through the work of metaphysics, that is, of that “determination of the truth of beings as a whole and of the essence of such truth”, which “grounds

5 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, “The Age of the World Picture”, in Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 58.

6 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, *Nietzsche*, volume 4, p. 100; see also p. 240: “Mere renunciation (*Abkehr*) of Christianity signifies nothing if a new essence of truth has not previously been determined for that renunciation, and if being as such and as a whole is not made to appear in terms of this new truth”.

an age in that [...] it provides that age with the ground of its essential shape".⁷ If this basic truth is not fully digested, confusion is inevitable. The effect, I mean, will be mistaken for the cause and people will come to believe, for example, that the essence or the ground of modern nihilism lies in unbelief, that is, in disaffection with Christian doctrine or symbolism. The latter, however, is on closer inspection only the philosophically dull consequence of much deeper and more ancient causes. Failure to grasp this point means surrendering to a "semblance of reflection, so long as it refrains from thinking about a settlement for man's essence and from experiencing that place in the truth of being".⁸

Still, Nietzsche's statement actually seems to speak of a less bombastic event, closer to the experience of ordinary people. The madman, after all, moves between the marketplace (where he meets "many people who did not believe in God") and the different churches into which he makes his way singing *Requiem aeternam Deo*. Moreover, he refers to the people who make fun of him as murderers and reminds them at every turn that "*We have killed him, – you and I!*". The death of God, in other words, is an episode in the history of human institutions, perhaps even a suicide of Christianity, a victim of its own inability to foresee and curb the nihilistic consequences of its reverent trust in truth. But it concerns primarily the minds, hearts, and bodies of flesh and blood people. The same faithfulness to the earth preached by Zarathustra only makes sense in the light of a principled rejection of any otherworldly destination for humanity. All-in-all, Nietzsche seems to treat the question of the eclipse of God in the modern world and its repercussions on human existence more as a practical problem than as a theoretical conundrum. For the philosopher from Meßkirch, on the other hand, the question is eminently speculative. "Thought as the effective reality (*wirksame Wirklichkeit*) of everything real (*Wirklichen*)", Heidegger points up, "the supersensory ground of the supersensory world has grown unreal (*unwirklich*). This is the metaphysical sense of the metaphysically thought word 'God is dead'".⁹ 'I', to indulge in a questionable pun, has taken the place of 'High' in the age of Nothingness, unmasking once and for all the onto-theological nature of Christian faith. Nietzsche was quite good at sensing and following the traces of this metamorphosis. However, he "interpreted them nihilistically, thereby completely burying their essence".¹⁰

7 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, *Nietzsche*, volume 4, p. 100; Heidegger, Martin, "The Age of the World Picture", p. 57.

8 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, "Nietzsche's Word: 'God is Dead'", p. 166.

9 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, "Nietzsche's Word: 'God is Dead'", p. 189 et seq.

10 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, "Nietzsche's Word: 'God is Dead'", p. 197. On Heidegger's belated doubts as to whether Nietzsche really was "the last metaphysician" see Gadamer's testimony in Gadamer, Hans-Georg, "Heidegger und Nietzsche: 'Nietzsche hat mich

There is a race to the top here, although the basic harmony between the two thinkers is not in question. Both Nietzsche and Heidegger see the time they happened to live in as an age of decay, decline, oblivion, and they hunt for the origin and meaning of this destiny in the long history of the Christian West. In the end, they come to different conclusions, although they start from similar assumptions. The same could be claimed for contemporary theorists of secularization and disenchantment. If we are to listen to Heidegger, they give superficial answers to a crucial question. But what, in the end, is this question?

Figures of Accomplished Disenchantment

The idea that secularization can be interpreted, from the point of view of a myth-history punctuated by axial turning points, as the unveiling of the nihilistic essence of the West (be it the eternal *Abend-land* or modern North Atlantic civilization) is a topos of twentieth-century philosophical thought that periodically resurfaces in academic circles and continues to inspire great historical frescos that, starting from apocalyptic descriptions of contemporary society, seek to shed light on our deep past. As Heidegger himself notices in passing, despite the variety of styles and content, all these meta-narratives share an edifying intent (and tone). "And we, unprepared as all of us are together", he admits, wearing an unusually modest suit,

we must not think that we will alter the destiny [of two millennia of Western history] by a lecture of Nietzsche's statement or even learn to know it only adequately. Nonetheless, this one thing is now necessary: that out of reflection we are receptive to instruction and that on the way to instruction we learn to reflect.¹¹

The literary genre, of which Nietzsche's aphorism is an illustrious example, is populated by books that lie somewhere on the spectrum going from apocalyptic sermon to sober spiritual testament. Works such as Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, José Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses*, Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* or Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, have provided entire generations with the words, concepts and images required

kaputtgemacht!", in: *Aletheia* (5/1994), pp. 6–8; Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *La lezione filosofica del XX secolo. Intervista con Riccardo Dottori*, Rome: Reset 2000, p. 132.

11 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, "Nietzsche's Word: 'God is Dead'", p. 160.

to bring disturbing aspects of their everyday experience into focus. Joking, but not too much, this literary genre could be called the literature of “nothing is sacred anymore” or, to use a semantically vague American expression, of “losing your religion”.¹²

A significant subset of these popular exercises in cultural criticism are the *grands récits* on the socio-cultural consequences of disenchantment. The most recent of them usually revolve around a *Zeitdiagnose* that has now become a common feeling, even more than a shared opinion. The diagnosis goes more or less like this: the horizon of contemporary society has lost depth, it has flattened out and expanded without limits. The result is a sort of dead calm, of perfect horizontality, which does not suggest, however, the image of emptiness, but rather that of a nauseating and debilitating hyper-density. One could even speak of a lethal satiety. This double process of dilation and thickening has a *pendant* in the changes of contemporary subjectivity, which appears increasingly amorphous, centerless, compulsive, immersed in the present, dispersive, exposed to the insidiousness of the banality of evil. This oscillation between daze and bewilderment, euphoria and melancholy seem to signal the appearance in human history of a new character, better: a non-character, a sort of Eichmann of peace time.

Such peremptory ways of representing the gigantic historical transition that led to this strange form of restless helplessness, of frenetic idling, are evidently onerous from a theoretical point of view. In Italy, the just described “anthropological mutation” was anticipated in some prophetic pages by Pier Paolo Pasolini and has been recently re-proposed by the literary critic and poet Guido Mazzoni in a book, *I destini generali*, which has all it takes to serve as a *vade mecum* in this central section of the chapter.¹³

Mazzoni’s pamphlet has a direct link with the debate on secularization because he portrays today’s hegemonic way of life as the product of the dissolution of the essential tension between the worldly and the ideal planes of experience from which the titanic modern mobilizations, of which the

12 For a broader discussion of this way of framing the modern phenomenon of the receding of religion, cf. Costa, Paolo/Zordan, Davide, *In una stanza buia. Filosofia e teologia in dialogo*, Trento: FBK Press 2014, pp. 112–126.

13 Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *I destini generali*, Rome/Bari: Laterza 2015. A poetic translation of the atmosphere enveloping Mazzoni’s argument can be found in Mazzoni, Guido, *La pura superficie*, Rome: Donzelli 2017. For a review of *I destini generali* see Costa, Paolo, “Il disagio della postmodernità”, in: *La società degli individui* (18/2015), pp. 156–160. Mazzoni is also the author of an excellent account of modern poetry. Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *On Modern Poetry*, trans. by Z. Hanafi, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2022. As to Pier Paolo Pasolini, see the essays collected in *Scritti corsari*, Milan: Garzanti 2008.

consumer society is, so to speak, the ungrateful heir, also drew their momentum. At the end of this tragic story, the Western way of life emerges as the prosaic historical offspring of a kind of timequake, whose distinctive feature is the non-triumphant victory of absolute immanence, to which corresponds, on the side of subjectivity, something akin to a silent psychic metamorphosis.

What does this fateful mutation consist in? In short, it is the unexpected and paroxysmal realization of Marx's and Engels' assessment of the historically revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie. On the one hand, the founding fathers of historical materialism were not far from the truth when, at the beginning of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, they claimed that *alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft, alles Heilige wird entweiht* (all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned) in capitalist modernity.¹⁴ At the same time, though, it can be said, with the benefit of hindsight, that Marx and Engels were wrong, because, contrary to what they both foresaw and hoped for, the sudden dissolution of the traditional constraints on human activism and self-interest did not ultimately lead either to alienation or emancipation, but to an unresolved and ambivalent condition of simultaneous liberation and disorientation, restlessness and discomfort, wealth and poverty. The historical dialectic, in other words, did not issue in a meaningful and recognizable synthesis.

How, then, can be described the process of "liquidation", or better still evaporation, which, according to the most radical version of the disenchantment thesis endorsed by Mazzoni, Western societies have experienced with increasing speed since the revolution of customs embodied, metonymically, by a formidable year of our recent past: '1968'? It is a multi-faceted transformation that led to the rise of a new form of life: the "Western Way of Life". What characterizes it? To begin with, it involves, on the level of subjective experience, the loosening of intrapsychic constraints. This means, in a nutshell, the primacy of the pleasure principle, the replacement of the "traditional, repressive and censorious superego with a new form of superego based on the compulsion to enjoy", and the parallel deconstruction of any substantive interpretation of personal identity as a rationalist myth.¹⁵

On the level of social dynamics, the effect of this late-modern 'meltdown' is, if possible, even more macroscopic. Faced with the unchallenged primacy of the quest for personal enjoyment, emotional, ideal and socio-political ties inevitably fade into the background. Although they remain an essential ingredient of life, they are increasingly experienced by individuals as interchangeable goods,

14 Cf. Marx, Karl/Engels, Friedrich, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. by S. Moore, New York: Bantam Books 2004, p. 17.

15 Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *I destini generali*, p. 15.

i.e. as something that does not require the assumption of unconditional commitments. The family, the groups to which ordinary people belong, the nation, loyalty to past monuments or future mirages lose their consistency once faced with the intensity and relevance of immediate pleasures. Hedonism thus ends up prevailing not in theory, but in everyday practice, that is in the wake of the sacred value that has been ascribed to the cultivation of the most ordinary aspects of life since the beginning of modernity.¹⁶

As I noted above, the world picture emerging from this global process of dissolution is profoundly ambiguous. On the one hand, a vivid sense of the “precariousness of everything, the terminal meaninglessness of things” dominates people’s experience.¹⁷ This sense of fragility leads them to adopt without triumphalism a *carpe diem* philosophy, the ultimate justification for which is that nothing in life is more substantial than personal gratification, and that there is nothing deeper than this merry-go-round that has befallen us. The gist of this tacit insight, as Mazzoni observes, is that “consumption represents the extreme point of modern secularization” or, put another way, that “enjoyment modelled on the consumer form, on consumption as a relationship with the world, presupposes [...] an absolute immanence”.¹⁸ The total victory of absolute immanence, however, is devoid of any triumphalism because it is not experienced by people as an existential revolt or the solution to the mystery of being. On the contrary, it is offered as a brute fact from which individuals draw a tacit lesson for navigating their world by sight. The awareness that there is no answer to the fundamental riddles of life pushes them to muddle through, to seek precarious balances that do not respond to a single logic, but whose meaning changes according to age, available energies, victories achieved and defeats suffered, in short, destiny’s merry pranks (starting with the genetic and family lottery).

Once this unspoken insight is transposed into philosophical terms, the worldview that best suits such a basic sense of absolute immanence – “a world subject to time passing without striving for a higher purpose, surrounded by death and its avatars: emptiness, boredom, transience, the need to renew pleasure to remove emptiness, boredom, transience”¹⁹ – is a bland naturalism. As far as fundamental existential questions are concerned, this outlook has in

16 On the affirmation of ordinary life see Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self*, part 3.

17 Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *I destini generali*, p. 45.

18 Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *I destini generali*, p. 45. For a comparable, albeit non-dysphoric, interpretation of the relationship between consumerism and secularization, see Vattimo, Gianni, *After Christianity*, trans. by L. D’Isanto, New York: Columbia University Press 2002, pp. 76–78.

19 Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *I destini generali*, p. 60.

store only answers (Big Bang, descent of the human species from ‘apes’, etc.) that are set on such an outsized temporal, spatial and conceptual level that it deprives them of any real impact on people’s ordinary lives. On the other hand, from an ethical point of view, the main effect of this naturalistic frame of mind is the dissolution of the boundary separating strongly evaluated goods from mere subjective preferences.²⁰ Thus, even if it does not justify it in a strict sense, this disenchanting stance fosters a laid-back attitude towards the world that is well captured by familiar phrases such as “if it pleases you (or me or him or her), why not?”, or the more brutal “at the end of the day, who cares?”. In this manner, as Pasolini had already claimed, capitalism rehabilitates and allies itself with a deep current of the common wisdom of all times and “under the logic of consumption and spectacle resurfaces, like a fossil layer covered by recent soil, the bedrock of popular vitalism, with its cynical, disillusioned, nihilistic habitus”.²¹ Together, the new spirit of capitalism and the immortal relaxed scepticism of the ‘hoi polloi’ join forces to celebrate what Milan Kundera called “the festival of insignificance” in his last novel.²²

In this context, which Mazzoni, focusing on the “psychic life of the Western masses”, describes as a condition of bland schizophrenia, the experience of the sacred, although it remains one of the many possibilities disclosed by, if not actually “etched” in the human condition, loses any privileged status and becomes available for uses ranging from the most irrational episodic exaltation to its debunking through a naturalistic (today mostly neuroscientific) explanation.²³ In short, like art, eros and idealism, religion too can be co-opted, incorporated and in a certain sense domesticated within that sort of universal acid – neo- or turbo-capitalism – where everything is destined to evaporate or dissolve without trace, provided it can become an object of desire and consumption.²⁴

20 For an in-depth study of the metaphilosophical meaning of contemporary naturalisms, see Costa, Paolo, *Un’idea di umanità. Etica e natura dopo Darwin*, Bologna: EDB 2007, ch. 3.

21 Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *I destini generali*, p. 37.

22 Cf. Kundera, Milan, *The Festival of Insignificance*, trans. by L. Asher, New York: Harper 2013.

23 Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *I destini generali*, pp. 9 and 62.

24 Cf. Boltanski, Luc/Chiapello, Ève, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by G. Elliott, London: Verso 2017.

In Blame or Praise of Profanation?

The grand narrative chosen to exemplify a view of the present as an age of de-sacralization or universal profanation speaks of a world caught up in the superficiality of a shallow well-being or, to use a popular expression, in the banality of evil.²⁵ The protagonists of these stories are, without exception, lame characters, in whose lives the ‘monster’ created by modernity has saturated any fissures, however small, of reality, with the consequence that their imagination is dominated by the tacit intuition that reality is one-possibility thing. This, incidentally, does not pacify them at all. On the contrary, it makes them, if possible, even more restless and reckless, since the fact that everything is apparently available, present at hand, pushes them towards a compulsive form of consumption that leaves nothing of value in its wake.

From this point of view, secularization appears as the penultimate stage of a long historical trajectory leading to radical disenchantment – the eclipse of all that was unavailable, heteronomous, removed in principle from human endeavour – and thus to the collapse of the very distinction between sacred and profane. This curve is actually parabolic, because the final liquidation of the sacred was preceded by its simultaneous purification and exaltation, which placed it outside the world in a position of absolute apicality. Afterwards, all that was needed for the boundaries of the profane to become insurmountable was severing the ties with the supersensible, with the ‘world behind the world’. The final profanation, however, when everything enters the domain of the always-on-hand, deals the death blow to the very act of profanation and things end up losing any meaning. This is how the Immanent Frame reveals its nature as a closed world structure: a mousetrap.

It remains to be established, though, whether this despairing condition should be presented as a novelty or as an eternal and immutable truth about the *conditio humana*, which would only be obscured or camouflaged for a relatively short historical time. The verdict therefore retains a certain amount of opacity. What exactly are we claiming here? That the idea that another world, another life, is possible has always been a pious illusion, only another

25 For an illuminating analysis of what “living on the surface of everyday life” might mean today, see Zamperini, Adriano, “Attrazione o adattamento interpersonale? L’indifferenza come regola emozionale in Bret Easton Ellis”, in: *La società degli individui* (11/2008), pp. 37–50; Zamperini, Adriano, *L’indifferenza. Conformismo del sentire e dissenso emozionale*, Turin: Einaudi 2007.

hallucination caused by the “opium of the people”? Or are we suggesting that the last word in the matter has yet to be spoken?²⁶

The same atmosphere of uncertainty pervades Giorgio Agamben’s influential essay “In Praise of Profanation”.²⁷ One possible interpretation of his gloom account of the present situation is that religion, by removing “things, places, animals, or people from common use” and, transferring them to a separate sphere, acted as a brake, a *katechon*, on the ineluctable ruin of the ages.²⁸ In other words, while the possibility of profanation, implicit in the ritual segregation of the sacred, disclosed a space of freedom in the form of play, that is of the restoration of the use value of a practice or object, or the emancipation of things and living beings from the forced means-end relationship, secularization, on the contrary, turned out to be a way of transferring the ‘petrifying’ force of the sacred into the world. In the end, what it left in its wake is only a pseudo-profanation that does not liberate, but rather imprisons people in the oppressive logic of a thick web of apparatuses, ‘Capitalism’ or ‘Neoliberalism’, which admits nothing outside itself and is therefore totalitarian by definition.

All grand narratives that belong to the Para-Nietzschean literary genre of “nothing is sacred anymore” converge in recognizing the gigantic nature of the ongoing change. Secularization is one of the faces of the Great Transformation. Where philosophical tales of secularization diverge is in the interpretation of the deeper meaning of this historical breakthrough, of its implications for today and tomorrow. What exactly does the fact that ‘nothing is sacred anymore’ mean for us? Does it mean (a) that we will no longer need the goods that religions have traditionally granted to their followers, because the needs of *homo religiosus* are not universal, i.e. they are not rooted in humans’ natural endowment? Or (b) that the true religion of the past will be replaced by pseudo-religions with increasingly catastrophic outcomes? Or, on the contrary, (c) that the end of a certain kind of devotion will simply make way for other models of religiosity, some of them comparatively superior to their predecessors, because the questions underlying the human desire for eternity have not yet been convincingly answered and probably never will be?

26 For an open-ended diagnosis of the present, against the background of a meta-narrative similar to the one just outlined, see Bell, Daniel, “The Return of the Sacred: The Argument about the Future of Religion”, in: *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (31/1978), pp. 49–55.

27 Cf. Agamben, Giorgio, “In Praise of Profanation”, in Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. by J. Fort, New York: Zone Books 2007, pp. 73–92. See also Agamben, Giorgio, *What Is an Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. by D. Kishik and S. Pedatella, Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press 2009.

28 Cf. Agamben, Giorgio, “In Praise of Profanation”, p. 74.

In all three cases the judgement about how terrifying, disappointing, promising or perhaps even exhilarating is the world that emerged from the process of secularization remains undetermined, in spite of the radically different interpretations of the historical meaning of the modern receding of religion. An additional narrative is required to make fully sense of the fateful diagnosis. In what follows, I will try to extract the missing element from some reflections developed in his typical maximalist style by Peter Sloterdijk, who, between the lines of an unconventional reevaluation of William James's thought, suggested distinguishing between a narrow ("legal") and a broad ("philosophical") conception of secularization. The latter understands *saeculum* in a broad sense as *mundus* and the modern 'worldiness' along the lines of that "monster of energy, without beginning, without end; a firm, iron magnitude of force that does not grow bigger or smaller, that does not expend itself but only transforms itself [...] blessing itself as that which must return eternally, as a becoming which knows no satiety, no disgust, no weariness", celebrated by Nietzsche in an aphorism of 1885, significantly placed by the editors at the end of his controversial posthumous work *The Will to Power*.²⁹

At the beginning of his argument, deploying all the literary power of his exuberant prose, Sloterdijk draws the reader's attention to the fact that, "as soon as we understand the process of becoming worldly (*Verweltlichung*) not only as an expropriation of spiritual treasures and gradual transformation of passive liabilities into active assets", a second meaning of secularization comes up: "an elevation of the world into a paragon of being without an opposite", i.e. a self-sufficient ontological totality (*gegensatzlosen Inbegriff des Seienden*). In this sense, continues Sloterdijk, mundanization amounts to the

absolutization of the *saeculum* [generation, age, world] and at the same time the elimination of the two nonsecular, transmundane, or supernatural magnitudes that were to be distinguished from and opposed to the world, on the ontological model of classical metaphysics: God and the soul. [...] Thus the classical metaphysical triangle God, world, and soul implodes and an absolute block, the "world" as such, vaguely and monolithically takes the place of the well-tempered distances between the poles of the threefold totality [...] that would not permit its being offset by anything other than itself, anything superior to itself, or anything held in reserve against itself. In this world block, everything falling under the names "God" and "soul" that was previously known and assumed joins the ranks of effects of the world. What matters now is that the world is everything that is the case (*Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist*). [...] The world rolls up into a bundle in which all distinctions fall in on themselves. Under the

29 Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Will to Power*, trans. by W. Kaufmann/R.J. Hollingdale, New York: Random House 1967, § 1067, p. 550.

banner of modern secularization – perhaps “widening” would be a more correct description – the all-encompassing (*allesumgreifende*) world complex grows into an ontological monstrosity of hardly comprehensible form. Accordingly, secularization or becoming worldly would be the heading for a change in the image of the world – beyond the cultural-revolution implications of modernization. This is a change of disturbing proportions.³⁰

Once reformulated with this intellectual pathos, the question of the historical meaning of secularization takes on an unknown significance for those who inhabit the present with at least some occasional anxiety. The doubt may well arise in the minds of these people that living in a society in which there is no longer room for the ‘elsewhere’, for a ‘tomorrow’ that is not a faded repetition of ‘today’, and where the ‘actual’ has swallowed up the ‘possible’ down to its last drops, means in its own way brushing against the depths of a religious view of the cosmos.³¹

For a Postmetaphysical Christianity: The Celebration of Secularization in Gianni Vattimo

What remains to be clarified now is the influence exerted on such apocalyptic accounts of accomplished secularization by Nietzsche’s grand narrative of the advent of nihilism and its turning points: the defeat of the “nobles” and the devious victory of the “slaves”, the announcement of the “death of God” and the unmasking of the sick will to power of the “last men”, the unequal duel between the subhumans and the few superior men (man being “a rope

30 Cf. Sloterdijk, Peter, “Chances in the Monstrous. A Note on the Metamorphosis of the Religious Domain in the Modern World, with Reference to a Few Motifs in William James”, in Peter Sloterdijk, *After God*, trans. by I.A. Moore, Cambridge: Polity Press 2020, p. 210 et seq. (the original German version of the essay was the introduction to a new edition of James, William, *Die Vielfalt religiöser Erfahrung: Eine Studie über die menschliche Natur*, Frankfurt: Inselverlag 1997). See also Sloterdijk, Peter, *You Must Change Your Life*, p. 37: “The de-spiritualization of asceticisms is probably the event in the current intellectual history of mankind that is the most comprehensive and, because of its large scale, the hardest to perceive, yet at once the most palpable and atmospherically powerful”. For a discussion of Sloterdijk’s contribution to the recent secularization debate see Costa, Paolo, “Prisoners of a Metaphor: Secularization as a Deicidal Epidemic”, in: *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* (7/2021), pp. 376–397.

31 Benjamin’s celebrated annotations on capitalism are based on a similar insight. Cf. Benjamin, Walter, “Capitalism as Religion” (1921), in Marcus Bullock/Michael W. Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings*, Vol. 1: 1913–1926, trans. by R. Livingstone, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 1996, pp. 288–291.

stretched between the animal and the Superman – a rope over an abyss”³² – in short, the anti-fable that tickles the pride of people disgusted by the superficiality and bad taste of bourgeois society.³³

There is something that makes such meta-narratives unconvincing, if not frankly incredible, despite their descriptive and polemical power. The sore point is their levelling effect. That is, they end up paying a too high price for the sharpness of their diagnostic instruments, I mean, an unbalanced reduction of complexity. In particular, their excess of pathos makes them appear suspect. Everything is over the top in their storytelling and this makes them sound unrealistic, too simplistic. In other words, they are captivating, but one-sided; mythical, in the worst sense of the term.³⁴ Such dramatic emphasis, I contend, accentuates to the point of improbability the absolute power of negation of the supposed agencies of the catastrophe (Metaphysics, Capitalism, Technology). The result is a story that is more interested in what is subtracted than in what is brought in over the centuries. To indulge in the algebraic metaphor, the accounts add up all too easily in this perspective. But if the dramatic effect is assured, the same cannot be said for the gain in understanding. What is lacking, at the end of the day, is any sense of the contingency of historical events, their uncertain nature and the role played by genuine innovation in human affairs. Conversely, those who are persuaded that the Death of God leads to the fateful choice between the Last Men and the Overman, between the Dwarf and Zarathustra, also know that these are all literary inventions and that, in reality, there is no alternative to the bitter realization that we are bound to live in a world in which the sacred, and with it the profanations that the sacred-profane dyad made possible, have definitively waned and what is left on the table is that amorphous and seductive life in which the individuals described by Mazzoni revel thoughtlessly.

But if these, at first sight, appealing myth-histories are not reliable and if, nevertheless, the explanatory power of the grand narratives cannot be cast aside, what other option do we have?

In *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*, Peter Sloterdijk blames Nietzsche – a victim, for him, of the “theomorphism of his inner life” – for not having understood

32 Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, p. 8.

33 For a persuasive account of Nietzsche's influence on postmodern nihilism, see Habermas, Jürgen, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, ch. 4 (“The Entry into Postmodernity: Nietzsche as a Turning Point”).

34 The mythical character of the doctrine of the Superman is also stressed, albeit with different intentions, by Giorgio Colli in the foreword the Italian edition of the book. Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Così parlò Zarathustra. Un libro per tutti e per nessuno*, trans. by M. Montinari, 2 vols., Milan: Adelphi 1985, vol. 1, p. XV.

that “that all ascents start from the base camp of ordinary life” and that in order to unravel the mystery of a “vertical dimension without God” we have to realize that

vitality, understood both somatically and mentally, is itself the medium that contains a gradient between more and less. It therefore contains the vertical component that guides ascents within itself, and has no need of additional external or metaphysical attractors. That God is supposedly dead is irrelevant in this context. With or without God, each person will only get as far as their form carries them.³⁵

For the author of the *Critique of Cynical Reason*, asceticism, as a practical form of horizontal transcendence, supplies the key for defusing the bomb placed by Nietzsche in the very foundations of Western consciousness. But does this mean that the way out of the deadlock lies in weakening his apocalyptic statement? In routinizing it? In secularizing it further?

Gianni Vattimo followed the same line of argument in his later works. In keeping with the postmodern impatience with any form of despotic thought, he subjects the two specular dogmatisms of (Cartesian) foundational reason and (onto-theological) faith to the recursive logic of secularization, making room for a weakening of epistemic authoritarianism in favour of a more playful, ironic and uplifting approach to knowledge. From this perspective, secularization means first of all the profanation of metaphysics, i.e. of the *idols* of Western phallogocentrism, and the gradual extinction of patriarchal domination, the violent logic of scapegoating typical of archaic religions and, more generally, the hierarchical structure of state societies, the influence of which is also felt in the authoritarianism of the different churches and religious communities.

The conclusion of Vattimo's long argument is predictable given his Nietzschean-Heideggerian premises. Nevertheless, the arguments he puts forward to support it deserve to be made explicit and examined. The first step is a considered commitment to Nietzsche's prophecy. For him, acknowledging that “God is dead” means admitting that nihilism represents the accomplishment of modernity, which is, in turn, “the final consummation of the belief that Being and reality are ‘objective’ data which thinking ought to contemplate in order to bring itself into conformity with their laws”.³⁶ In short, the death of God is the end of metaphysics as a style of thinking in which being is conceived

35 Cf. Sloterdijk, Peter, *You Must Change Your Life*, p. 38 et seq.

36 Cf. Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. by L. D'Isanto/D. Webb, Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press 1999, p. 29.

as an objective presence and the ontological consistency of things is seen as a quality independent of the action, position and will of the subjects.

Nietzsche's argument, however, can be easily misrepresented because of its rhetorical overload. The rupture with the history of Western thought must remain open. To close it by hastily endorsing a new view of the world as it is (or should be) would be betraying its spirit. "There is a general misunderstanding to the effect that Nietzsche's strong affirmation 'God is dead' is a profession of atheism", Vattimo remarked in his autobiography.

That's not it. Nietzsche does not affirm that "God does not exist". He could never affirm that, because it would amount to another absolute truth entirely equivalent to the affirmation that "God exists". It is the point of view that is different. Wherever there is an absolute there is still always metaphysics, meaning a supreme principle, exactly what Nietzsche has discovered has become superfluous. "God is dead" signifies that there is no ultimate foundation.³⁷

To put the point concisely, the author of *The Gay Science* does not aim to carve out a prominent position for himself in the history of Western philosophy with his capital sentence. Rather, Nietzsche gestures toward the life he would like to live, or that he regards as possible and desirable *now*, provided that human beings dispose of the burden of self-imposed servitude for good. The *Übermensch* – the man who goes beyond, the human "bridge" – is precisely the individual who wishes to remove from his shoulders a burden so heavy that it has come to be confused with human nature or human destination as such. His goal is not abstract: it is to give a totally new meaning to his own actions and motives.

While Vattimo endorses the core of Heidegger's interpretation – neither nihilism nor the possible exit from nihilism involves the will, whether good or bad, because it is being itself that has a "nihilistic vocation" which manifests itself in history³⁸ – he gives it, though, an original twist. For he does not understand the end of metaphysics in a triumphalist sense, as a rising above (*Überwindung*) that is stabilized in a new foundation, if only in the form of a non-objective, purely negative opening. Rather, the historical affirmation of nihilism means the emergence of a new logic of the event, foreign to the mentality and rhetoric of fulfilment. From this point of view, the departure from metaphysics resembles a long convalescence from an illness, the indelible trace of which

37 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni/Paterlini, Piergiorgio, *Not Being God. A Collaborative Autobiography*, trans. by W. McCuaig, New York: Columbia University Press 2009, p. 18. See also Vattimo, Gianni, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, trans. by W. McCuaig, New York: Columbia University Press 2010, p. 73 et seq. ("Mythization of the World"; Italian: "Fabulizzazione del mondo").

38 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 35.

cannot be removed.³⁹ The alternative to the *Überwindung der Metaphysik* is precisely a *Verwindung*. This is both a coming to terms with a deficiency, a drift from the past and a renunciation, a lowering. The general sense of the transition is well captured by the idea of a gradual and general weakening of the violence (first of all epistemic violence, but it may be institutional violence as well) exercised by objectivism, essentialism and fundamentalism. Weak thought, the circular conception of truth typical of the hermeneutic postmetaphysical *koiné*, and the deconstructionist attitude towards tradition are different articulations of the same need for a new epistemic meekness or humility, in short, for a genuinely non-violent mode of thinking. From this point of view, the death of God appears as the symbolic sacrifice indispensable to initiate a process of escape from the prevaricating logic of superstition or metaphysical idolatry.⁴⁰

The despotism of metaphysics, however, does not consist only in the deceptively non-violent coercion with which the variety of experience is levelled and brought back to its foundation, to its *Grund*, to its exclusive *raison d'être*, but above all in the dualisms it establishes by shaping reality. Conceptual pairs like soul and body, spirit and matter, essence and appearance, substance and accident, supernatural and natural, logos and myth, reason and faith are powerful ordering devices that are difficult to ignore even in informal conversations. Nonetheless, the nihilistic vocation of postmodernity manifests itself precisely in the growing perplexity, or sometimes open scepticism about the consistency

39 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*, trans. by J.R. Snyder, Cambridge: Polity Press 1992, ch. 10 ("Nihilism and the Post-modern in Philosophy"); Vattimo, Gianni, "Verwindung': Nihilism and the Postmodern in Philosophy", in: *SubStance* (16/1987), pp. 7–17; Vattimo, Gianni, "The Trace of the Trace", in Jacques Derrida/Gianni Vattimo (eds), *Religion*, trans. by D. Webb, Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press 1998, p. 79; Vattimo, Gianni, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. by D. Webb, Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press 1997, p. 117 et seq. (note 14).

40 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 75. For Vattimo, epistemic violence is a form of violence that is philosophically more significant than the physical violence that has afflicted the lives of human beings since immemorial time. Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 65 (note 18): "The only possible philosophical definition of violence seems to be the silencing of all questioning by the authoritative peremptoriness of the first principle". On this aspect of the question see, in particular, Vattimo, Gianni, "Metaphysics and Violence: A Question of Method", in Gianni Vattimo, *Of Reality: The Purposes of Philosophy*, trans. by R.T. Valgenti, New York: Columbia University Press 2012, pp. 121–146. The fact that Vattimo chose this topic for the essay with which he paid tribute to the authors who contributed to the *Festschrift* published on the occasion of his seventieth birthday is a clear indication of the central role it plays in his work. Cf. Vattimo Gianni, "Conclusion: Metaphysics and Violence", in Santiago Zabala (ed.), *Weakening Philosophy. Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press 2007, pp. 400–421.

of such dichotomous portraits of the human condition. The example of myth is particularly instructive in this regard.

From the very beginning, Greek philosophy saw itself as a form of knowledge different from, and in direct competition with, the mythical mentality, i.e. with that way of narratively representing the relationship of human beings with other humans, with nature and with the gods, best exemplified by the Homeric poems. If we consider the dialogues of Plato's maturity, we notice, for example, how the distrust towards myth is most often manifested as a need to distinguish oneself from a form of pseudo-knowledge that is blamed for being dispersive (i.e. lacking in internal coherence), worthless (i.e. imprecise and vague) and incapable of offering a solid anchorage with respect to the true, the good and the beautiful. Myth can at best be reserved a lateral space in the lives of people who are lovers of Logos as the epitome of the archaic, the trace left behind by an earlier stage of human development, comparable to what the disorganized mind of children are for an adult.

After the death of God, however, "the 'true world' finally became a fable" ("die 'wahre Welt' endlich zur Fabel wurde"), as Nietzsche proclaims, tongue-in-cheek, in a section of *Twilight of the Idols* often invoked by Vattimo to clarify the meaning of the march of Western philosophy towards nihilism.⁴¹ As a result, once the distinction between truth and fiction, essence and appearance, was dismantled, the very dualism between *mythos* and *logos* became useless. The way was open, then, not so much for a primitivistic return to myth, but for a further exercise in self-reflection: the demythizing of the demythizing of myth.⁴² Myth thus ceases to be the Other of Reason. Both are, so to speak, stripped of their aura and symmetrically weakened in their claim to shape people's mind. The increase in reflexivity granted by this form of decentering, however, cannot be interpreted along the lines of the need for self-assessment typical of the Cartesian subject. Instead of strengthening the individual's capacity to dominate a reality, reduced to a manipulable object, its main effect is rather the dismantling of a module of the framework around which the final

41 Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Twilight of the Idols Or, How to Philosophize with the Hammer*, trans. by R. Polt, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing 1997, p. 23 ("fable" – German: *Fabel* – is rendered as "fiction" here).

42 This development is clearly summarized in Vattimo, Gianni, "Myth and the Destiny of Secularization", in: *Social Research* (52/1985), pp. 347–362; Vattimo Gianni, *The Transparent Society*, trans. by D. Webb, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1994, ch. 3 ("Myth Rediscovered"). Cf. also Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 29: "disenchantment has also produced a radical disenchantment with the idea of disenchantment itself [...] demythification has finally turned against itself, recognizing that even the ideal of the elimination of myth is a myth".

phase of Western metaphysics took shape. Recursive demythologization thus discloses new possibilities for the agent in her relations with herself, others and her social and natural environment. This emancipation does not liberate the agent in the sense in which modern philosophy has generally understood the autonomy of a rational subject, but it does make her more authentic, that is, more able to resonate with marginal parts of her own history and experience.

It is at this point that religion comes into play. It is no coincidence that Vattimo, well before systematically addressing the question of postmodern religious faith, chose the term 'secularization' to give a familiar name to the process of overcoming without rising beyond, of convalescence without immunization, evoked by the German word *Verwindung*. The term functions as a 'placeholder' in the absence of a concept that makes it possible to unequivocally specify how the prophecy of the death of 'God' must, on pain of losing coherence, remain in a condition of suspension. The linearity of metaphysical rationalism has to give way to different geometric forms: the circle, first of all. And the term 'secularization' has precisely the advantage of indicating a process that is both a drift and a metamorphosis, a weakening and a permanence. Moreover, if "God" stands for metaphysical foundation in Nietzsche's prophecy, shouldn't the equivalence apply in both senses? Put another way, is it not reasonable to seek the germs of the dissolution of metaphysics in religion as such? Aren't we entitled to see the truth of Christianity fulfilled in postmodern nihilism and "the development and maturation of the Christian message" achieved in hermeneutics?⁴³

This is, after all, the intuition underlying the philosophical performance enacted by Vattimo through designing and writing an atypical text such as *Belief*. The book is atypical because it is unusual the synergy between two strands of reasoning that are generally kept separate: the level of the author's taking stock of his own existence (programmatically ushered by the book's Proustian incipit: "For a long time I woke up early to go to mass, before school, before the office, before university lectures") and that of reflection *sine ira et studio* on the Last Things.⁴⁴ The alleged contemporary revival of religion is discussed in a way that serves also as a practical demonstration of the validity of the hermeneutic circle. Foreground and background – story and history, life and theory – illuminate each other in a rocking motion that, from forgoing the goal of objective knowledge, draws momentum for a reflexive empowerment

43 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, "The Age of Interpretation", in Richard Rorty/Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *The Future of Religion*, edited by S. Zabala, New York: Columbia University Press 2005, p. 47; Vattimo, Gianni, *Beyond Interpretation*, pp. 53–55.

44 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 20.

that transforms the weakening of reason's claim to rigorously separate truth from fiction, rationality from faith, into an opportunity for self-knowledge.

Once the two modern idols of Science and Progress have crumbled to dust, "there are no longer strong, plausible philosophical reasons to be atheists, or at any rate to dismiss religion" and the way is cleared for the recovery of a relationship with one's own religious past that is once again appropriable personally and collectively.⁴⁵ In both cases, what is at stake is the recognition of a removed or forgotten origin that brings into play our finiteness as individuals and as communities of destiny. The opportunity for such rediscovery may be the head-on collision with one's own mortality or the failure of an entire civilization to cope with the present global challenges, but what is important is that, in a postmetaphysical horizon, religion comes to us not as the foundation to cling to as we drift through history, but as an ally that may help us to fully understand the nihilistic vocation of the age of the death of God and to respond to it in the most ethically appropriate way. This is the deeper sense of the "nihilistic recovery of Christianity" advocated in *Belief*.⁴⁶

Seen against this background, the interpretation of the Gospel message in terms of *kenosis*, of the emptying/weakening of the violent sacred in favour of a non-victimistic and non-absolutist conception of sacredness, appears almost geometric in its establishment of a biunivocal correspondence between Heidegger's history of being and the Christian doctrine of incarnation. On the one hand, we have the natural sacred that is violent inasmuch as it "attributes to such a divinity all the predicates of omnipotence, absoluteness, eternity and 'transcendence' with respect to humanity".⁴⁷ But this despotic divinity, observed from a philosophical standpoint, is none other than "the God of metaphysics, what metaphysics called *ipsum esse subsistens*, the summation in pre-eminent form of all the characters of objective being as thought by metaphysics".⁴⁸ It is not surprising, then, that the dissolution of metaphysics represents as well "the end of this image of God, the death of God of which Nietzsche spoke".⁴⁹

45 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 28; see also p. 90: "Now that Cartesian (and Hegelian) reason has completed its parabola, it no longer makes sense to oppose faith and reason so sharply"; Vattimo, Gianni, *After Christianity*, p. 86. For a discussion of the specific contribution of hermeneutics in undermining "the bases of the principal arguments that philosophy has offered in favour of atheism", see Vattimo, Gianni, *Beyond Interpretation*, ch. 4 (the quotation is taken from page 45).

46 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 38.

47 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 38 et seq.

48 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 39.

49 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 39.

Another term for the same historical-cultural phenomenon is ‘secularization’, which Vattimo himself presents as “the keystone” of his argument.⁵⁰ Through incarnation, the Christian God transcends himself downwards and, by becoming worldly, weakens his own ontological status and the relative claim to truth with which he offers himself to the experience of individual believers. Certainly, as a religion, Christianity also incorporates an ideal of fullness, that is, of a perfect coincidence between factual existence and “its meaning”, between the “outside” and the “inside”.⁵¹ At the same time, however, the Jesus of the Gospels offers a non-majestic, non-reconciled example of the tension between meaning and event that is inherent in the experience of a hermeneutic animal such as *Homo sapiens*.

The biblical God, hence, is secularized through the second person of the Trinity and, by rising below himself into the *ici-bas*, initiates an “indefinite drift” in which “the meaning of the history salvation itself” is revealed.⁵² This drift takes place over the centuries through the metamorphosis of that “religious substratum”, without which “our historical existence would not make sense”, and which leads to the desacralizing interpretation that modern civilization offers, without betraying the teaching of Jesus.⁵³ From the perspective of the weakening of metaphysics, the term “drift” does not have a negative connotation, though. Here, Vattimo’s understanding of secularization differs indeed from Löwith’s. For the de-substantialized religious substratum that survives in his view of western history is the tendency towards weakening as the immanent sense of Christian proclamation. From this point of view, secular modernity is by no means a decline and even less a cultural degeneration, but an opportunity that must be seized, because it may guide people’s tentative endeavours to relate to their religious heritage. “If I have a vocation to recover Christianity”, observes Vattimo in *Belief*, “it will consist in the task of rethinking revelation in secularized terms in order to ‘live in accord with one’s age’ (*conformi al secolo*), therefore in ways that do not offend my culture as, to a greater or lesser extent, a man who belongs to his age”.⁵⁴ In this sense, Christianity

50 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 41.

51 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 22.

52 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 66.

53 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 33; Vattimo, Gianni, “The Age of Interpretation”, p. 53.

54 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 75. From this point of view, Vattimo’s account of secularization shows affinities with Blumenberg’s idea of *menschliche Selbstbehauptung* (human self-assertion) against the theological absolutism of late medieval nominalism. Blumenberg, however, is blamed by Vattimo for falling back to a metaphysical foundationalism disguised as descriptive anthropology. Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, “Postfazione”, in Giovanni Leghissa, *Il dio mortale. Ipotesi sulla religiosità moderna*, Milan: Medusa

represents both a convalescence and a gap – a *Verwindung*, as I said above – with respect to humankind’s violent religious past. Christianity can rightly be defined, then, as the religion of the departure from metaphysics.⁵⁵

Interpreting secularization as a drift means accepting that it is not accomplishable. In other words, there cannot be something like an absolute profanation because the process of secularization has its own internal limit that cannot be secularized. Such is the “formal” commandment of love: “The only truth revealed to us by Scripture, the one that can never be demythologized in the course of time – since it is not an experimental, logical, or metaphysical statement but a call to practice – is the truth of love, of charity”.⁵⁶ God’s love for his creatures is the “ultimate” meaning of divine *kenosis* and hence also of the dissolution of metaphysics. It is a residual rather than definitive sense: what remains of a vertical transcendence that secularization shifted to the purely horizontal plane of human finitude and historicity.⁵⁷

Within the theoretical framework outlined by Vattimo, Nietzsche’s grand narrative of the death of God takes on the guise of an antitragic, philosophically anti-absolutist *métarécit*, which detects the true meaning of the present time in the transition from metaphysics to a weak ethics of friendship and love, from the logic of identity to that of difference, from the violence of institutions to the non-autarchic freedom of individuals. And “authentic” (*eigentlich*), in this context, is not to be misunderstood for a synonym of “original” or “essential”, but as that which reveals itself as such (i.e., closer to the coincidence between factual existence and its meaning) only if it ethically embraces its own event-like and contingent quality (*ereignishaft*). Here, too, the theoretical figure of a recursive circularity between historical givenness and its ideal content prevails. This is “scandalous” from a metaphysical point of view but functional to Vattimo’s discourse. For its general effect is a weakening of what is

2004, pp. 284–286; Vattimo, Gianni, *Beyond Interpretation*, p. 51; Vattimo, Gianni, *After Christianity*, pp. 70–72.

55 On the similarities between Vattimo’s and Gauchet’s views, cf. Michel, Andreas, “The Strength of Weakness: Vattimo and Gauchet on Secularization”, in Stijn Latré/Walter Van Herck/Guido Vanheeswijck (eds.), *Radical Secularization?*, pp. 67–82.

56 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, “The Age of Interpretation”, p. 50 et seq. On the “non-objective” limit of secularization see also Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, pp. 62–65; Vattimo, Gianni, *Beyond Interpretation*, p. 51 (“Secularization has no ‘objective’ limit”).

57 On this idea of horizontal transcendence, cf. Vattimo, Gianni/Dotolo, Carmelo, *Dio: la possibilità buona. Un colloquio sulla soglia tra filosofia e teologia*, Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino 2009, pp. 17–19; Vattimo, Gianni/Girard, René, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue*, trans. W. McCuaig, New York: Columbia University Press 2010, pp. 75–77; Vattimo, Gianni/Sequeri, Pierangelo/Ruggeri, Giovanni, *Interrogazioni sul cristianesimo: cosa possiamo ancora attenderci dal Vangelo?*, Rome: Lavoro 2000, p. 31.

above, dominates and oversees, in favour of what is below, in profane time and space, and must live in a condition suspended between gratitude and grace.⁵⁸

Excesses of Weakness

With admirable frankness, Vattimo admitted in a self-interpretative digression contained in *Belief* that “the extension of the notion of secularization to phenomena that are so different borders on the arbitrary”.⁵⁹ To avoid the risk, it would then be better “to speak in more general terms of weakening, with secularization taken as its pre-eminent case”.⁶⁰ And yet, he decides to persevere in a loose use of the term because he wants to emphasize “the religious sense of all this process”.⁶¹ This is what he has in mind when he claims that “weak ontology is a transcription of the Christian message”.⁶²

The “complex and vertiginous argument” that Vattimo developed in Nietzsche’s wake condenses well the merits and defects of the category investigated in this book.⁶³ As we come to the end of it, it might be useful to recap schematically what is left of the thesis of secularization once it is recursively exploited to undermine any form of intellectual absolutism, in accordance with the Nietzschean belief that “there are no facts, only interpretations, and even this, however, is an interpretation”, unreservedly endorsed by the Italian philosopher.

What is left, then? What remains is, first of all, the “unitary perspective”, which enables us to put the present in a relationship of mutual illumination with its historical-cultural background, no matter if near or far.⁶⁴ The idea of the progressive mundanization or profanization of something that was formerly higher and separate, conceived of as a simultaneous process of lowering, emptying, weakening, articulation, fluidification, is an intuition that

58 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, pp. 35 and 97.

59 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 42.

60 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 42.

61 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 42.

62 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 42; see also p. 92: “If, as I believe, religious experience consists in a feeling of dependence [...], an awareness that my freedom is an initiative that has been initiated by someone else [...], then the philosophical thought of Being as event is also intrinsically oriented toward religion. [...] Conversely, it is the philosophical reading I believe I can give of Christianity, focused on the idea of secularization, that itself allows me to avoid any pretension of having completely rationalized my religious attitude”. See also Vattimo, Gianni, *After Christianity*, pp. 78–80.

63 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, p. 74.

64 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Belief*, p. 65.

has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to bring about a synthesis of the heterogeneous.

This mainstay of the (modern) spirit usually goes together with the feeling (or something very much like a hunch) that ‘religion’ or, at any rate, what we tend to associate with religion (the sacred, worship, devotion, a sense of the numinous), is somehow the hinge of human history. Such role is not necessarily played by religion in a foundational form – as “what holds the world together”, to invoke an expression encountered in the previous chapter – but it may take place under the guise of a tenuous link with the origin (as revival, remembrance, provenance or oblique genealogy). This continuity between present and past needs not be skewed towards the origin, as it was the case, for instance, with Karl Löwith, but may lean towards a future that, while not exercising any kind of causal power over historical events, nevertheless acts as their immanent goal, much as classical works of art end up embodying a meaning that transcends the context of their genesis even in the absence of an independent external foundation.

In this light, secularization is therefore an unfinished unitary process, always in progress, open to the future. Its incessant dynamism, on which the recursive pace of demythologization depends, however, is contingent on the existence of an immaterial internal bond, which is ethical in the broadest sense of the term, and that Vattimo associates with self-giving, oblation love (Christ’s *caritas*). The latter already makes itself felt in the idea of a downward transcendence, of a weak inclination of human events towards non-violence, emptying, abandonment to the event-like quality of historical action. In this sense, the meta-narrative of secularization always has something edifying about it: a lesson, however small, to be taught in a field of knowledge where “essentially contested concepts” understandably predominate.⁶⁵

The inclusive power of the classical thesis of secularization has already been stressed in the previous chapter. Just like demythologization, *Säkularisierung* is never a mere dissolution of the historical substratum that is being secularized. The secret of its inclusiveness lies in the recontextualizing appropriation

65 For an interpretation of the secularization theorem in terms of a *Geistesgeschichte*, i.e., as “a speculative history that is aimed at conveying a moral, in which essentially contested concepts play a constitutive role”, cf. Griffioen, Sjoerd, “Modernity and the Problem of its Christian Past: The *Geistesgeschichten* of Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet”, in: *History and Theory* (55/2016), pp. 185–209. René Girard has expressed doubts about the self-soothing nature of Vattimo’s grand narrative in Girard, René, “Not just Interpretations, There are Facts, too”, in Vattimo, Gianni/Girard, René, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, pp. 88–108; cf. also p. 68 et seq.

through which the possible truth content of what is incorporated is preserved in a de-powered, or at least refashioned, form within a broader horizon. A dialectic between dependence and freedom, finitude and dexterity, is at work here, which is mirrored by the image of a recursive de-centering produced by the gradual weakening of the claim to being able to know things as they are – the historical phenomenon that Vattimo calls the “nihilistic consummation of the principle of reality”.⁶⁶ But what inclusiveness are we talking about here? On the one hand, as we have seen in chapter 5, discourses based on an offhand use of the concept of secularization always expose themselves to the risk of relapsing into a form of unconscious ethnocentrism or cultural imperialism.⁶⁷ In this case, the degree of ‘weakness’ of a civilization (which, as we have just seen, can also be construed as evidence of its level of reflexivity) ends up becoming more or less surreptitiously the yardstick (if not an objective standard at least one based on the authorizing force of the history of Being) with which to judge its ‘universalizable’ value, meaning or, if we want to opt for a less onerous term, ‘allure’.⁶⁸

The opposite risk is that of rendering the concept of secularization almost evanescent. Now, the fact that everything miraculously makes sense ceases to be an indication of hermeneutic fruitfulness, and becomes evidence that the notion has begun to run in circles, frictionless. The danger, therefore, is that the Neo-Nietzschean *grands récits* centred on the recursive force of the profanation of what was once sacred are reduced to little more than a self-portrait of

66 Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *Beyond Interpretation*, p. 42, translation modified (original: “nichilistica consumazione del principio di realtà”).

67 For a powerful articulation of this objection see Caputo, John D., “Spectral Hermeneutics. On the Weakness of God and the Theology of the Event”, in John D. Caputo/Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, pp. 77–83. Vattimo came very close to advocating an essentialist conception of the Christian identity of the West in *After Christianity*, ch. 5, especially p. 77 (“What I intend to argue is that the West is essentially Christian to the extent that the meaning of its own history appears as the ‘twilight of Being’, that is, the diminishment of reality’s solidity through all the procedures of dissolution of objectivity brought about by modernity”). Contrarywise, he defended the reasons for a “moderate ethnocentrism” (similar to that adopted by Richard Rorty) in a dialogue with Richard Kearney. See Kearney, Richard/Zimmermann, Jens (eds.), *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God with James Wood et alii*, New York: Columbia University Press 2016, p. 134 (italics mine).

68 See Vattimo’s reply to Girard in Vattimo, Gianni/Girard, René, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, p. 71. On the idea of the “universal as task or project or guiding idea (*idea regolativa*) [...] bound rigorously to a political project”, cf. Vattimo, Gianni, “The Construction of Universality is Political”, in Gianni Vattimo, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, pp. 115–117 (the quoted sentence is from p. 116 et seq.).

the narrator, disguised as historical frescos, like it happens to those painters who systematically portray themselves in the faces depicted in their paintings. Even though interpretative macrocategories have often acted as a projective test in modern history, where the ghosts of the interpreting community reappear magnified, this does not make the suspicion that the secularization thesis is ultimately nothing more than an exemplary case of theoretical self-mimesis any less unsettling.

Conclusion: Do We Still Need the Concept of Secularization?

This book was born with a specific aim: to bring back into the spotlight a concept which, whilst it played a crucial role in the philosophical discourse of modernity, is now at the centre of a pressing and convergent theoretical contestation. More precisely, its aim was to track its recent developments, which – this is my book’s main claim – have been so remarkable as to make legitimate, if not mandatory, the reference to Thomas Kuhn’s notion of a paradigm shift.

Once the change has been processed, some interesting details can be fleshed out. The investigator’s attention is drawn, for example, to the fact that the word ‘secularization’ presupposes a concept of process. In other words, uses of the word that are not just vague or allusive involve the picture of a historical transition from one specific condition to another specific condition of opposite sign: in a nutshell, from religion to non-religion. In fact, this shift has appeared to most people as both macroscopic and elusive. It is this incongruity that has muddled and thwarted the discussion about a social phenomenon that, as strange as it may sound, is both stratified and immediately recognizable.

On the other hand, ever since the term appeared in the main European languages, the concept of ‘secularization’ has not only been tracking experience, but has seemed to be perpetually lagging behind it. Indeed, the oft-told story of the birth and spread of the word describes a repeated extemporaneous, albeit not arbitrary, migration from one semantic domain to another.¹

It all began in the sixteenth-century when the term emerged spontaneously from the bosom of the Christian canonical tradition to designate the coming and going of goods and persons between the sacred and profane realms of life. This symbolic dynamism is made possible in a post-axial religion such as Christianity by a two-dimensional conception of time, on which the bifurcation between the economy of salvation and the economy of individual survival is more generally based. The Church itself, after all, is an institution that straddles these distinct yet intertwined planes of reality. Its primary function, in fact, is to oversee the traffic between the city of God and the earthly city, modulating the variable amount of self-love and love of God between which human action oscillates as a consequence of original sin.

1 For the relevant bibliographical references see the Introduction (note 15).

After the Thirty Years War and the cultural cataclysm caused, among other things, by theological disagreements about the interpretation of the right balancing point between rejection of the 'century' and dedication to it, the concept of secularization reappears in a new guise. Its occasional use in a difficult diplomatic negotiation, as people were forced to come to terms with the confiscation of a conspicuous amount of ecclesiastical property in the new European religious and geopolitical order, gives an idea of the extent of the change taking place in the relationship between political and religious authority. With a brilliant move of analogical thinking, 'secularizing', making secular, becomes in that context a synonym of 'nationalizing', putting under state control. With hindsight, one remarkable aspect of the affair is that, thanks to the use of a canonical term, a historical process that could have given rise to an irreligious reading of events was instead at least partly brought back into the realm of a Christian worldview. Along the way, the question of the secularity of the state or, more generally, of the functional differentiation of the political sphere from the religious realm, has taken on its typically modern form.

Finally, a further significant semantic migration occurred in the eighteenth-century. This one was driven by a series of deep social changes and an understandable wave of distrust towards the religious enthusiasm that had proliferated during the Wars of Religion. Back then, the European intelligentsia developed a growing need to give a name to the first symptoms of the crisis of Christianity in Europe. The polemical comparison with the Middle Age played a crucial role here. However, such development was not only a corollary of the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*. For the disillusionment went hand in hand with the persuasion that the various creeds and cults are nothing more than different local instantiations of a universal anthropological phenomenon that goes under the name of 'religion'. It was Hume, in particular, that launched the project of a critique of religion based on a naturalistic reinterpretation of the human tendency to endorse onerous beliefs even when they fail to meet our standards for compelling reasoning.²

Even apart from (most) Enlightenment thinkers' impatience with Christianity and, what is more, the widespread popular resentment against its institutional embodiments, there were many in the Age of Reason who interpreted the meaning of the historical transformation underway in terms of a growing and irreversible mundanization of human mentality and sociality. The decline of Christianity in Europe, rather than as a local and/or temporary phenomenon, was thus increasingly seen as a necessary and irreversible cultural

² On this aspect of the issue, cf. the useful remarks by Joas, Hans, in *The Power of the Sacred*, ch. 1.

development, which concerned humanity as a whole and indicated an end-goal towards which it was not only reasonable, but inevitable to move. On this basis, the idea of secularization as a Christian '*détour*', the new model of statehood and self-sufficient secular government, and the intuition of spiritual progress within an exclusively immanent horizon merged together in a philosophically fruitful synthesis of the heterogeneous.

The latest migration of the concept is taking place before our eyes today. The theory and practice of 'secularization' or, more precisely, 'secularity', have now definitively emerged from their European or Euro-Atlantic shells and are being forced to measure themselves against a global cultural context encompassing historical trajectories that are in some cases very different from the one that made them possible in the West. Faced with this challenge, the semantic axis of the term gives the impression of being on the verge of collapsing, as though there were a terminal phase for concepts too, in which even the most enlightening categories end their natural evolution by rapidly losing energy and elasticity.

For what of the world around us can be explained only by means of the concept of secularization? Is there something about political Islam, the economic boom of the Asian tigers, Japanese eccentricity, Indian creative chaos, or the African enigma that can be better understood on account of the religious/secular dyad? More generally, does the future of humanity gain or lose clarity depending on whether we refine or set aside such an insidious noun of process?

Doubts about the soundness and residual fruitfulness of the concept are justified. It is not clear, however, whether, they depend on the overambitious use made of it in the past rather than on its intrinsic weakness. If pessimists were right, a few years' moratorium on the scientific use of the term would probably be the most logical choice in the absence of a better lexical alternative, which is not on the horizon, yet.

Conversely, perhaps a prudent, frugal and circumstantial use of the concept might suffice. What is essential is that the resonance with personal and collective experience is not detrimental to the constellation of meanings within which such a resonance can only bear fruit if it does not abuse the deceptive veneer of obviousness that always comes from an excessive acquaintance with its source. This is precisely the conclusion reached by the British historian Owen Chadwick at the end of one of the most balanced analyses of the phenomenon investigated in this book. The spirit that animates it, if I am not wrong, is the same that has guided my attempt to chart – without being able to supervise it – a debate whose complexity far exceeds the synoptic capacities of

any researcher today. It makes sense, therefore, to let him have the last word, while I take my leave of those readers who have had the patience to follow my reasoning up to this point.

Umbrella terms, however doubtful, are useful. I do not think it an abuse of such a term to call this radical process, still in part so obscure to the enquirer, still in part undefined and possibly in part undefinable, by the name of secularization; on the one condition (and it is an absolute condition) that the word is used, neither as the lament of nostalgia for past years, nor as propaganda to induce history to move in one direction rather than another, but simply as a description of something that happened to European society in the last two hundred years. And what happened, and why, must still be matter for much enquiry by students of history and religion and society.³

3 Cf. Chadwick, Owen, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth-Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975, p. 265 et seq.

Index

- Abbey, Ruth 31
Adorno, Theodor W. 4, 128, 157
Agamben, Giorgio 163
Ahmad, Irfan 83, 86, 88
Alfieri, Fernanda x
Andolfi, Ferruccio x
Appel, Kurt IX, X
Arendt, Hannah 5
Arènes, Jacques 104
Arens, Edmund 122
Arnold, Matthew 157
Asad, Muhammad (Weiss, L.) 82
Asad, Talal XXVI, 71–72, 77, 80, 82–91
Asher, Linda 161
Autiero, Antonio IX
Azouvi, François 103
- Baltes, Paul B. XXI
Banfield, Edward C. XVI
Barash, Jeffrey A. 7
Bardawil, Fadi A. 71, 83, 86
Bardon, Aurélia 47
Beiner, Ronald 31
Beister, Hella 121
Bell, Daniel 163
Bellah, Robert N. 38, 67, 81, 107
Benhabib, Seyla 128
Benjamin, Walter XII, 129, 149, 165
Bennett, Jo XXII
Berardini, S. x
Berger, Peter 17, 23, 149, 176
Bergeron, P. 103, 104, 113
Bhargava, Rajeev x, 31, 48, 76, 81–82
Bianchin, Matteo 145
Biano, Ilaria x
Bilgrami, Akeel 53, 76
Biondi, Damiano 65
Bloch, Ernst 123
Bloom, Allan 157
Blumenberg, Hans VII, IX, XII, XXIV–XXVI,
3, 5, 8–13, 15, 16, 28, 31, 37, 53–55, 64, 86,
88, 146, 173, 176
Böckenförde, Ernst-Wolfgang 93
Bohmann, Ulf x
Boltanski, Luc 161
- Bondolfi, Alberto IX
Bonhoeffer, Dietrich 145
Bortolini, Matteo IX, XXI
Bouchindomme, C. 37
Bremmer, Jan N. XXI
Brient, Elizabeth 8, 12
Brieskorn, Norbert 123
Brown, Wendy 85
Bruce, Steve XV
Brunner, Otto XX
Bruun, Hans H. 102
Buddha 67
Bullock, Marcus 165
Bullock, Michael 67
Bultmann, Rudolf 8, 10, 12
Burchardt, Marian 77
Burge, Oscar 103
Butler, Judith 51, 85
- Calhoun, Craig 32, 34, 36, 76, 77, 79, 82, 122,
142
Calloni, Marina 135
Caputo, John D. 154, 177
Capuzzi, Frank A. 154
Cardini, Stefano x, 60
Carnevali, Barbara x
Carroll, Anthony J. x, 35, 76, 100
Casanova, José x, XVI, XXI, 36, 82, 85, 87–89
Cau, Maurizio x
Certeau, Michel de XIV
Chadwick, Owen 181–182
Chakrabarty, Dipesh 55, 74–75
Chiapello, Éve 161
Clastres, P. 106
Coda, Piero xxi
Cohen, Jean L. 93
Colli, Giorgio 166
Common, Thomas 153, 154
Confucius 67, 81
Conrad, Sebastian 79
Conze, Werner XX, XXI
Cortella, Lucio x
Cosman, Carol 58
Costa, Paolo XX, 27, 31, 32, 60, 67, 122, 158,
161, 165

- Cox, Harvey xviii
 Cox, Jeffrey 15, 18
 Cronin, Ciaran 4, 121, 122, 124, 131
 Crump, Eric 131
 Cunico, Gerardo 121, 125, 139
- Dalferth, Ingo U. xxii
 D'Andrea, Dimitri x
 Danz, Christian 145
 De Vries, Hent xxi
 De Vriese, Herbert xx, xxii, 21, 38, 123
 Debray, Régis 116, 120
 Derrida, Jacques 169
 Deuser, Hermann 57
 Dews, Peter 131
 Dhawan, Nikita 73, 75
 Dillon, Michele xv
 D'Isanto, Luca 160, 167
 Dobbelaere, Karel 81
 do Mar Castro Varela, María 73, 75
 Donaggio, Enrico x, 5–7, 11
 Dotolo, Carmelo 174
 Dostoevsky, Fyodor 47
 Dottori, Riccardo 157
 Duns Scotus, John 10–11
 Durkheim, Émile 42, 45, 58
- Elias, Norbert 40
 Elliott, Gregory 161
 Ellis, Bret Easton 162
 Ellis, Fiona x
 Engels, Friedrich 159
 Ernaux, Annie xii
- Fazio, Giorgio 7
 Ferlan, Claudio ix
 Ferrara, Alessandro x
 Ferry, Luc 117
 Feuerbach, Ludwig A. von xxiii
 Filoramo, Giovanni xxi
 Finch, Henry A. 100
 Fingarette, Herbert 81
 Flanagan, Kieran 39
 Fornari, Emanuela 73
 Fort, Jeff 163
 Foster, Hal 128
 Foucault, Michel 40, 72, 80, 89
 Freeman, Laurence 46
- Frenaye, Frances xii
 Freud, Sigmund 157
 Frisch, Max 152
 Frontini, Davide 104, 105
 Fultner, Barbara 122, 125, 126
- Gabriel, Karl 58
 Gadamer, Hans-Georg 5, 8, 156–157
 Gandhi, Leela 73
 Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand 80
 Ganes, Jeremy 56
 Gauchet, Marcel vii, xxvi, 99, 103–120, 174, 176
 Gehlen, Arnold 5
 Gibellini, Rosino ix
 Gieben, Bram 74
 Girard, René 174, 176–177
 Goldstein, Warren S. xv
 Gregor, Mary J. 142
 Greisch, Jean 10, 104
 Gordon, Peter 121
 Gorski, Philip S. xv
 Green, David E. 4
 Grotius, Hugo 49
 Griffioen, Sjoerd 176
- Habermas, Jürgen vii, x, xxvi, 4, 5, 51, 121–152, 166
 Hagedorn, Ludger x
 Hall, Stuart 74
 Hanafi, Zakiya 158
 Haynes, Kenneth 154
 Hedström, Peter 62
 Hegel, Georg W.F. xii, xx, xxiii, 4, 5, 32, 34, 44, 64, 104, 124, 129, 134, 142, 172
 Heidegger, Martin 8, 154–157, 167–168, 172
 Hellems, Staf 35, 76
 Henrich, Dieter 5
 Herck, W. van xxii, 107, 174
 Herzfeld, Michael 71
 Hirschkind, Charles 71–72, 83–87
 Hohengarten, William M. 133
 Hogg, Helen S. 4
 Hollingdale, Reginald J. 164
 Horkheimer, Max 4, 143, 157
 Hölsle, Vittorio 122
 Hume, David 5, 129, 142, 180
 Huntington, Samuel P. 93

- Hurley, Andrew 25
 Hurley, Robert 106
- Ingram, David 125
- James, William 165
 Jaspers, Karl 38, 67, 69
 Jay, Martin 13
 Jennings, Michael W. 165
 Jephcott, Edmund 4
 Jesus of Nazareth 6, 113, 173
 Joas, Hans x, xxvi, 4, 27, 38, 56–70, 71, 88,
 100, 102, 104, 122, 129–130, 180
 Juergensmeyer, Mark 79, 82
 Junker-Kenny, Maureen 122
- Kaesler, Dirk 122
 Kafka, Franz 10
 Kant, Immanuel 103, 123, 126, 129, 135, 142,
 144, 146, 147, 150, 151
 Kaufmann, Walter A. 164
 Kearney, Richard 177
 Keast, Paul 56
 Keding, Gesche x
 Kennedy, John F. 3
 Kenny, Peter P. 131
 Kerkwijk, Marthe x
 Kishik, David 163
 Klein, Barbro 4
 Kloppenberg, James T. 56
 Knuth, Micha ix
 Kohn, Jerome 5
 Kompridis, Nikolas 31
 Koselleck, Reinhart xxi, 4
 Krell, David F. 154
 Kroll, Joe P. ix, 8–10
 Kuhn, Helmut 3, 4, 8
 Kuhn, Thomas xv, 30, 179
 Kühnlein, Michael 31, 46
 Kundera, Milan 161
 Küng, Hans 150
 Künkler, Mirjam 17
- Laborde, Cécile 47, 51, 93
 Laforest, Guy 31, 104
 Laitinen, Arto 31
 Landgrebe, Ludwig 5
 Lara, Philippe de 31, 104
- Larmore, Charles x
 Lasch, Christopher 118, 157
 Latré, Stijn xxii, 107, 114, 174
 Lawrence, Frederick G. 128, 129, 131
 Leask, Ian 32
 Lefort, Claude 105
 Leghissa, Giovanni 173
 Lepper, Marcel 8
 Leskov, Nikolai xii
 Levi, Carlo xii
 Levine, George x
 Lingua, Graziano xvi, 103
 Livingstone, Rodney 70, 165
 Löwith, Karl vii, xxiii, xxiv, 3–9, 11, 15, 24,
 146, 176
 Lübbe, Hermann xiv, 3, 7–8
 Luhmann, Niklas 151
 Lutz-Bachmann, Matthias 31, 46
- Maclure, Jocelyn 31, 51–52
 Mahmood, Saba 77, 85, 93
 Manent, Pierre 119
 Marcuse, Herbert 157
 Marquard, Odo 5
 Marramao, Giacomo xx
 Martin, David vii, x, xxiv–xxvi, 15–30, 31,
 53–56, 129
 Marx, Karl 7, 19, 21–22, 121, 159
 Mazzoni, Guido 158, 159–161, 166
 McCarthy, Thomas 124, 134, 138
 McCuaig, William 168, 174
 McNeil, Brian 122
 McPherson, David x, 31
 Meijer, Michiel 31, 38, 122
 Mellino, Miguel 73
 Mencken, Henry L. 123
 Mendieta, Eduardo 51, 121–122, 128–131, 142,
 144, 146
 Mezzadra, Sandro 73
 Michel, Andreas 174
 Middell, Matthias 77
 Milbank, John 142
 Minelli, Alessandro x
 Mommsen, Wolfgang J. 101–102
 Monod, Jean-Claude x, xii, xiv, 8, 37, 100,
 154
 Monroe, Marilyn (Mortenson, N.J.) 3
 Montinari, Mazzino 166

- Moore, Gregory 59
 Moore, Ian A. 165
 Moore, Samuel 159
 Moses 133
 Müller Doohm, Stefan 121
- Namli, Elena 8
 Needham, Anuradha Dingwaney 81
 Nehru, Jawaharlal 80
 Nemenko, Ekaterina x
 Neri, Marcello x
 Nielsen, Hviid T. 142
 Nietzsche, Friedrich VII, XV, 4, 44, 64, 72,
 89, 103, 123, 153–157, 163–168, 170–172,
 174, 175, 177
 Nussbaum, Martha C. x
- Ockham, W. of 10–11, 48
 Orsi, Robert A. 77, 88
 Ortega y Gasset, José 157
 Outhwaite, William 185
- Pace, Enzo x
 Parsons, Talcott 67, 101
 Pasolini, Pier Paolo 158, 161
 Paterlini, Piergiorgio 168
 Pensky, Max 121, 131, 135
 Petrucciani, Stefano 125
 Piras, Mauro x
 Piron, Sylvain 103
 Pisu, Renata 81
 Plato x, XX, 154, 170
 Pollack, Detlef xv, 58
 Polt, Richard 170
 Pombeni, Paolo x
 Propp, Vladimir J. xv
- Rabinow, Paul 72
 Rähme, Boris ix
 Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder 81
 Randeria, Shalini 79
 Ratcliffe, Matthew x
 Ratzinger, Joseph (Benedict XVI) 122, 146,
 148–150
 Rawls, John 49, 137, 147
 Reder, Michael 122, 123
 Rehg, William 121
 Rendall, Steven 138
- Reynolds, Stefan 46
 Ricci, Matteo 35
 Ricoeur, Paul 104
 Riesebrodt, Martin 138
 Ritter, Joachim 3
 Robbins, Jeffrey W.
 Roncalli, Angelo Giuseppe (John XXIII) 3
 Rorty, Richard 171, 177
 Rosa, Hartmut x, 31
 Rospocher, Massimo x
 Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 12
 Ruggeri, Giovanni 174
 Rushdie, Salman A. 83
 Russell, Bertrand xviii
- Said, Edward 74
 Schäfer, Heinrich Wilhelm 57, 59
 Scheler, Max 58
 Schiller, Friedrich J.C. 101
 Schmidt, Josef 122, 123
 Schmitt, Carl xxiii, 8, 86, 146
 Schmitz, Alexander 8
 Schößler, Sabine 56
 Scott, David 71, 72, 82–87
 Scott, Laurence xv
 Seligman, Adam 120
 Sequeri, Pierangelo 174
 Shils, Edward A. 100
 Skinner, Alex 57, 58, 60
 Skinner, Quentin 33
 Sloterdijk, Peter 44, 164–167
 Smelser, Neil J. xxi
 Smith, James K.A. 31, 32
 Smith, Nicholas H. 31
 Smith, Wilfred Cantwell 86
 Snyder, Jon R. 169
 Socrates 67, 123
 Spengler, Oswald 157
 Spinoza, Baruch 123
 Spohn, Ulrike ix, x, 93, 131
 Srinivasan, Thirukodikaval Nilakanta 81
 Stambaugh, Joan 154
 Stein, Abe 106
 Steuer, Daniel 121
 Strätz, Hans-Wolfgang xx
 Strayer, Alison L. xii
 Svenungsson, Jayne 8
 Szonyi, Michael 81

- Tagore, Rabindranath 80
 Taussig, Sylvie 31, 37, 46, 76, 120
 Taylor, Charles VII, X, XX, XXV–XXVI, 18,
 31–52, 53–56, 66, 73, 76–78, 80, 101–102,
 104, 120, 131–132, 146, 149, 160
 Testa, Italo x
 Thaidigsmann, Edgar 122
 Todd, Jane Marie 51
 Tolstoy, Leo 63
 Tönnies, Ferdinand XIV
 Tschannen, Olivier XV, 18
 Tully, James 31, 33

 Valgenti, Robert T. 169
 Vanantwerpen, Jonathan 32, 34, 36, 51, 76,
 77, 79, 82, 122, 142, 146
 Vanheeswijck, Guido XXII, 107, 174
 Vattimo, Gianni XXVI, 154, 160, 165, 167–177
 Veer, Peter van der 78–79, 81
 Ventura, Marco ix
 Viano, Carlo Augusto 104
 Voegelin, Eric 3, 5

 Wallace, Robert M. 8
 Warner, Michael 32, 34, 36, 76, 77, 79, 81,
 92–93, 130

 Wayne, John (Morrison, M.M.) 122
 Webb, David 167, 169, 170
 Weber, Marianne 101
 Weber, Max XX, 5, 40, 70, 99–103, 104, 111,
 120, 122, 126, 144
 Weil, Éric 5
 West, Cornel 51
 Whimster, Sam 100
 Whitman, Walt 92
 Wiedmann, Franz 3, 4, 8
 Wiegandt, Klaus 63
 Wingert, Lutz 59
 Wittrock, Björn 62
 Wohlrab-Sahr, Monika 77
 Wojtyła, Karol J. (John Paul II) 148

 Young, Julian 154
 Young, Robert J.C. 73

 Zabala, Santiago 169, 171
 Zabel, Hermann xx
 Zamperini, Adriano 162
 Zarathustra 154, 156, 166
 Zimmerman, Jens 177
 Zohn, Harry XII, 101
 Zordan, Davide V, X, XX, 158