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CONTESTED MODERNITY

KARL LÖWITH, HANS BLUMENBERG AND CARL SCHMITT
AND THE GERMAN SECULARIZATION DEBATE

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Karl Löwith, Hans Blumenberg and Carl Schmitt
and the German Secularization Debate

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Introduction

'A Tale of Two Churches'

Secularization is usually taken to indicate a general process of transformation from one worldview to another. However, 'secularization' carries multiple meanings and macro-historical concepts also 'occur' as concrete micro-histories. As such, it not only pertains to grand developments such as the separation of church and state, but also to the transformation of towns, rural communities and the every-day lives of individuals, as for instance the Dutch historian Geert Mak has shown in *Hoe God verdween uit Jorwerd*.¹ Secularization, in other words, is *also* a story of 'how God disappeared' from the small Frisian village of Jorwerd. The current study is a philosophical investigation of secularization. More specifically, of the philosophical polemics between Karl Löwith, Hans Blumenberg and Carl Schmitt within the broader context of the German secularization debate. Before introducing these authors and the debate, however, let us first take a very concrete image of secularization, namely an empty church, as point of departure, in order to illustrate two different conceptions of secularization relevant to this study.

A common way of thinking about secularization assumes that modernity and religion are essentially antagonistic concepts.² According to this view, religion is assumed to be modernity's 'other'. It represents the past that we have irrevocably left behind. 'Secularization' is subsequently regarded as a development that signifies the proportionate disappearance of religion and advance of modernity, or of its presumed auxiliaries: Enlightenment and/or science. The continued existence of religious ideas or practices in the present does not falsify this claim. Rather, it shows the stubborn persistence of a non-modern historical residue.³ To those who adhere to this conception of modernity and secularization the question remains whether this 'non-modern residue' will inevitably give way to modern secular rationality or not; many hope that this is indeed the case. In the Dutch cultural context, secularization is commonly equated with '*ontkerkelijkjng*': a decline in church attendance. The waning influence of the local church on daily life in a village or town replicates on a more tangible level a general development: the advance of modernity implies the decline of religion. This understanding of 'secularization' presupposes that, like the emptying of churches, we are dealing with a mono-linear, unidirectional and irrevocable process of gradual *disappearance*, be it one that occurs on multiple levels: God disappears from Jorwerd, people leave the local church, and religion exits society. Many, moreover, evaluate this process as an instance of *progress*, signifying the unproblematic removal of an inessential or detrimental element from society or daily life.⁴

The second understanding of secularization – one which will be more pertinent to this study – does not refer to the unproblematic disappearance of religion in modernity but to its ambivalent transformation. Rather than signifying the removal of religion from society, secularization is conceived in this view as a process in which a religious element or function is transposed to a secular context, or where religious ideas are *translated* to a secular language,

1 Mak (2002) cf. pp.113-143.

2 Perhaps it is worth noting that when I use the term 'modernity' I refer specifically to the Western variety. Hence my discussion of religion usually focusses on Christianity and, to a lesser extent, on Judaism. The 'multiple modernities' approach (cf. Taylor 2007, p.21) is significant, but falls beyond the scope of the current investigation.

3 Cf. Blumenberg (1966) pp.60-61.

4 Cf. Taylor (2007) p.22.

while retaining a built-in reference to the religious context in which they originate.⁵ Although it acknowledges that the position of religion has become problematized in modernity, this alternative conception of secularization does cast doubt on whether modernity and religion are indeed as discontinuous as adherents of the first view suggest. Not only does the second view imply that the persistence of religious elements signifies something else than the persistence of the non-modern in modernity, it also suggests that secular, modern phenomena themselves may contain traces of religion. This perspective casts a different light on *ontkerkelijkering* and the fate of the local church: while the first view of secularization can account for a decline in church attendance, the second view is more attuned to the strange afterlife religion can have in secular society. It pertains, for example, to how some people, having left the church, seek new communities or new meaningful narratives, or how people replace church rituals with different, quasi-secular equivalents, or how they experience the absence of such rituals. Finally, it refers to how the emptied church building itself survives, fulfilling awkward new functions in ‘a secular age’, either as a monument to the past, or, repurposed, as a bookshop, apartment building or dance hall. In this second sense, the local church equally serves as an exemplar of ‘secularization’. However, rather than exemplifying the unproblematic disappearance of religion it serves as a sign of its continued, ambivalent presence, directly, indirectly or even *in absentia*.

Postsecular Critiques of Progress and Secularization

The second conception of secularization is often involved in attempts to shed a different, usually more critical light on the idea of ‘progress’ that is commonly espoused by the first view. The implication is that ‘progress’ itself contains a religious residue, even when it is employed to signify the overcoming of religion by modernity or of faith by reason. Enlightenment-inspired notions of the gradual improvement of the world, the rationalization of society or the emancipation of humanity from bondage and “self-incurred immaturity” are argued to be ‘secularized’ versions of religious conceptions of providence.⁶ Whether it is assumed that a religious substance persists in a secular form or that a religious function is given new, secular content, in both cases it is claimed that *something* religious survives, often without the knowledge of those who adhere to these ‘secularized’ phenomena. To be sure, this *transitive* use of the term secularization – as in x is a secularized y – is not limited to the topic of progress.⁷ Examples abound of this transitive meaning, ranging from the banal and every-day to the incendiary and political. For instance, a journalist uses this meaning of ‘secularization’ to explain his new love of hiking in the woods and his urge to introduce representations of the forest into his home, in the form of houseplants: “If the forest is the god of our age, then the houseplant is the Madonna icon.”⁸ On a more contentious note, a leader of a populist political party uses it to cast doubt on the climate crisis: “It is a masochist heresy, this secularized diluvianism [*zondvloedgeloof*] that has captured the hearts ... of our governors”.⁹ While the

5 The notion of ‘translation’, e.g. of something from an exclusive religious language to a more commonly accessible secular language, is thematized by Habermas (2006b).

6 Cf. Taubes (2009); Löwith (1949).

7 On ‘transitive’ secularization, cf.: Zabel (1968) pp.15-39; De Vriese (2016) p.37.

8 Van Veelen (2018), my translation: “Als het bos de god van onze tijd is, dan is de kamerplant het Mariabeeldje.”

9 From a speech by Thierry Baudet, my translation: “Het is een masochistische ketterij, dit gesecculariseerde zondvloedgeloof, dat zich in onze tijd heeft meester gemaakt van de harten ... van onze bestuurders.” Cf. Tempelman (2019). For other examples of ‘transitive secularization’, see: Blumenberg (1983) pp.13-16.

transitive meaning of secularization has a wider range of application, critiques of progress as ‘secularized’ religion are especially poignant because they attempt to strike at what is assumed to be the core of the self-consciousness of modernity: that it is unproblematically a-religious, founded on “reason alone”, and that modernization is unequivocally a good thing.¹⁰ Paul Kingsnorth, author of *Savage Gods* (2019), states in an interview that economic growth has become an idolatrous religion that will ultimately destroy the planet: “Christianity is replaced by an unconditional faith in industrialization, progress and rationalism. We have killed God and placed Progress on his throne. Everything that is needed to halt the ecological crisis founders on the necessity of economic growth.”¹¹ John Gray argues along similar lines that “the idea of progress is a secular version of Christian eschatology” and that many secular thinkers venerate Reason or Humanity as “surrogates of the God they have cast aside. ... The idea that the human species realizes common goals throughout history is a secular avatar of a religious idea of redemption.”¹² Probably unbeknownst to them, Kingsnorth and Gray hereby reiterate a claim that was made famous by Karl Löwith in his 1949 book *Meaning in History*, a work that will form one of the primary focal points of this investigation.¹³

Löwith’s contention, shared by Kingsnorth and Gray, that the quintessentially modern notion of progress has religious roots, even though it is often framed as the victory of secular reason over religious faith, problematizes the clear-cut dichotomy between modernity and religion that is presupposed by the first conception of secularization. Indeed, it can be added that the very notion of ‘secularization’ itself – which refers to the originally Christian distinction between *saeculum* and eternity – is inextricably tied to the concept of religion. This means that even if purely as a reference point, or as a perceived absence, religion retains an ambivalent presence of some sort when its disappearance is discussed.¹⁴ In recent years, issues such as these are addressed in the so-called ‘postsecularism debate’. This is a broad multidisciplinary discourse where the meaning of concepts such as ‘modernity’ and ‘secularization’ are put up for discussion and in which the ‘religion-secular binary’ is problematized and renegotiated. Prominent voices such as those of Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas and Gianni Vattimo call into question the mono-linear secularization narrative that describes religion’s unproblematic disappearance. They concur that Western modernity did not come into existence *despite* Christianity but that it emerged out of it, and that – also because of its assumedly secular nature – it continues to carry traces of this past. Such issues are relevant because in the context of debates on globalization, ‘multiple modernities’, and multiculturalism it casts a critical light on the assumption that a Western variety of ‘secularization’ is universal, that it is an ahistorical occurrence in which faith and superstition automatically give way to reason and enlightenment.¹⁵ Postsecularism, in short, emphasizes the ambivalent presence and transformation of religion in modernity.

However, the recent attunement to the possible shortcomings of the first conception of secularization, concomitant with an increased focus on what I have termed ‘the strange

10 On the notion of “reason alone”, cf.: Taylor (2011) pp.326-346.

11 Kingsnorth and Mulder (interview) (2019) p.11. My translation: “Het Christendom is vervangen door een onvoorwaardelijk geloof in industrialisatie, vooruitgang en rationalisme. We hebben God vermoord en Vooruitgang op de troon gezet. Alles wat nodig is om de ecologische crisis te keren, loopt stuk op de noodzaak van economische groei.”

12 Gray (2004) p.11; *ibid.* (2019) p.1.

13 As far as I know, Gray does not refer to Löwith in his claims that ‘progress is secularized eschatology’. The similarity between their claims is notable however, as Kroll (2010, pp.4-8) has already observed.

14 Cf. Adam (2001) p.149.

15 Cf. Habermas (2002) pp.155-156.

afterlife of religion in secular society’, raises a host of questions about which little agreement exists in the postsecularism debate. They all relate to the general issue of how Western modernity should be evaluated over against its Christian past. Indeed, if the boundary between religion and modernity is more porous than previously thought, or if it is true that certain core ideas – even ‘secularization’ and ‘progress’ – can be related to religious origins, does this mean that modernity suffers from false self-consciousness or that it is somehow *indebted* to Christianity? To return to the image used earlier, should we perceive modernity as an empty church from which all spiritual meaning has dissipated, as some pessimistic theologians might argue, or as a *repurposed* church, a structure with a new content that retains its old parameters?¹⁶ Or is it rather a new edifice that might have emerged from older structures but that possesses its own character and dignity? In short, does modernity possess its own legitimacy over against its Christian past or will it always remain beholden to it? Questions such as these inevitably come into play as soon as the self-evidence of the ‘secular-religion binary’ is disputed, as post-secularism has done. However, for the rather diffuse nature of postsecularism these questions are not discussed in a systematic manner, nor are they always explicitly addressed.

To obtain a better understanding of poignant issues such as these, I propose that we turn to the German secularization debate: a wide-ranging polemic that centered on the work of Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt. In this debate these questions were discussed in depth. While it is commonly referred to as a polemic of great importance to philosophical reflection on modernity’s relation to religion – it is for instance regarded as *the* forerunner of the post-secularist discourse – there have been few extensive or systematic studies of this secularization debate, let alone studies that focus on how Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt should actually be situated within it.¹⁷ The current investigation endeavors to address this lacuna. Moreover, it will highlight meaningful connections between postsecularism on the one hand and the older German debate on the other, although this is not my primary focus. The main roles of this investigation are reserved for Löwith, who believed that modernity is defined by hubris and crypto-religious illusion, Blumenberg, who argued that while modernity’s origin should be understood in relation to Christianity it *does* possess its own independency and legitimacy, and, finally, Carl Schmitt, who identified secularization as a detrimental processes of neutralization, understood as an increased meaninglessness and the stifling of the human will. Aside from these three philosophers, this study also reconstructs the broader discursive context in which they should be situated. This will involve analyses of the contributions of various authors – e.g., Hermann Lübbe, Odo Marquard and Jacob Taubes – who are less well-known in the contemporary postsecularism discourse but who can be seen to offer illuminating insights on the subject. In a nutshell, the current study seeks to answer a historical question, namely what the significance is of the polemic between Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt in the development of the German secularization debate, but it also offers a philosophical reflection on the continued relevance of this debate with regard to any theorizing on the nature of modernity and its relation to religion.

16 Famous theological accounts of secularization along these lines are: Guardini (1998); Troeltsch (1911).

17 There are exceptions, namely: the early analysis of Zabel (1968), which however omits Schmitt’s role in the debate, Ruh (1980), who however could not cover the further development of the debate on political theology in the 1980’s, and the more recently Kroll (2010). Kroll’s insightful analysis however focusses less on the role and reception of Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt within the broader secularization debate. In the course of this study it will become clear that my analysis partly builds on but also differs from Kroll’s in several respects.

A Return to the German Secularization Debate

I will commence the investigation with an analysis of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate. Blumenberg is known for mounting a defense of the legitimacy of modernity in his seminal work *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (1966).¹⁸ In this book he not only rejects the idea that modernity is founded ahistorically ‘on reason alone’ but, more importantly, he also takes aim against widespread attempts to reduce the defining features of the Modern Age to religious precedents. Significantly, Blumenberg chose Löwith, who had argued that the quintessentially modern idea of progress is secularized eschatology, as the prime representative of this supposedly detrimental tendency. Blumenberg identified this tendency as ‘*the secularization theorem*’. While their polemic forms a standard point of reference in recent literature on secularization, we will also discover that the reception of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate is hampered by stubborn misunderstandings. Many commentators tend to perceive this polemic through the lens of Blumenberg’s critique, which implies that they assume that Löwith is indeed guilty of all the transgressions that Blumenberg pointed out and assumedly ‘decisively refuted’.¹⁹ Another misunderstanding dictates that Löwith and Blumenberg were actually in agreement and that their dispute is merely a miscommunication that hides a more fundamental similarity between their positions. I shall argue instead that upon reconstructing their polemic it becomes clear that Löwith’s and Blumenberg’s positions are fundamentally at odds with each other when it comes to their conceptions of modernity, progress and Christianity. This disagreement stems from diverging philosophical anthropologies: whereas Blumenberg opts for an ‘anthropocentric humanism,’ Löwith eventually rejects anthropocentrism in favor of a ‘cosmocentric view’. I contend that both positions deserve to be taken seriously, also within the context of postsecularism, as they provide illuminating perspectives on the status of modernity vis-à-vis religion and on the question whether the human lifeworld should relate to something beyond itself, e.g., ‘the natural order’ or ‘the absolute’.

An observant reader of this book might receive the impression that it serves, at least in part, as a rehabilitation of Löwith’s position. After all, in comparison to Blumenberg and Schmitt, Löwith is the philosopher who appears to be the least well-known today, or who is deemed less relevant for contemporary discourses.²⁰ Although rehabilitation was not my initial intention, I cannot fully dispel such a reading either. That being said, I do not wish to simply invert the standard reading of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate by claiming that *actually* Löwith and not Blumenberg has ‘won’ this discussion. I consider both positions to be more or less valid and my reconstruction indicates that their debate is more a meaningful exchange between two fundamentally incompatible viewpoints than a refutation of an inferior theory by a superior one. This too is a rehabilitation of some kind, because it reinstalls Löwith’s position on an equal footing to Blumenberg’s. We will find that Löwith’s perspective is simultaneously both unique and influential. It is unique because he represents an ‘ecological critique’ of modernity that would not be out of place in current discussions on the Anthropocene and the Post-Human Turn but that was more rare in his own time. He also exerted a considerable influence on the German secularization debate, because his formula ‘progress is secularized eschatology’ was widely adopted by others, be it in the service of purposes that differed from Löwith’s own.

The position of Carl Schmitt, the third primary subject of this investigation, will arguably seem less agreeable or sympathetic than those of Löwith and Blumenberg. This former

18 English translation of the revised edition: *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1983).

19 Brient (2002) p.29 fn.32; Jay (1985) p.192.

20 This has to do with the earlier Anglophone reception of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate, which tends to portray Löwith’s position as having been rendered obsolete by Blumenberg’s critique. Cf.: Wallace (1981); Rorty (1983).

‘crown jurist of the Third Reich’ is, after all, well-known for his defense of *Führertum* and his anti-liberalist emphasis on the essentially antagonistic nature of politics. However, it should be recognized that Schmitt has had a major influence on academic discourse, probably more so than Löwith and Blumenberg, and that his evocative views on secularization are relevant to any investigation of this topic. Furthermore, Schmitt’s contribution to the German secularization debate deserves to be examined because he played a significant role in its development: he was an important source of influence for various interlocutors and, with the publication of his *Politische Theologie II* (1970), was co-responsible for a significant political turn in the secularization debate.²¹ Last but not least, Schmitt engaged actively in an extensive debate with Blumenberg, conducted through letters and multiple publications, while Löwith proved to be more reluctant in this respect. The fact that the interaction between Blumenberg and Schmitt was more prolific has led several commentators to conclude that the Blumenberg-Schmitt debate is actually more significant than the Löwith-Blumenberg debate. Schmitt, for instance, is deemed to be the stronger opponent or Löwith’s position is considered to be nearly identical to Blumenberg’s, hereby being made redundant. My analysis demonstrates instead that, first, it is also possible to reconstruct a meaningful polemic between Schmitt and Löwith and, second, that while there are different superficial points of overlap, all three positions are at bottom irreducible. By situating these three positions over against each other in different constellations we will obtain a richer and more complex understanding of all three philosophies. Moreover, it will help illuminate the significant political implications of the theories of Löwith and Blumenberg, who are both commonly regarded as apolitical philosophers.

The next stage of my investigation involves the broader context of the German secularization discourse. Not only will we discover that Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt exerted a significant influence on the development of this wide-ranging debate, which included various disciplines and multiple ideological ‘camps’, but that their own contributions are also best understood when they are placed in this discursive context. My reconstruction suggests that they were at the forefront of a collective endeavor to grapple with the perceived challenges of the time. ‘Secularization’ was a hotly debated issue in German academia in the 1960’s because it became *the* supposed keyword with which to ‘unlock’ the challenge of how to relate to the recent catastrophes of the first half of the 20th century in Germany in particular and Western society in general.²² Do these catastrophes indicate that society should reconnect with the religious traditions of the past or, rather, that it ought to leave the past behind and start anew, this time on more humane and strictly human as opposed to religious terms? Some authors claim, in line with Schmitt and more indirectly with Löwith, that the horrors of the 20th century are indicative of the alienation from authentic religion. Totalitarianisms are thus described as idolatrous *Ersatzreligionen* just as all evils of modernity are explained in terms of apostasy. Others argue, in line with Blumenberg, that these totalitarianisms share with religion a dangerous absolutism. This implies that the way forward lies in rejecting any kind of absolute and grandiose hope for political salvation. I contend that the secularization debate – including the contributions of Löwith, Schmitt and Blumenberg – should in part be understood as a form of ‘*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*’: a collective ‘coming to terms with the past’ that is simultaneously oriented towards the future.²³ Rather than suggesting that the German secularization debate only has local historical relevance, I argue that philosophical debates such as these are

21 English translation: *Political Theology II* (2014).

22 Lübke (1965).

23 Lübke (1965) pp.109-130.

necessarily informed by the perceived needs of the present condition (similar to how post-secularism is informed by the perceived challenges of *our* time). In short, discussions such as these center on attempts to offer a diagnosis of the present condition.²⁴

We will find that the development of the secularization debate reflects broader intellectual political shifts. Löwith's early contribution (1949) resonated with conservative attempts during the 1950's and early 1960's to come to terms with the *recent* past by reconnecting with a more *distant* past. Blumenberg's book (1966) was meant to undermine such conservatism and thereby provided a philosophical legitimation of a modest liberal progressivism. A few years later the secularization debate took a new turn, this time towards the overtly political. While this turn was in part represented by Schmitt's intervention (1970), it did not move uniformly into his preferred political direction. Rather, Schmitt's political theology was adopted by the generation of 1968, the 'New Left'. This meant that Blumenberg's progressivism was overtaken by the leftist radicalism of the new generation and became conservative by comparison. 'Theology' was no longer employed to advocate a return to a revered past but to promote radical change, to fulfill past promises of future redemption. Against this new background I will focus extensively on Jacob Taubes and Odo Marquard. Their contributions not only illustrate the transformation of the secularization debate into a debate on political theology during the 1970's and early 1980's, but they also explicitly draw on Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt, hereby petering out a number of political implications from these theories that had remained buried before.

The final step in this investigation will be to offer a methodological reflection on what is discussed in the preceding chapters. This will be done by means of an excursion into the field of historical theory or analytical philosophy of history. By then we will have encountered in previous chapters a host of different 'narratives' about the origin of modernity and the nature of secularization, most of which are profoundly at odds with each other, both on a descriptive and normative level. Hence, I first will reflect on what type of 'narrative' we are dealing with here, e.g., whether it is proper historiography or 'mere' speculation. I will argue that it is a brand of philosophical historiography, that I will refer to as *Geistesgeschichte*, that has its own legitimate function distinct from that of a Rankean variety of historiography.²⁵ Second, I will ascertain what can be seen to cause the wide divergence between these narratives. I will point out that such narratives are typically presentist and evaluative in nature and that, as such, they tend to stake particular claims on the meaning of "essentially contested concepts".²⁶ Third, I will reflect on the limits and on the added value of this particular genre.

The methodological reflection that comprises the final chapter of this book can be regarded, in part, as a justification of my own approach. That is to say that it has not been my intention to add one more particularist secularization narrative to a growing body of similar stories. However, I deemed it unsatisfactory to simply reconstruct the various secularization narratives from a quasi-neutral standpoint without any providing any sort of evaluation. Hence, my methodological framework is meant to facilitate a debate about and between various different *Geistesgeschichten*. I will reflect on the purposes of a debate such as the German discourse on secularization and provide possible guidelines that could make such a debate more constructive and reasonable. I argue that *Geistesgeschichte* constitutes a legitimate form of historical engagement and that there are 'empirical' and 'practical' (i.e., ethical) quality markers that can be identified and used to draw a debate between different grand narratives out of a

24 Cf. Foucault's (1984, pp.49-50) notion of 'ontology of the present'.

25 I borrow this particular definition of *Geistesgeschichte* from Rorty (1984).

26 Gallie (1968).

sphere of mere partisanship. This section of the book is methodologically innovative, as far as I can tell, because it introduces insights from narrativist approaches or analytical philosophy of history in order to analyze a domain that is mostly neglected by it, namely the historiographical dimension of a common brand of continental philosophy.

PART I

Karl Löwith and
Hans Blumenberg

Chapter 1

The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate: From Overlapping Aversions to Fundamental Differences

Introduction

The philosophical debate between Karl Löwith and Hans Blumenberg has become a widely-discussed topic, both in and outside of Germany, since its inception in the 1960's.¹ For good reason: this debate can be regarded as a valuable conceptual repository for philosophical thought on the subject of modernity, religion and secularization.² The polemic between Blumenberg and Löwith represents both a clash between fundamentally different philosophical outlooks and between generational attitudes towards the problems of their age. Löwith, a member of the apolitical *Bildungsbürgertum* raised on Nietzsche and Burckhardt, was convinced that most human endeavors are futile, and embraced a contemplative ideal of stoic imperturbability. Blumenberg on the other hand can be held to represent the generation of West-Germany's post-war restoration. This generation embraced a cautious optimism in human progress but it also recognized the fragility of both individual existence and of the human order that protects the individual from chaos and violence.³ These different attitudes – which should be understood in relation to Löwith's and Blumenberg's personal experiences with the war and totalitarianism – translate into different philosophical outlooks on *modernity*: in their respective philosophies this epoch either represents human hubris (Löwith) or a modest shelter against absolute violence (Blumenberg). 'Secularization' became a contested issue between them because this concept is inextricably linked with 'modernity'. The concept of

1 A condensed version of the argument contained in the present chapter has been published in *New German Critique*, see: Griffioen (2019).

2 On the significance of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate in the German context, see: Zabel (1968); and Ruh (1980). The latter notes that it is no accident that Löwith was Blumenberg's primary target (p.199): "Die besonders ausführliche Auseinandersetzung, die er [Blumenberg] verglichen mit anderen, mehr beiläufig angeführten Säkularisierungsbehauptungen mit Löwiths These über die Herkunft der Geschichtsphilosophie führt, ist nicht zufällig, sondern entspricht durchaus dem Stellenwert, der dieser These auch sonst in der Diskussion zum geistesgeschichtlichen Säkularisierungsbegriff zukommt."

3 Cf. Marquard (1989) pp.3-18. For an intellectual biography that focusses on Blumenberg's earlier years, see: Flasch, *Hans Blumenberg. Philosoph in Deutschland: Die Jahre 1945 bis 1966* (2017).

secularization, in short, necessarily relates to the question whether, as Blumenberg argues, modernity possesses a certain independence vis-à-vis its religious past, or, as Löwith suggests, whether it instead remains indebted to it. The former perspective attests to the legitimacy of modernity whereas the latter serves as an indication of its fatal confusion.

Philosophical scholarship on the difficult relationship of modernity with religion confirms the historical and philosophical significance of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate. A survey of the relevant literature indeed indicates that the Löwith-Blumenberg debate is a standard reference point in contemporary discussions of religion and secularization.⁴ Moreover, it became a significant focal point in its original discursive context, namely the broader academic and societal secularization debate of 1950's and 1960's Germany. This wide-ranging discourse would eventually span several decades (roughly speaking: from the 1950's to the 1970's or 1980's), and it involved a variety of academic disciplines (philosophy, theology, historiography, sociology of religion), different approaches and moral-political standpoints. In this debate, intellectuals of different backgrounds and creeds grappled with the question whether an areligious modernity can be self-sufficient or whether, in its claim to independence, it displays a detrimental 'false self-consciousness' in denying its religious 'roots'. The various answers that were provided were meant to deal with a shared sense of crisis, that is, the intimation that the horrors of recent 20th century history were a symptom of an underlying problem that somehow involves the nature of modernity itself.⁵ The question that divided opinions was whether modernity's areligious and individualist features were part of the problem or the solution. From this division emerged different 'camps' in the German secularization debate in which one can recognize the mark of Löwith and Blumenberg respectively. One camp, of culture-pessimists, critics of modernity and conservative theologians, derided secular modernity for its claim to autonomy and urged instead for a renewed sense of proportionality, either with regard to tradition, nature or the transcendent. The other, pro-modern camp, defended the Enlightenment-inspired claim to human self-sufficiency and self-assertion against (what was perceived as) the impositions of naturalistic, theological or historicist affirmations of heteronomy.

However, before we can study the broader discourse it is necessary to critically analyze the Löwith-Blumenberg debate itself – as is the purpose of the present chapter. In doing so I will correct what I take to be two entrenched misunderstandings about the debate. The first is that Blumenberg's critique of Löwith is often taken at face value by commentators. It is assumed for instance that Blumenberg "provides a decisive refutation of Löwith's thesis", as Elizabeth Brient states, and that this implies a "death blow", according to Martin Jay, to the "secularization theorem" that Löwith supposedly represents.⁶ In this context, the "secularization theorem" is interpreted as a claim that something is illegitimate *because* it is secularized,

4 Harrington (2006) pp.42-44; *ibid.* (2008) 21–24; Latré (2013) pp.20-24; Bangstad (2009) p.189; Gordon and Skolnik (2005) p.6; De Vriese (2016) pp.37-42; Pecora (2006). Rather than providing an exhaustive list of the secondary literature on the Löwith-Blumenberg debate here, a few examples must suffice. Despite being well-known, this topic has not been the subject of many monographic studies, one exception being Joe-Paul Kroll's (2010) *A Human End to History?* It has however been the subject of many papers: Robert Wallace, the translator of Blumenberg's major works, set the tone for the English-speaking world with his 'Progress, Secularization and Modernity: the Löwith-Blumenberg Debate' (1981) and his introduction to *Legitimacy* (1983). Some other examples are: McKnight (1990); Talay (2011); Buch (2012); Latré (2013); Monod (2016). Zabel's (1968) and Ruh's (1980) studies analyze the broader German debate, but also focus extensively on the polemic between Löwith and Blumenberg.

5 Cf. Lübke (1965) pp.105-133; Boterman (2013) pp.578-613.

6 Brient (2002) p.29 fn.32; Jay (1985) p.192. I suspect that many commentators have taken their cue from Wallace (1981; 1983) in his portrayals of the polemic along Blumenbergian lines.

with ‘secularization’ operating as a juridical category of guilt or debt (*Schuld*).⁷ My reconstruction will demonstrate that Blumenberg in fact attacks a straw man that bears little resemblance to Löwith’s actual argument. This moreover implies, as I will show, that the latter does not represent the ‘secularization theorem’ that forms the target of Blumenberg’s critique. The second view I wish to correct is an improvement in comparison to the first, because it does not take Blumenberg’s critique of Löwith at face value. This interpretation is more cognizant of the fact that the debate had in part been muddled by miscommunications and a failure on both sides to fully grasp what the other was actually trying to convey. It moreover points out several areas of agreement or overlap between the two philosophers that are overlooked by commentators who hold the first view. Milan Babík, for instance, asserts that Blumenberg’s own theory indeed “converges with Löwith’s secularization model” to a significant degree.⁸ Several scholars have noticed that Löwith and Blumenberg “agree a good deal” on certain shared aversions, such as toward ‘speculative philosophy of history’, which both reject as an unwarranted projection of eschatological hope onto immanent history.⁹ For Pini Ifergan, “Blumenberg espoused a view ... reminiscent of Löwith’s, whereby historical consciousness and eschatological belief are beyond reconciliation.”¹⁰ However, this recognition of a level of miscommunications and points of agreement leads some who hold this second view to the erroneous conclusion that Löwith’s and Blumenberg’s positions are actually very similar if not identical, and that hence the Löwith-Blumenberg debate is essentially a farce. Odo Marquard provides the strongest version of this reading: “Die Säkularisierungskontroverse zwischen Blumenberg und Löwith ist ... *inszeniert* zur bloßen Tarnung [of their] *grundsätzlichen Positionsideutlichkeit*.”¹¹ Most authors who are inclined to this reading suggest, in line with Marquard, that Blumenberg’s theory forms a superior version of Löwith’s, rendering the latter more or less irrelevant.¹²

While drawing on earlier attempts at assessing and mitigating Blumenberg’s critique, my contribution in this chapter is twofold: first, most of the scholars who have noticed the shortcomings of Blumenberg’s critique of Löwith have offered their remarks only in passing, without elaborating on where and to what extent it falters and on how Löwith should be interpreted instead, whereas my reconstruction aims to be more comprehensive in this respect.¹³ Second, and more importantly, these commentators continue to ignore a significant aspect of Löwith’s account that was already overlooked by Blumenberg, which is that his normative claim against modernity and its idea of progress does not, in fact, fully derive from or depend on his account of ‘secularization’. Rather, it relies on an ideal-typical conception of ‘pure faith’ and ‘pure reason’, two idealized ahistorical norms of which modern thought falls short, according to Löwith. Thus Löwith is misrepresented as a ‘secularization theorist’ and is therefore not decisively refuted by Blumenberg. My reconstruction indicates that beneath a superficial level of mutual misunderstandings *and* agreements lies a more fundamental level of disagreement between the two philosophers, namely with regard to the meaning of Christianity, their conceptions of history and modernity, and ultimately on what the rightful place is of the

7 Buch (2012).

8 Babík (2006) p.393.

9 Pippin (1987) p.541.

10 Ifergan (2010) p.168.

11 Marquard (1983) p.79 (emphasis added). Cf. *ibid.* (1973) pp.14-17; Marquard in: Blumenberg (1971) p.530.

12 Buch (2012) pp.353-56; Kroll (2010) pp.151-158; Pippin (1987) p.541.

13 Liebsch (1995) pp.70-71; Wetz (1993) p.48. Kroll’s (2010) reconstruction, *A Human End to History?*, certainly forms an exception with regard to this first point. With respect to my second point, however, he does - valuable insights notwithstanding - tend to downplay those aspects that separate Löwith from Blumenberg.

human individual in the universe. In short, in this chapter I first expound on Blumenberg's straw man representation of Löwith. Then I will elaborate on the former's critique and on his defense of the legitimacy of modernity. I subsequently reconstruct Löwith's account, bringing to light the extent to which Blumenberg misrepresented him. Partly building on the sparse reservations offered by other scholars, I will then offer a rebuttal of Blumenberg's critique and provide my own proposition for how this debate should be assessed, namely by elaborating on the deeper level of contestation between Löwith and Blumenberg.

Blumenberg's Account

The Secularization Theorem and Blumenberg's Straw Man

The cultural pessimism (*Kulturpessimismus*) that had dominated the intellectual discourse of the Weimar Republic did not disappear after World War II. Rather, it became intertwined with 'the question of guilt', *die Schuldfrage*. Thus the war was interpreted as an indication of the bankruptcy of the West or of modernity itself; it became regarded as a symptom of an underlying problem that involved the very nature of modern civilization.¹⁴ This meant that the concept of *Schuld* – with its dual implication of guilt and debt – was elevated to the level of philosophical self-diagnosis, where it was used to question not only the recent catastrophe but also the entire epoch in which it took place. Underlying these philosophical expressions of pessimism was a sense, not always explicated, that modernity is somehow the product of 'alienation' from an original, authentic state, where humankind lived in a more truthful and genuine relation with nature, with transcendence, or with itself. This alienation is not simply a disconnection; on the contrary, what was deemed lost somehow remained present, in its absence, as a reference point for a nostalgic yearning. In this sense, the present contains a continuing debt and guilt, suggesting an illegitimate continuity between past and present.¹⁵ Often these pessimistic accounts were conveyed through the narrative form of *Verfallsgeschichte* – such as in the works of Martin Heidegger, Eric Voegelin, and Theodor W. Adorno – in which the current situation is seen as the product of a long history of regression. The objective of such *Verfallsgeschichten* is the unveiling of an underlying guilt/debt, a *Schuld* that unmask the current situation as 'illegitimate'.¹⁶

Blumenberg, who was younger than most of the prominent philosophical pessimists, perceived this tendency toward delegitimizing modernity with apprehension. He was especially disgruntled with those accounts that attacked the *secular* nature of modernity, which suggested that the Modern Age's illegitimacy lies in its distorted relation with transcendence or religion. Accusatory accounts of this type were popular among the German public, such as Alfred Müller-Armack's *Jahrhundert ohne Gott*, Hans Sedlmayr's *Verlust der Mitte* or Romano Guardini's *Das Ende der Neuzeit*. Such pessimistic narratives of decline adopted the aforementioned topos of 'alienation' but interpreted this process as 'secularization'.¹⁷ This implies that modernity is defined by its break with religion, on the one hand, but also remains bound to it, in its indebtedness, on the other. Hence it is assumed that there is a covert, illegitimate continuity between Christianity and modernity that renders the latter a deplorable "Christian heresy".¹⁸

14 Boterman (2013) pp.578-613.

15 Blumenberg (1983) pp.117-118.

16 Blumenberg (1983) pp.113-125; *ibid.* (1964) p.242; (2010) pp.39-42; Kroll (2010) p.93; Flasch (2017) pp.471-476, 481-482.

17 Flasch (2017) pp.471-481; Kroll (2010) pp.24-30; Pannenberg (1973) pp.114-116; Lübke (1965) pp.109-116.

18 Blumenberg (1964) p.265. E.g.: Voegelin's *New Science of Politics* (1952).

It is this pattern of thought, the attempt at portraying modernity as an illegitimate derivative or “bastard child” of a more authentic Christian origin that Blumenberg would brand as “the secularization theorem”.¹⁹

This theorem formed the object of his critique, first in his 1962 lecture ‘Säkularisation: Kritik einer Kategorie historischer Illegitimität’, held at a conference *Philosophie und die Frage nach dem Fortschritt* at which Löwith was also present, and four years later in most well-known book, *Legitimität der Neuzeit*, the first part of which he would revise in 1974 in response to its critics.²⁰ In this book, Blumenberg notes that the accounts he subsumed under the secularization theorem tend to assume that the authentic, religious “substance” remains hidden but is nonetheless present in its secular derivations, “implied” or “wrapped up” in it, as it were:

The genuine substance of that which was secularized is ‘wrapped up in’ [*die Implikation des*] what thus became worldly, and remains ‘wrapped up in’ it as what is essential to it, as when, in the model instance developed by Heidegger for the hermeneutics of his school, ‘Dasein’s understanding of Being’ is essential to it and yet ‘in the first instance and for the most part’ hidden and withdrawn from it. I am almost inclined to say that that was what I was afraid of.²¹

Blumenberg intended to undermine the secularization theorem in general, but to do so, he needed to make one especially prolific account his primary target: Löwith’s *Meaning in History* (1949).²² Blumenberg chose Löwith as his primary object of critique because his thesis was especially well known and, as Robert M. Wallace suggests, because it was regarded as the most full-blown critique of modernity in terms of the secularization theorem. Also, since the central thesis of *Meaning in History* appeared to be easily apprehendable and in fact was quickly appropriated by others, it had acquired a “dogmatizing effect,” according to Blumenberg.²³ Indeed, the impression that Löwith’s thesis had had a dogmatizing effect is not far off the mark if one regards the air of self-evidence with which the formula was adopted by a wide variety of authors, such as Carl Schmitt, his students Reinhart Koselleck and Hanno Kesting, the political philosopher Eric Voegelin, and the physicist-philosopher Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker.²⁴ Löwith’s formula found also found a favorable reception in theology, for instance in Rudolf Bultmann’s *History and Eschatology* (1957). In this respect it has been noted that Blumenberg’s critique applies more to the theological *reception* (or appropriation) of Löwith’s formula than to Löwith’s theory itself.²⁵ Yet there are examples of theological writers active in that time, such as Friedrich Delekat, Arnold Müller-Armack, and Friedrich Gogarten, whose theories seem to meet Blumenberg’s description of the ‘secularization theory’ even better than the aforementioned scholars, without displaying an explicit indebtedness to Löwith.²⁶

19 Kroll (2010) p.153. In Koselleck’s German translation of Löwith’s *Meaning in History* another metaphor is introduced, which is absent in the English original: modernity is like “ein entlaufener Sklave von seinem entfernten Herrn” (Löwith, 1953, p.83). Cf. Ruh (1980, p.247).

20 Blumenberg (1964) pp.240-265; *ibid.* *Legitimität (1966); Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung* (1974). I will use the 1983 English translation, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.

21 Blumenberg (1983) p.17.

22 Other prominent examples of secularization theorists Blumenberg mentions are: Schmitt, *Political Theology I and II* (2005; 2014. Originally: 1922; 1970); Delekat (1958); Bultmann (1957); Voegelin (1952).

23 Blumenberg (1983) p.27; Wallace (1981) p.68; *ibid.* (1983) p.xvi; Ruh (1980) pp.199, 238; Jaeschke (1967) pp.35-36, 43; Zabel (1968) p.196.

24 Schmitt (1950); Koselleck (1959); Kesting (1959); Voegelin (1952); Von Weizsäcker (1964).

25 Zabel (1968) pp.231, 243; Ruh (1980) pp. 236-237, 262-65; Timm (1967); Flasch (2017) p.549.

26 Delekat (1958); Gogarten (1966); Müller-Armack (1948).

Blumenberg, however, chose Löwith as the principal representative of the secularization theorem, and in doing so he constructed a straw man to attack the secularization theorem in general. According to Blumenberg's portrayal, Löwith denounced modernity by arguing that the idea of progress, the Modern Age's core principle, was nothing but secularized eschatology. This would render modernity itself disingenuous and illegitimate – or, to express it as a formula, modernity is illegitimate *because* it is secularized. The 'secularization as alienation' topos determines that Christian 'eschatology' is the authentic, original substance and that progress is a mere derivation in which the original core remains implied.²⁷ This derivation is most apparent in grand, speculative philosophies of history – especially of the Hegelian, Marxist, or Comteian varieties – that tell sweeping tales about the secular salvation of humankind, culminating in worldly visions of paradise.²⁸ Modern thought is defined by this idea of progress, the argument continues, because it conceives of itself as having 'overcome' Christianity. The exposure of modern progress as a derivation of what it explicitly rejects shows its "false self-consciousness" – in other words, the illegitimacy – that extends to the modern epoch in general.²⁹ Blumenberg interprets Löwith as implying that "the autonomy of ... historical consciousness as an ultimate category is exposed as its self-deception as soon as it is recognized, in accordance with the secularization theorem, as existing 'by the grace of' Christianity".³⁰ The thesis that the modern idea of progress is secularized eschatology exemplifies the overall picture that the secularization theorem conveys, which is that all significant modern phenomena are mere derivations of authentic Christian counterparts: "even a post-Christian atheism is actually an intra-Christian mode of expression of negative theology, and a materialism a continuation of the incarnation by other means."³¹

The purported illegitimacy of modernity resides not only in its misguided self-consciousness but, more important, in an act of "expropriation". That is, the status of the Modern Age is defined by the fact that it consists of expropriated substances, such as eschatology, that were originally – and thus properly – Christian. In short, Löwith is interpreted as arguing that modernity is illegitimate on no other grounds than *because* it is determined by Christianity. The implied *Schuld* should hence be read as 'guilt' rather than as a vague indebtedness; that is, it invokes a juridical framework.³² So 'secularization' functions as a category of guilt, and saying that x is a secularized form of y is enough to render x illegitimate.³³ This would of course be a dubious assumption (were it not that Löwith does not actually make it), which Blumenberg then criticizes.

Blumenberg's Critique

For the sharpest version of Blumenberg's critique, one must turn to his 1962 lecture on secularization. *Legitimacy*, written in 1966, can be seen as an elaboration of this initial criticism that is supplemented by his own account of modernity's relation to its religious past, whereas in the later edition of the book (1974) Blumenberg arguably downplays the sharpness of his original

27 Blumenberg (1983) pp.19, 27–35.

28 Blumenberg (1983) pp.32, 85–86.

29 Blumenberg (1983) pp.25, 117-118; Wallace (1981) p.67.

30 Blumenberg (1983) p.28.

31 Blumenberg (1983) p.115. This critique would be more applicable to Jacob Taubes (2009; 2010), as we will discover in Chapter 7.

32 This framework was invoked in Lübke's analysis (1965), on which Blumenberg explicitly draws to describe the secularization theorem, especially in the first edition (1966, pp.12-13, 16) of *Legitimität der Neuzeit*. Zabel (1968) later criticized Blumenberg for his tendency to reduce any use of the concept of secularization to the juridical notion of expropriation.

33 Wallace (1983) p.xiv; Pippin (1987) pp.540-541; Brient (2002) pp.17, 21–23.

polemic in response to various criticisms, while holding on to the gist of his initial argument.³⁴ Blumenberg's first concern with Löwith's purported use of the concept of secularization is that it is wielded as an explanatory device rather than as something that needs prior explanation. Instead of first elucidating what happened in a process that can, descriptively, be called secularization afterward, this term is used as a ready-made and easily applicable explanation in itself. Such uses of secularization for instance explain (or delegitimize) the modern work ethic as "inner-worldly asceticism", the varieties of modern utopianism as varieties of paradise, and the modern idea of individualism as the secularization of Christianity's focus on the individual soul.³⁵ Such a use of secularization as an explanatory device is intrinsically problematic, as Blumenberg goes on to show.

Building on an early analysis of the secularization debate by Hermann Lübbe (*Säkularisierung: Geschichte eines ideenpolitisches Begriffs*, 1965), Blumenberg asserts that the secularization theorem is based by analogy on the model of expropriation.³⁶ This model originally pertained to a situation during the Reformation in which tangible possessions that belonged to the church were estranged by a secular institution. Later on, 'secularization' was interpreted as the expropriation of ideas or concepts from the spiritual domain by the worldly sphere.³⁷ Advocates of the secularization theorem use this model either implicitly or explicitly, but, according to Blumenberg, they should be able to demonstrate that such an expropriation actually occurred. To do so, they should be able to meet the following requirements that Blumenberg devised: they must demonstrate "a) die Identifizierbarkeit des enteigneten Gutes; b) die Legitimität des primären Eigentums; c) die Einseitigkeit des Entzuges".³⁸ He then shows that the secularization theory cannot meet these requirements and is not even aware of this "methodischen Beweislast".³⁹

These unfulfillable criteria are meant to establish that the secularization theorem is based on a fallacious presupposition, namely, "substantialism".⁴⁰ This entails that the secularization theory assumes the existence of fixed 'substances' (intellectual contents, e.g., ideas or concepts) that appear within history and remain constant throughout it. Tied to their initial context of origination, these authentic contents, through appropriation, become alienated but preserve their implicit connection to their origin. The notion of authenticity, which is central to the secularization theorem, presupposes that these substances contain a "dimension of hidden meaning" – in other words, these origins remain present in their absence.⁴¹ Blumenberg claims that the presupposition of substantialism is essential to the secularization theorem, because "[w]ithout such a substantial identity, no recoverable sense could be attached to the talk of conversion [Umbildung] and transformation."⁴²

34 *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung* (1974) is the revised version of the first part of *Legitimacy*. On the changes made in the separate versions of *Legitimacy*, see: Dickey (1987); on its relation to the 1962 lecture, see Kroll (2010) pp.131-158.

35 Blumenberg (1983) p.4; *ibid.* (1964) pp.240-241; Brient (2002) p.17. See for a critique of this reading of Weber's famous thesis: Turner (1993) p.60.

36 Lübbe (1965); Blumenberg (1966) pp.12-16; *ibid.* (1983) p.4; (1964) pp.240-241; Brient (2002) p.17.

37 Blumenberg (1983) pp.18-19; *ibid.* (1964) pp.241-42. See also Lübbe (1965) pp.28-30.

38 Blumenberg (1964) p.241; *ibid.* (1983) pp.16-25, 64.

39 Blumenberg (1964) p.243.

40 Blumenberg (1983) pp.28-29, 48-49, 64-66, 88, 120, 466; *ibid.* (1964) p.263.

41 Blumenberg (1983) pp.17-19; (1964) p.263. The quote is a reference to Gadamer's (1968, pp.201-202) review of *Legitimacy*.

42 Blumenberg (1983) p.16. "Ohne eine solche substantielle Identität ließe sich der Rede von Umbildung und Transformation kein nachvollziehbarer Sinn beilegen." (1974, p.23) On the importance of substantialism for Blumenberg's argument, see: Jaeschke (1976) pp.34-36.

In this critique of the secularization theorem Blumenberg zooms in on Löwith's thesis on progress and eschatology. First, he argues that 'progress' cannot be a secularized form of 'eschatology', because there can be no substantive continuity, and hence no identifiability, of one substance throughout the process, due to the differences between the phenomena. There is a structural or formal difference between progress and eschatology, Blumenberg argues: whereas "an eschatology speaks of an event breaking into history, an event that transcends and is heterogeneous to it, ... the idea of progress extrapolates from a structure present in every moment to a future that is immanent in history".⁴³ Then there is a genetic or historical distinction between the two, in that these phenomena have different historical origins. In Blumenberg's theory this implies that they answer two separate questions. Whereas eschatology was meant to address the transcendent meaning and goal of history in its totality, the idea of progress originated to conceptualize the more modest and more specific idea of scientific and artistic progression.⁴⁴

The second requirement, that 'legitimate ownership' of the original possession should be proven, is equally indicting of Löwith's theory, Blumenberg suggests. This because the former has to presuppose a questionable concept of an 'authentic' version of eschatology that is actually anachronistic. Blumenberg notes that Christian eschatology is a historically problematic phenomenon that had – insofar as it actually existed in an unadulterated sense – a very short life span. The early Christian form of eschatology, the radical, immediate expectation of the *eschaton* (*Nabermartung*), quickly caused disappointment, given the apparent delay of the Second Coming. Therefore it became transformed and diluted in medieval eschatological thought. Blumenberg makes two observations in this respect. First, the transformation of eschatology during the Middle Ages meant that the *eschaton* became a thing to be feared instead of hoped for, which implies that modern progress cannot be a secularization of Christian hopefulness, as Löwith purportedly claims.⁴⁵ Second, and this also refutes the attainability of the third requirement, Blumenberg argues that through this medieval transformation of eschatology it in fact 'secularized itself'. By suppressing the immediateness of expectation, this self-secularization opened more room for human activity and thus created a more affirmative appraisal of worldly history.⁴⁶ Hence it cannot be claimed that 'the world' expropriated something from 'the spiritual realm'.⁴⁷

After this specific critique of Löwith's account, Blumenberg drives his point home by connecting it to a more fundamental critique of the secularization theorem in general. He argues that the theorem's implicit substantialism, which allows it to presuppose a fixed 'substance' that can be alienated by 'the world', in fact reveals it to be a kind of crypto-theology. Its notion of authenticity not only betrays a Romanticist substantialism in which the phenomenon always remains bounded to its original context of origin but it also requires a *transcendent source*. The secularization theorem must presuppose such a source, even when this point of origin is concealed. This is because the secularization theorem situates concepts that are authentically conceived exclusively in the past, in 'pure' Christianity, and ignores their historical contingency. Therefore the secularization theorem enters into the realm of "theologischen Selbstdeutung und Selbstbehauptung". If it does not replace theology's Christian-Platonic notion of ownership – which presupposes a divine origin and implies the derivative nature of subsequent

43 Blumenberg (1983) p.30; *ibid.* (1964) p.243. Cf. Zabel (1968) p.236.

44 Blumenberg (1964) p.243.

45 Blumenberg (1964) p.246.; *ibid.* (1983) pp.44-46. On the role of *Nabermartung* in Blumenberg's theory, cf.: Ruh (1980) pp.98-107.

46 Blumenberg (1964) p.247; *ibid.* (1983) pp.44-47.

47 Blumenberg (1983) p.47; *ibid.* (1964) p.248.

'copies' – then it is nothing more than a form of crypto-theology, Blumenberg suggests.⁴⁸ This also explains the incriminating indebtedness of modernity, because as a derivation of the theology the theorem also adopts theology's rancor toward the Modern Age as the purported 'usurper' of Christianity.⁴⁹ In short, the secularization theorem functions as the "*letzten Theologumenon*"; a final, if veiled protest of theology against its obsolescence in modernity.⁵⁰

Blumenberg's critique of the secularization theorem and his concomitant portrayal of Löwith as a secularization theorist became widely accepted, especially (but not exclusively) in English-language scholarship. To give but a few examples, Laurence Dickey writes that "by all accounts, Blumenberg was most successful" in refuting the secularization theorem.⁵¹ And William J. Bouwsma found *Legitimacy*, as "an extended refutation of Karl Löwith's ... *Meaning in History*," to be "wholly convincing".⁵² This also means that many scholars have adopted Blumenberg's straw man as a truthful representation of Löwith's account, implying that *Meaning in History* consists solely of an attempt to demonstrate modernity's illegitimacy on the basis of the expropriation model and its concomitant substantialism.⁵³ Benjamin Lazier, for instance, writes that Löwith's thesis "identifies a substance proper to medieval Christianity, which in its modern guise appears to have undergone transformation into a secularized form but in fact has not dislodged itself from its originally Christian framework."⁵⁴ And Robert B. Pippin concurs that Löwith, in trying to show modernity's indebtedness, "does often breezily assume that pointing out this necessary Christian 'horizon' is enough to delegitimize, expose as self-deceived, the claim that the modern belief in progress is wholly modern and therewith rational."⁵⁵

Blumenberg's critique of the secularization theorem appears to be justified in itself. Indeed, one might contend that if one seeks to demonstrate the illegitimacy of modernity with this model of expropriation, one at least has to be able to delineate this 'substance', assert the legitimacy of the original ownership, and reveal how the expropriation took place. This is impossible simply because whereas one could postulate a notion of substantive continuity as a heuristic instrument, one cannot, when investigating the historical development of ideas, actually find them as objects can be found in nature.⁵⁶ The question I address later in this chapter however is not whether Blumenberg's critique of the secularization theorem is justified but whether he justifiably portrayed Löwith as a secularization theorist.⁵⁷

48 Blumenberg (1964) pp.244, 254; *ibid.* (1983) p.10.

49 Blumenberg (1964) p.242; *ibid.* (1983) p.119; Ruh (1980) pp.120-121; Jaeschke (1976) pp.329-331.

50 Blumenberg (1964) p.265. Cf. Buch (2012) p.243.

51 Dickey (1987) pp.153-154. Cf. Rorty (1983).

52 Bouwsma (1984) p.698.

53 Wallace (1981); Henning (2014) pp.377-378; Trierweiler (1998) p.155; Lindahl (1997) p.10; Ingram (1990) p.5; Palti (1997) p.504; Yack (1987) p.253; Bouwsma (1984) p.698.

54 Lazier (2003) p.628.

55 Pippin (1987) p.541. Cf. Flasch (2017, p.477) for a similar argument. Habermas (2019, p.57) notes: "Die historische Nachweis der Ähnlichkeit von Denkfiguren einer Tradition mit denen einer anderen Tradition ist kein Beleg für die Abhängigkeit moderner Fortschrittskonzeptionen von der *Gültigkeit* religiöser Überlieferungen, von deren Denkfiguren sie zehrt."

56 In his review of *Legitimacy*, Löwith (1968, p.454) indeed criticized Blumenberg for establishing criteria that, by the latter's own account, are unfulfillable.

57 I have suggested earlier that Blumenberg's description of the secularization theorem in fact approximates some scholars, such as Müller-Armack and Delekat, better than others. I would also suggest that one can find the two characteristics of the secularization theorem – substantialism and expropriation – most clearly in Delekat, *Über den Begriff Säkularisation* (1958). Still, one might also wonder, as Ruh (1980, p.267) does, whether the ill-fitting nature of "the secularization theorem" as an ideal-type should not lead one to question if it has any merit in the first place.

Blumenberg's Defense of Modernity

Having discussed Blumenberg's critique of Löwith and the secularization theorem it is necessary to turn now to his alternative account of modernity, as it is presented in *Legitimacy*.⁵⁸ Blumenberg counters the secularization theorem's insistence on the supposedly derivative nature of modernity vis-à-vis its Christian 'roots' by portraying modern individualism as a legitimate revolt against the overbearing impositions of "theological absolutism". One necessary step in defending this alternative thesis is to supplant the substantialism of the secularization theorem by a different conception of historical continuity. He does this on the basis of a distinction between function (or form) and substance, which he deploys in what Brient calls a "dialogical model of historical change".⁵⁹ This model suggests that each epoch is characterized by its own unique substance, and that any continuity between different epochs is only a formal and not a substantive one. This formal continuity is engendered by a perceived need in one age to answer those questions that the previous age left behind.⁶⁰ Thus, Blumenberg argued that what might appear as a substantive continuity – or in other words as 'secularization' as the transformation or expropriation of a substance – is in fact a formal continuity that is caused by the "reoccupation" (*Umbesetzung*) of old "positions" (*Stellen*). In other words, "carry-over questions", left unanswered by the disappearance of one worldview, receive new answers that in terms of substance derive from another worldview.⁶¹ He states that what "occurred in the process that is interpreted as secularization" by the secularization theorists should actually "be described not as the *transposition* [*Umsetzung*] of authentic theological contents into secularized alienation from their origin but rather as the *reoccupation* [*Umbesetzung*] of answer positions that had become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated."⁶²

The primary example of reoccupation – and the one that is most pertinent to this chapter – that Blumenberg uses in *Legitimacy* as a reference to Löwith is how the Christian-medieval question on the ultimate goal or meaning of the totality of history, conceived of in providential terms as the final victory of good over evil, kept pressing on the modern consciousness even though the original context in which the question could still be answered satisfactorily had disappeared.⁶³ Medieval Christianity had answered this question by synthesizing an early-Christian notion of eschatology with the Stoic concept of divine providence. Once the medieval worldview disintegrated this meant that that "carry-over question" was left vacant. Meanwhile, Blumenberg insists that the modern idea of *progress* originated completely independently of this theological carry-over question; it formed a legitimate and rational concept that arose out of the artistic 'quarrel of the ancients and the moderns' and the scientific revolution of the 17th century. This authentically modern idea was however appropriated in the 19th century by immodest speculative philosophies of history of, e.g., Hegel, Marx and Comte, to answer (or reoccupy) the originally theological

58 In the following, I present the outlines of Blumenberg's narrative of modernity exhibited in *Legitimacy*. Admittedly, Blumenberg is more difficult to pin down than Löwith (Flasch, 2017, p.477, claims that their books belong to 'different leagues'), as his works are more complex and because he is not easily tempted to make strong (polemical) statements, leaving the sometimes quite radical implications of his philosophy implicit. Hence, we must keep in mind the rule of thumb offered by Marquard as a guideline: "Blumenberg verstehen heißt ihn zu kürzen, auf die Gefahr hin, dabei zu verkürzen." (1984, p.32)

59 Brient (2002) p.8.

60 Blumenberg (1983) e.g.: pp.48-51, 63-70.

61 Blumenberg (1983) pp.42-49, 63-75; Pippin (1987) p.536.

62 Blumenberg (1983) p.65 (translation modified)/*ibid.* (1974) p.77.

63 Blumenberg (1983) pp.48-49, 65, 89.

question on the ultimate meaning of history.⁶⁴ In Blumenberg's account, this meant that a rational and authentic modern idea (progress) became "overextended" to fulfill an irrational, theological need.⁶⁵

the modern age found it impossible to decline to answer questions about the totality of history. To that extent the philosophy of history [of e.g. Hegel] is an attempt to answer a medieval question with the means available to a postmedieval age. In this process, the idea of progress is driven to a level of generality that overextends its original, regionally circumscribed and objectively limited range ... As one of the possible answers to the question of the totality of history, it is drawn into the function of consciousness that had been performed by the framework of the salvation story, with Creation at the one end and Judgment on the other. The fact that this explanatory accomplishment exceeded the powers of its characteristic rationality was not without historical consequences.⁶⁶

Based on this reoccupational model Blumenberg is able to distinguish between a legitimate concept of progress and an illegitimate one. This separates his theory from Löwith's because the latter assumedly regards *all* modern iterations of 'progress' as expropriated versions of Christian eschatological beliefs. Speculative philosophy of history wields an illegitimate concept of progress because it uses an authentically modern substance to fulfill a medieval function to which it is ill-suited, since modern rationality cannot answer theological-metaphysical questions. The legitimate idea of progress, on the other hand, emerged out of early-modern attempts at making sense of individual life and history in a context in which such theological questions are no longer deemed appropriate.⁶⁷ Modernity is in this sense depicted as an essentially *post-metaphysical* epoch by Blumenberg. This means that questions concerning history's ultimate meaning, its absolute fulfillment or a final salvation from earthly suffering should be renounced.⁶⁸

The modern, modest idea of progress brings us to the notion of "self-assertion" (*Selbstbehauptung*), which plays a central role in Blumenberg's theory. It is shorthand for an 'authentic' modern form of individuality that can be seen to underlie this idea of progress. Self-assertion consists of

an existential program, according to which man posits his existence in a historical situation and indicates to himself how he is going to deal with the reality surrounding him and what use he will make of the possibilities that are open to him.⁶⁹

The decline of the Christian epoch meant that the individual could no longer rely on transcendence as a source of truth or meaning, but that he/she had to *create* it. Blumenberg notes in his 1962 lecture that the Modern Age introduced a new conception of truth, as something 'made' rather than 'given' by a transcendent source. This occurred not in the last

64 Blumenberg (1983) pp.57-69, 120. Cf. Dickey (1987) p.156.

65 Blumenberg (1983) pp.48-49, 89; *ibid.* (1964) p.249.

66 Blumenberg (1983) pp.48-49.

67 Blumenberg (1983) pp.33-35.

68 To Blumenberg, this entails that modernity is characterized by an essential *resignation* vis-à-vis absolute claims to truth, salvation or meaning: (1983) pp.33-35, 83-87, 153; *ibid.* (2010) pp.31-64. Cf. Marquard (2016).

69 Blumenberg (1983) p.138.

place because the assumed inscrutability implied in the late-medieval voluntarist conception of God had made this external source unreliable. This unreliability necessitated a “theoretischen Selbstbehauptung der Vernunft: nur die selbsterzeugte Wahrheit ist die selbsteigene Wahrheit”, implying a radical rejection of truth as a “*Schenkung*” from a metaphysical origin.⁷⁰ Human reason asserts itself over against a disenchanted universe in a way that is analogous to individual self-assertion in history. Since the modern individual lacks guarantees of a metahistorical purpose that promises the victory of good and the defeat of evil, he/she has to take the sole responsibility for making “history more bearable”, as Robert Wallace phrases it.⁷¹ Blumenberg states that the “proposition that man makes history still contains no guarantee of the progress that he could bring about in making it; it is ... only a principle of self-assertion against the uncertainty imposed on knowledge by the heterogeneous theological principle”.⁷² In short, ‘progress’ is more a necessary existential *postulate* and a practical *commitment* than an epistemic claim about the actual course of history. Both scientific reason and self-assertion as an existential program reflect the need for the modern individual to autonomously create meaning and truth, in absence of a stable and pre-given meaningful order or transcendent revelation.⁷³

The Middle Ages and Christianity

Turning now to the pivotal role of ‘self-assertion’ in Blumenberg’s theory of epochal succession I will also expound on how he perceives of Christianity and the medieval worldview, and shed further light on the concept of epochal (il)legitimacy’ he employs. In short, Blumenberg portrays self-assertion as a uniquely modern response to problems medieval Christianity could not solve. These problems necessitated a decisive rejection of the metaphysical parameters of this worldview rather than an a solution *within* those parameters.⁷⁴ He thus repudiates the view he attributes to Löwith, that modernity is an illegitimate derivative of a Christian source. We will discover that if self-assertion is perceived as a justified response to a medieval problem this implies that Blumenberg’s theory of functional continuity allows for both illegitimate re-occupations of questions that have no proper place in the current age as well as for legitimate attempts at meeting genuine “residual needs” that run deeper than the more direct concerns of circumscribed successive epochs.⁷⁵

If self-assertion is to form a legitimate response to the problems of medieval thought, or in other words a legitimate *revolt* against a theological worldview, Blumenberg first has to convincingly show that the Christian-medieval system was destined to collapse due to its inherent contradictions and that it necessitated the formulation of a new type of individuality in reaction to it. One of the reasons why Blumenberg considers the medieval epoch

70 Blumenberg (1964) p.253. Cf. *ibid.* (1983) pp.70-75.

71 Wallace (1981) p.79.

72 Blumenberg (1983) p.34.

73 Blumenberg (1983) pp.137, 151.

74 Blumenberg (1983) pp.34, 47, 138, 152.

75 Blumenberg (1983) p.65. Due to the scope of our discussion, which concerns Blumenberg’s conceptualization of ‘the Modern Age’, ‘Christianity’ and ‘the Middle Ages’ over against Löwith’s theory, I expound on the philosophical-historical narrative of *Legitimacy* without passing judgement on the empirical support for the historical claims contained in it. Cf. Flasch (2017, pp.482-547) for an extensive historicist critique of the historical narrative of *Legitimacy*. In addition, with regard to the notion of reoccupation and residual needs it has been noted – e.g., by Habermas (2019, p.66) and Gadamer (1968, p.204) – that Blumenberg does not make it sufficiently clear why his theory of functional continuity (suggesting an “angenommene Kontinuität des sogenannten ‘anthropologischen’ Grundproblems”) would be superior to a theory of substantive continuity.

inherently unstable and inferior to modernity is because, like the 19th century philosophers of history such as Hegel, medieval metaphysicians too felt the urge to answer questions that it inherited from a previous age.⁷⁶ But whereas the core principles of modernity – self-assertion and possible progress – can be sharply distinguished from the ‘unmodern’ speculations of some 19th century thinkers, the medieval system *did* fully integrate foreign elements, thus creating an unstable amalgamate of Christian belief and Graeco-Roman metaphysics. Medieval thought integrated foreign elements through a perceived obligation to fulfill the same functions that the metaphysical world-model of classical Antiquity had created. Blumenberg suggests that medieval theology thereby *overextended* Christian concepts that properly belonged to faith-based soteriology in order to occupy positions that were carved out by Graeco-Roman philosophical cosmogony.⁷⁷ As an example, Blumenberg notes how attempts at reconciling Jewish-Christian fideist theism with the demands of Graeco-Roman philosophical metaphysics pale in comparison to “the great cosmological speculations of Greek antiquity”:

The embarrassment that is already evident in Philo of Alexandria and then in the patristic authors in their efforts to set up something on the basis of the biblical story of the creation that would be comparable to the great cosmological speculations of Greek antiquity, and the quantity of allegory that had to be found in order to comply with this externally imposed compulsion, show us the pressure of the ‘carry-over’ of questions to which an answer was held to be possible.⁷⁸

However, the *primary* reason why Blumenberg judges medieval thought to be fatally unstable and hence inferior to modernity lies at the heart of Christianity itself.⁷⁹ To clarify the relation between the concepts ‘Middle Ages’ and ‘Christianity’ in this narrative: whereas the medieval worldview is regarded as permeated with Christian substance, and indeed is intrinsically Christian in nature, it is on the other hand fraught by a paradox. This is that it is both necessary *and* impossible to ‘realize’ or ‘materialize’ the early-Christian message of unworldliness and *Nabernwartung* – implying a radical indifference to the political and historical realm – in the worldly historical sphere. The fact that it was deemed necessary to ‘realize’ Christian faith in the world, and hence dilute its original message, had to do with the ironic success of the Christianizing mission (i.e., its institution as a Roman state religion and subsequent spread across the Western world) and with the indefinite delay of the Second Coming.⁸⁰ The unexpected survival of the world and the emergence of Western Christendom as a historical and political entity meant that a dilemma at the core of the Christian faith, previously dormant, could become acute. This principal problem of Christianity is what Leibniz would later dub

76 For example, Blumenberg (1983, pp.41-42) detects a tension between the original ‘unworldliness’ of early Christianity and the neo-Platonic ‘extra-worldliness’ that was introduced into theology later in the Middle Ages. This assumedly resulted in the convolution of two heterogeneous elements that each contained diverging implications. Another example (pp.76-79; cf.: 2010, p.58) is the problematic integration of the Greek, cosmic concept of ‘infinity’ – originally “an element of extremely worldly metaphysics” – with the Christian concept of transcendent omnipotence, which entailed that an attribute that was originally construed for cosmology became applied to the wholly different sphere of theology.

77 Blumenberg (1983) pp.67-68, 463, 484. Cf. Flasch (2017) p.480.

78 Blumenberg (1983) p.65.

79 Blumenberg (1983) pp.126-130, 336.

80 Blumenberg (1983) pp.42-43. Ruh (1980, pp.98-102) notes that this interpretation of Christianity is based on the theology of Overbeck. See also Blumenberg’s (1959) review of Bultmann’s *Geschichte und Eschatologie* for an early formulation of his conception of modernity’s relation to Christianity in embryonic form.

the question of the ‘theodicy’: i.e., the existence of evil in a world created by a good an omnipotent monotheistic God.⁸¹

Blumenberg holds that there is only one possible solution to this conundrum, and that, historically, this solution has already been provided by Gnosticism. This is to deny the good God’s involvement in creation and place the blame for the existence of evil on a lesser divinity, the Demiurge. The one God of monotheism is thus divided into a good God of salvation and an evil (or simply lesser) God of creation. This implies a separation between the principle of redemption and the principle of creation that devaluates the latter.⁸² However, the orthodox Christianity of late Antiquity – represented by the figure of Augustine – could not accept this solution and therefore blamed humanity for the existence of evil in the world so as to save the unity of God and the goodness of creation. Although this did not decisively solve the problem it did neutralize it, at least for the time being.⁸³ In order to further eschew the negative evaluation of the world that was implied by the Gnostic solution to the theodicy, medieval Scholasticism attempted to reaffirm the goodness of creation by integrating the ‘cosmic thought’ of Greek philosophy, which meant that the cosmic order received its own divine dignity.⁸⁴

This medieval attempt at “overcoming Gnosticism” by blaming humanity for the existence of evil while asserting the inherent goodness of creation foundered however, according to Blumenberg, when late-medieval thought (he mainly refers to nominalism in this context) began to criticize the cosmic accommodation of Aristotelian Scholasticism.⁸⁵ Blumenberg claims that late-medieval thinkers such as William of Ockham began to recognize that medieval varieties of Aristotelianism and Platonism, which endowed the cosmic order with a *logos* and semi-divine nature of its own, contradicted the radically free will and transcendent sovereignty of God. However, these voluntarist and nominalist attempts at reaffirming the radical freedom of God inadvertently reintroduced the problem that Blumenberg calls “theological absolutism”. In his theory, the very idea of an omnipotent, unrestricted God necessarily has to infringe on the agency of the human individual, which means that theological absolutism – inherent, be it sometimes latent, to any orthodox monotheism – is diametrically opposed to the idea of human self-assertion.⁸⁶ Thus, late-medieval attempts at vindicating God’s inscrutable willpower against theories of cosmic *logos* meant that the creation itself became devaluated and that humanity no longer could be seen to occupy a privileged place in creation as a partaker of the divine *logos* that assumedly permeates the cosmos.⁸⁷ Blumenberg argues that the reappearance of theological absolutism meant that the world once more became the dreadful place that it had been for the Gnostic. Through the theory of divine predestination and an emphasis on God’s unknowable *potentia absoluta* it is suggested that late-medieval and protestant theology once again widened the distance between God as a creator and God as a redeemer, which entailed a “practical equivalent” of Gnostic dualism “*ad hominem*”.⁸⁸ In short, Blumenberg maintains that Christianity is inextricably haunted by its heterodox ‘other’,

81 Blumenberg (1983) pp.53-54, 128-136. Note that Blumenberg’s concept of theodicy is more ambivalent than I present it here. On the one hand it signifies an Augustinian assertion of human depravity in favor of God’s ‘innocence’, on the other hand it can also signify a Leibnizian defense of modern rationality (pp.55-59) against the late-medieval *Willkürgott*. In this chapter I employ the former meaning, in Chapter 7 I discuss the latter.

82 Blumenberg (1983) pp.129-136.

83 Blumenberg (1983) pp.35-54, 129-136 . Cf. *ibid.* (1985) p.199.

84 Blumenberg (1983) pp.136-137.

85 Blumenberg (1983) pp.151-163.

86 Blumenberg (1983) pp.43, 46, 136, 202, 336; Ruh (1980) p.109.

87 Blumenberg (1983) pp.135-138; *ibid.* (2010) p.40.

88 Blumenberg (1983) p.154.

Gnosticism, and that the Medieval attempt at “overcoming Gnosticism” eventually had to fail because it could not circumvent or negate the Gnostic answer to the problem that defines the core of Christian thought.⁸⁹

Modernity – encapsulated by self-assertion – constitutes the “second overcoming of Gnosticism” according to Blumenberg. The removal of God from the world in late-medieval thought meant that the world had become de-divinized and that human individuals were completely left to their own devices. The principle of predestination moreover entailed that the individual could no longer voluntarily choose to escape the world on his/her own accord, as was still possible for the Gnostic. Hence, Blumenberg states:

The second overcoming of Gnosticism, at the end of the Middle Ages, is accomplished under ‘aggravated circumstances’. It is no longer able to save the cosmos of Scholasticism and is dominated by doubt whether the world could even originally have been created for man’s benefit. The [Gnostic] escape into transcendence ... has lost its human relevance precisely on account of the absolutism of the decisions of divine grace [i.e. predestination] ... This changed set of presuppositions brings into the horizon of possible intentions the alternative of the immanent self-assertion of reason through the mastery and alteration of reality.⁹⁰

This overcoming did not consist of a solution to Christianity’s problem of the theodicy but rather of a principled *rejection* of the metaphysical-monotheist parameters that had engendered this problem in the first place. First tacitly, later overtly, modern thought gradually ignored the “*Deus absconditus*” (hidden God) postulated by late-medieval thought, and instead focused on “the mastery and alteration of reality” through science and instrumental rationality, rather than attempting to contemplate the divine logos behind the world of appearances. Shifting these parameters meant that the frightful, de-divinized world of late-medieval and protestant theology underwent a Gestalt-switch as it became the ‘disenchanted world’ of modern science. The contingency of reality, previously a consequence of divine voluntarism, was now perceived in terms of its malleability to the benefit of a proactive form of individuality.⁹¹ Blumenberg notes that the “destruction of trust in the world made him [i.e., modern man] for the first time a creatively active being, freed from a disastrous lulling of his activity.”⁹² The idea of progress was subsequently formulated as a commitment to the project of gradual, albeit modest improvement of human circumstances, not as a quasi-eschatological claim of absolute fulfillment or salvation. Against Löwith, Blumenberg thus contends that the modern principle of self-assertion and the idea of progress forms a revolt against theological absolutism rather than that it illegitimately reoccupies a position left vacant by theology.

The Concept of ‘Legitimacy’

At this stage it is necessary to briefly reflect on Blumenberg’s conception of ‘legitimacy’ in relation to the idea of self-assertion, as it further illuminates his theory of modernity, which in turn will help distinguish his philosophy from Löwith’s. The commentary of scholars such as David Ingram, Robert Pippin and Laurence Dickey suggests that Blumenberg’s concept of

89 Blumenberg (1983) pp.133-135. This forms a rebuttal of the thesis put forward in Eric Voegelin’s *New Science of Politics* (1952) that modernity is a ‘Gnostic age’.

90 Blumenberg (1983) p.137.

91 Blumenberg (1983) pp.34, 47, 137-143, 173.

92 Blumenberg (1983) p.139.

'legitimacy' is both more multifaceted and more ambiguous than one might expect.⁹³ Partly building on this available commentary I discern three distinct but interrelated uses of the category of 'legitimacy', all three of which point to a different aspect of Blumenberg's philosophy of modernity. The first, which appeared prominently in the initial 1966 edition of *Legitimacy* and shifted more to the background of the later version, was meant to contrast the substantive continuity asserted by the secularization theorem (and hence by Löwith, according to Blumenberg) by associating legitimacy with the *substantive autonomy* of modernity.⁹⁴ Against the secularization theorem's model of illegitimate expropriation of Christian substance, Blumenberg claimed that the core principles of modernity (self-assertion and modest progress) were legitimate because they were 'home grown', i.e., they emerged out of a modern context and were not expropriated versions of Christian originals.⁹⁵ This use of the term 'legitimacy' in terms of self-production and ownership ties in with Blumenberg's aforementioned modern conception of truth as something that is 'self-generated' rather than being bestowed and transferred from a transcendent source, as "analogous to grace".⁹⁶ It is in this sense that Blumenberg regards the secularization theorem as an "anachronism in the modern age", because it purports that truth or meaning can only be transferred from older, more authentic origins, which postulates a "cultural debt" and ignores the essentially modern option of truth as the product of the "self-assertion of reason".⁹⁷ The upshot of this conception of modernity's legitimacy is that it emphasizes its substantive self-sufficiency or *autonomy* and thus accentuates the assumed discontinuity between the Modern Age and its Christian past. However, Blumenberg could not place the full weight of his argument on this meaning of legitimacy, because it would bring him too close to naïve ahistorical narratives, which he himself criticizes, of modern rationality coming into being *ex nihilo* after millennia of metaphysical-dogmatic slumber.⁹⁸

The second meaning of legitimacy that can be discerned from Blumenberg's book is related to what Brient calls the "dialogical model of historical change" but is nonetheless distinct from the straightforward question-answer pattern this model refers to. Whereas the "dialogical model" pertains to the process of "reoccupation" (*Umbesetzung*) that Blumenberg tends to regard as an *illegitimate* occurrence, since it involves answering essentially unmodern questions through the "overextension" (i.e., abuse) of modern substances (e.g., answering the question of the ultimate goal of history using the modest scientific idea of progress), self-assertion on the other hand is regarded as a legitimate phenomenon because it is provoked and hence necessitated by the unbearable impositions placed on human life by theological absolutism.⁹⁹ The legitimacy of self-assertion resides in it being an act of a self-defense in response to an *underlying* problem inadvertently caused by theology (existential anxiety) rather than that it forms a direct answer to a previously posed question.¹⁰⁰ Distancing himself more from the

93 Ingram (1990); Pippin (1987); Dickey (1987). Cf. Habermas (2019) pp.66-67.

94 Dickey (1987, pp.154-162) notes the development of Blumenberg's thought between the two editions of *Legitimacy* (1966 and 1974). Ingram (1990, p.6) distinguishes legitimacy as 'autonomy' from legitimacy in terms of 'necessity'.

95 Blumenberg (1983) pp.72-75; *ibid.* (1964) p.253. By conceiving of legitimacy in terms substantive self-sufficiency, Blumenberg has evoked criticism that he remains indebted to the model ('illegitimacy = substantive continuity') he seeks to reject. See: Gordon (2019, pp.166-170); Ruh (1980) p.122. In this vein, Schmitt (2014) has accused Blumenberg of having an 'autistic' conception of modernity.

96 Blumenberg (1983) p.73.

97 Blumenberg (1983) pp.63-75, 119.

98 Blumenberg (1983) pp.116, 183-185; Brient (2002) pp.14-15; Pecora (2006) p.61.

99 Blumenberg (1983) pp.97, 137-139, 151, 380, 541; Ingram (1990) pp.4-9.

100 Blumenberg (1983) p.97; Ruh (1980) p.120,

ahistorical implications of legitimacy as a category of scientific invention and novelty than in the 1966 version of *Legitimacy*, Blumenberg states in the second edition that the “concept of the legitimacy of the modern age is not derived from the accomplishments of reason but rather from the *necessity* of these accomplishments.”¹⁰¹ In this instance, legitimacy is regarded as a historical category of action rather than as a category of property-ownership. That is, self-assertion is presented as a legitimate, antagonistic response to the provocations of theological absolutism. The significance of this second meaning of ‘legitimacy’ is that it clearly demonstrates that Blumenberg conceives of modernity as an essentially anti-theistic age. We will discover in later chapters that his followers, especially Odo Marquard, readily accepted the anti-theistic implications of this theory of modernity.¹⁰²

Whereas at first “reoccupation” appears to function only as a concept of illegitimacy in Blumenberg’s theory, he also indicates in some instances that behind the surface level of illegitimate carry-over questions there are deeper, *legitimate* “residual needs” that require answering. This implies a third meaning of legitimacy in relation to self-assertion, as it presents self-assertion as a legitimate reoccupation of a more fundamental “Bewußtseinsfunktion”.¹⁰³ Pippin and Dickey suggest this respect that Blumenberg’s conception of reoccupation and legitimacy is less than clear, as it is difficult to ascertain when a question or “position” belongs to a legitimate, fundamental conceptual framework or when it belongs to more epoch-specific question-frameworks that should be rejected by modern reason.¹⁰⁴ Dickey asks:

But how do we know, without recourse to a philosophy of history of our own, which need is legitimate and which one not? Why, for example, should the need which underlies the [illegitimate] idea of “inevitable progress” be interpreted in terms of a modern reoccupation of a Christian position while the need which informs the [legitimate] idea of “probable progress” be interpreted as a legitimate expression of a program of human self-assertion?¹⁰⁵

The suggestion offered by Dickey, namely that Blumenberg requires a basis – he suggests a “philosophy of history” – on which to determine the respective (il)legitimacy of needs, is correct; later in this chapter we will discover that this concept of legitimacy as a function of fundamental (rather than epoch-specific) needs invokes an underlying philosophical anthropology that Blumenberg developed in his later works, but which is already presupposed in *Legitimacy*.¹⁰⁶ We will find that it is an aversion to *absolutism* of any kind that motivates Blumenberg’s defense of modernity as a modest project of human survival against violent outside forces. I will argue that it is this philosophical anthropology that separates Blumenberg from Löwith, and not necessarily the latter’s ideas on ‘secularization’, which will be discussed in the next section.

101 Blumenberg (1983) p.99 (emphasis added). Cf. Ingram (1990) pp.4-10. Blumenberg stresses this point in a chapter that he added to the second edition of *Legitimacy* (1983, pp.89-101) in response to Schmitt’s criticism, which the latter raised in *Political Theology II* (2014), against the presumed ‘autism’ of the former’s initial argument.

102 Cf. especially: Marquard (1983); *ibid.* (1984).

103 Blumenberg (1964) p.249.

104 Pippin (1987) pp.554-557; Dickey (1987) pp.159-165.

105 Dickey (1987) p.160.

106 Cf. Hudson (1993) pp.110-115; Habermas (2019) p.65.

Löwith's Account

First Line of Thought: Secularization as Conflation

In Blumenberg's critique of Löwith much depends on the former's substantialist reading of the latter's assumption that the modern idea of progress is a secularized form of eschatology. Moreover, Blumenberg's portrayal of Löwith's account as a paradigm example of the secularization theorem, modelled on the juridical concept of expropriation, rests on this substantialist interpretation. Hence, to assess if this critique is justified it is necessary to ascertain, first, what Löwith meant by his assertion and, second, what role it plays in his overall theory. This requires an extensive reconstruction of Löwith's account as presented in his *Meaning in History* (1949), because, despite its apparent straightforwardness on a surface level, on closer inspection this narrative turns out to be more complicated and ambiguous than has been admitted. Moreover, it can be seen as lacking in clarity and at times in consistency, especially in view of those elements that have formed the focus of his later critics. This is an ambiguity that has evidently made Löwith's narrative susceptible to misinterpretations.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, to give Löwith's account a fighting chance against Blumenberg's critique, I consider it necessary to reconstruct this theory in a way that restructures his own arguments and explicates those aspects that have proved relevant in light of his later criticisms. This reconstruction separates two lines of thought intertwined in Löwith's original argument, and, corresponding to these lines of thought, it distinguishes between a descriptive and a normative claim. The account of secularization serves a descriptive function that is secondary with regard to a – previously underexposed – second line of thought in *Meaning in History*, which connects to its central normative claim, namely, the denunciation of modernity on the basis of pure faith and pure reason. The upshot of this reconstruction is that, at least analytically speaking, the central normative claim of Löwith does not depend on his secondary line of thought, that is, his theory of secularization.

In order to find out what secularization means in Löwith's theory we must begin with his conception of Christianity and its relation to history. Alluding to the book's title, *Meaning in History*, Löwith states in the preface: "I have tried to be honest ... about the impossibility ... of imposing on history a reasoned order or of drawing out the working of God." That is, "to the critical mind, neither a providential design nor a natural law of progressive development is discernible in the tragic human comedy of all times."¹⁰⁸ When speaking about "meaning in history," Löwith understands meaning in a teleological sense, as "purpose". To him, this implies that to the critical mind – properly speaking – *there is no meaning in history*.¹⁰⁹ The book is an account of how this fallacious idea of a purposeful history developed from its Christian origin up till Löwith's own time. As the subtitle – *The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* – indicates, this book seeks to expose the implicit presupposition of theological patterns in modern historical thought, the most important of which is "the theological concept of history as a history of fulfillment and salvation".¹¹⁰

An ideal-typical depiction of Christianity functions as a benchmark of secularization in Löwith's theory. Significantly, a 'genuine' Christianity, Löwith argues, is hostile toward any

107 Kroll (2010) pp.105-111.

108 Löwith (1949) p.v.

109 Löwith (1949) p.5.

110 Löwith (1949) p.1. The German translation is titled: *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen* (1953). In his 'Curriculum Vitae' (a postscript of his autobiographical book *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933*) he notes that this is a more "apt title", suggesting that the earlier title raised the impression that he *defended* the 'theological implications of the philosophy of history' (1994, p.164).

assumption of meaning *in* history; after all, salvation, the only thing truly meaningful to Christian faith, occurs not in history but beyond it. It concerns the individual soul and is indifferent, if not inimical, to worldly historical-political constellations. Similarly, the *eschaton* (the ‘end’ of history) does not imply the fulfillment of history, in the sense that history anticipates its goal, but essentially means the termination of it. In the face of absolute transcendence, Löwith suggests, Christian eschatology relativizes history to the extent of rendering it meaningless. Similarly, God’s hidden plan, the history of salvation (*Heilsgeschehen*), is said to take place behind or beyond worldly history (*Weltgeschichte*), rather than be intertwined in it. This distinction is paralleled by Augustine’s paradigmatic separation of the *civitas Dei* from the *civitas terrena*.¹¹¹ Another significant aspect of Christian faith is that it is motivated by hope. This separates the Christian faith from the resolute detachment that Löwith finds in the Greek worldview, and to which he himself is inclined. Given that the hope of Christianity is a hope for a wholly transcendent salvation, it nullifies every hope in an inner-historical fulfillment.¹¹²

The most evident line of argumentation that one can find in *Meaning in History* is that these originally separated spheres of *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschehen* that existed within Christian thought became increasingly intertwined in the history of Western thought. Finally, they became synthesized in the modern philosophy of history of, for instance, Comte, Hegel, and Marx – i.e., secular salvation histories.¹¹³ These philosophies of history, but also a more modest idea of ‘infinite progress’ (which Blumenberg defends), represent what Löwith perceives as the modern historical consciousness. Contrary to Christianity, the modern historical consciousness projects its hope on history itself and expects a fulfillment to occur within history. Thus, Löwith argues, it consists of “degrading sacred history to the level of secular history and exalting the latter to the level of the first”.¹¹⁴ For most of *Meaning in History*, Löwith traces the gradual conflation of sacred and profane history, beginning with the pessimistic ‘histories of decline’ (*Verfallsgeschichten*) of his (near) contemporary, Oswald Spengler, via the optimistic philosophies of history of the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries, until he arrives at the point where they were first drawn together, in the “theological historicism” of the 12th century Franciscan scholar Joachim of Fiore.¹¹⁵

Only a quick overview of Löwith’s ‘genealogy’ from Spengler to Joachim should suffice to obtain a grasp of his theory of secularization. First, it is clear that *Meaning in History* (1949) is written with the atrocities of Nazism and the Second World War fresh in the author’s memory (Löwith wrote the book in the United States, where he lived as a former refugee); sparse but significant references to recent historical events reoccur throughout the book.¹¹⁶ Löwith recognizes a widespread impression that in the aftermath of the Second World War ‘progress’ no longer seems as inevitable or viable as it had for the 18th century *philosophes*, suggesting that “we find ourselves more or less at the end of the modern rope”.¹¹⁷ However, rather than lending his support to a pessimistic *Verfallsgeschichte* à la Spengler (or Nietzsche and Heidegger),

111 Löwith (1949) pp.160-173, 250 fn.1. Ruh (1980, pp.257-258) and Zabel (1968, pp.208-213) both critically reflect on how Löwith’s interpretation of Christian eschatology is influenced by Oscar Cullmann’s *Christus und die Zeit*.

112 For Löwith’s depiction of Christianity, cf.: (1949) pp.3-19, 160-207.

113 Löwith (1949) pp.33-103; *ibid.* (1966) pp.435-437.

114 Löwith (1949) p.59. See: ‘Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus’ (1952) for a more extensive critique of modern historical consciousness, which includes not only philosophy of history but also a non-teleological historicism. In *From Hegel to Nietzsche* (1967) it is argued that this historicism amounts to a Hegelian affirmation of historicity sans teleology and transcendence.

115 Löwith (1949) p.156; *ibid.* (1966) p.438.

116 Löwith (1949) pp.27, 85-89, 159, 207-211.

117 Löwith (1949) p.3.

Löwith regards recent events as indications of the essential meaninglessness of history. He interprets such ‘histories of decline’ as inverted versions of optimistic philosophies of progress.¹¹⁸ In *Meaning in History* this critique of historical pessimism is not quite as succinct as he formulated it in his 1962 lecture, ‘Das Verhängnis des Fortschritts’ (presented at the same conference where Blumenberg first mounted his critique):

Die christliche Zuversicht auf eine künftige Erfüllung ist zwar dem modernen Geschichtsbewußtsein abhanden gekommen, aber die Sicht auf die Zukunft als solche und auf eine unbestimmte Erfüllung ist herrschend geblieben. ... Von der Zukunft her motiviert sind aber nicht nur die radikalen Fortschrittsphilosophien von *Concordet*, *Saint Simon* und *Comte* ..., sondern *nicht minder ihr Umschlag in negativ fortschreitende Verfallstheorien*, wonach es so aussieht, als sei die ganze Geschichte Europas ein einziger, folgerichtiger Hervorgang des ‘Nihilismus’, der sich in einem ‘Zeitalter der vollendeten Sinnlosigkeit’ erfülle.¹¹⁹

Proceeding to his treatment of optimistic philosophies of history, we arrive at Löwith’s portrayal of Marx and Hegel. Both philosophies are presented as a climax in the process of the conflation of sacred and profane history: Marx because of the typically modern discrepancy he supposedly exhibits between his claim to a resolute secular-scientific outlook and his conceptual indebtedness to the eschatological horizon of futurism, and Hegel “because he is the last philosopher whose immense historical sense was still restrained and disciplined by the Christian tradition”.¹²⁰ In this narrative, Marx and Hegel fall on either side of a turning point in the development of Western thought: namely its departure from the *contents* of the Christian tradition through a modification of the Christian *template* of “salvation history”. The Enlightenment paved the way for this departure, as Löwith shows through the work of Voltaire, Turgot, Concordet and Comte. These authors conceived of progress as a unified, *universal history* that is oriented towards a single end in the *future* and which is determined by *hope*; three aspects which betray the Christian derivation of the idea of progress in Löwith’s eyes.¹²¹ In short, this meant that:

Man will seek to replace providence, but within the established horizon, by secularizing the Christian hope of salvation into an indefinite hope of improvement and faith in God’s providence into the belief in man’s capacity to provide for his own earthly happiness.¹²²

From figures in this genealogy who are still firmly embedded in the Christian tradition we obtain a sense of how the “degradation” of “salvation history” could have occurred within Christianity in the first place. Löwith criticizes 17th century bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet

118 For Löwith’s critique of *Verfallsgeschichte*, see e.g.: (1995) p.95; *ibid.* (1964) pp.19-20. Löwith does not attack Heidegger explicitly in *Meaning in History*. For an extensive critique of Heidegger, one must turn to his collected essays *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism* (1995). One objection is that Heidegger operates as a ‘secularized’ Kierkegaard, replacing ‘God’ with ‘death’ in his existentialism (as in *Sein-zum-Tode*).

119 Löwith (1964) pp.19-20 (second emphasis added).

120 Löwith (1949) p.57, cf. pp.33-59. For a critique of Löwith’s reading of Marx, see e.g. Henning (2014).

121 Löwith (1949) pp.17-18, 60-61.

122 Löwith (1949) p.111. It should be noted that Löwith, as opposed to Blumenberg, does not distinguish between eschatology and providence; both are interchangeable instances of *Heilsgeschehen*. This whereas Blumenberg (1983, pp.34-37) emphasizes not only the structural difference but also the historical distance between these two concepts, providence being of Greek-Stoic origin.

for deviating from the orthodox conception of providence – in his philosophy this means: a strictly Augustinian one – by attempting to legitimize the French monarchy as a providentially ordained Christian empire.¹²³ By attributing worldly, political developments to providence, Bossuet and likeminded authors ignore an essential axiom of the Christian outlook, according to Löwith, which is that a “*World* which calls itself *Christian* is a contradiction in terms, and a Christian understanding of history can be based only on the fundamental antagonism between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of man.”¹²⁴

Joachim of Fiore, finally, marks the origin of the process of the conflation of sacred and secular history. The example of Joachim shows most clearly that the process of secularization as the “exaltation” of worldly history does not necessarily stem from the desire to profane sacred history, on the contrary: Joachim rather wished to ‘spiritualize’ secular history. His chiliasm indicated that the end of history in the second coming of Christ would be preceded by an ‘age of the Spirit’ within history. He thus predicted that within this ‘third dispensation’ – of which St. Francis was recognized as the “*novus dux*” or “new Christ” – every individual would embrace a monastic aspiration to holiness. This meant that the priesthood, and indeed the Church itself as a separate institution, would be abolished with the spiritualization of the world.¹²⁵ Regarding the ultimate consequences of this development Löwith is clear: “The third dispensation of the Joachites reappeared as a third International and a third *Reich*, inaugurated by a *dux* or *Führer* who was acclaimed as a savior and greeted by millions with *Heil!*”¹²⁶

Summing up, we can see that – contrary to what one might expect from reading Blumenberg – secularization is not phrased by Löwith in terms of the transferal of a substance from one context to another. Rather, he appears to conceptualize it as the appropriation of a theological *pattern* and the simultaneous rejection of the concomitant theological *content*. Thus the Enlightenment thinkers and philosophers of history adopted the Christian teleological scheme of future fulfillment and turned it against the Christian belief in providence and transcendence. This was possible because this scheme was now interpreted as the progressive overcoming of Christianity and other archaisms in favor of human freedom and rationality. Hence Löwith repeats the statement throughout his book that such modern notions of progress are “Christian by derivation and anti-Christian by consequence.”¹²⁷ In light of this, it becomes possible to define *secularization* – a term Löwith uses only sparingly – from this reconstruction of *Meaning in History*.¹²⁸ That is, rather than signify the alienation of a substance, secularization should be held to denote the gradual conflation of sacred and profane history through the adoption of the theological scheme and the simultaneous rejection of the theological content. However, this assertion is not enough for Löwith to pass judgment on modern historical consciousness; on the contrary, it is only secondary to his central argument.

Second Line of Thought: The Athens-Jerusalem Antithesis

Although Löwith does not explicitly separate his second line of argumentation – which I refer to as the “Athens-Jerusalem antithesis” – from the first, it should be seen as a distinct

123 Löwith (1949) pp.137-144.

124 Löwith (1949) p.144. Cf. *ibid.* (1965) p.36.

125 Löwith (1949) pp.145-159.

126 Löwith (1949) p.159.

127 Löwith (1949) p.202, cf. pp.60, 61, 112–14, 197, 202.

128 Löwith uses the term only in an unspecific manner, e.g.: (1949) pp.103, 158, 193.

argument.¹²⁹ In short, the assumption of this antithesis implies that Löwith regards modernity as caught between two incompatible but venerable traditions, namely, Christian ‘faith’ and Greek ‘reason’. He denounces modern thought because it cannot decide between the two.¹³⁰ Löwith states that the “modern mind has not made up its mind whether it should be Christian or pagan. It sees with one eye of faith and one eye of reason. Hence its vision is necessarily dim in comparison with either Greek or biblical thinking.”¹³¹

Löwith presents Christian faith and Greek rationality as the only two truthful outlooks on the world and its history. A ‘pure’ Christianity is disinterested in worldly affairs because it focuses on transcendent salvation. The classical Greek standpoint – as Löwith conceives it, that is, in terms of a Stoic-Epicurean detachment – also rejects any notion of a meaningful history.¹³² However, it does this not because of a hope for salvation but because of a rigid skepticism with regard to transient affairs, inspired by a reason that solely devotes its attention to the permanence of nature and the cosmos. Since truth is seen to reside in permanence, history has never been a proper object for philosophy. Indeed, “to the Greek thinkers a philosophy of history would have been a contradiction in terms.”¹³³ The only insight that Greek thought offers in history is that it should be regarded as cyclical rather than linear; this corresponds with the motions of the heavens, but is also dictated by the classic conception of fate.¹³⁴ In addition, whereas ‘pure faith’ is driven by both a hope for salvation and a fear of damnation, ‘genuine reason’ rejects both hope and fear – in accordance with the Stoic credo “*nec spe nec metu*” (neither hope nor fear) – in a spirit of calm resignation and acceptance of fate. Löwith himself favors the Greek option, and most of his work should be read in light of his attitude of resignation and the attempt to live “hopelessly, without being *de-sperans*.”¹³⁵

Throughout *Meaning in History*, Löwith judges whether or not prominent figures in the history of ideas fall short of these two ahistorical standards, faith and reason. Because they represent ahistorical outlooks, Löwith refrains from suggesting that the development of modern thought is characterized by a gradual alienation from these standards, as that would amount to the type of *Verfallsgeschichte* he seeks to deny. Jacob Burckhardt for instance emerges in the first chapter as a modern example of Stoic-Epicurean detachment, healthy skepticism and

129 This term, derived from Tertullian, is not used in *Meaning in History* itself; Löwith does however refer to it in *Wissen, Glaube und Skepsis* (1958, p.34).

130 Löwith (1949) pp.165, 207; Riesterer (1969) p.71. This is not to say that he believes a genuine decision to be viable; see his negative appraisal of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in *From Hegel to Nietzsche* (1967) and his rejection of decisionism in *Heidegger and European Nihilism* (1995).

131 Löwith (1949) p.207, cf. pp.3, 19, 165.

132 Habermas (1983) p.83; Kroll (2010) p.100. With regard to this affiliation with Greek thought, it has been suggested by scholars such as Odo Marquard (1983, p.79) that, despite the overt disagreements between Blumenberg and Löwith, their positions are near identical since both their philosophies can be identified with Greek thought, namely, Epicureanism and Stoicism, respectively. I am inclined to disagree with the general tenet behind this reading of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate, since it downplays the substantial differences between the two scholars, which center – in my analysis – on their philosophical anthropologies, and the different evaluations of modernity and history they give rise to. In this respect, I think that there is something to be said for Hans-Georg Gadamer’s interpretation of Löwith’s philosophy (2013, pp.550–551), which is that his resort to the Greek notion of the ‘cosmos’ serves as a negative mirror image of the things he wishes to deny rather than as a basis for a positive philosophy. From this it follows that Löwith’s ‘Stoicism’ is more a modern philosophical reflection than an ‘authentically’ classical position, which might also apply to Blumenberg’s purported Epicureanism. See for his response: Löwith (1966b) pp.215–218. A final judgement on the ‘authenticity’ of Löwith’s Stoicism lies beyond the scope of this study.

133 Löwith (1949) p.4. Cf. *ibid.* (1966) 434–441.

134 Löwith (1949) pp.4–11.

135 Löwith (1949) p.204, cf. pp.199–204. Quote: Kroll (2010) p.115.

temperance. He is praised for seeing clearly that history is nothing more than a permanent flux from which no purpose or moral meaning can be derived.¹³⁶ Later in the book, Giambattista Vico is also presented approvingly in a similar vein. He comes to the fore as a thinker who, despite his Catholicism, reiterates the classical-Greek view of history as an endless *ricorso* without true “end” or “fulfillment”.¹³⁷ Finally, while Löwith does not mention modern exemplars of a genuinely Christian outlook in *Meaning in History*, it is clear from this book that he views figures such as Francis of Assisi (“the most authentic imitation of Christ”) and Augustine as paradigms of Christian faith and orthodoxy.¹³⁸

The crucial inference that follows from this distinction between Athens and Jerusalem is Löwith’s ultimate rejection of modernity. This inference is contingent on two features of this antithesis: both poles agree on the essential meaninglessness of history, and these two poles are incompatible. Modernity – through its constitutive principle of progress – is condemned by Löwith because it cannot choose between reason and faith. Rather, it wants to synthesize both options by rejecting a belief in transcendence while embracing hopefulness for the future. In doing so, modern thought seeks to impose meaning and hope on the realm of history, whereas the impossibility of this imposition is the *one* thing faith and reason agree on.¹³⁹ Thus modernity’s error lies in its unawareness of the fundamental opposition between its constituent parts:

Modern man is still living on the capital of the cross *and* the circle, of Christianity and antiquity; and the intellectual history of Western man is a continuous attempt to reconcile the one with the other, revelation with reason. This attempt has never succeeded, and it cannot succeed unless by compromise. Both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard have shown that the initial decision between Christianity and paganism remains decisive; for how could one reconcile the classical theory that the world is eternal with the Christian faith in creation, the cycle with the *eschaton*, and the pagan acceptance of fate with the Christian duty of hope?¹⁴⁰

The question then arises how these two lines of thought, secularization-as-conflation and the Athens-Jerusalem antithesis, can be related to each other. The assertion that the modern idea of progress is the result of the conflation of sacred and secular history is analytically distinct from the assertion that modern consciousness cannot choose between the Greek and Christian modes of thought. That is, the distinction between sacred and secular history – both of which are conceived in a linear sense rather than cyclical – is *already a product of Christianity*. Löwith’s account of secularization does not convey how modernity became caught in between Athens and Jerusalem and why it cannot choose between them; it only describes how it departed from the *Christian* position, namely, by conflating secular and sacred history into one notion of purposeful history. Indeed, Löwith’s account of secularization-as-conflation does not provide the reasons for rejecting the modern conception of history, since he does not wish to return to the Christian position *per se*.

These two lines of thought can however be conceived as building up to the same conclusion, although clearly the second argument is more important than the first. The primary objective of *Meaning in History* is the evaluation of modern historical thought in terms of its

136 Löwith (1949) pp.20-32.

137 Löwith (1949) pp.123-133.

138 Löwith (1949) p.59; on Augustine, cf. pp.160-173. Elsewhere (*ibid.*, 1956, p.193; 1966, pp.438-441) he presents figures such as Blaise Pascal and Karl Barth as having an ‘authentically’ Christian outlook on history.

139 Löwith (1949) p.192; *ibid.* (1966) pp.435–36, 444–45.

140 Löwith (1949) p.165.

deviation from both the Christian and the Greek modes of thought. Löwith's negative judgment of modernity hinges on the idea that it discards the pure transcendence of Christianity (faith) without, however, resorting to the only other genuine alternative, namely, a Greek-philosophical appreciation of the unchanging cosmos combined with a rejection of any hope in future fulfillment (reason). Instead, modern thought – and especially the philosophy of history – supplants this originally transcendent end with a *telos* that is neither fully immanent nor transcendent but an inherently unstable amalgam of the two. The secularization-as-conflation argument illustrates how the modern idea of progress originated out of Christianity, whereas, in my interpretation, it is only the Athens-Jerusalem-antithesis argument that supplies the normative ground for rejecting this idea. Löwith's condemnation of modern historical thought as “foreign to wisdom *and* faith” serves as the ultimate point of *Meaning in History*; it is with respect to this conclusion that the description of secularization plays a secondary part.¹⁴¹

Reevaluation of Blumenberg's Critique

We can now assess Blumenberg's portrayal of Löwith: first, we have seen that the latter is depicted in 'Säkularisation: Kritik einer Kategorie historischer Illegitimität' and *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* as a prime representative of the secularization theorem, which in turn is a species of a broader genre of *Verfallsgeschichte*.¹⁴² However, Löwith's theory can be distinguished from such histories of decline, at least as they are portrayed by Blumenberg, namely, as crypto-theological stories of alienation or expropriation from a transcendent source. Indeed, in his *Meaning in History* as well as on other occasions Löwith himself rejects such histories of decline as merely pessimistic versions of the Hegelian philosophy of history that he objects to.¹⁴³ Bearing in mind his own Stoicism with regard to not only hope but also fear – which is merely the other side of hope – it is not difficult to see that, in contrast to these pessimistic histories of decline, his own historical narrative is meant to be a sobering renunciation of a yearning for either the future or the past. Löwith thus renounces not only a hope for a future fulfillment but also a longing for a golden age from which we supposedly became removed, which, after all, is a precondition for *Verfallsgeschichte*.¹⁴⁴

Blumenberg's more specific critique of Löwith centers on the accusation of substantialism. However, we have seen that Löwith's narrative does not trace the gradual alienation of a single substance but focuses on the continued existence of schemes or patterns, while the contents or substances gradually become replaced.¹⁴⁵ For example, Löwith says that Comte adopted the “Catholic *system* without faith in Christ”; that is, the Christian form had been turned against its substance, analogous to how the originally Christian idea of a purposeful history was interpreted in the Enlightenment in terms of the victory over Christianity itself.¹⁴⁶ This, according to Löwith, explains “the ambiguous *structure* of [the] leading idea of progress, which is as Christian by derivation as it is anti-Christian by implication.”¹⁴⁷ Occasionally, Löwith even seems inclined toward

141 Löwith (1949) p.192 (emphasis added). 'Modern historical thought' also includes the non-teleological historicism à la Dilthey and Gadamer, see: *ibid.* (1952).

142 On the connection between cultural pessimism, *Verfallsgeschichte*, and the secularization theorem, see: Kroll (2010) p.93. Löwith is depicted as a *Verfallshistoriker* by Habermas (1983, p.84; *ibid.* 2019 pp.40-74), Rorty (1983, pp.3-5) and Zabel (1968, pp.208, 228-230). Blumenberg (1983, pp.15-18) suggests that Löwith belongs to the camp of “cultural pessimism”.

143 Löwith (1949) pp.11-13, 199; *ibid.* (1964) pp.19-20; *ibid.* (1952) pp.300, 318; Pecora (2006) p.59; Barash (1998) pp.81-82.

144 Löwith (1949) pp.89–90, 180–81, 190–200.

145 Wetz (1993) p.47.

146 Löwith (1949) p.83 (emphasis added); cf. p.88.

147 Löwith (1949) p.61 (emphasis added).

a functionalistic account of secularization, thus approximating Blumenberg's own notion of functional reoccupation. For instance, Löwith states that "eventually ... the very doctrine of progress had to assume the *function* of providence, that is, to foresee and to provide for the future."¹⁴⁸ Admittedly, Löwith's theory is not entirely consistent with regard to the substance-form distinction, nor is this distinction entirely explicit – which makes his account vulnerable to wrongful accusations of substantialism.¹⁴⁹ But even though there are a few instances in which Löwith appears to suggest otherwise, the general sense obtained from a close reading of *Meaning in History* is that the author takes secularization to refer to a substantive discontinuity and a formal continuity, that is, as the projection of the pattern of *Heilsgeschehen* onto the material of *Weltgeschichte*.

One objection that one could offer in support of Blumenberg's critique is that, even if the continuity that Löwith asserts is purely formal, it can still be evaluated in terms of an expropriation and hence in terms of illegitimacy. However, a close inspection of Löwith's argument demonstrates that his attack on modernity is not based on the model of expropriation, be it of a substance or of a form. Before I return to what actually serves as the ground of Löwith's normativity, it can be conceded that *Meaning in History* does not describe the theft of an authentic Christian (i.e., spiritual) substance *or* form by 'the world' but instead shows how secularization originated *within* Christianity itself – for instance, in the Franciscan spirituality of Joachim. Furthermore, the entire juridical terminology that Blumenberg introduces into the discussion – expropriation, possession, and ownership – is misapplied to Löwith's theory. This has been noted by commentators such as Zabel, but also by Löwith himself.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, Löwith explicitly made this point in a review of Blumenberg's book, written two years after the first publication of *Legitimacy*, stating that he never intended to use secularization in a juridical sense, as denoting either legitimate or illegitimate ownership of a 'substance'. The presupposition of legitimate ownership is fruitless with regard to history, Löwith argues in his review, since all ideas or concepts necessarily estrange themselves from their origins in the appropriation by others. Hence all historical development is 'illegitimate', rendering this concept useless: "im übertragenen Sinn, auf historische Epochen angewandt, kann von Legitimität oder Illegitimität eigentlich keine Rede sein".¹⁵¹

Löwith's concept of secularization was never intended as a category of guilt in a juridical sense, and in his response to Blumenberg, Löwith stated that he simply sought to discern the *conditions of possibility* of modern historical thought:

Denn auch unsere These [Löwith's] besagt nicht mehr und nicht weniger, als daß alttestamentliche Prophetie und christliche Eschatologie einen Horizont von Fragestellungen und ein geistiges Klima geschaffen haben – im Hinblick auf die Geschichtsphilosophie einen Horizont der Zukunft und einer künftigen Erfüllung –, das den modern Geschichtsbegriff und den weltlichen Fortschrittsglauben *ermöglicht* hat.¹⁵²

148 Löwith (1949) p.60 (emphasis added). Cf. *ibid.* (1964) p.26: "Durch diese ungeheuren Erfolge des wissenschaftlichen Fortschritts nimmt nun der Physiker die Stelle des Theologen ein: der planbare Fortschritt hat die *Funktion* der Vorsehung übernommen" (emphasis added).

149 For example, note the differences between (1949) pp.111, 114, and p.44, on Marx.

150 Löwith (1968) p.459; Zabel (1968) pp.229–30.

151 Löwith (1968) p.459. Cf. *ibid.* (1949) pp.212–213; in: Braun (1964) p.336.

152 Löwith (1968) p.455. However, Löwith only supplies vague rebuttals in his review without properly addressing Blumenberg's actual accusations, such as those concerning substantialism or expropriation. Perhaps this lack of critical-constructive contributions is why this review has received little attention by commentators on the Löwith-Blumenberg debate.

This assertion suggests neither the substantialism that Blumenberg attributes to him nor the normative weight that the concept of secularization is supposed to carry according to his critics. My reconstruction of Löwith's theory supports this impression: it shows that his account of secularization describes how the modern idea of progress came to be through a substantive discontinuity and functional continuity with the Christian hope for a future fulfillment, and that it does not form his principal normative argument.

Blumenberg's criticism is partly misdirected because he mistook Löwith's descriptive account of secularization for his normative claim. If secularization is indeed regarded as the sole carrier of normativity, namely, as a category of guilt, then it is easily perceived as an accusation of illegitimacy and expropriation. This misunderstanding remained present in the later edition of *Legitimacy*, where Blumenberg did respond to Löwith's "vehement" review, but continued to interpret the latter as implying that "the autonomy of ... historical consciousness as an ultimate category is *exposed as its self-deception* as soon as it is recognized, in accordance with the secularization theorem, as existing 'by the grace of' Christianity." In other words, Blumenberg continues to read Löwith as saying that modernity is illegitimate for no other reason than because it is secularized.¹⁵³

It is however not the account of secularization but the second line of thought – the Athens-Jerusalem antithesis that Blumenberg mostly ignores – that forms the normative basis for the conclusion of *Meaning in History*: the rejection of modern historical thought due to its failure to choose between the ideal-types of faith and reason. Thus Löwith's principal normative claim entails a rejection of modern historical consciousness, not because it would be illegitimate but simply because it is erroneous.¹⁵⁴ The fateful mistake he sees in the modern consciousness is that it tries to combine two outlooks that contradict each other: faith and reason. One is intertwined with an 'acosmic' hope – to use a Weberian term – whereas the other necessarily rejects hope and affirms the cosmos. The mistake of modern thought consists in rejecting the transcendent nature of religious hope while clinging to hope itself. Modern thought remains within the religious frame of thought while rejecting its vital core, the transcendent orientation point. Modern thought then mistakenly directs its hope to history, which is the one domain rejected by both faith and reason as utterly and intrinsically meaningless.¹⁵⁵

As mentioned, Löwith criticizes modernity for being *wrong* rather than for being illegitimate. This distinction is important, because it not only pertains to the question of whether Blumenberg was justified in his critique but it also illuminates a significant characteristic of Löwith's account, namely the supposedly 'ahistorical' nature of his theory. Arguably, the juristic framework of (il)legitimacy that Blumenberg introduces refers to states of affairs that can

153 Blumenberg (1983) p.28 (emphasis added). Blumenberg did not revise his interpretation of Löwith in this respect, as this quotation demonstrates. Although he did acknowledge in his later version of *Legitimacy* that Löwith favors the Greek worldview instead of the Christian one – writing that Löwith supposedly promotes "a renaissance of cyclical cosmology" – Blumenberg continued to regard *Meaning in History* as an example of the secularization theorem. It is likely that Blumenberg modified his reading of Löwith in response to criticism of Zabel (1968), who presents him as a Nietzschean *Verfallshistoriker*. Cf. Ruh (1980) pp.71-72. Flasch (2017, pp.475-477) appears to concur with Blumenberg's revised reading of Löwith. In a letter to Schmitt, Blumenberg (2007, pp.134-135) complained that Löwith's review was based on the 1962 lecture rather than on the 1966 *Legitimität*.

154 Cf. Löwith (1949) pp.113-114: "The crux of the modern religion of progress is not, as has been suggested, that it forgot the spiritual 'center' of its secular 'applications' but that it applied an idea of progress which is antireligious and anti-Christian both by implication and by consequence."

155 Löwith (1949) pp.89–90, 189.

only be called historical.¹⁵⁶ It either refers to (un)rightful ownership and to (il)legitimate transfer of the ‘possession’ in question or to the legitimacy of historical acts as reactions to earlier provocations; that is to say, ‘legitimacy’ refers to historical states or developments.¹⁵⁷ This is however not what Löwith – who is described as an antihistoricist – intends to do according to my reading. To avoid self-contradiction, he needs to steer clear of the impression that he criticizes modern historical consciousness on the basis of a norm that is itself historical. It is for that reason that he requires an ahistorical benchmark – the ‘faith-reason antithesis’ – as a basis for critique. One can imagine that he thus seeks to escape the criticism leveled at him several times, namely, that he remains somehow indebted to the historical consciousness that he seeks to reject.¹⁵⁸ This reading of Löwith’s theory fits well with the objection that he raised in some of his minor writings against Hans-Georg Gadamer and historicism in general, which is that ‘truth’ is independent of its historical expression.¹⁵⁹ In that sense, it can be surmised that, to Löwith, modernity is not illegitimate but simply erroneous – an ahistorical, logical category. It appears that Blumenberg did not recognize this tenet of Löwith’s theory, perhaps due to the ambiguous nature of *Meaning in History*. Instead, Löwith is portrayed as a simple *Verfallshistoriker*, and many commentators apparently did not see a reason to look behind the straw man that they were presented with.

Three things need to be addressed before I turn to what the consequences are of this rebuttal for the resulting appraisal of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate. First, we must recognize how aforementioned confusions and misinterpretations have left their mark on the debate and on its reception, and that part of this misunderstanding can be reduced to confusion over form and substance. That is, since Blumenberg associated secularization solely with substantialism, he could only conceive of it in terms of a substantive continuity, thus ignoring the fact that secularization could also be held to imply a formal continuity and a substantive discontinuity, as one actually finds in Löwith’s account.¹⁶⁰ But Löwith in turn failed to see that Blumenberg wielded a purely substantialistic definition of secularization, which explains why – instead of attacking this definition and elaborating on his own definition that *would* allow for substantive discontinuity – he merely asked in his review of *Legitimacy*, rather naively, what secularization could be other than the immanentization of something originally transcendent.¹⁶¹

Second, even though Löwith avoids the dubious assumptions of the secularization theorem, his own argument is not beyond reproach.¹⁶² However, it has become clear that a critique of his account of secularization does not endanger his normative claim, because the former only describes how the modern idea of progress came to be, not why it should be rejected. If it can indeed be proved that modern progress originated independently from Christianity,

156 Incidentally, this notion that ‘legitimacy’ is a category that refers to historical continuity can be found in Schmitt’s critique of Blumenberg, in *Political Theology II* (2014) pp.116–20.

157 In addition, the more ‘biological’ metaphor of (il)legitimate offspring – modernity as a “bastard child” of Christianity – also relies on a historical mode of thought that Löwith (1968, p.459) rejects in his review.

158 Habermas (1983) p.86; Riesterer (1969) p.78. Van der Elst (2004, pp.139-140) deals with this question in more detail.

159 Löwith (1952). On the Gadamer-Löwith debate, which centered on the viability of Löwith’s positive “antihistoricism,” see Gadamer (2013, pp.528-567); and Löwith (1966b, pp. 215-218).

160 Löwith (1949) pp.113–14, 155–56, 197; *ibid.* (1968) p.456.

161 Löwith (1968) p.456.

162 For a critical reflection on Löwith see, e.g., Kroll (2010). Another example is Ruh (1980, p.248) who criticizes Löwith’s concept of secularization for being too broad and imprecise. On the other hand Ruh (pp.258-259) argues that Löwith cannot account for the enormous difference he asserts between eschatology and modern progress, which would imply that the continuity between these two phenomena, on which *Meaning in History* hinges, can only be razor-thin.

as Blumenberg intends, then this would arguably matter little to Löwith's normative claim because it rests on philosophical *a priori*s, which – although they evidently remain disputable – are immune to easy refutations.

Third, regardless of Blumenberg's inability to refute Löwith's theory, this does not imply that the connection between Löwith and the *Verfallsgeschichten* of the secularization theorem is simply chimerical. That is, although Löwith's own theory cannot be reduced to a quasi-theological narrative of alienation from paradise, it is not difficult to see why his theory – or rather, the formula that others extracted from it – lends itself for such appropriations. Given the dual definition of *Schuld* as guilt/debt it can be argued that while secularization cannot be seen to function as a category of *guilt* in Löwith's account, he does argue for a certain 'indebtedness' in a way that sometimes approximates the readings of his critics.¹⁶³ And even if it is acknowledged, in line with my reconstruction, that this indication of indebtedness is not the principal normative basis for Löwith's critique of modernity, it must still be conceded that it is not purely 'neutral', either. On occasion one can find in *Meaning in History* – especially in the chapter on Marx – a tendency to revel in the observation that something seemingly anti-Christian has remained indebted to Christianity all along, though the implications of this assertion of indebtedness remain unclear.¹⁶⁴

Agreements and Disagreements: Suggestions from Secondary Literature

To understand how the Löwith-Blumenberg debate should be interpreted if it is indeed not a question of a decisive refutation of one theory by another, I turn to those scholars who *have* noticed the discrepancy between Löwith's own account and Blumenberg's portrayal of him. Evidently, one's appraisal of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate in general depends on one's interpretation of Löwith's account and concomitantly on how one reads Blumenberg's criticism. Even if one agrees on the assumption that Blumenberg misrepresents Löwith, one could still draw different conclusions from this. In this respect, I show that because aforementioned scholars ignore the central claim of Löwith's narrative, they display a tendency of reconciling the positions of Blumenberg and Löwith, whereas from my analysis there emerges a picture of a fundamental divide between the two views.

Several scholars who have proved themselves more observant as to certain discrepancies between Blumenberg's depiction and Löwith's own account agree that the former's main criticism, substantialism, is unjustified. It has been acknowledged by Liebsch that, contrary to Blumenberg's claims, one cannot find a substantialist definition of secularization in Löwith. Wetz agrees that Löwith "begreift *mitnichten* die neuzeitliche Geschichtsphilosophie als eine bloße Umformung der heilsgeschichtlichen Substanz des Mittelalters", and concurs that he was focused on the conditions of possibility of modern thought.¹⁶⁵ In this vein, scholars such as Babík note that Löwith's account of secularization should be seen more in terms of a formal than a substantive continuity. Indeed, "[Löwith] does not contend that the transcendental *civitas Dei* made it across the epochal break, only that the *eschaton* did: the habit of comprehending history in terms of an eschatological structure."¹⁶⁶

163 In this observation I am 'indebted' to an anonymous reviewer of my paper in *New German Critique* (Griffioen, 2019), who remarked that even though the 'guilt' accusation has been refuted, there remains an element of 'indebtedness' in Löwith's theory that is not completely neutral in a normative sense.

164 Ruh (1980) pp.242-245.

165 Liebsch (1995) pp.70-71; Wetz (1993) p.47 (emphasis added).

166 Babík (2006) p.393.

It appears that most commentators who criticize Blumenberg's portrayal of Löwith do so to argue for some sort of reconciliation between the two positions. This is possible if one focuses solely on Löwith's descriptive account of secularization, given that it indeed asserts a substantive discontinuity and a formal continuity between Christianity and modernity, similar to Blumenberg's own theory. Babík, Kroll, and Marquard, for instance, point out that both accounts narrate how the modern idea of progress relates to Christian eschatological thought, either in terms of a projection of the scheme of *Heilsgeschehen* onto *Weltgeschichte* or as the formulation of a modern answer to a medieval problem.¹⁶⁷ With regard to Löwith's notion of Christianity providing the precondition for modernity, Kroll states that "to say that Biblical eschatology opened a new perspective is reconcilable with claims stopping short of positing a straightforward genetic derivation [substantialism]; reconcilable, even, with Blumenberg's theory of a functional substitution of eschatology by 'progress.'"¹⁶⁸ To this, one could add that Löwith himself even suggests a functional substitution himself in the aforementioned remarks that "man will seek to *replace* providence" or that "progress had to assume the *function* of providence."¹⁶⁹

The reconcilability between Löwith's and Blumenberg's accounts extends to what we might distinguish as a normative level, especially in their shared aversion to the 'philosophy of history'. Both Löwith and Blumenberg object to the exaltation of the idea of 'progress' to the totality of history, visible in philosophies of history in which a secular 'salvation' is expected to occur within history.¹⁷⁰ Pippin, for instance, states that Blumenberg "agrees with a good deal" of what Löwith argues:

For all his criticism, he agrees that the modern view of progress as the 'significance' of history as a whole is a remnant of sorts of the premodern tradition, and is an inappropriate, even illegitimate one, one that cannot trace its parentage to modernity itself.¹⁷¹

This aversion to immanentized eschatology – which contains a violent potential toward everything that obstructs the future fulfillment – points to a shared fear of totalitarianism, as Jeffrey Barash suggests, but also to a joint aversion to Christianity, as Kroll argues.¹⁷² Indeed, both Löwith's and Blumenberg's accounts might be construed as attempts to 'overcome' a residue of Christianity: the hopeful expectation of salvation, either within or without history.¹⁷³

Valuable points are made by aforementioned commentators, especially insofar as they demonstrate that Löwith's and Blumenberg's narratives can potentially be reconciled on a descriptive level, and that Löwith's account has not been 'disproved' as univocally as Blumenberg's followers seem to believe. However, these mitigations appear to occur in light of a regrettable tendency, which is a failure to do full justice to the normative core of Löwith's standpoint – namely, the decisive rejection of modernity due to its erroneous nature in light of faith and reason. They thereby neglect the impossibility of reconciling Löwith and Blumenberg on a deeper, normative level, and subsequently ignore the substantial differences between the two.

167 Kroll (2010) p.111; Babík (2006) p.393; Marquard (1982) p.17. As mentioned, Marquard (1983, p.79) even states that the secularization controversy between Löwith and Blumenberg is "inszeniert", covering up their "grundsätzlichen Positionsidentität".

168 Kroll (2010) p.111. Cf. Ruh (1980) pp.251-254, 265-266.

169 Löwith (1949) pp.111, 60 respectively (emphasis added).

170 Liebsch (1995) pp.70–71 fn.162; Kroll (2010) p.157; Pippin (1987) p.541; Ifergan (1990) p.168.

171 Pippin (1987) p.541.

172 Barash (1998) p.70; Kroll (2010) p.157. Flasch (2017, p.475) claims in this respect that Löwith's secularization theory only served the purpose of showing the illusory nature of theologically inspired projections.

173 Marquard (1983) p.79.

Moreover, these attempts at reconciliation usually mean that one position is curtailed to fall in line with the other. It is implied, especially by Kroll and Robert Buch, that while Löwith can be read in line with Blumenberg, the latter's argument should be seen as a superior version of the former's, not least because of the weak points in *Meaning in History* that Blumenberg's critique has uncovered.¹⁷⁴ Hence, among these scholars there is, with few reservations, an inclination to agree with the gist of Blumenberg's criticism, combined with a readiness to evaluate Löwith's standpoint favorably only when and insofar as it can be seen as compatible with the former's.¹⁷⁵

My reconstruction of Löwith's account, however, supports a different appraisal of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate. Although there are similarities on a descriptive level, Löwith's and Blumenberg's theories diverge significantly on a normative level. This places the debate in a different light: it shows that it does not boil down to a definite refutation of an inferior theory by a superior one, nor, for that matter, is it merely a concocted disagreement that conceals deeper similarities between the two. Rather, the debate should be seen as a conflict between two fundamentally incompatible normative standpoints. The fact that both Löwith and Blumenberg criticize the philosophy of history should thus be considered in view of the different grounds from which they mount this criticism: respectively, a condemnation of 'historical consciousness' in general or a defense of modernity and a modest idea of progress.

In sum: if substantialism, expropriation, or a preoccupation with (il)legitimacy cannot be found in Löwith's theory it can be conceded that he is not a secularization theorist, even when one focuses solely on his first claim, concerning secularization, as most scholars do. However, this does not imply that the opposition between the two is merely apparent. The underlying difference between them only comes into view clearly when accounting for Löwith's second claim, the Athens-Jerusalem antithesis, which provides the normative ground for the central point of *Meaning in History*: the critique of modernity's indecisiveness vis-à-vis faith and reason. This forms a stark contrast to Blumenberg's defense of modernity in terms of 'possible progress' within the historical realm. In the following section we discover that each theory is based on incompatible presuppositions concerning the place of humanity in the universe, and that it is in light of this deeper level of disagreement that the Löwith-Blumenberg polemic must be understood.

Underlying Differences in the Philosophies of Löwith and Blumenberg

Christianity and History

The more fundamental divergence between the outlooks of Löwith and Blumenberg comes clearer into view when surveying their other writings and, more specifically, their different

174 Buch (2012) pp.353-356. Kroll (2010, pp.154, 169, 241) argues that Löwith's and Blumenberg's stories are not so dissimilar once they are compared with Schmitt, and in arguing this case, he sometimes underemphasizes the differences between Löwith and Blumenberg over against Schmitt, who is portrayed as the 'real' adversary of both (pp.17-20, 158, 237). Whether or not this assertion – that the difference between Schmitt and Löwith/Blumenberg is greater or deeper than the difference between Löwith and Blumenberg – is true, Kroll appears to be slightly inconsistent in his reading of Löwith. Whereas at first he is critical of Blumenberg's interpretation of Löwith, later he appears to accept the former's substantialist-juridical reading (pp.154, 169, 241) without explicit reservations. In both cases, however, one receives the impression that Löwith's and Blumenberg's theories are very much alike but that Blumenberg's is simply a superior version of a similar argument (pp.17, 154-157).

175 See e.g.: Pippin (1987); Buch (2012); Kroll (2010). Incidentally, Marquard (1982, pp.15-18) at first tries to write Blumenberg in line with Löwith, whereas in later instances (1983; 1984) he tends towards the opposite route of accommodating the latter's to the former's position.

assessments in these texts of the prominent themes that reoccur. A broader (albeit necessarily cursory) view that looks beyond the works that are central in this debate, *Meaning in History* and *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, will help uncover the deeper differences that can become obscured by a sole focus on superficial misunderstandings or overlapping aversions. On the one hand, commentators such as Marquard, Kroll, Pippin, Babik and Ifergan are correct in suggesting that there are points of agreement between Löwith and Blumenberg – in that they opt against Christian faith in transcendence and reject any attempt at immanentizing eschatology in history – but on the other hand it is important not to exaggerate this area of overlap and acknowledge the wide disparity between the outlooks that underlie them. In order to understand this disparity I first zoom in on Löwith's and Blumenberg's – at first glance seemingly similar – views on Christianity and speculative philosophy of history. I subsequently explain how the dissimilarities that emerge relate to their different attitudes towards the realm of history. I then return to their different definitions and evaluations of modernity, after which I finally disclose their 'philosophical anthropologies', i.e., their fundamental assumptions on humanity and nature.

Several commentators, such as Hermann Zabel and Ulrich Ruh, but also Blumenberg himself, have noted that Löwith's negative position on Christianity has been overshadowed by the positive reception of his *Meaning in History* by theologians. Zabel, Ruh and Blumenberg associate the actual intention behind Löwith's critique of modernity with the promotion of a Nietzschean "renaissance" of Antiquity; of finally overcoming all residues of the Christian past in favor of a more thorough godlessness.¹⁷⁶ Evidently, this would bring the position of Löwith closer to that of Blumenberg, as Kroll has remarked.¹⁷⁷ However, my reconstruction of Löwith's thesis indicates that while it is true that he opts against 'faith' in favor of 'reason' this does not entail that he looks upon 'faith' altogether negatively. Instead, his evaluation of Christianity is more ambivalent.

From his other works, such as his famous *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (1941), his essay *Wissen, Glaube und Skepsis* (1958), and his minor writings on history, modernity and religion (some of which are collected in his 1960 *Gesammelte Abhandlungen: zur Kritik der geschichtlichen Existenz* and his 1965 *Vorträge und Abhandlungen: zur Kritik der christlichen Überlieferung*), we can surmise that Löwith envisions Christianity in Augustinian terms, reminiscent perhaps of the theology of Karl Barth, in a way that emphasizes the essential 'unworldliness' of faith and the radical 'otherness' of transcendence.¹⁷⁸ The relation between faith and the world is for Löwith encapsulated in the Paulinian formula according to which "die Weisheit dieser Welt eine Torheit vor Gott ist" and vice versa.¹⁷⁹ Hence, any attempt at synthesizing Christianity with bourgeois culture or 'the world' in general is doomed to fail, as Löwith shows in *From Hegel to Nietzsche*. Here he describes the collapse of the bourgeois-Christian synthesis, hypostasized in Hegel's philosophy, that resulted in the antithesis between Kierkegaard's spiritualism and Marx' materialism, and which eventually lead to the nihilism of Nietzsche.¹⁸⁰ From these various writings it becomes clear that Löwith does not place the blame on 'pure' Christian faith for its secularization into modern "irreligions of progress" but on individuals who could not accept that

176 Ruh (1980) pp.237-238, 245; Zabel (1968) pp.225-243. Blumenberg (1983, p.28) concurs with Zabel that Löwith advocates a Nietzschean "renaissance of cyclical cosmology". Cf. Habermas (2019) pp.55-56.

177 Kroll (2010) pp.156-157.

178 Timm (1967) pp.587-590. Cf. Löwith (1966) pp.440-443; *ibid.* (1995) pp.75-76. The first book is translated as *From Hegel to Nietzsche* (1967).

179 Löwith (1958) p.11. Cf. *ibid.* (1994) p.164; Timm (1967) pp.575-576. This refers to a Bible passage from 1 Corinthians 3: 19.

180 Löwith (1967) pp.68-69, 135, 150.

its basic message is a “*scandalon*” to the world, a “foolish”, unsubstantiated hope for things unseen, casting the believer irrevocably outside of rational, worldly discourse.¹⁸¹ In the conclusion of *Hegel to Nietzsche*, Löwith states that there is a vast “abyss” between the bourgeois, post-Christian world (that at the time of writing had plunged itself into total warfare and mass destruction), and the original Christian message. He adds: “This does not mean that a faith which once conquered the world perishes with its last secular manifestations. For how should the Christian pilgrimage *in hoc saeculo* ever become homeless in the land where it has never been at home?”¹⁸²

Briefly put, in Löwith’s oeuvre Christianity is usually presented negatively in comparison to the classical Greek outlook due to the former’s destruction of the idea of a cosmic order, its introduction of anthropocentrism and its departure from the contemplative ideal of ancient philosophy, whereas both poles are presented positively in comparison to the confused nature of modern thought.¹⁸³ In his ‘Das Verhängnis des Fortschritts’ lecture, Löwith suggests that even though Christianity introduced the detrimental idea that nature is created for humanity’s use, at least here the individual was still given a sense of proportionality vis-à-vis a divine plan and the order of creation, which functioned as a necessary safeguard against the unbridled, ‘fateful’ will to ‘progress’ that followed.¹⁸⁴

It is equally unlikely that Löwith, as Zabel and Blumenberg suggest, envisions a ‘Nietzschean renaissance’ once the Christian ‘substance’ on which modernity draws has been depleted.¹⁸⁵ Not only do Zabel and other commentators thereby fail to take Löwith’s critique of Nietzsche seriously – which boils down to the objection that given Nietzsche’s nihilism, decisionism and emphasis on will, he functions more as an anti- or post-Christian thinker than as a genuine advocate of Stoic-Epicurean temperance and resignation – but they also ignore an implication of his anti-historicism, which is that he cannot promote *any* historical ‘return’ to a paradise lost or a historical ‘overcoming’ towards a grandiose future.¹⁸⁶ Löwith’s aversion to modern philosophy of history – progressive, retrogressive or cyclical – stems from his skeptic belief that history is nothing but a meaningless flux. It is true that, on occasion, he appears to advocate a cyclical conception of history – which could in theory involve such ‘returns’ – but he distinguishes himself from thinkers such as Spengler or Nietzsche by abstaining from any personal investment whatsoever (e.g., in terms of actively *willing* the *Untergang des Abendlandes*) in such a historical movement.¹⁸⁷ In short, contrary to Spengler, Löwith does not expect anything from history, let alone a political ‘revival’; the most important aspect of his attitude towards history is that he believes it to be insignificant vis-à-vis his ideal of contemplative reason.¹⁸⁸ For instance, in his ‘Vermittlung und Unmittelbarkeit’, he argues (against

181 Löwith (1958) p.6; *ibid.* (1949) p.212. See his lecture on the impossibility of the ‘Christian gentleman’ (1948, pp.163-170). In the afterword of his *My Life in Germany* (1994, p.164) Löwith comments on a misunderstanding surrounding his *Meaning in History*, that its “intention was often misinterpreted as a positive Christian one because it seemed to conform to particular tendencies in Protestant theology. I hope I have remedied this misunderstanding through my short book on *Wissen, Glaube und Skepsis* ... , and to be in agreement with the theologians [only] to the extent that the wisdom of this world would pass as a folly in the eyes of God.”

182 Löwith (1967) p.358.

183 E.g.: Löwith (1960) pp.254-255; *ibid.* (1952) p.322; (1966) p.436.

184 Löwith (1964) pp.27-29; *ibid.* (1952) p.322; (1966) p.441. On the issue of “Weltverlust” due to Christian anthropocentrism, see the final half of his *Wissen, Glaube und Skepsis* (1958). Cf. Timm (1967) p.593.

185 Zabel (1968) p.243; Ruh (1980) p.238; Blumenberg (1983) p.28.

186 Löwith (1966b) p.217; *ibid.* (1952) p.317. In Löwith’s *Nietzsches Philosophie und der ewigen Wiederkehr des Gleichen* (1956b, e.g. pp.125-126) this is made especially clear.

187 Löwith (1949) pp.10-14.

188 Cf. Löwith (1960).

Gadamer) that the truth of the classical Greek outlook is something that can be grasped *at any time* through critical, individual reflection. It does not require a collective-historical movement forward or backward, on the contrary.¹⁸⁹ The contemplative insight that Löwith strives for, the “Einsicht in das, was ist – nicht jetzt und nicht künftig, sondern immer – ist nicht geschichtlich auf die griechische Philosophie beschränkt”.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, examples abound in his writings of figures – e.g., Vico, Goethe, Burckhardt, Overbeck – who have contemplated timeless truths without first requiring a historical development to prepare the conditions in which these truths can be grasped, as Comte, Hegel and Dilthey would suggest as a necessary precondition.

Blumenberg’s evaluation of Christianity is very different from Löwith’s. Whereas *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* tends to zoom in on the presumably inherent conceptual instability of the Christian worldview, his later works further expound on what is the underlying reason for Blumenberg’s unfavorable appraisal of Christianity: its ‘theological absolutism’. This forms an indictment of all varieties of monotheism. The implication is that the very presupposition of an omnipotent divinity – regardless of whether it chooses to restrict itself (e.g., *potentia ordinata*) – is essentially inimical to human self-preservation and freedom from infringement by external forces, since it renders everything contingent and fundamentally uncertain. Whereas Löwith regards the idea of a divine plan as a positive restriction of an otherwise boundless human will – even though it is outweighed by the idea of an immutable cosmos – Blumenberg instead views the idea of a divine will as an impossible imposition on human existence. Seen in this light it becomes clear that, to Blumenberg, the destruction of the originally Greek idea of an immutable cosmic order by late-medieval thought is not a historical accident but the only possible, if belated, outcome of theological absolutism. It is in this vein that self-assertion forms a necessary response to the existential anxiety that theological absolutism, in its late-medieval manifestation, has created.¹⁹¹ This means that the path Löwith favors is no longer an option: “[a]fter the classical philosophy of the Greeks, the postulate of ataraxia was still possible, whereas after the theological absolutism of the Middle Ages, *self-assertion* had to be implication of any philosophical system.”¹⁹² Jacob Taubes, a close colleague and critic of Blumenberg, summarized the latter’s ideas on theology as follows:

Er steigert die Allmacht Gottes zu einem absoluten Prinzip, so daß der Mensch sich nur in der Negation dieser allmächtigen Gottes behaupten kann. Aus der Negation eines molochitischen Gottes gewinnt Blumenberg auch historisch und systematisch die Legitimität einer atheistischen Neuzeit.¹⁹³

After *Legitimacy*, Blumenberg would situate his aversion to theological absolutism in a broader philosophical framework, one that is characterized by a resolute “philosophical anti-absolutism”.¹⁹⁴ His extensive lecture ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkunspotential des Mythos’ (1971) and the book that followed from it, *Arbeit am Mythos* (1979), introduces the concept of “the absolutism of reality”, a perennial object of human existential fear of which theological

189 Löwith (1966b) p.185; *ibid.* (1952) p.311.

190 Löwith (1960) p.207.

191 Marquard (2016).

192 Blumenberg (1983) pp.151-152.

193 Taubes in: Blumenberg (1971) p.539.

194 Savage (2010) p.223; Marquard (2016) pp.20-22.

absolutism comes to be seen as but one manifestation.¹⁹⁵ Blumenberg suggests that every significant cultural endeavor forms a response to the challenge that the absolutism of reality poses. Fundamentally, this occurs in two directions: one is the attempt at reiterating the absolute in unified form – be it within the confounds of human reason and imagination, by representing it in a theological or philosophical system – and the other is the attempt at ‘dissipating’ or ‘disintegrating’ it into a plurality, namely through myth and art, thus rendering it less frightful.¹⁹⁶ In historical-religious terms, these two directions are represented by monotheism and polytheism. Blumenberg writes in a short essay titled ‘Politische Theologie III’ that while the pagan pantheon is characterized by a liberating “Dissipation des Absoluten”, the “exotische Theologie” of monotheism however undoes polytheism’s positive effects in seeking to re-present “das Absolute in Reinkultur”, in unified form. This meant a rejection of the “Gewalteinteilung im Pantheon” in favor of God’s sovereign rule.¹⁹⁷ Monotheism tries to reiterate the “höchste Ernst der grauer Vorzeit” instead of neutralizing it through “ein freies Spiel der Phantasie” in myths and poetry, thus relinquishing the typical “Liberalität der Mythologie”.¹⁹⁸ Simply formulated, Blumenberg prefers the polytheistic solution to the problem of the absolutism of reality because it is better able to “unburden” humans from the fear and existential uncertainty this original condition engenders, whereas monotheism simply reintroduces the initial problem in sublimated form.¹⁹⁹

Despite the aversion of both authors to speculative philosophy of history, Blumenberg’s conception and evaluation of the historical realm stands in stark contrast to Löwith’s. Robert Savage argues that “Blumenberg marks his own position by vindicating the ‘fallen’ or ‘inessential’ realm of history against those who would transcend it in either direction”, either towards the cosmos, as Löwith does, or towards ‘Being’ or transcendence. This vindication of the “inessential” realm of history is, as Savage suggests, a function of his “philosophical anti-absolutism”.²⁰⁰ Blumenberg is not a straightforward ‘historicist’ in the hermeneutical school of, e.g., Dilthey and Gadamer; rather than affirming historicity as such, Blumenberg – motivated by his more universalist philosophical anthropology – defends the practical *right* of “modern man” to make his own history.²⁰¹ He presents modernity as a project of human self-assertion, expressed in the idea of “possible” or “infinite progress”. According to Wallace, Blumenberg aims to “defend the *possibility* of man making history more bearable for himself”; progress is not a given but an existential commitment and responsibility.²⁰² The modern idea that “man makes history”, as Blumenberg writes in a paper titled ‘An Anthropological Approach to Rhetoric’, “is a prospect on which, after detours through philosophy of history, the modern age has wagered.” In the Modern Age, “man” has legitimately reoccupied the position of “the subject of history”, and with it he claimed the right to shape his own fate, be it “under

195 English version: *Work on Myth* (1985). The phrase absolutism of reality is not used explicitly in Blumenberg’s ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff’, but the underlying theme of absolutism versus attempts at “unburdening” (*Entlastung*) is already there (1971, pp.16-28).

196 Blumenberg (1971) p.15; *ibid.* (1985) pp.3-32.

197 Blumenberg-Schmitt (2007) p.169

198 Blumenberg (1971) pp.15, 21.

199 Marquard (1991, pp.8-25) has further thematized this concept of ‘unburdening’. He (2016, p.20) formulates the *Grundgedanke* of Blumenberg’s philosophy as “der Entlastung vom Absoluten”.

200 Savage (2010) p.141.

201 Hudson (1993); Ingram (1990); Blumenberg (1987).

202 Wallace (1981) p.79 (emphasis added).

circumstances ... given and transmitted from the past”.²⁰³ Speculative philosophy of history hence not only falters because it answers the wrong question – namely a medieval-Christian (“what is the ultimate goal of history”) rather than a perennial one (“who is the subject of history”) – but it is also rejected by Blumenberg because it fails to make “history humanly bearable”. The modest idea of infinite progress is preferable to the speculative idea of a final goal of history because

the idea of infinite progress ... has a safeguarding function for the actual individual and for each generation in history. If there were an immanent final goal of history, then those who believe they know it and claim to promote its attainment would be legitimized in using all the others who do not know it and cannot promote it as mere means. Infinite progress does make each present relative to its future, but at the same time *it renders every absolute claim relative*.²⁰⁴

Promethean Modernity and Philosophical Anthropology

Whereas Blumenberg’s defense of modernity in *Legitimacy* is mounted from a ‘historical’ perspective, it is closely connected with the more universalist philosophical anthropology that he developed in his other works, such as in the aforementioned *Work on Myth*, in his early work *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie* (1960), as well as in various minor writings.²⁰⁵ In order to understand the root of the differences between Löwith and Blumenberg we must zoom in on this level. A study such as *Work on Myth* builds on what he calls elsewhere a ‘Theory of Nonconceptuality’.²⁰⁶ This theory contends that *myths* and *metaphors* – in other words, linguistic-cultural templates – predetermine human experience and cognition, but that they can also change throughout the history of their usage. Cultural templates such as “absolute metaphors” assumedly operate as irreducible “pre-theoretical” and pre-empirical projections or frameworks of meaning that compensate for humanity’s lack of a direct access to the natural world.²⁰⁷ Such templates however not only compensate for an *epistemic* deficiency – our incapability to access reality directly – but they also compensate for an *existential* human deficiency, that is, a “lack of fit with [the] world” or a failure to coincide with one’s natural *Umwelt*.²⁰⁸ In ‘Anthropological Approach to Rhetoric’, for example, Blumenberg invokes the philosophical anthropology of Ernst Cassirer and its notion of the human as a “*animal symbolicum*” as well as that of Arnold Gehlen, which portrays the human as a “Mängelwesen”, a “creature of deficiency”.²⁰⁹ Blumenberg holds that humans cannot live of natural instincts: they fail to adopt to their surroundings and are unable to cope with the hostility of nature, the latter of which is

203 Blumenberg (1987) pp.451-452. The final part of the quotation is Blumenberg’s citation of Marx. We can now see how Blumenberg distinguishes legitimate reoccupations from illegitimate ones on the basis of his philosophical anthropology: the first meets genuine human needs (self-preservation, unburdening), whereas the latter only answers epoch-specific questions. Cf. Palti (2010, p.206): this is a ‘rhetorical’ reoccupation rather a metaphysical one.

204 Blumenberg (1983) p.35 (emphasis added). Cf. *ibid.* (2010) pp.44-56.

205 *Paradigmen* is translated as *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (2010b). See also: Blumenberg, ‘Anthropological Approach to Rhetoric’ (1987); *ibid.*, ‘Theory of Nonconceptuality’, in: *Shipwreck with Spectator* (1997); *Care Crosses the River* (2010); *Beschreibung des Menschen* (2014).

206 Blumenberg (1997) pp.81-102.

207 *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (Blumenberg, 2010b) deals with “absolute metaphors”. See also: Blumenberg (1997) pp.81-102; *ibid.* (1987). Cf. Palti (2010).

208 Savage (2010) p.144.

209 Blumenberg (1987) pp.430, 438-439.

expressed by “the absolutism of reality”.²¹⁰ This deficiency forms the basis of ‘culture’. That is, by failing to belong to a pre-given world, humans *construct* their own ‘world’ to function as a buffer between them and a hostile and inaccessible outside reality.²¹¹ They thus attempt to leave the “*absolute Feindlichkeit der Natur*” behind by retreating in an artificial world of human culture.²¹²

The latter half of *Work on Myth* is devoted to the figure of Prometheus and the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of this myth in modern history. Similar to *Shipwreck with Spectator* – which focusses on the history of this image of seafaring and spectatorship – Blumenberg emphasizes the broad range of applicability that the history of this template demonstrates, as it is adopted by (e.g.) Schelling, Goethe, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. The young Goethe, for instance, “identifies with Prometheus as the aesthetic demiurge and rebel against the Olympian father”, whereas Marx in *Das Kapital* depicts him as “the prefiguration of the proletariat, chained by a law of nature to the naked rock of capitalist production”.²¹³ However, regardless of the discontinuities in the history of its use – as well as the problems and ambiguities each adoption gives rise to, which Blumenberg also emphasizes – it can be surmised from *Work on Myth* that throughout its history, the myth of Prometheus is predominantly used as a vehicle to promote human self-assertion against the principle of divine sovereignty. It is in this sense that Gregor Campbell asserts that in Blumenberg’s philosophical defense of modernity, Prometheus occupies a central place: “Blumenberg focuses on the Prometheus myth as the myth of modernity itself, as a revolt against the gods in the name of human civilization.” Tying the broader thematic of *Work on Myth* to that of *Legitimacy*, Campbell states that this myth “offers a legitimizing narrative for human self-assertion in a world previously occupied by gods and nature.” In short:

The absolutism of the gods creates a situation of dependency for both man and nature, while the Promethean revolt of man against this dependency liberates man to begin the task of turning nature into technology and suggests the social construction of reality as the foundation of infinite progress and self-making. Instrumental reason and myth equally free us from what Blumenberg calls the ‘absolutism of reality’.²¹⁴

Not only does Blumenberg’s defense of modernity presuppose an underlying philosophical anthropology, so does Löwith’s critique of modernity – hence it is on this level where the two philosophers fundamentally diverge.²¹⁵ Significantly, Löwith also adopts the concept of the *Mängelwesen* in order to philosophize on the relation between humanity and nature, but he uses it to advance in a different direction. For instance, in his *Gesammelte Abhandlungen: zur Kritik der geschichtlichen Existenz* (1960) Löwith writes that the human is an “unfestgestelltes Tier” or “Mangelwesen” that lacks both “tierischer Selbstgenügsamkeit und göttlicher Vollkommenheit”.²¹⁶ Humanity cannot directly coincide with nature as other animals do, but Löwith emphasizes – more than Blumenberg – that it also remains inextricably bound to it. It is suggested that this condition forms both a blessing and a curse: the “*Offenständigkeit*” of the human “*Weltverhaltens*” (as opposed to the “*Geschlossenheit tierischer Umweltverhaftung*”)

210 Blumenberg (1985) pp.3-32.

211 Blumenberg (1987) pp.429-456; *ibid.* (1985) pp.3-16.

212 Blumenberg-Schmitt (2007) p.171 (emphasis added).

213 Blumenberg (1985) pp.584, 591.

214 Campbell (1991) p.63. Cf. Blumenberg (1985) pp.30-31.

215 Cf. Hudson (1993) p.111; Marquard (1982) p.135.

216 Löwith (1960) p.188.

enables the human individual ataraxic freedom as a spectator of the cosmic order, but the ill-fitting place humanity occupies in nature can also lead to an attempt at withdrawal from nature, and the hypostatization of ‘the human world’ (e.g., the realm of history) as if it is the *only* world.²¹⁷ Evidently, Löwith asserts that the latter choice is the wrong one, and that the continuous failure to recognize this is responsible for most (if not all) of humanity’s woes. In short, the *pointe* of Löwith’s philosophical anthropology is that it is anti-anthropocentric: he claims that we should regain a sense of *proportionality*, resituate the human world in the natural world and human history in ‘natural history’.²¹⁸ Whereas Blumenberg promotes a withdrawal into the artificial cave of culture, to hide from the absolutism of reality and the “absolute Feindlichkeit der Natur”, Löwith rather insists that we do the opposite:²¹⁹

Sobald man aber seine vier Wände und seinen Wohnort und das geschichtliche Land und Volk, zu dem man zufällig gehört, verläßt und aus der Zivilisation des *mondo civile* heraustritt, erschließt sich möglicherweise auch dem heutigen Höhlenbewohner der geschichtlichen Welt die elementare Gewalt und die eintönige Große der Welt, die nicht die unsere ist und die nicht auf uns als ihr ‘Umwillen’ verweist, sondern nur auf sich selbst.²²⁰

Löwith suggests that humankind should reorientate itself towards nature, even if – or *especially because* – it will then discover the indifferent self-sufficiency of the natural world vis-à-vis human efforts.

In the lecture ‘Das Verhängnis des Fortschritts’ Löwith also identifies modernity with the figure of Prometheus, similar to Blumenberg.²²¹ As has become evident at this stage, Löwith however evaluates this identification very differently. It is suggested that the modern will to subjugate and conquer nature – itself a derivative of the Christian idea of creation – becomes ‘progressively’ unchecked, destructive and ultimately ‘fatal’, as it leads to the threat of the “Atom-Zeitalter”.²²² Löwith argues that modern thought thereby ignores the lesson enclosed in the myth of Prometheus, which is that any human intervention in nature contains inherent dangers that will always return to haunt humanity. Prometheus’ liberation of humans through the gift of fire is paralleled by his enchainment, just as we are “sowohl *befreit* wie *gefesselt* durch

217 Löwith (1960) p.205; on theoria as ataraxic freedom: pp.228-255; on the individual as “Zuschauer” of a cosmic “Schauspiels”: p.247.

218 Löwith (1960) p.243: he advocates an “exzentrische Betrachtung der Welt, worin der Mensch kein Mittelpunkt ist”. Cf. *ibid.* (1966b) p.216 fn.48. Löwith’s anthropology travels in two directions: on the one hand, he negates the human endeavor as a meaningless, transient affair that pales in comparison to the eternal, immutable cosmos, whereas on the other hand he also wants to positively re-entrench human culture and history in nature. His conception of ‘nature’ is however too imprecise and all-encompassing for his naturalistic anthropology to satisfactorily fulfill the latter function, as Habermas (1983) for instance notes.

219 Cf. Marquard (2016) p.26. The image of the cave and its exit is thematized by Blumenberg himself in his *Höhlenausgänge* (1989). See: Doni (2011); Keller (2015) p.94; Nicholls (2014) pp.195-196.

220 Löwith (1960) p.243. The metaphor of ‘retreat’ can of course also be used differently. Habermas (1983; *ibid.* 2019, p.57) for instance criticizes Löwith for his presumed ‘retreat’ from history into individual solitude. This inadvertently confirms Blumenberg’s usual emphasis on the multi-applicability of metaphors such as the ‘cave’ and the ‘exit’ from it (1989).

221 Cf. Blumenberg-Schmitt (2007) p.132.

222 Löwith (1964) p.27. Lest we regard this as an instance of *Verfallsgeschichte*, Löwith assures us elsewhere (1966, p.441) that the approximation of a global (ecological) catastrophe still does not make history meaningful to faith or reason, adding: “...angenommen, wir brächten es wirklich so weit, die Erde unbewohnbar zu machen, so würde auch dies nur das von den Naturwissenschaften vorgesehene natürliche Ende ihrer Bewohnbarkeit beschleunigen.”

unser Können” and its consequences. As a general indictment of modernity, Löwith claims that the ancient Greeks were right to retribute the “Raub des Himmelsfeuers” with the shackling of Prometheus, sensing that

dieser Raub des Feuers den Menschen mit einer Macht versah, die der stärksten Bindung bedurfte, um den Menschen nicht zum Verderben zu werden. In diesem Mythos bekundet sich eine heilige Scheu vor jedem Eingriff in die Mächte der Natur, in den physischen Kosmos, den die Griechen, im Unterschied zu dem Gemächten des Menschen, als etwas Göttliches empfanden. Jetzt scheint jede Scheu verschwunden zu sein.²²³

In sum: even though the theories of Blumenberg and Löwith may appear to overlap at several points – e.g., their negative appraisal of Christianity and of speculative philosophy of history – I contend that the ultimate reasons that underlie their overlapping judgements stem from widely divergent philosophical anthropologies that form the background against which their respective defense and critique of modernity should be understood. Furthermore, we have seen that these differing backgrounds also determine how Löwith and Blumenberg conceive of concepts such as ‘Christianity’ or ‘philosophy of history’, which makes that these areas of overlap become particularly narrow. This reconstruction indicates that since Blumenberg’s humanist anthropocentrism is diametrically opposed to Löwith’s “*exzentrische*” anthropology it also yields different conceptions of the main purpose of the human endeavor: self-preservation or a ‘selfless’ meditation of the cosmos. Both thinkers had personal experience with war and totalitarianism, but their philosophies traced the underlying crisis of the 20th century back to different causes: either the loss of the ‘human measure’ by a restoration of absolutism (Blumenberg) or the loss of an ‘*extra*-human measure’ that leads to solipsism and the unbridling of humanity’s inner destructiveness (Löwith). Evidently, it can be assumed that a cognition of this deeper level of disagreement obtains a better philosophical understanding of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate than a focus on their mutual misunderstandings and areas of convergence would.

Conclusion

Blumenberg’s critique of the secularization theorem falters when it is directed at Löwith, provided that the latter’s descriptive account of secularization presupposes only a formal continuity in the conflation of sacred and profane history. The most significant error in the commonly accepted view, however, is that Löwith’s descriptive account of secularization is confused with his normative claim. Failing to distinguish these two arguments, Blumenberg reduces *Meaning in History* to the formula ‘modernity is illegitimate because it is secularized’. I have argued instead that secularization does not function as a vehicle of guilt in Löwith’s theory, even though the suggestion of indebtedness survives. The true basis for his normativity lies elsewhere, namely, in his faith-reason antithesis. In this respect, I contend that Löwith’s presupposition of two idealized, ahistorical norms may very well be contestable, but that it falls beyond the reach of Blumenberg’s attempt at refutation.

Contrary to commentators such as Marquard, who take the impression that Blumenberg’s critique of Löwith is misdirected to imply that there is a “*grundsätzlichen Positionsidentität*” between them, my reconstruction of the debate instead points to a fundamental divide

223 Löwith (1964) pp.27-28.

between the two philosophers. While Blumenberg argues in defense of modernity against transcendence, Löwith argues against human hubris and in favor of a sense of proportionality in relation to a greater whole, the cosmos. On the basis of their respective philosophical anthropologies, both Löwith and Blumenberg identify modernity as a Promethean age, marked by a revolt against an extra-human order, be it cosmic or divine. Löwith condemns this move as a turning away from any sense of measurement, causing humanity to insulate itself in a 'cave' of its own making that occludes any reference to an 'outside'. Blumenberg, on the other hand, celebrates the Promethean revolt against divine sovereignty, and he defends the right of humanity to govern its own lifeworld against the indifferent hostility of nature. The anti-Promethean rejection and Promethean defense of 'the right to make history' creates a chasm between Löwith and Blumenberg that trumps their mutual misunderstandings and more covert similarities. Fundamentally, Blumenberg's account can be regarded as a defense not only of modernity but of novelty in general, of the right to start anew. Löwith's theory is a critique of any such attempts as hubris, as the convolution of those truths that might be ahistorical but which he still identifies with their age-old articulations. It is only in this general sense that the common portrayal of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate is correct: a struggle between the new and the old. This admission also explains why Löwith came to be identified – albeit unjustly – with conservative, crypto-theological *Verfallsgeschichten* in the first place.

The opposition between these two positions, an anthropocentric defense of enlightened modernity and a cosmocentric rejection of it, points towards more general divisions in the social, cultural and academic debate on secularization in post-war Germany. Although Löwith's non-humanist defense of nature and ataraxic bliss was met more with puzzlement than with approval, and even though Blumenberg's position would remain more reserved and nuanced than those of his supporters (e.g., Marquard), we will discover in the next chapters that their polemic nonetheless represents a more general opposition, one that centers on the question whether the human order, or the historical realm, should relate itself to an extra-human absolute orientation point or not.²²⁴ We shall find that Carl Schmitt, who will be discussed in the next three chapters, occupies a strange position vis-à-vis Löwith and Blumenberg in this respect. On the one hand, he disagrees with Blumenberg's contention that the absolute should be kept at bay at all costs, whereas he also disagrees with Löwith on the latter's claim that 'pure faith' amounts to a complete indifference to worldly affairs.

Meanwhile, the contemporary postsecularism discourse is still grappling with those subjects that, as I have shown, were left up for debate by Löwith and Blumenberg. It has been remarked in this respect, for instance by Peter E. Gordon and Jonathan Skolnik, that Löwith's suggestion that modernity remains bound to a religious horizon can be seen as a precursor of the postsecular focus on the afterlife of religion in the Modern Age.²²⁵ Löwith and Blumenberg both confirm postsecularism's intimation that the relation between modernity and religion cannot be reduced to a simple discontinuity, but the inconclusiveness of their debate also indicates that a thesis along Löwithian lines might still be viable for those scholars in the field of postsecularism, such as Gianni Vattimo, who wish to explore the purported continuity between Christianity and modernity.²²⁶ Perhaps more important, it demonstrates that any conceptualization of this relation will prove highly contestable – especially if it is informed by incompatible normative positions.

224 That is, it is my impression that Löwith's ahistorical, 'ecological' and non-humanist skepticism is, as noted, often misunderstood by contemporaries and commentators as a crypto-Heideggerian or Nietzschean type of *Verfallsgeschichte*. Cf. Zabel (1968); Habermas (1983); *ibid.* (2019) pp.40-72; Rorty (1983).

225 Gordon and Skolnik (2005) p.4.

226 Harris (2015).

PART II

The Polemics between
Carl Schmitt, Karl Löwith
and Hans Blumenberg

Chapter 2

The Political Theology of Carl Schmitt: Secularization, Eschatology and Enmity

Introduction

The debate between Karl Löwith and Hans Blumenberg has not been decisively resolved by the latter providing a ‘death-blow’ to the secularization theorem that the former is held to represent; the image that emerges from the first chapter is rather one of a fundamental disagreement on what is the proper place of humankind in the world, and on whether we should ‘retreat’ either from history or from nature.¹ However, although their philosophical paths diverge considerably, Löwith’s and Blumenberg’s lives and thought have both been shaped the fact that – in the period 1933-1945 – they found themselves on the receiving end of Nazi-state oppression. Both their philosophies can be seen as attempts to grapple with this catastrophe of the 20th century, though they arrive at different outcomes.² This background suggests a stark contrast with the figure who will be the focal point of this chapter and who will play a prominent role in the next two chapters as well: the philosopher, legal scholar and ‘political theologian’ Carl Schmitt. As is well-known, Schmitt was a leading member of the academic elite during the Nazi-era, even rising to the status of “crown-jurist of the Third Reich”. During the period 1933-1936, he applied his theory of “the political” and “the state of exception” in defense of the new political order that declared anyone of Jewish descent – which includes Löwith and Blumenberg – an ‘enemy’ of the German state.³

Despite his inevitable fall from grace after the war, however, Schmitt remained unabatedly influential in post-war German discourse, gaining a ‘secret’ following amongst intellectuals

1 Cf. Habermas, ‘Löwith: Stoic Retreat from Historical Consciousness’ (1983) pp.81-99.

2 For biographical information on both authors, see: Löwith, *My Life* (1994) and e.g. Marquard, ‘Entlastung vom Absoluten’ (2016) pp.17-27. On Blumenberg’s intellectual development during the war and after 1945, see: Flasch (2017) pp.14-27. In short, I would summarize their different philosophical responses to recent events as follows: whereas Löwith tends to understand this catastrophe in terms of human hubris and unbridled will to power, Blumenberg rather perceives it in terms of the detrimental reintroduction of ‘absolutism’ in the human lifeworld.

3 For two extensive philosophical biographies on Schmitt, see Jan-Werner Müller, *A Dangerous Mind* (2003) and Reinhard Mehring, *Carl Schmitt: Aufstieg und Fall* (2009). It should be noted that my interpretation of Schmitt’s work focusses less on changes and discontinuities in the development of his theories and more on overarching themes and patterns, which implies that I hence assume a general – albeit loosely defined – unity of his thought.

who were critical of the new political status quo.⁴ During the course of the second half of the 20th century until the present day his influence has spread even further, transgressing geographical and political borders as well as demarcations of scientific disciplines. In *A Dangerous Mind* (2003), Jan-Werner Müller writes:

Schmitt's frontal and 'general attack on liberal modernity' had a large and lasting intellectual fallout. It left arguments and theoretical fragments which were subsequently picked up by political thinkers of many – often contradictory – intellectual stripes in Europe and beyond. In fact, it might not be an overstatement to say that no twentieth-century thinker has had a more diverse range of thinkers.⁵

How far the influence of Schmitt's thought reaches is however not our primary concern. For our purposes it is important that Schmitt is also a seminal figure in the German secularization debate.⁶ He provided a paradigmatic formulation of 'the secularization theory' already in 1922, when in his *Politische Theologie* Schmitt claimed that all "significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts".⁷ Moreover, by introducing his own theoretical framework of 'political theology' he prepared the groundwork for the later politicization of the secularization debate, after 1968, which de facto meant that the secularization debate was transformed into a debate on political theology.⁸ Lastly, Schmitt is a significant figure because he actively engaged in an extensive polemic with Blumenberg, while Löwith meanwhile withdrew from direct confrontations with both thinkers. According to some commentators this means that the Schmitt-Blumenberg debate gradually overshadowed the initial discussion with Löwith in terms of philosophical and historical significance.⁹

The personal histories of Löwith and Blumenberg on the one hand and Schmitt on the other would suggest that in comparison, the former two philosophers have more in common in contrast to the latter. After all, it is partially in response to the totalitarian threat that Schmitt represents that Löwith and Blumenberg have reflected on the nature and viability of the modern worldview, questioning whether the recent catastrophe originates within modernity itself or rather if it can be attributed to non- or anti-modern forces.¹⁰ In the course of these three chapters I will however show that an investigation of the polemic between these philosophers evokes a more complicated image. We can in fact discern different lines of contestation, which makes that none of their positions can easily be reduced to another. Hence, even though in historical-political terms Schmitt represents a position that is diametrically opposed to those of Löwith and Blumenberg, I will argue that this does not necessarily imply the same in terms of their respective philosophies. Before we can proceed to the debates between Schmitt, Löwith and Blumenberg it is however necessary to first discuss the former's thought on secularization and political theology in isolation. This is necessary not because Schmitt is the more important figure in the secularization debate, but because his political theology, and especially its more arcane elements, requires some analysis and reconstruction before it is possible to understand his position over against those of Löwith and Blumenberg.

4 Cf. Van Laak (1993); Müller (2003) pp.49-218.

5 Müller (2003) p.1. On the range of his influence: pp.1-13. The quote "general onslaught on liberal modernity" stems from Taubes (2013) p.4.

6 Ruh (1980) pp.279-299; Kroll (2010) pp.159-285.

7 Schmitt (2005) p.36/ibid. (1934) p.49.

8 See Chapter 7 of this book.

9 This is argued explicitly by Kroll (2010) pp.17-19, 237-239. Cf. Schmitz and Lepper (2007).

10 Cf. Barash (1998); Keller (2015) pp.93-95.

In the following exposition I first expound on the wide divergence of interpretations that exists in Schmitt-scholarship. Because this is such a contentious field it is necessary to explicate how my reading of Schmitt relates to those of others. Furthermore, I will explain why Schmitt's thought is so difficult to grasp in an unambivalent and systematic manner. We then proceed to a brief discussion of Schmitt's political theory, focusing especially on his concept of the political and on his theory of sovereignty. This will lead us to the province of Schmitt's theory that is most pertinent to this study: his political theology and theory of secularization. After first sketching the outlines of these central elements I will subsequently analyze the theological dimension of Schmitt's thought from which these elements derive. This is done by first focusing on the content of Schmitt's theological beliefs, on his critique of modernity, and finally on his eschatology. The discussion of Schmitt's eschatology will raise two important questions: on the 'inescapability of the political' and on what serves as the 'ultimate foundation' of his thought – these two questions will be addressed in the final section of this chapter (on his 'stasiology') as well as in the conclusion.

Differing Interpretations of Schmitt and his Philosophical Style

The Status Quaestionis in Recent Schmitt-Scholarship

When surveying the available secondary literature it quickly becomes clear that Schmitt is an elusive figure. Heinrich Meier, an important Schmitt-scholar whose work I will also draw on in this chapter, notes that it can be challenging not only to make sense of Schmitt's own works but also to find one's bearings in the intellectual discourse that surrounds them: "Wer seine Orientierung aus den Meinungen über Schmitt zu gewinnen sucht, bewegt sich in einem Irrgarten, der Schmitts eigenes Labyrinth üppig wuchernd umlagert und wenig mehr als den Blick auf dessen Außenbezirke freigibt."¹¹ What concerns this investigation is the question – a bone of contention in the commentary on Schmitt – whether he is 'in the first place' a (secular) legal scholar and political theorist *or* a political theologian. There are indications that Schmitt consciously cultivated room for ambivalence in this respect, room which he could use to evade criticisms if necessary.¹² On occasion, Schmitt identified himself as a 'mere' jurist whose work deals with nothing more than legal-political questions. Indeed, in several disciplines he is of course mostly known for his contributions in the fields of law and political theory, for example: *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus* (1926), *Verfassungslehre* (1928), and *Legalität und Legitimität* (1932).¹³ Also his most famous texts, which form the focal point of this chapter – *Der Begriff des Politischen* (1932), *Politische Theologie* (1922), and his final work, *Politische Theologie II* (1970) – are presented as legal-political treatises.¹⁴ What is at issue in Schmitt-scholarship is whether they also deal with theological and metaphysical questions, and if so, if it is necessary to gain an understanding of this theological dimension in order to appreciate his legal theory fully.

Legal scholars and political philosophers such as Hermann Lübbe, Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, Günter Maschke, and more recently Matthias Lievens, hold that Schmitt is first

11 Meier (2012) p.14.

12 Meier (1995) pp.66-71; Groh (1998) pp.9-23.

13 On Schmitt's self-identification as a "jurist", cf.: Political Theology II (2014) p.148 fn.2.

14 In the following, I will use available English translations of the relevant texts, e.g., *Political Theology* (2005) and *The Concept of the Political* (1996), but I also refer to the original German texts if the relevant passages do not lend themselves to suitable translations. In the case of *Der Begriff des Politischen* there are also significant differences between the different editions of this book (resp. 1932, 1933, 1963), which requires some discernment.

and foremost a juridical and political thinker, and that allusions to theology ultimately serve a secular-political purpose in the formulation of his philosophical ideas.¹⁵ Lübke for instance states that, to Schmitt, the framework of ‘political theology’ signifies nothing more than an “akademisches Forschungsprogramm” that is meant to trace “analytisch erhebbare und dann historisch erklärbare strukturelle Analogien” between theological and juridical concepts.¹⁶ Ruth Groh, who does not belong to this camp, suggests in her study *Arbeit an der Heillosigkeit der Welt* (1998) that these purely juridical interpretations of Schmitt’s thought tend to resist any attempt at ‘theologizing’ him for fear that that would amount to a dismissal of his work. The idea is that if Schmitt’s work is ‘unmasked’ as crypto-theology it can no longer be taken seriously as legal scholarship.¹⁷ What the supporters of the strictly secular-juridical reading of Schmitt object to is the type of interpretation that is put forward most poignantly by Heinrich Meier. In his two famous studies – *Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss und ‘Der Begriff des Politischen’: zu einem Dialog unter Abwesenden* (1988) and *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts* (1994) – Meier structurally and comprehensively reduces every aspect of Schmitt’s thought to one single core, which is ultimately a religious faith in revelation (*Offenbarungsglaube*).¹⁸ Meier reads Schmitt’s entire oeuvre (including his strictly juridical texts) as a single exercise in political theology. “Die Politische Theologie setzt den Glaube an die Wahrheit der Offenbarung voraus. Sie ordnet ihr alles unter, und sie führt alles auf sie zurück.”¹⁹ The concern that Groh suspects behind the criticism of this ‘theologization’ of Schmitt becomes confirmed when Meier admits that if this political theology is at bottom grounded in a *revealed truth* this must mean, firstly, that secular philosophy principally cannot judge over its content, but secondly, this respectful demarcation also places Schmitt’s theory at a distance from the realm of proper secular-rational philosophy (where Leo Strauss *does* belong).²⁰

In the following exposition, I tentatively adhere to the ‘theologizing’ reading of Schmitt’s work. This line of interpretation has gained support in recent years, partly due to the posthumous publication of the *Glossarium* (1991) – a collection of private notes in which Schmitt explicates his more esoteric, arcane-theological ideas – which provides ample indications that the theological elements in his theory are more than just window dressing.²¹ The investigations of Meier and Groh form a helpful guide in the areas of Schmitt’s thought that are especially pertinent to the current study – as they concern secularization, eschatology and reflections on the ‘essence’ of modernity and Christianity – but which are also more obscure(d) than other provinces, such as his legal theory. However, I do not hereby intend to cast a verdict on the issue whether the political or the theological dimension is more fundamental to Schmitt. This is because, contrary to Meier, I will suggest that neither dimension is more fundamental since they – as Schmitt’s own definition of ‘political theology’ already signifies – are ‘structurally analogous’ to each other. In this vein, I contend that the theological component of his thought forms an essential, meaning-supplying *background* to the more accessible dimension of Schmitt’s theory, but not its ultimate foundation. The question that needs to be addressed

15 Lübke (1983); Böckenförde (1983); Maschke (1995); Lievens (2016).

16 Lübke (1983) p.47. Cf. Schmitt (2014) p.148 fn.2.

17 Groh (1998) pp.9-18. Cf. Müller (2003) pp.205-206.

18 The first is translated as: Meier, *The Hidden Dialogue* (1995). The second has been republished in 2012 with an additional chapter on the Blumenberg-Schmitt debate (pp.269-300).

19 Meier (2012) p.40.

20 Groh (1998) pp.9-24; Meier (1995) p.68; *ibid.* (2012) pp.260-261.

21 Groh (1998) pp.12-13, 210-211. Cf. Müller (1999) p.64: “Far from being ... ‘nonideological’, as some observers have claimed, Schmitt’s method was based on substantial metaphysical and religious beliefs, which led him to strategically deploy concepts, myths and his own private demonology.” *Ibid.* (2003) pp.202-206: On the “theologization of Schmitt”.

in the following is how this structural or “systematic analogy” between law and politics on the one hand and theology on the other should be interpreted.²²

Schmitt's Elusiveness and the Dynamic between Exoteric and Esoteric Elements

One may wonder at this stage why the relation between the theological and the political components in Schmitt's theory is still up for debate. The simple reason for this is that Schmitt was never fully clear about it, nor did he intend to be. In his two studies on Schmitt, Meier provides an adequate explanation for this lack of clarity. Meier claims that there is a continuity between Schmitt's philosophical style and the content of his thought. His “concept of the political” dictates that human interaction essentially consists of enmity and antagonism, which implies that he also saw intellectual discourse as a potential ‘battle’ with intellectual ‘enemies’ rather than as a free and transparent exchange of ideas.²³ Jan-Werner Müller concurs that for Schmitt, “concepts functioned as weapons in political battles”, and that “the battle over concepts ... was at least as ferocious, if not more so, than physical battle.”²⁴ Hence, the ultimate goal of intellectual discourse is not cooperative and transparent truth-finding but survival. This means that it can be expedient to strategically conceal certain components if necessary. According to Meier, Schmitt was inclined to keep the more arcane elements in his thought out of sight from his opponents, for fear that if they are exposed they can become neutralized and eventually vanquished under public scrutiny. Liberal thought, which he primarily opposed, has a tendency to “dissolve even metaphysical truth in a discussion”, which is why he attacks the presuppositions of liberalism “without exposing the core of his *own* politics to discussion, surrendering that core to ‘eternal conversation’, or allowing it to be taken in and relativized by the ‘eternal competition of opinions’.”²⁵ The second reason Meier gives for Schmitt's lack of transparency is theological: “Carl Schmitt envelops the center of his thought in darkness because the center of his thought is faith.”²⁶

This problem has also been addressed by Ruth Groh in her critical study *Arbeit an der Heillosigkeit der Welt*. She points out that Schmitt often employs a language of “*Wissenschaftlichkeit*”, of sociological-judicial neutrality and objectivity, but that this tends to disguise another layer of thought that is less easily accessible or acceptable.²⁷ Groh argues that this equivocity should be seen in terms of a distinction between a seemingly clear, accessible and exoteric level on the one hand, in which only descriptive, sociological claims are made, and an esoteric, prescriptive dimension on the other.²⁸ The latter dimension contains ideas of which he knew that they would not be generally accepted; partly because they were metaphysical, because they were unorthodox, or because post-war society deemed them abhorrent.²⁹ By separating these

22 Schmitt (2005) p.42, cf. pp.36-37.

23 Meier (1995) pp.66-77; *ibid.* (2012) pp.296-299.

24 Müller (1999) pp.71-72. Müller disagrees with Meier that Schmitt has a unified doctrine, he rather has a “single method” (p.62), but this “method was based on substantial metaphysical and religious beliefs” (p.64). Cf. Schmitt (1940) p.198: “Daher ist der Kampf um sie [i.e., on the definitions of political concepts] kein Streit um leere Worte, sondern ein Krieg von ungeheurer Wirklichkeit und Gegenwart.”

25 Meier (1995) p.68 (emphasis added), cf. pp.66-69; *ibid.* (2012) pp.293-299; Groh (1998) pp.19-22; Schmitt (2005) p.63; *ibid.* (1926) pp.45-46, 58, 61..

26 Meier (1995) p.68.

27 Groh (1998) pp.19-22, 154-155; Müller (1999) pp.67-70.

28 Groh (1998) pp.19-22. Cf. Müller (1999) pp.64, 70-80; Mehring (2003) p.198.

29 Cf. Müller (1999) p.79; Schmitt (1991) pp.18, 252-290.

two elements Schmitt was supposedly able to smuggle his less acceptable views into his works under the guise of a more acceptable ‘scientific’ language, thus using the more exoteric level of his writing to shield this esoteric content from open attack.³⁰ Groh notes that this esoteric content – which she calls his “politisch-theologischer Mythos” – is thus hidden “im Tarnkleid der Wissenschaft.” Using his most famous text as an example, she notes that this *mythos* “figuriert in ‘Der Begriff des Politischen’ als das esoterische Wissen, das auf der exoterischen Ebene von einer Fülle zutreffender Deskriptionen und Analysen überlagert wird, in denen für viele die hohe Überzeugungskraft dieser wohl berühmtesten Schrift Schmitts liegt.”³¹

The Concept of the Political and Decisionism

At this point it has become clear what kind of interpretation of Schmitt’s thought I intend to put forward as well as why any interpretation will prove to be contentious. In the following exposition I mainly focus on Schmitt’s political theology and his theory of secularization, but before this is possible it is necessary to gain an understanding of his juridical thought and his “concept of the political”. The latter is presented in his most well-known book, *Der Begriff des Politischen*. Here, he states that “[t]he political must ... rest on its own ultimate distinctions, to which all action with a specifically political meaning can be traced.” The ultimate political distinction cannot be reduced to a moral one (i.e., between good and evil), nor to an aesthetic (beautiful and ugly) or an economic (profitable or unprofitable) distinction: “[t]he specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that *between friend and enemy*.”³²

Commentators such as Theo de Wit, Meier and Müller argue that this core idea, that “the political” coincides with the friend/enemy-distinction, leads Schmitt to two distinct, and even incompatible conceptions of the relation between the political and other societal realms, such as those of morality, aesthetics and economy. The first conception of “the political” is upheld in the 1932 and the 1963 editions of *The Concept of the Political*, which depicts politics as an autonomous societal sphere among others. The upshot of this regional model is that politics should remain separated from other spheres, such as morality, implying that the purely political friend-enemy distinction should not be *moralized* by equating it with the good-evil distinction.³³ The problem with this view, as Leo Strauss would point out, is that it implies that Schmitt remains “in the horizon of liberalism”.³⁴ Hence, in the 1933 version of his book Schmitt would depart from this “regional” model of politics and instead opt for a “model of intensity”, allowing him to speak of the political as “the total”.³⁵ This model – which enabled him to use Nazified concepts such as “the total state” and the “total enemy” – reveals the political distinction as the ultimate ground for all other societal spheres. It thus follows that any distinction can *become* political once it reaches a

30 Groh (1998) pp.19-22, 154-155. Mehring (2003, p.198) notes that Schmitt’s writing was subject to censorship under National-Socialism, and “nach 1945, wie er meinte, unter dem Diktat der ‘Sieger von 1945’”, which explains why he felt it necessary to hide some of his beliefs.

31 Groh (1998) p.22. Cf. Müller (1999) pp.75-80.

32 Schmitt (1996) p.26 (emphasis added)/ibid. (1932) p.14. Cf. (1933) p.7-15; (2014) pp.116-130.

33 Meier (1995) pp.12-29; De Wit (1992) pp.468-474; Müller (2003) pp.32-33.

34 Müller (2003) p.32. Cf. Meier (1995) pp.11-12.

35 Schmitt (1933) pp.7-61. Cf. *Politische Theologie* (1934) p.7: “Inzwischen haben wir das Politische als das Totale erkannt und wissen infolgedessen auch, daß die Entscheidung darüber, ob etwas *unpolitisch* ist, immer eine *politische* Entscheidung bedeutet, gleichgültig wer sie trifft und mit welchem Beweisgründen sie sich umkleidet. Das gilt auch für die Frage, ob eine bestimmte Theologie politische oder unpolitische Theologie ist.”

particular degree of intensity: “[d]ie Unterscheidung von Freund und Feind bezeichnet die äußerste Intensität einer Verbindung oder Trennung”.³⁶ Hence, the political has no substance of its own: “[d]as Politische kann seine Kraft aus den verschiedensten Bereichen menschlichen Lebens ziehen ...; es bezeichnet kein eigenes, diesen Gegensätzen korrespondierendes Sachgebiet, sondern den Intensitätsgrad einer Verbindung oder Unterscheidung von Menschen”.³⁷

Whereas the regional model allowed Schmitt to critique the tendency to reduce political distinctions to moral, aesthetic or economic dualisms, the model of intensity illuminates his underlying decisionism, or in other words his existentialist ontology. That is, the friend-enemy distinction is presented by Schmitt not as an inference drawn from *experience*, but as a category of *will*. That is, it relates to a “sovereign decision”. All other distinctions, e.g., between good and evil, ultimately rely on the political decision – made by the sovereign – to differentiate between who is with us or who is against us.³⁸ Hence we can see that the concept of the political is intertwined with Schmitt’s notion of *sovereignty*. Schmitt develops his theory of sovereignty in his *Politische Theologie* (1922), where he famously states: “Sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception.”³⁹ This implies not only that the sovereign decides what has to happen once the state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*) occurs, but more fundamentally, he decides what it is and when it must be declared. The implication is that the will of the sovereign precedes the rule of law, and retains the possibility to intervene and interrupt the legal order when necessary; the sovereign receives a status vis-à-vis the legal order analogous to that of a voluntarist conception of God over against his creation.⁴⁰ Schmitt contradicts legal theorists such as Hans Kelsen by affirming that a true *rule* of law is impossible because there is always an authority needed – a sovereign will – to establish the law, to apply it, and to suspend it when necessary.⁴¹ ‘The exception’ or ‘emergency situation’ (*Ausnahmezustand*) – that which interrupts the legal order and calls for extra-legal actions – proves that the sovereign decision does not only precede the political order chronologically, but that it is also prior to it in an ‘ontological’ sense. The ‘exception’ is a manifestation of the *nothingness* that precedes the sovereign decision; in other words, *nothing* precedes the will of the sovereign. There are no pre-given truths, natural laws, a social *Grundnorm*, nor is there a pre-political morality to guide the sovereign’s decision: “Looked at normatively, the decision emanates from nothingness.”⁴² Ultimately, Schmitt’s political-judicial thought can be summarized by the phrase ‘*auctoritas non veritas facit legem*’ (‘authority, not truth, makes law’).⁴³

When combining these three elements – his theory of politics, sovereignty and law – we obtain a general impression of his political thought that will help understand his political theology. Schmitt’s decisionism harbors an existentialist ontology that prioritizes the individual decision and radically devalues – and almost denies – any pre-existing reality. Invoking Kierkegaard, Schmitt claims that real decisions occur in the face of nothingness. However, whereas Kierkegaard focused on the isolated individual Schmitt elevates the scope of the

36 Schmitt (1933) p.7.

37 Schmitt (1933) p.21. Cf. *ibid.* (2014) p.46. Cf. De Wit (1992) pp. 471-474.

38 Schmitt (2005) p.5-35; *ibid.* (1996) pp.19-79.

39 Schmitt (2005) p.5.

40 Schmitt (2005) p.10. This theory of “the state of exception” should, historically, be understood in light of Article 48 of the Weimar-constitution (cf. pp.11-12) which bestowed the president with the power to declare an “Ausnahmezustand” (e.g., the Reichstag Fire Decree of 1933), and take emergency measures accordingly, without prior consent from parliament.

41 Schmitt (2005) pp. 49-50; Reilly (2015) pp.164-168.

42 Schmitt (2005) pp.31-32, cf. pp.10-15; Reilly (2015) pp.164-166.

43 Schmitt (2005) p.33, cf. p.15.

decision to that of states and peoples, where it is the sovereign – acting as a Hobbesian “mortal god” – who decides on behalf of others.⁴⁴

Connecting the themes from *The Concept of the Political* and *Political Theology* it becomes evident that the either/or decision of the sovereign is identical to the distinction between friend and enemy. If it is the case that the political decision between friend and enemy “emanates from nothingness” for Schmitt then this entails that these two categories are assumedly *realized* by this very decision. If one decides for x this necessarily entails the postulation of y as its opposite. In order for it to be a real decision, the decision-maker (the sovereign) cannot rely on pre-given norms; after all, the decision precedes the norm. The ultimate implication is that the decision precedes and thus creates the reality to which it pertains; it is only *after* a decision is made that x and y become present as options in the first place. Moreover, Schmitt adds another existentialist dimension to this decisionism by suggesting that it is only through the creation of an enemy that it is possible to know oneself; i.e., only in opposition to someone else is self-identification possible.⁴⁵ Enmity becomes an existential category: “der Feind ist unsere eigene Frage als Gestalt.”⁴⁶

Political Theology and Theory of Secularization

‘Systematic Analogy’ between the Political and the Theological

We now turn to the element of Schmitt’s through that is most pertinent to the secularization debate and the polemic with Löwith and Blumenberg: his political theology and theory of secularization. Schmitt wrote two books titled *‘Political Theology’*, one in 1922 and the other in 1970. In both texts it appears that he leaves little doubt as to what this theory boils down to: political theology affirms a “systematic analogy between theological and juristic concepts”, or in other words a “systematische Struktur-Verwandschaft von theologischen und juristischen Begriffen”.⁴⁷ However, on closer inspection this statement is more equivocal than might be expected, since it can either be interpreted as the research question of a purely descriptive “akademisches Forschungsprogramm” (in the words of Lübbe), i.e., as a sociology of legal concepts, but it can also be taken as a prescriptive, metaphysical claim.⁴⁸ As with the dual implications of his concept of the political, Schmitt prefers to leave both options open rather than deciding for either one. Taken as a metaphysical claim, political theology constitutes an “ontologisch-existentialen Denkart” that posits an essential continuity between the political and the theological spheres.⁴⁹ The analogy that he asserts between theology and politics entails that Schmitt’s political existentialism is intertwined with a hyperbolized, voluntarist theology; hence the functional similarity between his conception of sovereignty and theological voluntarism, where the decision of the sovereign represents the act of creation *ex nihilo*.⁵⁰

44 Schmitt (2005) p.15. On Schmitt and Kierkegaard, see: Löwith (1958) pp.50-53, 58-59; *ibid.* (1995) pp.141-142, 157; De Wit (1992) pp.341-343. Evidently, there is a tension between the existentialism of the individual and the dictatorial decisionism of the sovereign, since the latter generally infringes on the individual freedom that is needed to make sense of the former. Mehring (2016, pp.85-91) suggests that Schmitt did conceive of his own existence in such decisionist terms.

45 Schmitt (1933) pp.8-9, 21, 35, 45; Löwith (1995) p.147.

46 Schmitt (1991) p.243. This is a quote from a poem by Theodor Däubler, cited e.g. in Cerella (2016) pp.280, 282 fn.24.

47 Schmitt (2005) p.42; *ibid.* (1970) p.101 fn.1.

48 Cf. Meier (1995) pp.61-62.

49 Schmitt (1933) p.45. Cf. Meier (1995) p.55.

50 Schmitt (2005) pp.36-39, 49, 51-66.

The *rücksichtslose* decisiveness that is demanded of the sovereign is mirrored by the inscrutable divine will with which the God of nominalism is often portrayed (by Blumenberg, for example); in both cases, will is placed before order, law or morality.⁵¹ This analogy does not merely function as a description of the relation between politics and theology, it contains a prescriptive-evaluative element: it *prescribes* how and what kind of politics (political absolutism) ought to relate to what kind of theology (theological voluntarism).⁵² But on the other hand, Schmitt also never abandoned the other option, according to which his political theology amounts to a “sociological” claim of a “systematische Struktur-Verwandtschaft” between the academic fields of law and theology.⁵³ The upshot of this claim is that political theology is a hermeneutical tool that enables understanding of the concepts of theology and law because it uncovers an identical structure in which the will of the agent (God or the sovereign) relates to order (creation, the law or the state). Thus, the ambiguity that is inherent in this central assertion of Schmitt’s political theology demonstrates Groh’s suspicion of an “esoterisches Wissen” that hides underneath the “Tarnkleid der Wissenschaft” with which he adorns his theory.⁵⁴ We can now begin to see that this “esoterisches Wissen” pertains to the question how the political sphere ought to relate to theology.

Multifaceted Concept of Secularization

Schmitt entertains a concept of secularization that is central to his thought and follows directly from the fundamental premises of his political theology. However, as is often the case with Schmitt’s philosophy, this concept too is more ambivalent on closer inspection than a first glance would suggest. Multiple commentators have suggested in this respect that one can discern more than one concept of secularization from his work.⁵⁵ Let us first focus on the most significant iteration of ‘secularization’, namely in *Political Theology*:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts. Not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The state of exception [*Ausnahmezustand*] in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology. Only by being aware of this analogy can we appreciate the manner in which the philosophical ideas of the state developed in the last centuries. The idea of the modern constitutional state [*Rechtsstaates*] triumphed together with deism, a theology and metaphysics that banished the miracle from the world. This theology and metaphysics rejected not only the transgression of the laws of nature through an exception brought about by direct intervention, as is found in the idea of a miracle, but also the sovereign’s direct intervention in a valid legal order.

51 Schmitt (2005) pp.36-39, 49; Groh (1998) pp. 177, 224, 275-295.

52 This evaluative-prescriptive dimension in Schmitt’s theory is affirmed by e.g.: Meier (1995); *ibid.* (2012); Müller (1999); Mehring (2009); Kroll (2010); Löwith (1995); Marquard (1983), among others.

53 Schmitt (2005) pp.42-46; *ibid.* (2014) pp.109, 117, 148 fn.2.

54 Groh (1998) p.22.

55 Meier (2012 pp.269-300), for instance, suggests that there is only one concept. Kroll (2010, p.210) distinguishes between two concepts: a genetic and a structural one, whereas Schmitz (2016, pp.710-712) and Ruh (1980, p.293) in fact distinguish three concepts.

The rationalism of the Enlightenment rejected the exception in every form. The theist convictions of conservative authors of the counter-revolution could thus attempt to support the personal sovereignty of the monarch with the aid of analogies from a theistic theology.⁵⁶

This quote suggests that we are indeed dealing with a complex concept of secularization. Not only are there mentions of “analogy” in terms of “systematic structure”, but also of “historical development” as a gradual decline into the apolitical, deist-rationalist constellation of the Enlightenment, represented on a metaphysical plane as the rejection of the “miracle”. Several scholars agree that *Political Theology*, among other works, in fact reveals two distinct concepts of secularization that are interrelated and in a sense presuppose each other. The one is an assertion of a *synchronic* relation of analogy in terms of “systematic structure”, and the other a declaration of a *diachronic* relation of “historical development”, in which concepts are “transferred from theology to the theory of the state”.⁵⁷ Joe-Paul Kroll states that it is necessary to distinguish “a diachronic, genetic, historical” concept of secularization, “concerning the *origin* of political concepts” from a “synchronic, structural one, relating the spheres of the divine and the political ... by means of analogy.”⁵⁸

To this necessary distinction between a structural-synchronic conception of secularization and a genetic-diachronic one I add another important differentiation, which is that – like Schmitt’s political theology itself – this concept has both a descriptive and a prescriptive function.⁵⁹ Thus, to understand this multifaceted concept it is necessary to conceive of it in terms of a diachronic-synchronic and a descriptive-prescriptive axis. In synchronic-*descriptive* terms, secularization refers to a reciprocal relation that Schmitt assumes between politics and metaphysics, which he holds to be universal. He notes, apparently without value-judgement, that “metaphysics is the most intensive and clearest expression of an epoch” and that there is a structural analogy to be discerned between, for example, early-modern theism and political absolutism or between deism and the constitutional state.⁶⁰ This denotes the ‘research program’ he refers to as his “sociology of juristic concepts”, which functions as a hermeneutical method that enables understanding of politics by relating it to the metaphysical presuppositions of an age.⁶¹ In synchronic-*prescriptive* terms, secularization functions as a concept that dictates how the political realm *should* relate to theology or transcendence. In *Political Theology I* (1922) and *II* (1970) and in the three editions of *The Concept of the Political* Schmitt does not merely acknowledge that each epoch is characterized by its own political-metaphysical “image”; he also upholds *one* form of politics and *one* corresponding type of metaphysics as an ultimate ideal. This functions as a yardstick with which to determine the value of the different political-metaphysical constellations that are found in history.⁶² This ideal is the political decisionism that he identifies with early-modern absolutism, and which he sees mirrored in a late-medieval or

56 Schmitt (2005) pp.36-37 (translation modified)/*ibid.* (1934) p.49.

57 Kroll (2010) p.210; Ruh (1980) pp.282-284. Schmitz (2016, p.712) distinguishes between a “structural analogy” and a “developmental line”.

58 Kroll (2010) p.210.

59 Cf. Böckenförde (1983) pp.19-21. He argues that it is possible to distinguish between a juridical, an institutional and an appellative conception of secularization or political theology, but that only the juridical conception can be found in Schmitt. Groh (1998, pp.15, 178) argues to the contrary that Schmitt’s work also contains a strong appellative function.

60 Schmitt (2005) p.46. Cf.: “The metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world has the same structure as what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as a form of its political organization.”

61 Schmitt (2005) pp.37, 42-46; *ibid.* (2014) pp. 70, 148 fn.2.

62 Schmitt (2005) 36-66; *ibid.* (2014) pp.114-130; (1933) pp.41-61; (1963) pp.121-122.

early-modern theological voluntarism. He thus prescribes that a specific relation between the theological and the political should be maintained, namely one that authorizes the sovereign will as the sole representation of an all-powerful inscrutable God.⁶³

On the diachronic axis it is also possible to differentiate between a descriptive and a normative conception of secularization. The diachronic-descriptive function follows directly from the synchronic-descriptive variety: if Schmitt presupposes a structural analogy between the metaphysical presuppositions of an age and its political organization, then the diachronic variety describes the development, e.g., from theism/absolutism to deism/constitutionalism.⁶⁴ The diachronic-prescriptive conception of secularization is especially significant, because it plays an important role in the debate between Schmitt and Blumenberg. It refers to the *legitimate* transferal of divinely ordained authority from one instance to another; this can signify the transferal of authority from God to the sovereign, or in historical terms, the line of succession Schmitt presumes between the authority of the medieval Catholic church and the modern secular state.⁶⁵ What is significant is that in *Political Theology II* Schmitt uses the term “*Umbesetzung*” (reoccupation) – a reference to Blumenberg’s model of functional continuity – in order to describe this process of legitimate transferal.⁶⁶ Responding to Blumenberg, he states:

It should have been noticed that my elaborations on political theology are not grounded in diffuse metaphysics. They bring to light the classical case of a transposition [*Umbesetzung*] of distinct concepts which has occurred within the systematic thought of the two – historically and discursively – most developed constellations [*Stellengefüge*] of ‘western rationalism’: the Catholic *church* with its entire juridical rationality and *the state of the ius publicum Europaeum*, which was supposed to be Christian in even Thomas Hobbes’ system.⁶⁷

This instance of secularization depicts the early-modern absolutist state as the legitimate successor of the church, which, as Meier justifiably notes, does not occur to the detriment of Christianity but *in its name*: this “*Umbesetzung*” takes place on “*christlichen Boden*”, or in other words, it is “*christlich inspiriert*.”⁶⁸ In any case, it is evident that whereas the prescriptive-synchronic concept of secularization pertains to the divine authorization of secular power as an a-temporal occurrence, its diachronic twin-concept rather depicts this same authorization as a process, a historical development, in which the secular state is ordained as a divine placeholder through legitimate reoccupation.⁶⁹

Finally, there is yet another way in which ‘secularization’ can be interpreted in Schmitt’s work, but in this instance it is usually referred to as “neutralization”. Neutralization receives a decisively negative evaluation in in this theory, for it signifies a diachronic process of decline or removal from the political-theological ideal “image” of absolutism/voluntarism that Schmitt maintains as a evaluative standard. In his 1929 lecture “The Age of Neutralizations

63 Schmitt (1933) pp.45-49; *ibid.* (2005) 53-66; Meier (2012) p.286; De Wit (1992) pp.388-395, 400-409.

64 Schmitt (2005) pp.36-52. Cf. *ibid.* ‘Age of Neutralizations’ (1993, pp.130-142) for a similarly (seemingly) descriptive line of development, but now perceived as a shift in “central spheres”, from theology to metaphysics to the moral-humanism, ending in the technological-economic sphere.

65 Schmitt (2014) pp.116-130. Cf. *ibid.* *Nomos of the Earth* (2006) pp.61-62.

66 Schmitt (1970) p.110/*ibid.* (2014) p.117 Cf. Geréby (2008) p.25. *Umbesetzung* is of course the very same term that Blumenberg (1983) uses in his theory of functional continuity (translated by Wallace as ‘reoccupation’).

67 Schmitt (2014) p.117 (cf. p.63)/*ibid.* (1970) p.110.

68 Meier (2012) p.275. Cf. Ruh (1980) p.293.

69 Schmitt (2014) pp.117-118; *ibid.* (2005) pp.36-52. Cf. Groh (1998) p.228.

and Depoliticization’ and in *The Concept of the Political* it is indicated that neutralization operates as a functional synonym of ‘depoliticization’ (*Entpolitisierung*), while in *Political Theology II* it becomes clear that both terms are equivalent to ‘detheologization’ (*Enttheologisierung*).⁷⁰ Neutralization denotes the process in which Western civilization becomes alienated from a rightful understanding of ‘the political’ (as the reality of enmity and the fragility of order) and a concomitant openness towards ‘transcendence’.⁷¹ Hence, this definition of the concept of ‘neutralization’ indicates a narrative of decline, a *Verfallsgeschichte* – as such, it is tied up with Schmitt’s critique of modernity, as we will discover at a later stage.⁷²

The Theological ‘Core’ of Schmitt’s Thought?

This multifaceted concept of secularization indicates that Schmitt’s thought is “based on substantial metaphysical and religious beliefs”, as Müller confirms.⁷³ I concur with scholars such as Müller, De Wit, Meier and Groh that ‘political theology’ is not merely a descriptive “sociology of juridical concepts”, but that it amounts to a prescriptive or appellative theory that advocates a (re)connection of secular politics with transcendence.⁷⁴ A close reading of Schmitt’s work indicates that, as Meier and De Wit convincingly argue, it is deeply informed by theological beliefs, according to which, for instance, ‘the political’ functions as a placeholder for or representation of the divine. If one surveys the multitude of hints, allusions, apodictic and often unsubstantiated claims that Schmitt makes throughout his oeuvre, it only takes a relatively small reconstructive step, one that is made by Meier and others in his wake, to assert that Schmitt’s ‘political theology’ is determined by a kind of religious faith.⁷⁵ Meier’s study, *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts*, depicts this religious faith as the ultimate foundation or theological core to which every aspect of Schmitt’s thought can be traced back. Meier however declines to answer what kind of a faith this is, and how it relates to “orthodox” Christianity, since matters of religious revelation fall beyond the jurisdiction of philosophy. “Ob sie [Schmitt’s position] orthodox genannt werden darf, muß entscheiden, wer sich dazu berufen glaubt.”⁷⁶

Other scholars follow Meier’s lead in taking the ‘theological’ dimension of Schmitt’s thought seriously while refraining, over against Meier, from what they consider a tendency to reduce this ‘political theology’ to a single, unified doctrine that ultimately rests on an inaccessible faith in revelation.⁷⁷ What emerges from these analyses is an image of Schmitt’s faith that is by no means ‘orthodox’ in any usual sense of the word; it rather amounts to a highly individualized Kierkegaardian political existentialism with Gnostic/Manichean overtones. It has been described as a “bizarre private crypto-Catholic

70 Schmitt, ‘Age of Neutralizations’ (1993) pp.137-142; *ibid.* (1996) pp.61, 69-70; (2014) pp.122-128. Cf. ‘Three Possibilities’ (2009) pp.167-168.

71 Cf. Schmitt (1993) pp.137-142; *ibid.* (1963) pp.121-123. This concept is similar to Eric Voegelin’s (1952, e.g. p.119) concept of “immanentization”.

72 Geréby (2008) p.12; Müller (1999) p.70. Habermas (2019, pp.42-45) refers to this conception of secularization, as neutralization, in his recent discussion of Schmitt (thereby glossing over the fact that the concept has multiple meanings in the latter’s political theology).

73 Müller (1999) p.64.

74 De Wit (1992); Meier (2012); Groh (1998) p.171.

75 Meier (2012) pp.260-261, 269; *ibid.* (1995) pp.xiv, 68; De Wit (1992) pp.211, 411, 424-436; Mehring (2016) pp.77-91.

76 Meier (2012) p.41. Cf. Müller (2003, pp.202-205) on Meier’s ‘theologization’. Authors who focus more on Schmitt’s presumed heterodoxy are: e.g. Groh (1998); Kroll (2010).

77 Muller (1999) p.64; Kroll (2010) pp.163, 183-184; Groh (1998) pp.13-14, 185, 239.

mythology” that emphasizes the destitute and hopeless nature of creation, the blindness and *Erlösungsbedürftigkeit* of human beings, the constant and pressing necessity of the theological-existential decision, and a serious uncertainty with regard to the reality of salvation and the eschatological outcome of history.⁷⁸ It is an idiosyncratic ‘homebrew’ religiosity, distilled from Catholicism, crisis theology, modern existentialism and other sources, that Groh calls a “katholisierenden Privatmythologie” – and which, according to her, ultimately boils down to a ‘nihilistic theology’.⁷⁹

Evidently, this characterization of Schmitt’s beliefs requires some unpacking. In his recent article ‘Carl Schmitt and the Religiosity of Life’ (2016), Reinhard Mehring argues that the most illuminating insight into Schmitt’s religious beliefs is offered in a brief, hermetic piece of writing titled: ‘Drei Möglichkeiten eines christlichen Geschichtsbildes’ (1950).⁸⁰ We will return to this particular article on multiple occasions throughout these three chapters, not only because it explicates some of Schmitt’s core ideas on eschatology and Christianity, but also because it is a central text in his polemic with Löwith and Blumenberg. Mehring states: “Nowhere else does Schmitt express himself in such a decidedly Christian manner.”⁸¹ This already becomes evident from Schmitt’s own definition of Christian faith:

Christianity is in its essence no morality and no doctrine. It is no penitential sermon, and no religion in the sense of comparative religious studies, but a historical event of infinite, non-appropriable, non-occupiable singularity. It is the incarnation in the Virgin Mary.⁸²

It is suggested by Mehring – and confirmed by Groh – that, by emphasizing the unique, “non-occupiable singularity” of the *event* “of the incarnation in the Virgin Mary”, Schmitt demonstrates his indebtedness to an existentialist, negative theology that demands a non-substantiated openness towards divine interference in the form of “miracles”, the most significant of which is the “incarnation”.⁸³ As Blumenberg’s theory also demonstrates, the presumed existence of a voluntarist God radically undermines the stability of reality and the sense of it as an independent *order*; it creates a strong awareness of “contingency”. Mehring argues that this sense of contingency inherent to a life under (what Blumenberg calls) “theological absolutism” gives rise to two possible responses on the part of the individual believer: “active asceticism”, which means that the individual acts in God’s stead as a divine “instrument”, and a passive, receptive “mysticism”.⁸⁴ As far as the sovereign is concerned, Schmitt evidently opts for the register of active asceticism, according to which the agent represents the divine

78 Müller (2003) p.205. Cf. *Ibid.* (1999); Groh (1998); Kroll (2010) pp.183-185.

79 Groh (1998, p.18) quotes Barbara Nichtweiß. Cf. Motschenbacher (2000); Mehring (2016); Geréby (1999) p.32; Müller (1999). There is still much debate on the precise nature of Schmitt’s political theology, which all centers on the question which is more fundamental to Schmitt: politics or theology. Whereas Meier emphasizes that theology is the foundation of Schmitt’s thought, others, such as Motschenbacher (2000, e.g. p.368), assert that theology plays a merely instrumental role vis-à-vis the political. (We will see this issue reappearing in Schmitt’s debate with Blumenberg.) I will argue, instead of asserting the primacy of the political or the theological, that we must assume a ‘structural analogy’ in Schmitt’s thought.

80 Mehring (2016) pp.84-85. English translation: ‘Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History’ (2009) pp.167-170. Originally published under the title: ‘Drei Stufen historischer Sinngebung’ (1950) pp.927-931.

81 Mehring (2016) p.84; *ibid.* (2009) p.477.

82 Schmitt (2009) pp.169-170.

83 Mehring (2016) pp.84-90; Groh (1998) pp.115-132, 276-293.

84 Mehring (2016) p.86. This distinction derives from Weber, ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’ (1946) pp.324-327.

in a destitute world. Mehring adds that this theory does not only apply to political leaders but that Schmitt also saw his own life through this theological-political lens: “Schmitt experienced everyday life as a state of exception under the idea of salvation”.⁸⁵

Seen in light of this negative, existentialist theology and the call for active asceticism, where the individual acts on behalf of God, it becomes clear that Schmitt’s decisionism requires the sovereign to ‘do God’s work in the world’. This entails a continuous task of distinguishing or dividing (*unterscheiden*), i.e., deciding (*entscheiden*) for God and against the enemy. Groh emphasizes that this decisionism negates any sense of a pre-given moral order from which the individual can take his/her guidance. Rather, any decision “emanates out of nothingness”, just as God creates *ex nihilo*.⁸⁶ The lack of a pre-given moral order makes that the call to decisiveness itself functions as a moral imperative. However, other than this unsubstantiated call, the agent receives no true guidance.⁸⁷ This reading leads Groh to the conclusion that the theology of Schmitt is ultimately *nihilistic*.⁸⁸ God is only perceived in terms of a resolutely negative theology, who calls for blind decisions without any guidance as to which decisions are ‘good’. Theology does not offer the individual anything in terms of a measure, standard or guideline, save for an emphasis on the necessity of the decision itself. Groh claims that the divine decision *ex nihilo*, which is mirrored in the sovereign political decision, forms the “normlosen, substanzlosen Kern jener Lehre von der göttlichen Allmacht, die der Politischen Theologie zugrundeliegt.”⁸⁹

Circling back to the concept of secularization we can now better appreciate the significance that Schmitt attributes to it. The *positive* function of secularization, both of the synchronic and the diachronic variety, does not only legitimize the ‘reoccupation’ that occurs between the spiritual and political spheres, it constitutes a prescriptive thesis that pertains to the position of the individual vis-à-vis God and the world. It situates the individual/sovereign in the world as a divine instrument, albeit without any divine guidance.⁹⁰ ‘Secularization’ in this sense refers to a continuous relation – an open channel – between the divine and the worldly carriers of authority. Secularization-as-neutralization on the other hand, i.e., Schmitt’s *verfallsgeschichtliche* concept, pertains to a gradual closure of this channel, until it is blocked entirely. For Schmitt, the disappearance of ‘the political’ entails an alienation from the proper relation between the individual and the divine. It means a detrimental denial of the ‘moral’ call to decisiveness. Schmitt claims that “mit dem Theologischen das Moralische, mit dem Moralischen die politische Idee verschwindet und jede moralische und politische Entscheidung paralyisiert wird in einem paradisischen Diesseits Unmittelbaren, natürlichen Lebens und problemloser ‘Leib’haftigkeit. [sic]”⁹¹

85 Mehring (2016) p.89. Cf. Groh (1998) pp.115-155, 225-232.

86 Schmitt (2005) p.32; Groh (1998) pp.118-120, 275-295.

87 Meier (1995, pp.46-49) especially emphasizes this ‘moral’ dimension. I contend however (in line with Groh) that this should not be seen as a pre-given moral law, but rather as an unsubstantiated moral calling.

88 Groh (1998) pp.275-295, 288.

89 Groh (1998) p.288, cf. p.224. She (pp.117-120) emphasizes that Schmitt assumes a ‘blindness’ on the part of the individual agent, combined with an obligation to act nonetheless. Groh suggests that with this “blinde Vorgebot” (p.118) Schmitt is able to absolve himself of responsibility for his own political actions, because he was only heeding the divine call to act, without knowing beforehand which decision was right.

90 There is a parallel between Schmitt’s decisionism and the theological notion of *Sohnschaft* that Friedrich Gogarten introduces in *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit* (1966), which will be discussed in a later chapter. Cf. Ruh (1980) p.295.

91 Schmitt (1934) p.82 (emphasis added)/*ibid.* (2005) p.65.

Philosophy of History and Critique of Modernity

The concept of neutralization – i.e., depoliticization or detheologization – brings us to Schmitt's philosophy of history, which serves as a precursor to his 'eschatology'. Throughout his oeuvre, Schmitt can be seen to develop his own philosophy of history, one that is intertwined with his critique of enlightened modernity.⁹² 'Modernity' – in as far as it coincides with liberalism and Enlightenment – is defined as an epoch of depoliticization: "Heute ist nichts moderner als der Kampf gegen das Politische."⁹³ The anti-political modernity that Schmitt rails against is considered to be the product of several interrelated modes of thought, namely liberalism, the Enlightenment, modern science, atheism and progressivism. They all appear as different aspects of the same endeavor to progressively eliminate 'the political', the state of exception (which entails the necessity of the decision), and transcendence. This endeavor supposedly aims for the establishment of a system of pure immanence that closes itself off entirely from outside interference or interventions. In this realm of pure immanence, it erects a counterfeit paradise that is devoid of danger and seriousness: a "paradiesischen Diesseits".⁹⁴ Schmitt abhorred the idea of a "completely pacified globe", where "the distinction of friend and enemy would ... cease", because in his mind this also entails a loss of meaning and identity; the enemy is, after all, a necessary precondition for existential self-identification.⁹⁵ In this world devoid of seriousness and meaning, everything becomes relegated to mere "entertainment".⁹⁶

Neutralization entails a gradual pacification, not only in the sense that open conflict is brought to a halt, but also in that any meaningful antagonism is repressed in favor of a mere conflict of opinion. Schmitt's *Politische Romantik* (1919) for instance already deals with the typical liberal-enlightened tendency to reduce meaningful difference and conflict to a mere difference in opinion, expressed in friendly discussions.⁹⁷ Viewed in terms of 'neutralization' it becomes apparent that the denial of enmity, inherent in the tendency to draw everything into a sphere of "endless conversation", is assumed to have disastrous consequences: it eliminates a necessary precondition for meaning and identity. In 'The Age of Neutralization and Depoliticization' we get a sense of what, according to Schmitt, a neutralized world would like. It does not paint a picture of blissful paradise but a techno-industrial dystopia in which the "demonic" "spirit of technicity" – led by an anti-religious "Diesseits-Aktivismus" – holds sway over 20th century mass-society.⁹⁸

In Schmitt's philosophy of history, neutralization – as a synonym of detheologization and depoliticization – equals a loss of existential *Ernst*, resulting in a state of meaninglessness.⁹⁹ It appears that this state of meaninglessness can be conceived of through two dystopian models: it can take the form of a Huxleyan meaninglessness of a soma-induced bliss (*A Brave New World*) or of the grimmer picture of an Orwellian state of total control over a mass-society

92 E.g.: Schmitt (1996) pp.53-58, 69-79.

93 Schmitt (1934) p.82.

94 Schmitt (1934) p.82. Cf. *ibid.* (2014) pp.128-130.

95 Schmitt (1996) pp.58-79. Cf. *ibid.* 'Die Einheit der Welt' (2005b) pp.845-852.

96 Schmitt (1996) pp.35, 53-54, 65. Cf. Meier (1995) pp.39-40; De Wit (1992) pp.124-129.

97 English version: Schmitt (2017). Cf. pp.27, 139-140 on the Romantic-liberalist notion of the "endless conversation". Cf. *ibid.* (2005) p.63.

98 Schmitt (1993) pp.141-142; *ibid.* (1963) p.93: "Der Geist der Technizität, der zu dem Massenglauben eines antireligiösen Diesseits-Aktivismus geführt hat, ist Geist, vielleicht böser und teuflischer Geist, aber nicht als mechanistisch abzutun und nicht der Technik zuzurechnen." Cf. Habermas (2019) p.44.

99 Schmitt (2014) p.124; *ibid.* (2005) p.65.

(1984).¹⁰⁰ In any case, Schmitt presupposes an essential analogy between theology, politics and meaning; this connection delineates his *Verfallsgeschichte*. In *Political Theology* it for instance becomes clear that depoliticized political liberalism is on par with the neutralized liberal theology of German *Kulturprotestantismus* (which seeks to repress the more ‘miraculous’ character of Christianity), and that both serve as halfway-stations to the ultimate consequence of this development, which is a state of atheism, anarchy and nihilism. In other words, because theology, politics and the possibility of meaning are intrinsically connected, it follows that the ultimate denial of God coincides with the absence of authority and a state of utter meaninglessness.¹⁰¹

A few remarks on the connection between morality and theology will help explain why Schmitt was so abhorrent of the notion of a “completely pacified globe”. This in turn enables understanding of the eschatological background of his philosophy of history. It is emphasized in the 1933 edition of *The Concept of the Political* that both a genuine theology and a genuine concept of the political presuppose one thing: belief in original sin, or in other words, the assumption that ‘man is evil’. “Demnach bleibt die merkwürdige und für viele sicher beunruhigende Feststellung, daß alle *echten* politischen Theorien den Menschen als ‘böse’, d.h. als ein keineswegs unproblematisches sondern als ‘gefährliches’ und ‘dynamisches’ Wesen voraussetzen.”¹⁰² He then asserts a crucial “Zusammenhang politischer Theorien mit theologischen Dogmen von der Sünde” that comes to the fore in the works of those scholars he considers to be *genuine* political theoreticians, such as de Maistre, de Bonald and especially Donoso Cortés. They share an

ontologisch-existentialen Denkart, die einem theologischen wie einem politischen Gedankengang wesensgemäß ist. ... Das theologische Grunddogma von der Sündhaftigkeit der Welt und der Menschen führt ... ebenso wie die Unterscheidung von Freund und Feind zu einer Unterscheidung und Einteilung der Menschen, zu einer ‘Abstandname’; dadurch wird der unterschiedslose Optimismus eines durchgängigen Menschenbegriffes unmöglich.¹⁰³

Schmitt asserts that the dogma of original sin is analogous to the political assumption of the irrepressible reality of enmity. It is because “man is a wolf to another man”, to quote a Hobbesian phrase, that there can never be peace on earth. In Schmitt’s mind, this necessitates a continuous willingness to distinguish between friend and enemy.¹⁰⁴

The connection between the theological assumption of the fallen state of the world and the political notion of enmity requires some elaboration, because it is not as obvious as Schmitt suggests; it is for instance not necessarily self-evident why a denial of enmity would be so dangerous. Surveying Schmitt’s work, there appear to be two possible reasons for this. The first reason is seemingly commonsensical: a denial of enmity creates weakness. If one does not recognize the ‘wolf’ in a fellow human being one risks becoming its prey. Similarly, a liberal, post-metaphysical society that tries to ‘neutralize’ enmity by relegating it to mere ‘discussion’ between interlocutors – i.e., “political romanticism” – creates the risk of being overrun by enemies that *do* assume the reality of enmity and are accordingly able and willing to combat the enemy in actual warfare. “If a people no longer possesses the energy or the will to maintain

100 ‘Soma’ is a drug in *A Brave New World* that induces a blissful comatose state. In his *Glossarium* (1991), Schmitt regularly refers to Huxley and Orwell. Cf. *ibid.* (2005b) p.847; Kroll (2010) p.190.

101 Schmitt (2005) pp.50-51. Cf. Meier (1995) p.75.

102 Schmitt (1933) p.43 (emphasis added).

103 Schmitt (1933) p.45.

104 Schmitt (1996) pp.64-65. Schmitt on Hobbes: *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (2008).

itself in the sphere of politics [i.e., to acknowledge the reality of enmity], the latter will not thereby vanish from the world. Only a weak people will disappear.”¹⁰⁵ The suggestion here is that the attempt to suppress enmity will always fail in the end. It will ultimately reappear, but more radically and with more violent consequences.¹⁰⁶

The second reason why an unwillingness to recognize enmity is detrimental according to Schmitt already points to the eschatological dimension of his thought. From the standpoint of his anti-progressivism, Schmitt regards ‘enemies of enmity’ (e.g., liberalism) as protagonists of a dangerous philosophy of history that actively strives to establish a false paradise on earth, sacrificing meaning and seriousness for a lethargic state of “security” and “entertainment”.¹⁰⁷ The denial of enmity is assumedly disastrous because the decision against the enemy (i.e., the act which calls the enemy into existence) forms the precondition for self-understanding and self-achievement. This implies, as especially Groh repeatedly points out, that Schmitt requires the world to exist in fallen, destitute state, because this forms a precondition for his theological-political existentialism. Groh argues that this leads him to an affirmation of the fallen state of the world, or even to an active “Arbeit an der Heillosigkeit der Welt”, as the title of her critical study already suggests.¹⁰⁸ In the *Glossarium*, Schmitt provides an indication why he *needs* the progressive, utopian project of enlightened modernity to fail, namely because it would herald the end of the fearful, fallen state of the world that is divinely decreed, and which forms a prerequisite for a meaningful human existence:

Was ist eine Utopie? Die Aufhebung der unendlichen Möglichkeiten des Menschen in einer endlichen Realisierung; erst nur gedacht, dann verwirklicht. Denn jeder Gedanke des Menschen geht in Erfüllung. Die *Sünde* der Utopie liegt darin, daß die Realisierung im Endlichen die Angst aufheben soll, die in der Möglichkeit des Unendlichen liegt; daß die endliche Realisierung uns von dem *Stachel* des Unendlichen erlösen, daß sie die *Bienen Gottes*, die uns belästigen, wie Ungeziefer töten soll.¹⁰⁹

Modern utopianism seeks to eliminate the divine ‘sting’ of fear and insecurity that humans suffer in a life under theological absolutism. But, as Schmitt argues elsewhere, it is precisely this sting and state of destitution that constitutes “the hope and honor of our existence.”¹¹⁰

The fallen state of the world is a necessary part of the divine ordinance. According to Schmitt, this condition forms a prerequisite for humans to freely decide either for or against God – and accordingly, to distinguish between those people that fall on either side of this decision, friends and enemies. This means that enmity has a providential origin in Schmitt’s thought, as Meier notes.¹¹¹ In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt refers to a speech by Oliver Cromwell in which “the Spaniard” is identified as “*the providential enemy*”: “He is a natural enemy”, his “enmity is put into him by God.”¹¹² In the 1933 version of *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt claims that such instances form “Höhepunkte der große Politik” which are “zugleich

105 Schmitt (1996) p.53. Cf. *ibid.* (1933) p.35.

106 Schmitt (2005b) p.852; *ibid.* (2014) p.125.

107 Cf. Groh (1998) p.203.

108 Groh (1998) p.183. Cf. Schmitt (1991) p.94. De Wit (1992, 392-403) regards this as a theological affirmation of a ‘good order of creation’.

109 Schmitt (1991) p.94 (emphasis added).

110 Schmitt (2009) p.170.

111 Schmitt (1996) pp.67-68; Meier (1995) pp.46-47, 56, 70.

112 Schmitt (1996) p.68 (emphasis added).

die Augenblicke, in denen der Feind in konkreter Deutlichkeit als Feind erblickt wird".¹¹³ The providential nature of enmity designates antagonism as an essential part of the condition of the world. This implies that it is only in the *next* world where the necessity of distinguishing between friend and enemy is finally absolved. Similarly, it is also only there that an unproblematic, global unity and true peace is possible. In 'Die Einheit der Welt' he notes: "Man darf nicht vergessen, daß die ideale Einheit sich *im Reich des Guten Hirten verwirklicht*, nicht aber in jedweder menschlichen Organisation."¹¹⁴ In the meantime it is necessary to combat anyone who does not recognize this. It is in this sense that Groh claims that Schmitt does not merely accept the *Heiligkeit* of the world as a given but rather actively affirms it as an imperative; it entails a declaration of war against anyone who seeks to undo the divinely willed fallen state of the world.¹¹⁵ Hence, 'neutralization' does not only consist of a denial of the divinely ordained state of destitution but it is regarded as a diabolical scheme, a project to actively negate the fallen state, and hence God's decree. In one word, Schmitt considered it to be the work of the Antichrist, as Meier suggests.¹¹⁶

Eschatology: Schmitt and the Katechon

'Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History'

The eschatological dimension of Schmitt's thought, crucial to his debate with Löwith and Blumenberg, now comes clearly into view. In order to understand Schmitt's idiosyncratic eschatology it is necessary to again zoom in on the hermetic essay 'Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History'. This paper, written as a review of *Meaning in History*, is significant not only because it illuminates many arcane-theological elements of Schmitt's thought within a explicitly eschatological framework but also because it directly and critically addresses Löwith's philosophy (which is why we will return to it in the next chapter). Against Löwith, Schmitt presents in this review three possible ways in which a Christian believer is able to discern 'meaning in history'. The first possibility is called "the great historical parallel": it assumes an essential correspondence between the beginning of Christianity in the Incarnation and the current widespread sense that the world as we know it is ending. It draws on "the certainty of an exhausted age". Christians must interpret this in eschatological terms: they "have to elevate the parallel to the level of identity, because for them the essential events of the Christian eon, i.e., the Advent, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of the Son of Man, remain alive in immutable presence."¹¹⁷

The second possibility is contained within the concept of the *katechon*, or 'the restrainer' (*Aufhalter*).¹¹⁸ This notion appears in the New Testament, 2 Thessalonians 2: 9: "the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way". This suggests that a force restrains the arrival and subsequent

113 Schmitt (1933) pp.48-49. Cf. Meier (1995) p.28.

114 Schmitt (2005b) p.841 (emphasis added). Cf. *ibid.* (2014) p.115.

115 Groh (1998) pp.127-129, 161, 183.

116 Meier (1995) pp.47-49, 79. Cf. Kroll (2010) pp.192-193; Habermas (2019) p.44; Schmitt (2005b) p.841; *ibid.* (1991) p.94.

117 Schmitt (2009) p.169.

118 Schmitt (2009) p.169; *ibid.* (2006) pp.59-66; (2014) p.92; (2005b) p.850; Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.120.

See for a very different interpretation of Schmitt's philosophy of the *katechon* Lievens (2016). He proposes a secular reading, according to which the 'katechon' is part of a "very sober and profane" view of history.

reign of the Antichrist. Schmitt opposes the catechon to an unadulterated version of eschatology that he recognizes in Löwith's depiction of Christianity, the latter of which amounts to a passive expectation of the end and an indifference to the world and its history. This "vivid expectation of an imminent end seems to take away the meaning from all of history, and it causes an eschatological paralysis".¹¹⁹ The question "whether eschatological faith and historical consciousness can coexist" is answered affirmatively through the figure of the catechon: it imbues a force, person or institution with the divine ordination of actively combatting, *in history* and through active *decisions*, those forces that seek to accelerate the coming of the end. Schmitt evidently fears the eschaton: it is identified with the reign of the Antichrist rather than with the arrival of Christ.¹²⁰ Schmitt argues that the catechon is a distinguishable force in history, i.e., it is possible to identify the catechon with concrete historical agents or powers. For example, in his *Der Nomos der Erde* (1950) Schmitt expounds on how the Christian empires of the Middle Ages, and especially the Holy Roman Empire, can be identified as a catechontic power.¹²¹ But it is not only the medieval empire that functions as a catechon; in his *Glossarium*, Schmitt suggests that the catechon is a metaphysical, transcendent form that remains constant throughout history and which becomes reoccupied time and again by successive, different instances. As a form, it must never remain 'empty', since that would clear the way for the coming of the Antichrist. In a letter to Gerhard Günther, he writes:

ich glaube an den Katechon; er ist für mich die einzige Möglichkeit, als Christ Geschichte zu verstehen und sinnvoll zu finden. ... Ich wollte eigentlich von Ihnen [i.e., Gerhard Günther] wissen: Wer ist heute der κατέχων? ... Man muß für jede Epoche der letzten 1948 Jahre den κατέχων nennen können. Der Platz war niemals unbesetzt, sonst waren wir nicht mehr vorhanden. Jeder große Kaiser des christlichen Mittelalters hat sich mit vollem Glauben und Bewußtsein für den Katechon gehalten, und er war es auch.¹²²

The third possibility that is introduced in his already quite obscure text is arguably the most difficult to grasp. It can be termed as either the 'Marian' view of history or that of the 'Christian Epimetheus', and it concerns the "infinite singularity of historical reality".¹²³ Schmitt elects Epimetheus as a paradigm because he is the antithesis of Prometheus. Whereas Prometheus represents foresight, progress, 'planning', and enlightened modernity in general, Epimetheus stands for hindsight and the understanding of the unique significance of singular historical events.¹²⁴ It is 'Marian' because "the incarnation in the Virgin Mary" is held to be the preeminent historical event of "infinite, non-appropriable, non-occupiable singularity".¹²⁵ The value of 'hindsight' Epimetheus represents signifies that the future is essentially open-ended and that humans are 'blind' vis-à-vis the outcomes of their decisions in the historical realm. Hence Epimetheus directs us to not look forward, as foreknowledge

119 Schmitt (2009) p.169.

120 Cf. Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) pp.131-132; Motschenbacher (2000) pp.219-224.

121 Schmitt, *Nomos of the Earth* (2006) pp.59-66.

122 Schmitt (1991) p.63.

123 Schmitt (2009) p.169.

124 Kroll (2010) pp.182-183; Groh (1998) p.127.

125 Schmitt (2006) pp.169-170. Cf. *ibid.* (2005b) p.851. According to Lievens (2016, p.408), this notion of the unique singularity of 'the event' should be extrapolated to the historical domain in Schmitt's thought. He reads Schmitt as a historicist, who focusses on the unique nature of each event, according to the credo: "A historical truth is true only once."

is a privilege only reserved for God, but backwards, to find a hidden meaning in history that can shed light on the present.¹²⁶

History is presented as a non-teleological, protean realm. In *Political Theology*, Schmitt writes that “humanity reels blindly through a labyrinth that we call history, whose entrance, exit, and shape nobody knows”.¹²⁷ However, the shapelessness of history and our blindness does not make history meaningless: rather, Schmitt asserts in ‘Three Possibilities’ that it is in this “darkness” that its meaningfulness resides. Because in darkness, we sense the “Einstückung des Ewigen in den Ablauf der Zeiten, ein Wurzelschlagen im Sinnreich der Erde, durch Mangel und Ohnmacht die Hoffnung und Ehre unseres Daseins.”¹²⁸ Combining the two notions, of history as darkness and the singularity of ‘the event’, it becomes clear what the task is of the Christian Epimetheus. It designates the function of grasping the meaning of these single, unique events. He writes: “Christians look back on completed events and find a basic reason [Ingrund] and an archetype [Inbild]. Through the active contemplation of them, *the dark meaning of our history continues to grow*.”¹²⁹ These ‘basic reasons’ that allow us to discern a ‘dark meaning’ can however never be integrated into any grand historical, teleological scheme or ‘plan’, given the essentially singular nature of these ‘events’. History is a sphere of darkness shot through with singular shimmers of eternity; to Schmitt, this is the only way of conceiving history as meaningful without surrendering to the grand, teleological-progressive philosophies of history.¹³⁰

Katechon or Grand Inquisitor?

Taken together, these three concepts allow for an overview of Schmitt’s atypical eschatology. Regarding the question how these ‘possibilities’ relate to each other I contend – in line with the analyses provided by Kroll and Groh – that the Christian Epimetheus has a passive, contemplative role that is mirrored by the activist, decisionist function of the katechon.¹³¹ Regarding the future, both stand under what Groh calls a “blinde Vorgebot”: the individual believer can only act through blind decisions or ‘leaps of faith’, and it is only in retrospect that the Epimetheus can ascertain the providential significance of these decisions.¹³² The most important subject of the epimethean task is the discovery of the “great historical parallel” between the beginning and the end of the Christian aeon. This “immediate expectation of the end” in turn attributes urgency and significance to the role of the katechon, arguably the most important of Schmitt’s historico-eschatological concepts.¹³³ Indeed, the question of the role and significance of the katechon was considered by Schmitt himself to be “die *Kernfrage* der (meiner) Politischen Theologie”.¹³⁴

126 Cf. Groh (1998) pp.115-132; Lievens (2016) pp.407-411. Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (2007, p.264) mentions a similar prohibition with regard to foreseeing the future.

127 Schmitt (2005) p.59.

128 Schmitt (1950) p.931. Cf. *ibid.* 2005b, pp.851- 852; Kroll (2010) p.184.

129 Schmitt (2009) p.170 (emphasis added).

130 Schmitt (2005b) pp.845-852.

131 Groh (1998) pp.115-132; Kroll (2010) pp.178-209. The title of the current section refers to Motschenbacher’s book, *Katechon oder Großinquisitor?* (2000).

132 Groh (1998) pp.118-120, cf. pp.116-124, 276. Meier (2012, pp.250-252) proposes a slightly different interpretation of the relation between the katechon and Epimetheus, in which the katechon signifies a defensive and the Epimetheus an offensive stance.

133 Kroll (2010) p.205; Meier (2012) p.289.

134 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.120 (emphasis added).

The importance of the catechon is affirmed in other texts as well. In *The Nomos of the Earth* Schmitt states that “I do not believe that any historical concept other than *katechon* would have been possible for the original Christian faith”, whereas in *Glossarium*, as we have seen, this becomes a personal confession: “ich glaube an den Katechon; er ist für mich die einzige Möglichkeit, als Christ Geschichte zu verstehen und sinnvoll zu finden.”¹³⁵ In both *Nomos of the Earth* and in “Three Possibilities” we find an indication as to why this is the case: assumedly, the idea of the catechon forms a “bridge between the notion of an eschatological paralysis of all human events” and “historical thought”. In other words, it makes it possible to conceive of *meaning in history*, and more specifically to imbue decisions in the historical realm with meaning, because it delineates a historical project of active combat against the forces of progress and utopianism. Without the catechon, eschatology typically negates any notion of meaningful political action, as it negates society, history, or the world in general; this is referred to as “eschatological paralysis”.¹³⁶ The catechon solves this problem because it allows for the acknowledgement of the eschatological framework of history on the one hand, while it also affirms the meaningfulness of political action on the other.¹³⁷ The catechon enables Schmitt to borrow the sense of seriousness and urgency from eschatology while it suspends the fatalism and passivism that is usually implicated in an immediate expectation of the end.

This again raises the question what kind of Christian faith we are dealing with here. Meier suggests that this eschatology stems from the more or less orthodox belief that the Antichrist will appear in a concealed form and that is therefore necessary to be ever vigilant, as Schmitt intends.¹³⁸ Kroll on the other hand understands this catechontic eschatology as an indication of the *heterodoxy* of Schmitt’s faith. He notices that Schmitt is driven more by a fear of the Antichrist than by a hopeful expectation of the kingdom of God.¹³⁹ This in turn points to an interesting feature of Schmitt’s belief, which is that he appears to be haunted by a lingering uncertainty with regard to the outcome of history. According to Kroll’s reading, Schmitt was never really certain that Christ would indeed return, while he *was* certain that the process of neutralization and depoliticization was actually occurring, and that it was, in fact, detrimental.

Kroll suggests that if “the political and its corollary, the plurality of powers, are considered to be grounded in human nature, there seems to be no reason to fear their obsolescence – yet this is precisely what Schmitt fears.”¹⁴⁰ Thus, it appears that in Schmitt’s mind history is zero-sum game between the ultimate victory of the Antichrist or Christ.¹⁴¹ However, the anxiety that this brings also receives a positive connotation in Schmitt’s theory. Fear and uncertainty heightens the importance of the role of the catechon and it deepens the necessity and seriousness of the decision, which, after all, would disappear if there were actual divine guarantees with regard to the outcome of history. Indeed, “Angst” is a necessary infliction created by the “Stachel des Unendlichen” of “die Bienen Gottes”.¹⁴² Kroll argues that, according to Schmitt, “[t]he maintenance of fear was ... an eminently political task.”¹⁴³

135 Schmitt (2006) p.60; *ibid.* (1991) p.63 (emphasis added).

136 Schmitt (2006) p.60; *ibid.* (2009) p.169.

137 For instance Lievens (2016, pp.114-119) argues as much, in that the catechon allows Schmitt to steer between the Scylla of a passivist eschatology and the Charybdis of an activist one. However, his ‘secular’ reading of Schmitt suggests that this eschatological background was merely metaphorical, and should not be taken literally, which evidently contradicts the approach that I take in this reconstruction.

138 Meier (2012) pp.246-247.

139 Kroll (2010) pp.184, 192-193, 208-215. Cf. Motschenbacher (2000) p.219.

140 Kroll (2010) p.187.

141 Kroll (2010) p.199.

142 Schmitt (1991) p.94.

143 Kroll (2010) p.193. Cf. Groh (1998) p.203.

Schmitt has a tendency to take features of orthodox Christian belief and transform them into 'heterodox' varieties; consider, for instance, his affirmation of enmity and the fallen state of the world as a positive feature of the divine ordinance. The fact that he explicitly opts against the eschaton – traditionally an object of hope – by his resolute endorsement of the catechon indicates that his eschatology leaves the outcome of history uncertain.¹⁴⁴ This ties in with another significant topos in Schmitt-scholarship: the figure of the Grand Inquisitor. In Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, the Grand Inquisitor imprisons Christ (who has returned unexpectedly in medieval Seville) for disrupting the age-old stability and authority of the Catholic church. The common interpretation of this parable is that it critiques the notion of a Christianity without Christ. The fact that Schmitt places such emphasis on authority, order, and the need to restrain the eschaton instead of hopefully awaiting it, has caused several commentators, such as Groh, Alfons Motschenbacher and Jacob Taubes, to note a significant parallel between his position and that of the Grand Inquisitor.¹⁴⁵ For instance, Groh argues that this figure encapsulates Schmitt's decision in favor of absolute authority, combined with an intensified emphasis on the sinfulness of humankind, and that it signifies his blindness for other aspects of Christian thought which might have a more disruptive, anarchic potential: e.g., the notion of 'Christian freedom', universal love, and the relativization of worldly power.¹⁴⁶ However, Schmitt shows in the *Glossarium* that he not oblivious to the 'anarchic potential' of Christianity. Here, he writes that Hobbes recognized this threat, and drew the only proper conclusion, which is a 'scientific' version of the Grand Inquisitor's task: "Hobbes spricht aus und begründet wissenschaftlich, was Dostojewskis Großinquisitor tut: die Wirkung Christi im sozialen und politischen Bereich unschädlich machen; das Christentum ent-anarchisieren".¹⁴⁷

Jacob Taubes writes that, in a personal meeting with Schmitt, the latter concurred with this identification of him as the Grand Inquisitor. Taubes paraphrases:

Schon früh hatte ich in Carl Schmitt eine Inkarnation des Dostojewskischen 'Großinquisitors' vermutet. In der Tat in einem stürmischen Gespräch in Plettenberg 1980 sagte mir Carl Schmitt, wer nicht einsehe, daß der 'Großinquisitor' schlechthin recht hat gegenüber all den schwärmerischen Zügen einer jesuanischen Frömmigkeit, der habe weder kapiert, was Kirche eigentlich heißt noch was Dostojewski – gegen seine eigene Gesinnung – 'eigentlich' vermittelt habe.¹⁴⁸

This self-identification is significant because it confirms the suspicion that Schmitt's eschatology was driven by a genuine fear for the possible victory of the Antichrist.¹⁴⁹ It can be argued that because of Schmitt's uncertainty vis-à-vis Christ's return, and for fear of his counterpart, he wanted to take his chances and assume the role of the Grand Inquisitor instead of adopting a more passive role of a hopeful expectation. This explains the motivation behind his notion of the catechon, i.e., because it is uncertain what the outcome of history will be it is necessary to delay its end.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, it illuminates Schmitt's theory of secularization further: the

144 Groh (1998) pp.127-128, 239.

145 Groh (1998) pp. 183-185, 212-216; Motschenbacher (2000) pp.314-350; Taubes (2013) pp.7-8.

146 Groh (1998) pp. 212-216; Motschenbacher (2000) pp.223-224.

147 Schmitt (1991) p.243, cf. p.320.

148 Taubes (1987) p.15. Cf. Schmitt (1991) p.243, 320; *ibid.* (1970) p.74.

149 Kroll (2010) pp.187, 198-199, 215.

150 Motschenbacher (2000, pp.386-392) suggests that if Schmitt indeed saw himself as a *Großinquisitor* then this means that he ultimately lacks in faith. It is a "Politische theologie ohne Glauben". I would instead argue in line with Kroll that this affinity with the Grand Inquisitor might point to a idiosyncratic faith riddled by doubt.

essential connection between the political and the theological (systematic secularization) must be maintained over against the gradual depoliticization (neutralization) because of a genuine concern that this depoliticization process can actually reach its destination of achieving an artificial paradisiacal end state. Schmitt prefers to live in a ‘fallen’ world not only because it allows for an authentic life of decisiveness but also because he fears the realization of its alternative.

Schmitt’s Stasiology: the Identity of the Political and Theological

The katechontic eschatology of Schmitt was informed by a sense of fear that *the Enemy* – the personalization of the forces of progress and utopianism that aim to establish a counterfeit paradise on earth – might prevail in the end. However, this is not Schmitt’s “last word on political theology”.¹⁵¹ In his final book and intellectual testament, *Political Theology II: the Myth of the Closure of any Political Theology* (1970), Schmitt puts forward a last ‘proof’ that the political, i.e., enmity, is an inescapable feature of reality and that all attempts at depoliticization must ultimately fail. This ‘proof’ is presented in the Postscript of his book, which is significant because this text constitutes an attack on Blumenberg’s *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (which is why we return to this text in the chapter on the Schmitt-Blumenberg debate).¹⁵² The dense and suggestive Postscript provides an insight into the most esoteric elements in this political theology: Schmitt’s “stasiology”, or the final argument for the inescapability of the political.¹⁵³

The “stasiology” that forms the argumentative core of the Postscript conveys the idea that every unity in fact contains an antagonistic duality. Schmitt hereby provides an ontological-metaphysical ground for the principle of enmity. “Stasis” means “quiescence, tranquility, standpoint, status”, but more importantly, it *also* means “(political) unrest, movement, uproar and civil war”.¹⁵⁴ A formula on the nature of the divine from a patristic text by Gregory of Nazianzus forms a point of departure: “The One – *to Hen* – is always in uproar – *stasiazon* – against itself – *pros heauton*”. This statement on the nature and unity of God leads Schmitt to the conclusion that “[a]t the heart of the doctrine of Trinity we encounter a genuine politico-theological *stasiology*. Thus the problem of enmity and of the enemy cannot be ignored.”¹⁵⁵ By anchoring enmity – and hence the political – in the heart of theology, Schmitt asserts an essential and irreducible connection between the two spheres. The ‘stasiological’ interpretation of the divine is meant to prove that the Christian conception of God contains within it a struggle between two principles, namely between the Son and the Father.¹⁵⁶ The antagonism between the principle of redemption and creation is reminiscent of the Gnosticism of Marcion of Sinope, especially as Blumenberg portrays it in *Legitimacy*, but in contradistinction to the latter’s reading, Schmitt does not regard the Christian conception of God as a failed attempt at “overcoming Gnosticism”.¹⁵⁷ It rather *preserves* and *contains* the fundamental divide between the creator God and the God of salvation in a dualistic-antagonistic stalemate between

151 Müller (2003) p.167.

152 Schmitt (2014) pp.116-130.

153 This phrase derives from the title of De Wit’s book, *De onontkoombaarheid van de politiek* (1992).

154 Schmitt (2014) p.123.

155 Schmitt (2014) pp.122-123.

156 The Son is pitted against Father, making the former an ‘enemy’ of divine authority. Groh (1998, p.177) suggests that Schmitt implicitly distinguished between an orderly ‘Epimethean Christ’ and a revolutionary ‘Promethean Christ’.

157 Blumenberg (1983) p.126.

the Father and the Son. Schmitt suggests that the antithesis between two principles – Father/Son, creation/redemption – cannot be ‘*aufgehoben*’ in a Hegelian sense but must rather be preserved as such, for otherwise one would run the risk of the one collapsing into the other.¹⁵⁸

The Postscript of *Political Theology II* alludes to what risks are involved with not upholding this essential tension between the principles of creation and redemption. Schmitt identifies the Father with the existing order and authority, whereas he identifies the Son with revolution and the destruction of the existing order.¹⁵⁹ The implication of this stasiology is that if the hidden duality in every unity is ignored, i.e., the possibility of uproar, then this can have disastrous consequences, namely revolution and destruction of order. However, it also entails that the relative imperfection or destitution of the *existing* order should be recognized. If it is not, then this could supposedly amount to a tyrannical claim that the kingdom of the God of salvation has already been established. This would be a wrongful justification of an order that is still in need of salvation.¹⁶⁰ This tyranny might evoke revolt, a revolution that topples the old world in favor of a new one, one that in turn establishes its *own* wrongful claim to salvation.¹⁶¹ In short, ignorance of stasiology can either result in the tyranny of the old or in the terror of the new. In any case, this assertion of the intrinsic duality of any unity indicates that, if the reality of enmity is ignored, it will necessarily erupt in a more radical and violent form.¹⁶²

By exalting enmity to the highest order of theology, Schmitt provides the final ‘proof’ of the inescapability of the political.¹⁶³ The upshot is that, even if enlightened modernity considers itself fully absolved from any reference to theology and enmity, this does not mean that this dimension has actually disappeared:

The main structural problem with Gnostic dualism, that is, with the problem of the God of creation and the God of salvation, dominates not only every religion of salvation and redemption. *It exists inescapably in every world in need of change and renewal*, and it is both immanent and ineradicable. One cannot get rid of the enmity between human beings by prohibiting wars between states in the traditional sense, by advocating a world revolution and by transforming world politics into world policing. Revolution ... is a hostile struggle. Friendship is hardly possible between the lord of a world in need of change ... – a lord who is deemed guilty of this need for change because he does not support but rather opposes it – and the liberator, the creator of a transformed new world. They are, so to speak, *by definition* enemies.¹⁶⁴

He then drives the message home by introducing a famous phrase from Goethe in support of his claim. This dictum, which is known as the “extraordinary saying”, reads: “*nemo contra deum nisi deus ipse*”, translated by Schmitt as ‘only God against God’.¹⁶⁵ Schmitt adds: “The idea itself is old. If every unity implies a duality and therefore the possibility of uproar, or stasis,

158 Schmitt (2014) pp.122-125.

159 Schmitt (1991) pp.243, 230. Faber (1983, pp.88-99) notes that this stasiology can also be appropriated by a Leftist-revolutionary brand of political theology (in Chapter 7 we discuss this option in relation to Taubes).

160 Cf. Schmitt (1933) pp.44-45.

161 Schmitt notes elsewhere, invoking Goethe, that if the tension between the ‘real’ and the ‘ideal’ is not mediated then the ‘ideal’ will turn into something terrible: “the idea requires mediation: wherever it appears in naked directness or in automatical self-fulfillment, then there is terror, and the misfortune is awesome.” Schmitt (1996b) pp.27-28.

162 Schmitt (2005b) p.852.

163 Müller (2003) pp.158-159; De Wit (1992) pp.445-452.

164 Schmitt (2014) p.125 (translation modified, emphasis added)/*ibid.* 1970) p.120-121.

165 The proper translation is a point of contestation between Schmitt and Blumenberg.

is immanent, then theology seems to become ‘stasiology.’” It is clear to Schmitt that Goethe’s dictum has “a Christological origin”, which is why he sees it as a testament to his own antagonistic theology.¹⁶⁶

Conclusion

In conclusion, I address two outstanding questions that have already been touched upon in this exposition of Schmitt’s theory: the first concerns ‘the inescapability of the political’ and the second the ‘ultimate foundation’ of his political theology. First, we have seen that *The Concept of the Political* in fact harbors two incompatible conceptions of the political, each emphasized in different editions of the book: the regional model, according to which politics forms only one societal sphere among others (emphasized in the 1932 and 1963 versions), and the model of intensity, according to which *any* sphere can become political when the decisions made therein are acute or ‘sharp’ enough (as is highlighted in the 1933 version). The latter model allows Schmitt to speak of “politics as totality”, the “total state”, “total war” and the “total enemy”, as it asserts the inescapability of the political. The commentary of scholars such as Theo de Wit and Heinrich Meier indicates that this was indeed Schmitt’s aim.¹⁶⁷

Furthermore, we can conclude that our discussion of Schmitt’s work lends some support to the interpretation that is put forward most prominently by Meier, which is that the ‘theological’ dimension of this political theology should be taken seriously, i.e., that Schmitt’s thought was indeed informed by religious and metaphysical beliefs. However, this interpretation also forms a corrective of Meier’s reading. We have seen that – as has been demonstrated by Ruth Groh and Joe Paul Kroll – Schmitt’s beliefs were also determined by doubt, fear and uncertainty, and that this theological-existential *Angst* has a bearing on the content of his political theology. This becomes evident from Schmitt’s katechontic eschatology and the sense in which it is affected by doubt vis-à-vis the outcome of history. To give a final illustration: in ‘Die Einheit der Welt’ (1951) Schmitt seeks to confirm the adagio that ‘there is no honest peace in this world’ – and hence that the idea of global unity (“die Einheit der Welt”) is a dangerous illusion – but he formulates it in a manner that leaves room for ambiguity. “Jede Einheit der Welt, die nicht diesem christlichen Bilde folgt, würde nur den Übergang zu einer neuen Vielheit, schwanger von Katastrophen, ankündigen oder das Zeichen dafür sein, daß das Ende der Zeiten gekommen ist.”¹⁶⁸ If we follow the interpretation of Kroll we can surmise that, to Schmitt, “das Ende der Zeiten” could *either* imply the arrival of the “Reich des Guten Hirten” or the victory of the Antichrist – he was unsure which it would be, after all: “[a]uch das Reich Satans ist eine Einheit”.¹⁶⁹ Hence, it can be maintained that while Schmitt sought to affirm the inescapability of the political he was also uncertain of this axiom. This element of doubt might help explain his decision in favor of the katechon (against the eschaton) and why, as Groh, Jacob Taubes and Alfons Motschenbacher point out, he could identify with the Grand Inquisitor of Dostoevsky’s parable.

The Postscript of *Political Theology II*, Schmitt’s intellectual testament, is significant because it is meant to be “the last word” on the inescapability of the political, and as such it is

166 Schmitt (2014) pp.126-127.

167 De Wit (1992) e.g. pp.437-438, 468-474; Meier (1995) pp.12-29.

168 Schmitt (2005b) p.852. “Nulla in mundo pax sincera” is a motet by Vivaldi (not referred to by Schmitt as far as I know). Cf. *ibid.* (1933) p.36 for a comparable formula: “plena securitas in hac vita non expectanda”. De Wit (1992 pp.426-427) also addresses this ambiguity as an outcome of Schmitt’s theological beliefs.

169 Schmitt (2005b) p.841.

supposed to expel earlier doubts. This axiom is established in a final tour de force in which Schmitt raises the political to the heart of theology, and thereby of his metaphysics and social ontology. I propose that the question that has divided Schmitt-scholarship – what is the ‘ultimate foundation’ of his political theology – can be answered in light of his stasiology: the political is inherent to theology and vice versa. Anywhere Schmitt sees (the possibility) of uproar, the division of unity, and the attempt to topple an imperfect unity in favor of a new unity that will prove to be imperfect in time, he regards it as an iteration of the “Gnostic dualism” that is contained in the Christian idea of God. In short, Schmitt’s political theology can be encapsulated by the assertion of an essential isomorphism between the political and the theological spheres. This implies that neither “the political” nor “the theological” forms the foundation of his thought; they are structurally identical. Against Meier, I would therefore suggest that the fact that there are theological elements to be discerned in Schmitt’s thought does not entail that they serve as an ultimate ground. And against e.g. Motschenbacher I contend that the fact that these elements do not provide Schmitt any ground or stable guideline to base his decisions on does not imply that they are therefore purely instrumental vis-à-vis the primacy of the political.¹⁷⁰ Schmitt’s political theology wields a formal conception of theology and of politics that creates a certain ‘groundlessness’ in his theory. In the next chapter we will discover that Löwith regarded this feature as proof of a calamitous “active nihilism”.¹⁷¹

The structural identity of the political and the theological further elucidates Schmitt’s multifaceted concept of secularization. To Schmitt, any political order that acknowledges the *true* nature of the political – either consciously or subconsciously – participates in the legitimate transfer of power and authority from the divine to the sovereign. This is not necessarily tied to the Christian tradition in a substantive sense. Moreover, the fact that even the unity of God contains an antagonistic duality serves as a confirmation that the political sovereign must be ever vigilant, since every unity possesses the possibility of uproar. Neutralization hence acquires an apocalyptic meaning, for it could either engender a penultimate violent eruption of enmity or it could result in the establishment of an immanent counterfeit paradise.

This analysis of Schmitt’s thought has been interspersed with allusions to both Löwith and Blumenberg. In the following chapters we will find that Schmitt was in fact deeply involved in a debate with both Löwith and Blumenberg, and that central elements of his thought have been conceived over against the “counter-image” that these two philosophers pose to him.¹⁷² The question of secularization will form an important nexus-point that demonstrates the fundamental differences between these three thinkers. Moreover, we will discover that Löwith and Blumenberg have addressed – in different ways – this problem of the ‘groundlessness’ of Schmitt’s political theology. Situating Schmitt over against Löwith and Blumenberg will not only shed new light on the former, but it will also increase our understanding of the latter two thinkers, as it explicates the latent political dimension of their respective philosophies.

170 Motschenbacher (2000) p.367.

171 Löwith (1995). Cf. Reilly (2015) p.161.

172 Schmitt (2014) p.128.

Chapter 3

The Löwith-Schmitt Debate on Nihilism and Faith: Critique, Post-War Diplomacy and Mutual Suspicion

Introduction

In 1934 Karl Löwith fled to Italy. When he arrived and managed to rent “a beautiful room in the Via Gregoriana from a charming landlady” he immediately continued the work he had started in Germany, which dealt with *The Concept of the Political* by Carl Schmitt.¹ This work culminated in a scathing critique of Schmitt that would have a considerable impact on Schmitt-scholarship: “Der Okkasionelle Dezisionismus von C. Schmitt”, published in 1935 under the pseudonym Hugo Fiala.² Schmitt had meanwhile made a name as a pre-eminent state-counselor and legal scholar in Nazi-Germany when he was invited to give a lecture in Rome. Löwith attended this lecture, as we can read in the intellectual biography *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933*:

One of the subsequent visitors was Carl Schmitt, on whose ‘decisionism’ I had published a critical essay under a pseudonym behind which he suspected Georg Lukács. He had no idea that the author would be among his listeners ... Schmitt’s personal impression did not match my expectations. The State Councillor [*Staatsrat*, i.e. Schmitt] was by no means a self-assured dictator but a petty-bourgeois with a bland, rosy face. ... The central point of his lecture was as consistent as it was despicable: the ‘total state’ originated in ‘total war’. A total war, however, also required a ‘total enemy’, and the ‘immorality’ [*‘unsittlichkeit’*] (sic!) of the last war had consisted in the fact that it was waged without a total enemy. ... When he talked to Catholics like my friend Erik Peterson, his idea of the state would normally be slanted towards authoritarian Catholic terms. He personally came from the new Catholic circle which had earlier formed around Scheler. The difference between them was that Scheler’s inner doubt

1 Löwith, *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933* (1994) p.85.

2 Translated as: Löwith, ‘The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt’ (1995). Cf. *ibid.* (1994) p.86.

manifested itself in constant changes in position, whereas in Schmitt and Peterson it took the form of a *decision*, whether it be for the Church or the State.³

This unflattering sketch of a ‘rosy-faced petty-bourgeois’ National-Socialist official by a Jewish exile already contains, *in nuce*, several key elements of the Löwith-Schmitt debate. We will discover that Löwith criticized Schmitt for his “despicable” and dangerous preoccupation with the “total enemy” as a precondition for existential self-identification, whereas Schmitt would suspect that Löwith was nothing more than a mouthpiece of another critic, the theologian Erik Peterson. Furthermore, Schmitt would take great effort to convey to Löwith that there was *more* to his political theology than a mere thin veneer of ‘authoritarian-Catholic’ rhetoric.⁴

The polemic that developed between Löwith and Schmitt is significant, we will discover, because it provides a valuable insight into the philosophies of both authors and because it centers on central continuous issues that reoccur in the broader secularization debate. However, it has remained largely underexposed in the secondary literature. Surveying the field I surmise that there are three main reasons for this neglect: first, Schmitt himself was under the impression that the polemic between him and Löwith had never succeeded to get off the ground because the latter was reluctant to be drawn into a direct confrontation, i.e., that it was a “Kontroverse, die nicht stattfand”, in the words of Alexander Schmitz.⁵ Schmitt cautiously attempted to reach out to Löwith after the publication of *Meaning in History* (1949) – most notably by writing his ‘Drei Möglichkeiten eines christlichen Geschichtsbildes’ (1950) as a (seemingly positive) review of this book – but felt grieved when this rapprochement fell on deaf ears, as he would later admit to Hans Blumenberg.⁶ Second, Löwith’s initial reading of Schmitt in ‘The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt’ has more recently been declared outdated by commentators such as Heinrich Meier, Theo de Wit and (to a lesser extent) by Ruth Groh, because it supposedly fails to take the theological dimension of Schmitt’s thought seriously. Löwith, in short, scolded Schmitt for harboring a vacuous opportunistic nihilism, while Meier et. al. have pointed out that there is in fact a theological core or foundation in the latter’s thought that is thereby ignored.⁷ Third, the polemic between Löwith and Schmitt tends to be overshadowed in the scholarship on the secularization debate by the latter’s more direct and extensive discussion with Blumenberg, who was more willing to engage with this controversial figure. Schmitt himself believed that Löwith and Blumenberg formed a united front against him, and this view that has gained some acceptance by scholars. Hence, it makes sense to primarily focus on his polemic with Blumenberg, simply because there is more to focus on.⁸

In the following discussion of the Löwith-Schmitt polemic I will argue that these three concerns are largely misdirected. First, we will find that it is possible to discern a distinctly outlined polemic between Löwith and Schmitt that centers on the aforementioned two articles,

3 Löwith (1994) p.91 (emphasis added)/*ibid.* (1990) pp.86-87. Unbeknownst to Löwith, this was not the first time he was in the same room with Schmitt; both had attended the famous ‘Vocation Lectures’ by Max Weber in the winter of 1918-1919. Cf. editorial notes in: Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.141.

4 Löwith, *Mein Leben* (1990) p.87: “Gegenüber Katholiken wie meinem Freund Erik Peterson pflegte er seinen Staatsgedanken autoritär-katholisch zu färben”.

5 Schmitz (2007) pp.376-383. Cf. Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.140-141 (editorial notes), 275-285.

6 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.120. Cf. Schmitz and Lepper (2007) p.141.

7 Meier (1995) pp.7-8 fn.6, 24 fn.25, 61 fn.64; De Wit (1992) pp.269 fn.15, 345 fn.34, 459-465; Groh (1998) pp.288-295.

8 Kroll (2010) pp.17-21, 237-239; Marquard (1983) pp.77-81. Cf. Schmitz and Lepper (2007).

‘Occasional Decisionism’ and ‘Three Possibilities’.⁹ These two texts provide a comprehensive insight in their philosophical (and theological) disagreements once they are understood as nexus-points in the broader development of their philosophical oeuvres. Löwith’s ‘Occasional Decisionism’ addresses *The Concept of the Political* and *Political Theology*, whereas Schmitt’s ‘Three Possibilities’ is not only a belated response to the former’s initial criticism, it also forms a more direct attack on the theological dimension of *Meaning in History* in a way that anticipates the core argument of *Political Theology II* (1970) against Peterson and Blumenberg.¹⁰

Second, Löwith’s attack on Schmitt has an enduring significance for Schmitt-scholarship because it sheds further light on the problem of ‘groundlessness’ I referred to in the conclusion of the previous chapter. This is a problem that arguably remains prevalent even if the theological dimension in Schmitt’s thought is taken seriously. Löwith critiques the “active nihilism” he suspects behind “the concept of the political” and raises valid doubts as to whether Schmitt’s adoption of theological themes can enable him to withstand this nihilism. The answer to the third concern ties in with the second, which is that a focus on the Löwith-Schmitt polemic illuminates aspects in both their philosophies that would otherwise remain undisclosed. Löwith’s critique allows for a deeper understanding of the problems of Schmitt’s political theology already alluded to in the previous chapter, and it shows that, despite his own *apolitical* position, he clearly envisioned the object of his critique in political terms: Nazism as the result of “active nihilism”. Schmitt’s response, in turn, sheds a new light on the theological – and also on the political – dimension of Löwith’s thought, as it questions his ‘hyper-Augustinian’ definition of Christianity. In short, Schmitt places doubt on the assumption that “faith” is radically antithetical to an active political engagement in and with the human world.

This chapter reconstructs the Löwith-Schmitt debate and aims to bring out its encompassing themes, i.e., a critique of active nihilism and the possibility of political theology. I first focus on ‘Occasional Decisionism’ (1935), a paper that forms the template for two other, more condensed articles, ‘Max Weber und seine Nachfolger’ (1940) and ‘Max Weber und Carl Schmitt’ (1964), while paying special attention to the issue of secularization and an underlying criticism of the type of political theology Schmitt espouses. I will subsequently address the recent ‘theological’ reading of Schmitt put forward by Heinrich Meier et. al., that assumedly corrects the one-sidedness of Löwith’s reading. With the use of Ruth Groh’s analysis I then demonstrate that the gist of Löwith’s critique survives this theological corrective, as it is congruent with her notion of “theological nihilism”. Groh’s reflection helps us recognize that Löwith ultimately takes issue with what he perceives as a fatal heterodoxy in Schmitt’s theological beliefs. Turning to Schmitt’s ‘Three Possibilities’ (1950) I show that behind his attempt at writing himself in line with Löwith stands a more fundamental disagreement on theology and the legitimation of decisionism. Finally, after briefly expounding on a perceived connection between Löwith and Erik Peterson, I reflect on how the polemic between Löwith and Schmitt could be construed as a clash between antithetical theologies.

9 ‘Occasional Decisionism’ is republished in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen* (1960), and partly ‘recycled’ in ‘Max Weber und seine Nachfolger’ (1940) and ‘Max Weber und Carl Schmitt’ (1964/2007). Moreover, it resonates with Löwith’s general critique of ‘European nihilism’ (cf. *ibid.*, 1995). Schmitt’s reflections in ‘Three Possibilities’ reoccur for instance in *Nomos of the Earth* (2006) and ‘Die Einheit der Welt’ (2005b), and he also reacts to Löwith’s 1964 article in *Tyranny of Values* (1996b, p.16). However, aside from a few exceptions (Schmitz, 2007; Falk, 2014), the Löwith-Schmitt debate has remained rather underinvestigated.

10 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.275-306.

Löwith's Critique of Schmitt

An Apolitical Position with Political Implications

In *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933*, Löwith recounts that attending Max Weber's famous 'Vocation Lectures' in 1918-1919 – at which Schmitt was also present – had taught him that it is "pointless to wait for prophets to tell us what we should be doing in our disenchanting world."¹¹ For Löwith, this disenchantment resulted in a strict apolitical skepticism, a distrust of political "prophets" of any kind. "The struggle of the political parties could not interest me, as both those of the Left and those of the Right were fighting about things that were of no concern to me and therefore acted only as an irritant in my development."¹² Jürgen Habermas notes in his paper 'Löwith's stoischer Rückzug vom historischen Bewußtsein' (1963) that this apolitical attitude is a constant factor in Löwith's intellectual development; political events only appear in his biography as external annoyances that cause him to move desks and pick up his work elsewhere, first in Italy, then in Japan, then in the United States, before finally returning to Germany.¹³ However, the political teachings of Schmitt indicate – and with this Habermas agrees – that an apolitical attitude can also be construed as a political position, as it has ramifications in the political sphere.¹⁴ In the Epilogue of *My Life* Löwith admits that political events were more than an external hindrance in his development. He states that the events of 1933 "forced me to revise the intellectual direction in which I had been progressing", moving him away from Nietzsche's nihilism towards, at first, the measured skepticism of Burckhardt, then through an acquaintance with the Japanese worldview towards ancient Greek thought.¹⁵

Not only is Löwith's apolitical position motivated by political events, it is also the case that, as Jeffrey Barash asserts, his "idea of secularization" and critique of decisionism contains "eminently political implications", which come to the fore most clearly in his paper 'The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt'.¹⁶ With this paper, Löwith not only attacks Schmitt but the entire "nihilistic revolution" he is held to represent. This nihilistic revolution is understood as the result of the processes of secularization and historicization that are described in *From Hegel to Nietzsche* and *Meaning in History*. Barash suggests that out of Löwith's entire oeuvre, 'Occasional Decisionism' expresses most poignantly what the *political* implications are of this process: a loss of orientation on a collective scale, an embrace of active nihilism, glorification of war and enmity, and ultimately totalitarianism.¹⁷ The significance of this argument against decisionism is attested by the fact that, when Löwith republished this article in his *Gesammelte Abhandlungen: zur Kritik der geschichtlichen Existenz* (1960), he expanded it with an additional critique of Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Gogarten in the same vein, indicating that Schmitt serves as an exemplary case of a broader cultural-intellectual malaise.¹⁸ Furthermore, Löwith would reiterate the main points from his 1935 paper on two other occasions: first in the 1940 article 'Max Weber und seine Nachfolger' and then in the (near-identical) 1964 article

11 Löwith (1994) p.18.

12 Löwith (1994) p.18. Cf. Koselleck (1990) pp.ix-xv.

13 Habermas, 'Karl Löwith: Stoic Retreat from Historical Consciousness' (1983) pp.92-99.

14 Schmitt (2005) p.2; Habermas (1983) pp.92-98.

15 Löwith (1994) p.145, cf. p.52: "my book on Burckhardt (1935-1936) ... set me free from Nietzsche and the consequences of German radicalism." Timm (1967) pp.590-592.

16 Barash (1998) p.69, cf. p.78.

17 Barash (1998) pp.78-82. Cf. the collection of Löwith's (1995) papers on *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism* (in which the article on Schmitt appears); Wolin (1995) pp.1-25; *ibid.* (2001).

18 Löwith (1960) pp.117-126.

‘Max Weber und Carl Schmitt’. Both discuss Weber’s relation to the “nihilistic revolution” that Schmitt represents, but Löwith eventually dissociates the former’s intellectual legacy from the latter’s decisionism.¹⁹

‘The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt’

First, a brief exposition of Löwith’s argument is in order. The theme ‘Occasional Decisionism’ harkens back to Schmitt’s book *Politische Romantik* (1919), a critique of the ‘occasional romanticism’ of 19th century liberal bourgeoisie.²⁰ ‘Occasionalism’ refers to the early-modern philosophy associated with Nicholas Malebranche; this school of thought declared that “God is the final, absolute authority, and the entire world and everything in it are nothing more than an occasion for his sole agency”. According to Schmitt this occasionalist structure becomes secularized when “something else – the state, perhaps, or the people, or even the individual subject – takes the place of God as the ultimate authority and the decisive factor.”²¹ Schmitt berates liberal romanticism for replacing God with “the individual subject”, for the fact that “in the liberal, bourgeois world, the individuated, isolated and emancipated individual becomes the final court of appeal, the absolute.”²² *Political Romanticism* explains that the liberal occasionalist is unable to genuinely commit to the world, let alone decisively act in it, and that this attitude is fatally indiscriminate vis-à-vis the ‘occasions’ that cross its path. As Löwith paraphrases: “what is characteristic of the romantic ... is that for him *anything* can become the center of spiritual life, because his own existence has no middle.”²³ Löwith’s critique is that Schmitt is also an “occasionalist”. He merely traded an ironic and aestheticizing romanticism for an extremist, authoritarian decisionism, and exchanged the solitary individual for the state to ‘reoccupy’ (i.e., *secularize*) the position of God in occasionalism.²⁴ Löwith moreover suggests that because his decisionism lacks any pre-given substance or ground it is inevitably determined by its immediate historical context. This not only explains why Schmitt, a former defendant of the Weimar Republic, was quick to rally to Nazism, but it also creates a continued indebtedness to the liberal discourse he seeks to repudiate. In Löwith’s critique, “occasionalism” hence amounts to an accusation of (normative and substantive) vacuity and political opportunism.²⁵ (Later in this reconstruction I argue that this accusation of occasionalism is however only of secondary importance in comparison with Schmitt’s purported *nihilism*.)

Löwith quickly shifts his focus from *Political Romanticism* to his primary aim, *The Concept of the Political*, because it is here that the occasionalist vacuity of Schmitt’s theory becomes most acute. Based on his reading of ‘The age of Neutralizations and Depoliticization’ and especially by noting significant differences between the 1932 and the 1933 editions of *The Concept of the Political* it becomes clear to Löwith that Schmitt attempts to oscillate between two conceptions of the political – what Meier and De Wit refer to as the regional model and the model of

19 Resp.: Löwith (1940) pp.408-418; *ibid.* (republished: 2007) pp.365-375. The latter article also addresses Schmitt’s *Tyranny of Values* (1996b).

20 English version: Schmitt (2017).

21 Schmitt (2017) p.17; Löwith (1995) p.273 fn.17.

22 Schmitt (2017) p.99; Löwith (1995) p.140/*ibid.* (1960) p.96. In this instance I use the latter translation. “Das vereinzelte, isolierte und emanzipierte Individuum wird in der liberalen bürgerlichen Welt ... zur letzten Instanz, zum Absoluten.”

23 Löwith (1995) p.140.

24 Löwith (1995) pp.143-153, 273 fn.17. I use the Blumenbergian term ‘reoccupation’ to signify the functional continuity that is asserted in this instance.

25 Löwith (1995) pp.141-159.

intensity – but eventually decides in favor of one: “Schmitt’s talk of *the* political gives rise to the impression ... that the political is a specific subject area, even though it is precisely not supposed to be such a thing.”²⁶ The political “is by no means a substantive domain”. And indeed, while in the 1932/1963 version of *The Concept of the Political* Schmitt keeps both options open, Löwith’s interpretation is confirmed by a passage such as this one:

The political can derive its energy from the most varied human endeavors, from the religious, economic, moral and other antitheses. It does not describe its own substance, but only the intensity of association or dissociation of human beings whose motives can be religious, national (in the ethnic or cultural sense), economic, or of another kind and can effect at different times different coalitions and separations.²⁷

Löwith asserts that the model of intensity enables Schmitt to claim “that the political is the total”, and to speak of the “total war” that the “total state” wages against the “total enemy”.²⁸

To Löwith, this means that Schmitt’s concept of the political is – in its intensified form – purely formal. This is problematic because Schmitt regards the political – i.e., enmity and decisiveness – as a goal in itself, which means that it is ultimately built on “an absolute Nothing”, substantively speaking. Thus Schmitt’s decisionism is depicted as a form of “active nihilism” that can only boil down to “a decision in favor of decisiveness”.²⁹ Assumedly, this lack of substance causes Schmitt to focus only on the ‘*thatness*’ of life rather than on the ‘*whatness*’.³⁰ Similar to how in the existentialism of Heidegger life becomes orientated towards its limit case, namely death, Schmitt’s political theology becomes preoccupied with the total enemy and total war. The enemy appears as an ontological-existential category, as the negation of one’s own Being, the negative mirror-image that allows for self-identification. This emphasis however necessarily devalues any kind of qualification of this Being; the question what the meaning is of existence is only answered by Schmitt (and Heidegger) by pointing out, not *what* this existence consists of, but *that* one exists. This awareness comes most sharply into view when confronted with its limiting case, death. Löwith writes:³¹

the fundamental distinction between enemy and friend has no special characteristic in itself. On the contrary, this fundamental distinction reaches through and beyond all special distinctions and commonalities in human Being; it is meant in a ‘purely’ existential sense ..., because it is ‘simply’ the highest ‘degree of intensity’ of a potential commitment and division, even though it cannot be specified *what this intensity is an intensity of*. Of course one can say that political tension is all the more intensively ‘political’ in Schmitt’s sense the more impersonal and insignificant the substantive content of enmity is, because this intensity has nothing to do with anything definite and unique in the political Dasein human beings, but instead has to do with pure *Being or Non-Being*.³²

26 Löwith (1995) p.276 fn.40. “But the deeper reason for this indeterminacy ... may be that Schmitt *can* not specify what is proper to the political, unless what is proper to it is to be a totality which goes beyond all subject areas”.

27 Schmitt (1996) p.38; Löwith (1995) p.139.

28 Löwith (1995) p.276 fn.40; *ibid.* (1994) p.91; (2007) p.371; Schmitt (2005) p.2; *ibid.*, “Totaler Feind, totaler Krieg, totaler Staat” (2005b) pp.481-485.

29 Löwith (1995) pp.146, 158.

30 Löwith (1995) pp.150-151; *ibid.* (2007) pp.370-371; Timm (1967) p.590.

31 Löwith (1995) pp.147-150.

32 Löwith (1995) pp.149-150.

The *content* of a particular political “association or dissociation” not only becomes subordinate to the *fact* that a division is made, Löwith argues that it also ultimately receives a negative evaluation: the less substance a distinction has the more ‘purely political’ it is.³³ Löwith however suggests that a truly formal decision, or an existence that is only focused on the thatness of life and its limiting case, is a dangerous fiction. A preoccupation with the thatness of life entails that one becomes indiscriminate to any kind of content that will inevitably sneak into the decisions that are made, comparable to how the romantic occasionalist remains bound to a given historical “situation” despite his/her incapability to genuinely engage with it. There is no way of precluding beforehand contents that might be deemed immoral or unethical according to certain principles that precede the decision, because “the decision emanates from nothingness”.³⁴

Löwith insists that Schmitt is unable to transcend his immediate historical context, and thereby also becomes determined by that which he seeks to reject. In positing his own theory as a polemical counter-image to enlightened liberalism, Schmitt in fact becomes substantively indebted to his ‘enemy’ – after all, it only forms a negative reflection instead of offering anything substantively new over against it.³⁵ Moreover, the focus on the thatness of existence can offer no guidelines or moral principles as to which contents are genuinely off-limits. It follows that decisionism is highly susceptible to dangerous politics, namely for two reasons: negatively put, it cannot *preclude* ‘wrong’ or ‘immoral’ decisions in favor of a particular content, and positively put, it has an intrinsic tendency to favor those contents that intensify divisions and enmity rather than ‘neutralizing’ them (e.g., Nazism). Like Heidegger proposes a philosophy of existence that is continuously oriented toward the limiting case of death, so is Schmitt’s theory of the political preoccupied with war, killing and death on the battlefield.³⁶

‘Occasional Decisionism’: Secularization

Löwith’s condemnation of Schmitt’s alleged nihilist occasionalism also extends to the subject of secularization.³⁷ In line with his later book, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (1941), Löwith relates Schmitt’s decisionism to the disintegration of the bourgeois-Christian synthesis of the 19th century, encapsulated in the philosophy of Hegel.³⁸ The two prominent proponents of this disintegration were Marx and Kierkegaard; both emerge from the Hegelian tradition but opted against its conservative tendencies towards balance and synthesis. They revitalized the *antithesis* that remained latently present underneath Hegel’s synthesis, in favor of a decisive either/or. Whereas Marx opted for a rigid materialism and worldliness, Kierkegaard instead considered worldly affairs to be wholly insignificant over against the spiritual decision in favor of God and a revived Christian religiosity.

For both, Hegel’s spiritual completion of a two thousand year history [i.e., the *aufhebung* of Christianity and worldliness in his own philosophy] becomes a ‘prehistory’

33 Löwith (1995) pp.150-151; Schmitt (2014) p.46; *ibid.* (1996) p.26: “The distinction of friend and enemy denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation.”

34 Schmitt (2005) pp.31-32. Cf. Löwith (1995) pp.146-158; Barash (1998) p.81.

35 Löwith (1995) pp.138-149, 280 fn.72.

36 Löwith (1995) pp.146-149; *ibid.* (2007) pp.370-374.

37 Barash (1998, p.76) notes that Löwith’s critique of Schmitt thereby foreshadows his account of secularization in *Meaning in History* (1949).

38 Löwith (1995) pp.141, 156-159; *ibid.* *From Hegel to Nietzsche* (1967).

prior to an extensive revolution and an intensive reformation. Both turn their concrete *mediations* into abstract *decisions*, in the one case in favor of the old Christian God and in the other in favor of a new earthly world.³⁹

Löwith situates Schmitt's decisionism – and its inclination towards activism rather than contemplation, decision rather than sublation – in line with Marx's and Kierkegaard's decisive destruction of the Hegelian synthesis. However, he is quick to add that in the case of Kierkegaard and Marx it is impossible to speak of a pure decisionism unto itself.⁴⁰ According to Löwith, any brand of decisionism presupposes a state of chaos and despair that precedes the necessity of the 'sovereign decision', i.e., spiritual or societal "*decay*". However, "the spiritual power with which they [Marx and Kierkegaard] opposed themselves to this decay is not based simply on a decision in favor of *decisiveness*". Instead, it is "based on the fact that both ... had faith in a highest court of appeal, i.e., in 'God' and 'humanity' respectively, as the *measure* of their decision."⁴¹ Such a "measure", "court of appeal" or for that matter a fixed substance to decide upon, is assumedly lacking in Schmitt's philosophy.⁴²

In 'Occasional Decisionism', Löwith holds the view that Schmitt's apparent commitment to a Christian background is merely "occasional" and therefore disingenuous. Löwith sees no genuine commitment to Christian teachings in Schmitt's theory, as that would involve having an aim, measure or foundation that exists prior to the decision.⁴³ It is suggested that Schmitt's preference for early-modern absolutism and the *droit divin* is informed more by his formal decisionism than by a substantive and non-accidental indebtedness or commitment to this tradition. Löwith argues for example that Schmitt's affinity with the conservative-Catholic philosophy of the counterrevolution, represented by Donoso Cortés and de Maistre, "is not obligatory" (*unverbindlich*).

Whereas these thinkers, remaining within Catholic faith, decided against the political consequences of the French revolution, Schmitt's profane decisionism is necessarily occasional because he lacks not only the theological and metaphysical presuppositions of earlier centuries but the humanitarian-moral ones as well. ... What Schmitt defends is a politics of sovereign decision, but one in which content is merely a product of the accidental *ocasio* of the political situation which happens to prevail at the moment ...⁴⁴

Indeed, we have seen in the previous chapter that Schmitt is drawn to political absolutism because it exemplifies the God-like status of the worldly sovereign. Although according to his own political theology this analogy points towards the legitimate transfer of authority from God to the secular state, Löwith objects that Schmitt is merely attracted to these political theories because they hyperbolize the power of the political leader and eradicate any notion of a pre-existing law, order or principle preceding political action. The fact that the Catholic, royal absolutism of the French monarchy becomes interchangeable – from the perspective of

39 Löwith (1995) p.157. Cf. *ibid.*, *Wissen, Glaube und Skepsis* (1958) pp.49-67.

40 Löwith (1995) p.158.

41 Löwith (1995) p.158 (first emphasis added).

42 Löwith (1995) p.151.

43 Löwith (1995) pp.145-146, 150-151, 157-158; *ibid.* (2007) p.374.

44 Löwith (1995) pp.143-144, cf.: "hence content is precisely not a product of 'the power of integral knowledge' about what is primordially correct and just, as it is in Plato's concept of the essence of politics, where such knowledge grounds an order of human affairs."

political theology – with the puritanical dictatorship of Oliver Cromwell indicates that Schmitt is drawn to intensified “great politics” rather than to these substantive traditions.⁴⁵

Löwith emphasizes that these historical exemplars of decisionism (Cromwell, Donoso Cortés, Kierkegaard) related their notions of sovereignty to a belief in God. Cromwell based his belief that “the Spaniard” is “the providential enemy” on a knowledge of “Holy Scripture and God’s affairs – of which there is no talk in Schmitt”.⁴⁶ Schmitt’s interpretation of Donoso Cortés also falters; by claiming that the state is “created out of Nothing”, Löwith argues that he is “characterizing his own position rather than that of Donoso Cortés, who as a Christian had the faith that it is never humans but only God who can create something out of Nothing.” This preoccupation with nothingness suggests an “*active nihilism* ... exclusive to Schmitt and like-minded twentieth-century Germans.”⁴⁷ At this point it becomes clear what Löwith bases his verdict on: he assumes that Schmitt, even though he had a tendency “sein-en Staatsgedanken autoritär-katholisch zu färben”, transgresses the boundaries of orthodox Christianity so extensively that his use of Christian elements can only be occasionalist and disingenuous.⁴⁸

The verdict that Schmitt’s political theology falls short of a ‘genuine Christianity’ comes to the fore most clearly in two elaborate footnotes. One concerns the relation between Schmitt’s nihilist decisionism and the occasionalism of Malebranche: Löwith notices that whereas romanticism supposedly places the sovereign individual on the throne of God, Schmitt actually wants the secular state to occupy this position, as “highest court of appeal and foundational factor”.⁴⁹ Löwith will have realized that Schmitt does not object to the secularization of occasionalism per se – this is confirmed by our analysis of this theory of secularization in the previous chapter – but that he is more concerned with who or what reoccupies the position of God. Arguably, this indicates that while Löwith was aware of the legitimate, “systematic” concept of secularization Schmitt put forward in *Political Theology*, according to which the sovereign is authorized to operate in God’s stead, he disapproved of it.⁵⁰ To Löwith, this concept of secularization as a legitimation of worldly power is far removed from a core tenet of Christianity: a stern indifference to worldly matters such as history or politics.⁵¹

In a manner that is reminiscent of *Meaning in History*, Löwith employs a concept of ‘authentic’ Christianity as an ahistorical standard of judgement, one that Schmitt’s political theology cannot live up to. Another footnote provides further proof of this: here, Löwith notices that the Christian commandment of ‘loving your enemies’ makes for an ill fit in Schmitt’s theory. This problem is circumvented in *The Concept of the Political* by a distinction between a private enemy (*inimicus*) and a public one (*hostis*), implying that Jesus’s commandment only applies to the former.⁵² Löwith replies that “this means that Schmitt reduces, in good *liberal* fashion ... the absolute demand of the Christian religion to the relativity of a private concern.”⁵³ Schmitt, it is argued, inadvertently demonstrates his unconscious indebtedness to liberalism by attempting to ‘neutralize’ aspects of Christianity that do not fit into his theory. By seeking to relegate

45 Löwith (1995) pp.149-157; *ibid.* (2007) p.372; Schmitt (1933) pp.48-49. Cf. Groh (1998) pp.21, 52-63.

46 Löwith (1995) p.151.

47 Löwith (1995) pp.145-146. The quote continues: “In a decision created from out of Nothing, Donoso Cortés would have seen the same ‘horrible comedy’ he would have seen in the enteral conversation of romanticism.”

48 Löwith (1990) p.87. Cf. *ibid.* (2007) p.370.

49 Löwith (1995) p.273 fn.17; Schmitt (2017) p.17.

50 Löwith (1995) p.143. Cf. De Wilde (2008) p.34.

51 Löwith (1995) p.279 fn.65. Cf. *ibid.* (2007), p.374.

52 Löwith (1995) p.278 fn.65; Schmitt (1996) p.29.

53 Löwith (1995) p.278 fn.65 (emphasis added).

these aspects of Christianity to the private sphere, Schmitt contradicts the radical implications of this commandment, and for that matter, of Christian faith itself, according to Löwith:

this Commandment, as a total determination of human beings, must be the measure for the human being's *whole* relationship to the world. In his worldly way, the Christian knows neither enemies nor friends, be these private or public ... One who is in the world as if he were not of this world, one for whom it is not war but rather the Last Judgment that is the decisive exigency, can in principle not distinguish between private and public enemies.⁵⁴

Löwith thus argues that Christianity can never lend itself to the political theology that Schmitt prescribes without thereby deviating from its true nature, i.e., a resolute otherworldliness that renders political decisions and distinctions utterly meaningless.

Assessment of Löwith's Critique

A Theological Corrective?

This early criticism made a considerable impression on Schmitt-scholarship. Jan-Werner Müller notes that Löwith “offered one the most devastating critiques when he charged Schmitt with ‘Romantic occasionalism’”, and Reinhard Mehring calls it a “bis heute in die Schmitt-Forschung durchschlagende ... Kritik”.⁵⁵ The merits of this critical interpretation reside in the fact that it forms an early and already quite profound analysis of the inner tensions in Schmitt's thought – e.g., between two different conceptions of the political or between a desire for the ‘great’, spiritualized politics of yore and an inability to return to it – and because it offers a sophisticated explanation of his attraction to dangerous politics. One aspect of Löwith's critique has probably had the most enduring influence, which is that it encapsulates *and* critically elucidates Schmitt's thought in one phrase: “active nihilism”.⁵⁶ This captures his authoritarian political theology in a concept that immediately situates it against the background of the “nihilistic revolution” that Löwith recognized behind the catastrophe of 1933-1945.⁵⁷

Although Mehring claims that Löwith's interpretation has had a decisive impact on Schmitt-scholarship ‘up until the present day’, there are also prominent voices in the field that consider this nihilistic reading outdated. This because it tends to ignore the theological dimension of political theology, i.e., that dimension which Heinrich Meier puts forward as the essential ‘core’ or ‘foundation’ of Schmitt's thought.⁵⁸ We have seen in the previous chapter that Meier stands at the forefront of a broader ‘theologizing’ trend in Schmitt-scholarship, where the many references in Schmitt's work to theology, metaphysics and Catholicism are interpreted as expressions of a religious belief. This trend leaves the question open if these allusions signify orthodox faith, as Meier himself suggests, or whether they are elements in a “katholisierende Privatmythologie”.⁵⁹ Meier, and other scholars such as De Wit, explicitly

54 Löwith (1995) p.279 fn.65.

55 Müller (2003) p.40; Mehring (2009) p.475. Cf. *ibid.* (1994) pp.334-335.

56 Groh (1998) p.288 fn.709; De Wit (1992) p.123 fn.45; Motschenbacher (2000) p.118.

57 Löwith (1995) pp.173-234.

58 Meier (1995) pp.7-8 fn.6. Cf. Falk (2014) p.218; De Wilde (2008) p.34.

59 Quoted in Groh (1998) p.18, cf. pp.13-14; Müller (2003) pp.202-205; Groh (1998) pp.13-14.

present their interpretation of Schmitt as a corrective of Löwith's initial critique.⁶⁰ Hence, in order to obtain a sense of the continued philosophical significance of the Löwith-Schmitt polemic it is necessary to ascertain whether this 'theological corrective' indeed undermines Löwith's interpretation, as Meier suggests.

Meier's book, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, makes a strong case for the 'theological' reading of Schmitt. The route that led Meier to his 'discovery' of the theological-metaphysical background of Schmitt's thought was the reconstruction of the 'hidden dialogue' with Leo Strauss.⁶¹ Strauss published a critique of the first edition of *The Concept of the Political* (1932), after which Schmitt revised his book to a considerable extent in 1933. Whereas Löwith interprets these modifications as proof of Schmitt's political opportunism, Meier instead views the revision of the 1933 version of *The Concept of the Political* as a genuine philosophical attempt at elucidating the concept of the political in response to Strauss's critique.⁶² This interaction caused Schmitt to rethink his concept of the political and shift his emphasis from the 'regional model' to his *actual* 'model of intensity', according to Meier.⁶³

Strauss noticed that the earlier, 'regional' definition of the political is too similar to the liberal concept of culture to be of any help to Schmitt. The liberal definition of culture entails that each societal domain – e.g., science, art, economy, politics – is autonomous, and Schmitt would be obliged to subscribe to that view if he wishes to defend the political as an independent sphere among others.⁶⁴ This observation, Meier suggests, led Schmitt to finally decide for the 'model of intensity' that presupposes the omnipresent and irreducible nature of the political.⁶⁵ In this form, the political is essentially intertwined with the moral, metaphysical and theological dimensions of existence, because it encapsulates claims about human nature, the individual's being-in-the-world and his/her relation to the divine. Meier indicates that in 1932 Leo Strauss already had an inkling of this concealed moral-metaphysical background, and therefore invited Schmitt to focus more on this dimension, on what he perceived as "the order of the human things", for it could help him in "gaining a horizon beyond liberalism."⁶⁶

Meier analyzes the development of Schmitt's thought between the 1932 and the 1933 versions of *The Concept of the Political*.⁶⁷ His clash with Löwith's interpretation of these alterations is significant. Löwith noticed that Schmitt had quietly deleted all references to Jewish and/or Marxist authors that had, in 1933, become 'untimely' – a textual "Gleichschaltung".⁶⁸ In Löwith's eyes these alterations testified to Schmitt's opportunism, and consequently to the normative and substantive emptiness of his decisionism: "the principle underlying *all* the changes in the various editions is always that of an occasionalism which characterizes Schmitt's decisions, which are situation-bound and hence in every case polemical."⁶⁹ According to Meier, "Löwith misses what is most important *for the substantial issue*", which is that these changes constitute the tentative disclosure of the moral and theological background of Schmitt's thought.⁷⁰ This is demonstrated by one instance where Löwith discovers a modification that does not fit into his interpretative scheme. Schmitt states in the 1933 version of *The Concept*

60 Meier (1995) pp.7-8 fn.6, 61 fn.64; De Wit (1992) pp.345 fn.34, 459-465. Cf. Falk (2014).

61 Meier (1995).

62 Löwith (1995) pp.155-156, 279-280 fn.72; Meier (1995) pp.7-8 fn.6.

63 Meier (1995) pp.3-29. Strauss's 'Notes on The Concept of the Political' are included in this book (pp.91-119).

64 Strauss (1995) pp.91-119.

65 Meier (1995) pp.22-29. Cf. De Wit (1992) pp.468-474.

66 Strauss (1995) pp.115-119.

67 Meier (1995) pp.12-16, 50-75.

68 Löwith (1995) pp.155-156, 277 fn.48, 279-280 fn.72. "Gleichschaltung": *ibid.* (1960) p.113.

69 Löwith (1995) p.280 fn.72.

70 Meier (1995) pp.7-8 fn.6, cf. pp. 12-16, 50-80.

of the Political that the contemporary age “veils its metaphysical oppositions in moral or economic terms”.⁷¹ According to Meier, this points to a theological presupposition concerning the inescapable metaphysical significance of politics. “Metaphysical oppositions can be draped in moral or economic terms, but that does not blot them out of existence.”⁷² To Meier, this proves that Schmitt’s political theory is grounded on a metaphysical belief, whereas Löwith sees it as “an inconsistency, an odd contrast to his imaginary picture of Schmitt’s political decisionism, and he does not take the contradiction as an opportunity to examine whether the image is correct.”⁷³ Indeed, Löwith does appear surprised by this addition, wondering how Schmitt can make this claim when “the distinctively polemical mark of all of Schmitt’s writings is his denial that the theological, the metaphysical, the moral, and the economic can serve as the measure for the authentically political.”⁷⁴

In his study on Schmitt, *De onontkoombaarheid van de politiek* (1992), De Wit elaborates on Meier’s critique of Löwith by emphasizing the one-sidedness of the latter’s interpretation.⁷⁵ He suggests that Löwith’s attack on Schmitt’s polemicism is equally ‘polemical’, and that he (willfully) ignores those aspects that do not fit into his reductionist reading of the latter as an exponent of active nihilism. Löwith thereby ignores the fact that Schmitt distanced himself from the unadulterated bellicism of Ernst Jünger, and that, as De Wit emphasizes, this decisionism is based on an underlying, theologically informed notion of authorization and representation.⁷⁶ Moreover, Löwith’s interpretation forces him to disqualify all too easily Schmitt’s appeals to Christian authors such as Kierkegaard and Donoso Cortés as disingenuous.⁷⁷ De Wit states that, although it is possible to discern an inclination towards agonism and existentialistic decisionism in Schmitt’s writings from the 1920’s, Löwith’s claim that the ‘pure’ decision and the negation of the enemy are ends in themselves is “apert onjuist. Een dergelijke interpretatie moet de morele, metafysische en theologische achtergrond van Schmitts polemische methode eenvoudigweg negeren.”⁷⁸

The upshot of Meier’s and De Wit’s critique is that Löwith’s portrayal of Schmitt as a superficial opportunist ignores something that Strauss *has* noticed, which is the ‘moral’ dimension of Schmitt’s theory; i.e., that Schmitt supposedly strives to obtain “a *pure and whole* knowledge” of “the order of the human things”.⁷⁹ Meier and De Wit accept this insight and argue convincingly that, in Schmitt’s mind, the political is necessarily connected to a moral and a theological dimension; i.e., it presupposes a ‘pure knowledge’ of the moral-metaphysical state of the world. This does not entail a conception of a clearly delineated pre-given moral law, but rather an undefined moral *obligation* to blindly decide for God and against the enemy.⁸⁰ Meier and De Wit argue that Schmitt’s concept of the political does not merely amount to an affirmation of politics or decisiveness for its own sake, but that it rather presupposes

71 Schmitt (1933) pp.18-19; quoted in Meier (1995) p.61.

72 Meier (1995) p.62, cf. pp.7-8 fn.6, 61-62 fn.64; Löwith (1995) p.277 fn.48.

73 Meier (1995) p.61 fn.64.

74 Löwith (1995) p.277 fn.48. Cf. De Wit (1992) p.461.

75 De Wit (1992) pp.122-123, 454-461, 465.

76 De Wit (1992) pp.454-461, 465 fn.32.

77 De Wit (1992) p.461: “Om zijn these plausibel te maken is Löwith gedwongen alle tekenen die erop wijzen dat Schmitts denken een metafysische en theologische basis heeft als opsmuk en verhulling te duiden. Hij moet zijn beroep op denkers als Kierkegaard en Donoso Cortés als illegitiem beschouwen, Schmitts uitdrukkelijke ontkenning dat zijn politieke denken bellicistisch is als een leugen diskwalificeren, en zijn kritiek op Jüngers ‘agonale’ houding negeren.” Cf. Falk (2014) pp.222-223, 226.

78 De Wit (1992) p.461. “... patently incorrect. Such an interpretation simply has to ignore the moral, metaphysical and theological background of Schmitt’s polemical method.”

79 Strauss (1995) pp.118-119, cf. pp.42-47, 54, 64; De Wit (1992) pp.461-463.

80 Meier (1995) pp.46-49; De Wit (1992) pp.323-452. Cf. Schmitt (2005) p.65.

a moral-metaphysical view of human nature and the world. It presupposes that humanity is evil, that the condition of the world is marked by a primordial Fall from grace, and that this necessitates the divinely decreed dominion by the sovereign. The decisiveness that the fallen state of the world requires is regarded by Schmitt as a *positive* phenomenon, because it allows for a continuous reiteration of the decision for God against the Enemy.⁸¹ Meier and De Wit hence conclude that Schmitt's thought cannot be depicted as nihilistic or purely occasionalistic, because it ultimately relies on *faith*.

Groh's Reading: Theological Nihilism

In line with De Wit, it can indeed be conceded that especially in 'Occasional Decisionism' Löwith fails to take Schmitt's self-identifying references to Christianity seriously. Löwith suggests, as can already be inferred from *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933*, that whereas Schmitt might have been inclined to 'catholicize' his authoritarianism, he only did this when the 'occasion' called for it, e.g., "when he talked to Catholics like my friend Erik Peterson".⁸² Schmitt's decisionism is rejected as an 'empty' deviation from the thought of Kierkegaard and Donoso Cortés, because he lacks their genuine faith. This aspect of De Wit's and Meier's critique of Löwith appears to be justified, provided that the 'theological' dimension of Schmitt's thought is indeed irreducible – as I have acknowledged in the previous chapter – and is intertwined with his conception of the world, human nature, law, and, above all, the political. However, I argue that cognizance of the irreducible theological dimension of Schmitt's thought does not necessarily invalidate the gist of Löwith's critique. In order to make this case we must first return to the critical reading of Schmitt that Ruth Groh offers in her *Arbeit an der Heillosigkeit der Welt* (1998). While she affirms the importance of the theological and prescriptive dimension of Schmitt's thought, she argues that it does not function as a *foundation*, but rather as an essential catalyst that provides the anxiety, seriousness, and the 'sharpness' that constitute and nourish his political theology.⁸³ Her claim that Schmitt cannot avoid a *theological nihilism* will help reappraise the enduring value of Löwith's early critique.

Similar to Meier, Groh also focusses extensively on *The Concept of the Political*, but unlike him she does not discover a hidden theological-moral 'foundation' that substantiates and predetermines Schmitt's decisionism. She rather finds a theological 'empty core' that intensifies his belief in the reality of enmity but which does not give it any positive content.⁸⁴ Her reading of Schmitt – that can be used to further elucidate Löwith's – is best exemplified by briefly fixating on an esoteric cornerstone of this political theology, one that Groh pays special attention to. This is the so-called 'Hobbes-crystal', that appears in the 1963 version of *The Concept of the Political*: a schematic rendition of Schmitt's (interpretation of Hobbes's) 'political theology'. This 'Hobbes-crystal' – which he described as the "Frucht einer Lebenslanger Arbeit an dem großen Thema im ganzen und dem Werk des Thomas Hobbes im besonderen" – forms a schematic overview of what Schmitt depicts as the essence of Hobbes's thought but which, as Groh noted, should in fact be regarded as his *own* view on "the order of the human things".⁸⁵

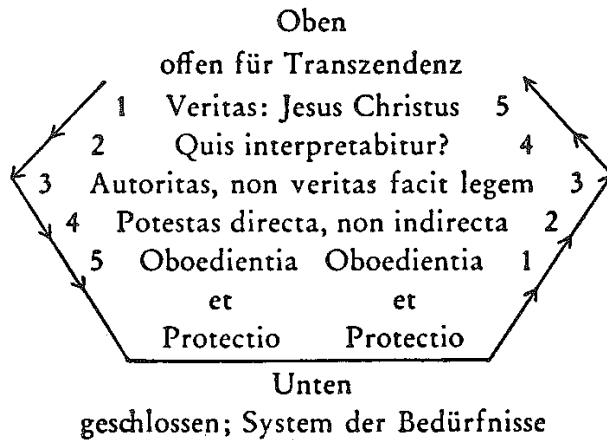
81 Meier (1995) pp.46-49, 125; De Wit (1995) p.429-435. In this call to *continuously* decide for God we can here echoes of Rudolf Bultmann and Friedrich Gogarten, as will be discussed in a later chapter.

82 Löwith (1994) p.91.

83 Groh (1998) pp.170, 275-295. Cf. Krol (2010) pp.183-184 215, 250-251.

84 Groh (1998) pp.201-203, 239, 276-291.

85 Schmitt (1963) p.122; Groh (1998) pp.52-63. Cf. De Wit (1992) p.408 fn.56; Mehring (2003) pp.197-202.



Source: Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen* (1963) p.122.

This scheme depicts the totality of the political order: beginning at its apex we find an ‘openness to transcendence’, then the truth ‘Jesus is the Christ’, the question ‘who decides’ on this truth, and its answer: the sovereign, whose authority determines what this aforementioned ‘truth’ means, and who enshrines his decision into law. His direct power subsequently ensures that the subjects receive protection in return for their obedience.⁸⁶ Significantly, this scheme depicts the sovereign as someone who ultimately wields one (and only one) absolute truth that precedes his sovereign decisions: i.e., that “Jesus is the Christ.” Schmitt regards this as the “Schlußstein” (keystone) of Hobbes’ (i.e., of his own) politico-theological edifice, which guarantees that this system keeps ‘a door open to transcendence’.⁸⁷ While this single ‘truth’ precedes all political decisions, Groh asserts that it is also clear that, as such, it is reduced to an absolute minimum.⁸⁸

After introducing this scheme, Schmitt raises the question “nach der Auswechselbarkeit oder Nicht-Auswechselbarkeit des Satzes, *that Jesus is the Christ*”, and suggests that it is indeed possible to reoccupy it with other ‘highest truths’, as long as they are equally open-ended and “interpretationsbedürftig”. Any truth that is in need of interpretation, e.g., “Allah ist groß” or any other “höchsten Werten und Grund-Sätzen, aus deren Vollzug und Vollstreckung Streit und Krieg entstehen, z.B. Freiheit, Gleichheit und Brüderlichkeit” can fulfill this role. However, Schmitt adds: “Ich glaube nicht daß Hobbes eine so totale Neutralisierung gemeint hat”.⁸⁹ Indeed, Meier and Mehring emphasize that Schmitt himself opposed the option of replacing this Christian truth with another – because it could involve a harmful neutralization once a less divisive creed takes its place – but the fact remains that he cannot preclude this route either, due to the purely formal nature of his authoritarian scheme: it remains an unsolved “systematische Grundproblem”.⁹⁰

Groh argues that the interchangeability of these ‘highest truths’ is a clear indication that Schmitt does not allow them to substantively or normatively predetermine the decisions of

86 Schmitt (1963) pp.121-123; Mehring (2003) p.199; Groh (1998) pp.52-54.

87 Schmitt (1963) p.123. Cf. *ibid.* (1965) pp.52, 62-63.

88 Groh (1998) pp.20-21; Mehring (2003) pp.199-202.

89 Schmitt (1963) pp.121-123.

90 Schmitt (1963) pp.121-123. Cf. *ibid.* ‘Die Vollendete Reformation’ (1965) pp.62-63; Meier (2012) pp.184-186; Mehring (2003) pp.199-202; Groh (1998) pp.58-61.

the sovereign; hence, the same authoritarian system can either take the guise of a theocracy or a secular 'ideocracy'.⁹¹

Der System-Kristall führt in aller Klarheit die ideale Staatsform vor Augen – und zugleich die *Anpassungsfähigkeit dieses Herrschaftssystems an andere politische Lagen*. Denn der Kristall deckt die Herrschaftsform einer Theokratie ebenso wie die einer Diktatur oder auch einer Ideokratie. Man braucht nur den obersten Leitsatz 'Jesus Christus' – für Schmitt ein politisch-theologischer antijüdischer Kampfmithos – durch eine andere 'Interpretationsbedürftige Wahrheit' auszutauschen.⁹²

The meaning of this 'truth' is indifferent to the structure of the system of power and obedience that supports it, because it is de facto emptied out of any content that could predetermine the sovereign's decision-making power. To Schmitt, *any notion* as to what this one truth entails is a matter of 'interpretation' on behalf of the sovereign.⁹³ Throughout his oeuvre this dual question signifies the status of the sovereign: *Quis interpretabitur? / Quis judicabit?* (who will interpret? / who will decide?). This not only affirms the identity of interpretation and decision, it also highlights the significance of the interpreting and deciding instance in a way that obliterates any notion of a pre-given content contained in such truths.⁹⁴ The outcome of the sovereign decision on the interpretation of the highest truth is a political differentiation: by deciding what the truth entails, it is decided who falls on which side of it. Thus, a decision on what "Jesus is the Christ" *means* amounts to a political exclusion of the political enemy as an enemy of Christ. The content of this truth does not predetermine the decision, because it is left 'empty', but it does legitimize its outcome.⁹⁵

Groh acknowledges that her reading approximates Löwith's interpretation of Schmitt, but she is not uncritical of his initial portrayal. Her critique of Löwith is twofold: first, she argues that Löwith failed to recognize the role 'secularization' plays in Schmitt's theory and therefore remained oblivious to the *pointe* of his political theology. "Anders als wir heute konnte Löwith damals noch nicht erkennen, daß der formalistische Charakter des Schmittischen Deziisionismus in struktureller Analogie zum Antiuniversalismus und Voluntarismus seines Gottesbegriffs steht – geradezu als dessen Säkularisat im Sinn einer Verwirklichung des Transzendenten."⁹⁶ Groh assumes that Löwith was not aware of the 'theological' component in Schmitt, which legitimizes secularization as a 'realization of transcendence' through the representation of the voluntarist God by the decisionist sovereign.⁹⁷ However, I contend that Groh's reading approaches Löwith's more closely than she admits, because 'Occasional Decisionism' already provides several indications that the latter *did* have a certain understanding – be it tentative – of this concept of secularization and the meaning of Schmitt's political theology: not only does Löwith refer on various occasions to the book *Political Theology*, he also notices (as we have seen) the 'systematic' concept of secularization as the state reoccupying the position of the occasionalist God.⁹⁸ Moreover, he also observes that Schmitt differentiates between two concepts of secularization: one in which political notions of sovereignty and

91 Groh (1998) pp.57-61.

92 Groh (1998) p.21 (emphasis added).

93 Groh (1998) pp.21, 56-63.

94 Schmitt (1963) pp.122-123: "Wer entscheidet, was Wahres Christentum ist?"; *ibid.* (2014) p.115; (1965) pp.64-68. Cf. Meier (2012) p.192; De Wit (1992) pp.403-409.

95 Groh (1998) pp.25-63, 128-129. Cf. Motschenbacher (2000) pp.334-339.

96 Groh (1998) p.289.

97 Groh (1998) pp.288-295.

98 Löwith (1995) pp.142-145, 273 fn.17.

power are “substantively developed from out of [analogous theological] notions”, and the other in which the theological-political constellation becomes “replaced by faith in anonymous laws of a natural scientific kind” (i.e., neutralization).⁹⁹

Groh’s second criticism follows from the first, which is that Schmitt’s decisionism is not as completely undetermined and indiscriminate as Löwith suggests, because it is based on the assumption of a divine decree that demands antagonism within a fallen world. Hence, this decisionism is not completely indifferent to the contents that would substantiate a sovereign decision, because its formal, political-theological structure creates a predilection for contents that lend themselves to *division*.¹⁰⁰ While she agrees with Löwith that Schmitt ‘decides for decisiveness’, *that* decision itself is not ‘occasionalist’.¹⁰¹ Ultimately, Schmitt’s ‘empty’ decisionism forms a response to a divine decree that the sovereign must act as a placeholder for God.

[Löwith ignores the fact] daß für den politischen Theologen die Entscheidungen immer schon gefallen sind, die Inhalte immer schon festliegen, jedenfalls tendenziell, und daß insbesondere die Entscheidung für die Entscheidung, also die Option für den Dezisionismus, selber keine beliebige, inhaltsindifferente war, sondern eine politische und zugleich politisch-theologische. Der Formalismus etwa der Freund-Feind-Unterscheidung oder des ... Hobbes-Kristalls als Modell eines politisch-theologischen Dezisionismus stellte die Leerformeln bereit, welche die eigenen subjektiven Interpretationen, die eigenen materialen Feindbestimmungen aufnehmen sollten.¹⁰²

In other words, this decisionism might not provide a substance of its own, but its form – which demands an intensification of division, dissociation, and enmity – does preclude certain ‘substances’ in advance, namely those that are intrinsically disposed towards neutralization or a sublation of division.¹⁰³ The decision for decisionism itself is not ‘occasionalist’, but rather stems from a deeply rooted belief in the ‘reality of enmity’.¹⁰⁴ Groh concludes that Schmitt’s decisionism ultimately relies on a ‘*theological nihilism*’. That is, the theological ‘foundation’ of Schmitt’s thought is a purely anti-universalist, nominalist voluntarism that denies any kind of a pre-given order or norm and depicts the sovereign ruler as the direct representation of this voluntarist God. Hence, the notion of ‘decision’ itself forms the “normlosen, substanzlosen Kern jener Lehre von der göttlichen Allmacht, die der Politischen Theologie zugrundeliegt.”¹⁰⁵

Löwith’s Critique Revisited

After this ‘theological corrective’ and Groh’s insistence on a ‘theological nihilism’ in Schmitt, it is time to assess the enduring value of Löwith’s first critique. First, it should be conceded that Meier and De Wit have convincingly demonstrated that Löwith dismisses too quickly

99 Löwith (1995) p.143.

100 Groh (1998) pp.290-294.

101 Groh (1998) pp.289-290.

102 Groh (1998) pp.289-290. To be sure, even though Löwith does suggest that Schmitt’s decisionism is itself a polemical counter-image of liberalism, his argument does not solely depend on the assumption that the decision for decisiveness *itself* is also ‘occasional’, as Groh interprets it. It is more important that any kind of commitment to a content that would, in second instance, *substantiate* this decision is occasional. Hence, in opposition to Groh, I don’t see a necessary contradiction between Löwith’s and Groh’s arguments.

103 Schmitt (1963) pp.121-123; *ibid.* (1965) pp.62-63.

104 Schmitt (2014) p.127.

105 Groh (1998) p.288, cf. pp.284-289.

Schmitt's reference to Christian sources as 'occasionalist' and inessential. However, we can see that an acknowledgement of an essential theological dimension in Schmitt's thought does not automatically disqualify Löwith's interpretation if one accepts – with Groh – that this theological background does not amount to a substantive core or foundation, as Meier claims, but rather to a 'normless, contentless core'.¹⁰⁶ Groh corrects Löwith by pointing out that the decision for decisiveness *itself* is not accidental or occasionalist, but this is arguably not the crux of his critique; his main contention is rather that an 'empty' but intrinsically 'divisionist' decisionism leads to an explosive and disastrous political situation. Surveying Löwith's similar writings on nihilism and historicism from the same period – e.g., his 'Max Weber und seine Nachfolger' (1940) and his 'Der europäische Nihilismus: Betrachtungen zur geistigen Vorgeschichte des europäischen Krieges' (1940) – it becomes apparent that he does not take issue with 'occasionalism' itself, but rather with the purported 'groundlessness' of the modern, historical consciousness, that, if *combined* with activist decisionism, creates the calamitous mixture that he signifies as 'active nihilism'.¹⁰⁷ The bottom line of this critique is arguably not "occasionalism" itself but rather the threat inherent to a modern groundlessness intertwined with a decisionist-existentialist attraction to the extreme "limiting case" of death and war.¹⁰⁸ This is a critique that Löwith would also level against Martin Heidegger and the theologian Friedrich Gogarten in the 1960 version of 'Occasional Decisionism'.¹⁰⁹

This raises a related issue, which is that Meier, De Wit and Groh interpret Löwith's critique as a mere accusation of empty opportunism or a complete indiscriminateness. However, although occasionally Löwith does indeed intimate that this is his point, once he compares Schmitt to the existentialism of Heidegger his critique becomes more precise. Then it becomes apparent Schmitt is not accused of being a mere political chameleon or wind vane, but of postulating a type of thought that, being preoccupied with the 'thatness' of life, is oriented towards the "extreme case" – i.e., war, the enemy and death – for lack of a positive content that might function as a moral or normative restriction.¹¹⁰ Arguably, this corresponds with Groh's claim that Schmitt's decisionism has an intrinsic predilection for those contents that can motivate its drive towards division. In Löwith's case, this amounts to a more sophisticated critique than a mere accusation of opportunism: any kind of philosophy that is, negatively speaking, formalistic and can be substantiated by a variety of different contents but which is positively dispositioned towards the intensification of division and the extremities of life, can easily succumb to a catastrophic ideology such as National-Socialism, and should therefore be rejected as a calamitous "active nihilism". This critique suggests that thought and action has to be grounded in truths and principles that remain constant throughout changing historical circumstances, functioning as fixed standards of judgement.¹¹¹ The implication is that if a theory – be it conceptually determined by theology or not – cannot prevent a "salto mortale" into the "*catastrophic manner of thinking*" that led to the rise of

106 Groh (1998) p.288.

107 Cf. Löwith, 'European Nihilism' (1995) pp.173-234; *ibid.*, 'Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus' (1952); Barash (1998); Timm (1967) pp.587-590.

108 Löwith (1995) p.141, cf. pp.146-150.

109 Löwith (1995) pp.159-169. Cf. *ibid.* (1960) p.82.

110 Löwith (1995) pp.147-159; *ibid.* (2007) pp.371-373.

111 Cf. Löwith (1995) pp.143-146, 156, 158.

Nazism, then it has proven itself lacking such standards, and is hence, to Löwith, nihilistic.¹¹² Meier seeks to point out an essential theological component in Schmitt's thought against the accusation of the latter's nihilism. However, the fact that Löwith also extends his critique to the theologian Gogarten in the later edition of 'Occasional Decisionism' proves that the admission of such a theological component in Schmitt's thought would not have provided a reason for him to mitigate his initial indictment of the assumed groundlessness of this decisionism.¹¹³ Löwith's analogous verdict in this text of Heidegger – who is presented as a secularized Kierkegaardian “theologian” who substitutes God for “the Nothing and death” – moreover demonstrates that Groh's concept of theological nihilism is not incongruent with the former's judgement of Schmitt.¹¹⁴

This brings out another aspect to Löwith's critique, one that has been mostly ignored by commentators. We have seen that Löwith has been charged, e.g., by Groh and De Wit, with dismissing all too easily any theological references in Schmitt's thought as mere symptoms of 'occasionalism'. However, what they thereby arguably overlook is the normative ground of Löwith's critique: i.e., his ahistorical, ideal-typical conception of 'authentic' faith, which we have already encountered in our analysis of *Meaning and History*. Hence, Löwith not only dismisses Schmitt's appropriation of theological components as *disingenuous* in 'Occasional Decisionism', he also indicates that – regardless of whether it is in earnest or not – this political theology is *inauthentic* if compared to 'real' Christian faith. This means that even when it is demonstrated that the theological dimension is an irreducible component of Schmitt's thought, signifying genuinely held beliefs, it still does not diminish the implicit – but, as we will discover, more trenchant – objection to his 'heterodoxy'.¹¹⁵

That this indictment underlies Löwith's critique becomes especially clear when he condemns Schmitt's attempt to neutralize the 'love your enemy' commandment by relegating it to the private sphere and leaving the public enemy (*hostis*) untouched by it. Löwith opposes this to the stance of an authentic believer: someone “who is in the world as if he were not of this world, one for whom it is not war but rather the Last Judgment that is the decisive exigency, can in principle not distinguish between private and public enemies.”¹¹⁶ Löwith thus maintains an 'Augustinian', world-negating conception of Christianity, on the basis of which he declares Schmitt's recourse to Christian sources to be unjustified because it contradicts this essential unworldliness.¹¹⁷ This indictment also extends to Schmitt's 'systematic' conception of *secularization*: wherever Löwith notices that Schmitt wants to endow the sovereign or the state with a God-like role as “the highest court of appeal” he suggests, by comparison to e.g. Kierkegaard and Donoso Cortés, that this endeavor is decidedly un-Christian.¹¹⁸ The implication is that

112 Löwith (1995) p.166; *ibid.* (1958) p.59-60. Cf. Falk (2014) pp.223-229 for a more critical reading of Löwith in this respect. My own analysis presupposes that Löwith's criterion for his repudiation of Schmitt, Heidegger and Gogarten is *their decision for Nazism*. Other thinkers, such as Weber or Karl Barth, also appear in Löwith's texts as proponents of “European nihilism”, but they are ultimately acquitted on the basis of their adherence to one fixed point – whether it is a noble character or transcendence – that could prevent them from making such a decision.

113 Löwith (1995) pp.166-169.

114 Löwith (1995) p.160, cf. pp.159-166; *ibid.* (1960) p.82. On “theological nihilism”: Falk (2014) pp.224-229.

115 Löwith (1995) pp.145-158, 278-279 fn.65; *ibid.* (2007) pp.374-375.

116 Löwith (1995) p.279 fn.65.

117 Löwith (1949) pp.169-173; *ibid.* (1958); (1966) pp.439-440. Cf. Timm (1967). In the following, I propose that Löwith's normative conception of Christianity is a negativistic, protestant-Augustinian one. Evidently, this is not the only possible reading of Augustine, but I cannot address such nuances here due to the scope of the current investigation.

118 Löwith (1995) pp.145-146, 151, 273 fn.17.

any notion of a legitimate representation of God in this world – as in what Weber calls “active asceticism” – is foreign to Löwith’s Augustinian, passivist-negativistic conception of Christianity, that is primarily defined by a resolute separation between the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena*.¹¹⁹ Hence, even if we only have indications that Löwith was aware of Schmitt’s positive concept of secularization, it can be maintained that he would not approve of it.

That there is indeed a normative, ideal-typical dimension to Löwith’s critique is affirmed by his article from 1964, ‘Max Weber und Carl Schmitt’, which, as far as Schmitt is concerned largely reiterates – in more condensed form – the main objections from the 1935 article on ‘Occasional Decisionism’.¹²⁰ One difference that is significant for our purposes is that, in this instance, Löwith appears willing to concede that Schmitt’s affiliation with Catholicism might express something more than a superficial occasionalism. What is striking is that, despite this admission, Löwith did not feel the need to otherwise modify the main points of critique already leveled against Schmitt in 1935. The significant accusations remain in place: Schmitt is charged with an empty, ‘polemical’ decisionism oriented towards the extreme case, a totalization of the political, a dangerous preoccupation with enmity, and a readiness to shift from an extreme decisionism to an authoritarian “Ordnungsdenken”.¹²¹ However, by now it had become clear to Löwith that Schmitt’s tendency “seinen Staatsgedanken autoritär-katholisch zu färben” stems from a more deeply rooted religious care for his soul. The publication of Schmitt’s book *Ex Captivitate Salus* (1950) indicates to Löwith that he “also irgendwie auf das Heil seiner Seele bedacht war.”¹²² But precisely this impression rekindles his irritation towards the fact that, as a self-proclaimed Christian, Schmitt appears oblivious to the essential tension that should always exist, according to Löwith’s idea of Christianity, between the two cities, or between world- and spiritual history. Löwith quotes from Weber’s *Politics as Vocation* to prove his point:

Wer das Heil seiner Seele und die Rettung anderer Seelen sucht, der sucht das nicht auf dem Wege der Politik, die ganz andere Aufgaben hat: solche, die nur mit Gewalt zu lösen sind. Der Genius oder Dämon der Politik lebt mit dem Gott der Liebe, auch mit dem Christengott in seiner kirchlichen Ausprägung, in einer inneren Spannung, die jederzeit in unaustragbarem Konflikt ausbrechen kann.¹²³

The fact that the – one might say ‘Augustinian’ – acknowledgement of a tension between a spiritual care for the soul and an engagement in political-worldly affairs appears to be absent in Schmitt’s thought could very well have been regarded by Löwith as a confirmation of his earlier judgement, i.e., that Schmitt’s theology – genuinely held or not – is inauthentic. The underlying message of Löwith’s critique, which remains unchanged in its various iterations, is that properly speaking, Schmitt’s model of a Christian political theology is a “contradiction in terms”.¹²⁴

119 De Wit (1992) pp.398-399; Mehring (2016) p.86; Löwith (1949) pp.169-173. Cf. Geréby (2008) pp.28-29.

120 Löwith (2007). His ‘Max Weber und seine Nachfolger’ (1940) is largely identical.

121 Löwith (2007) pp.370-373.

122 Löwith (2007) pp.370, 374. Cf. *ibid.* (1994) p.91.

123 Löwith (2007) p.374. Cf. Weber, *Vocation Lectures* (2004) p.90.

124 Löwith (1949) p.144. Cf. *ibid.* (2007) p.374.

Schmitt's Attempted Rapprochement and Covert Critique of Löwith

A Precarious Position in Post-War Germany

Schmitt never publicly responded to Löwith's critique, not even in the years after 1945, when he tried to make a careful comeback after his fall from grace.¹²⁵ His posthumous *Glossarium* shows that Schmitt regarded the Jewish former exiles with suspicion after the Allied victory, but that he was also highly cautious, as a former Nazi official, so as not to evoke the collective wrath of the post-war intelligentsia.¹²⁶ Schmitt lamented that his fate as an academic was to be linked with the vanquished enemy and that he would therefore be subjugated to the insufferable "Rechthaberei" of the victors and their version of historical events.¹²⁷ His attempts at adjusting to the new situation also meant that he tried to ingratiate himself with the intelligentsia of the post-war order, which involved reaching out to Jewish philosophers such as Löwith, and later Blumenberg and Jacob Taubes. Alexander Schmitz's 'Zur Geschichte einer Kontroverse, die nicht stattfand' (2007) recounts that Schmitt attempted to initiate a polemic with Löwith after 1949, when *Meaning in History* was published.¹²⁸ Schmitt requested Hans Paeschke to send Löwith an essay on Donoso Cortés – which he had published anonymously – but insisted that his name not be mentioned. "Den Donoso-Aufsatz möchte ich (ohne mit meinem Namen zu erscheinen) Karl Löwith zukommen lassen, nachdem ich von seinem 'Meaning in History' einen starken Eindruck erhalten habe."¹²⁹ He adds:

Nennen Sie aber keinesfalls meinem Namen [to Löwith]! Die Emigranten sind unberechenbar und meistens partiell gestört in moralischer Hinsicht. Sie sitzen auf ihrem Recht wie auf eine Beute und verteidigen es wie einen Raub. Sie sind durch Recht und Rechthaben außer sich und außerhalb der menschlichen Maße geraten; sie führen den gerechten Krieg, das Schauerlichste, was menschliche Rechthaberei erfunden hat. Ihr Recht und ihre moralische Entrüstung verschleißt ihnen die Rückkehr zu sich selbst und zur Vernunft. Ich weiß nicht, ob das auch für Karl Löwith gilt. Aber man muß heute mit solchen Möglichkeiten rechnen, und ich habe keine Lust, die Haßeffekte dieses Menschentypus zu meinen bereits überstandenen Verfolgungen zusätzlich auf Meine arme Person zu lenken. Mich erfüllt das taedium fugae, und was das publizieren angeht, so halte ich mich an den antiken Satz: non possum scribere de eo qui potest prosc[r]ibere.¹³⁰

125 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.276-77. In the Schmitt-Blumenberg *Briefwechsel* (2007, pp.140-141) we find an intimation of how Schmitt's received Löwith's critique in the additional editorial notes: "Schmitts hang nach Kalauer, der sich immer wieder in den Nachlaß-Materialien zeigt, findet sich auch an Löwiths Text bestätigt. Diesen überschreibt er: 'Gut gebrüllt, Löwith!'". See also Schmitz, 'Zur Geschichte eine Kontroverse, die nicht stattfand' (2007) on other aspects of the Schmitt-Löwith debate that are not to be addressed here, such as Löwith's critique of Schmitt's *Tyranny of Values* (1996b).

126 Schmitt (1991, p.252) uses the term 'Emigranten'. See Koselleck's remark in the 'Vorwort' for *Mein Leben* (1990, p.x): "Seit 1933 werden Löwith Alternativen aufgenötigt, die er sich nicht gesucht hat: Jude sein zu sollen, sein Amt aufgeben zu müssen, nach Italien zu entweichen, als Exilierter und nicht als Emigrant."

127 Groh (1998) pp.115-155; Müller (2003) pp.49-62.

128 Schmitz (2007) pp.379-381.

129 Quoted in Schmitz (2007) p.380 fn.18. Cf. Mehring (1996) pp.231-248. This essay was published in: Schmitt, *Donoso Cortés in gesamt-europäischer Interpretation* (1950b), where he also refers to Löwith as a "geistesgeschichtlichen Eingeweihten" (p.99).

130 Schmitt (1991) p.252; Van Laak (1993) pp.149-150. Cf. Schmitz (2007, p.280 fn.18) for the longer quotation.

After he had declined Paeschke's offer to translate *Meaning in History* into German – for which he suggested his student Hanno Kesting instead – Schmitt set out to write a 'review' of Löwith's popular book: 'Drei Möglichkeiten eines christlichen Geschichtsbildes' (1950).¹³¹ This text, of which Mehring states that "[n]owhere else does Schmitt express himself in such decidedly Christian manner", responds to a general challenge to his political theology he discerns behind both Löwith's direct attacks – i.e., 'Occasional Decisionism' and 'Max Weber und seine Nachfolger' – but also behind *Meaning in History*.¹³² This general challenge is a wholesale attack on the very possibility of political theology, which in Schmitt's mind originates in the theology of Löwith's "Catholic friend" Erik Peterson. Alexander Schmitz notes: "Die – persönliche und sachliche – Herausforderung von *Meaning in History* bestand für Schmitt darin, daß Löwith aus seiner Sicht wesentliche Argumente von Erik Peterson übernommen hatte, ohne dies kenntlich zu machen."¹³³ The paper 'Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History' forms both an attempt to establish Schmitt's theological credentials and to defend his entire project of political theology. This explains why, when Löwith did not respond to this review, Schmitt felt 'unsatisfied' and would complain to Blumenberg in a letter that his attempt at rapprochement fell on deaf ears.¹³⁴

'Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History'

To understand the sense in which Schmitt seeks to establish a link between him and Löwith – whose popularity as a philosopher might have helped him to reinsert his ideas into academic discourse – and simultaneously mount a counterattack in defense of his political theology, it is necessary to briefly return to this central text, 'Three Possibilities'. I argue that the decidedly Christian tone Schmitt strikes here and the insights he offers into the nature of his Catholicism should be understood as a response to the underlying implications of Löwith's critique I uncovered earlier in this chapter: i.e., the suggestion that the radical unworldliness of a genuine Christianity makes any positive connection between faith and worldly politics or history impossible.¹³⁵ In the following, I first discern the way in which Schmitt attempts to write himself in line with Löwith before addressing the covert critique that forms the undercurrent of this text.

In 'Three Possibilities', Schmitt makes an effort to emphasize the areas of overlap between him and Löwith. An obvious point of departure is their joint aversion to the modern idea of progress. Schmitt states, directly referring to Löwith's famous claim: "We know that the Enlightenment and the positivist belief in progress was only secularized Judaism and Christianity, and that it obtained its '*eschata*' from these sources."¹³⁶ The subsequent description of the efficacy of the idea of 'progress' in the modern world however quickly suggests a difference in approach. Schmitt namely regards progressive philosophies of history as the

131 Mehring (2009) p.475. First published as 'Drei Stufen historischer Sinngebung' (1950).

132 Mehring (2016) p.84; *ibid.* (2009) pp. 475-476. Cf. Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.275-293.

133 Schmitz (2007) p.381.

134 Schmitz (2007) p.380: "Für Schmitt, dem an einer sachlichen Auseinandersetzung mit Löwith gelegen war, verlief die Kontroverse unbefriedigend". In the Schmitt-Blumenberg *Briefwechsel* (2007, p.120) Schmitt mentions the concept of the katechon, adding: "Ich halte mich ... für verpflichtet, Ihnen das [i.e., the notion of the katechon] nicht zu verschweigen, obwohl ich auch in diesem Punkt verstummt bin, nachdem der Versuch, bei Löwith dafür einen Sinn zu finden, auf eine vielleicht von mir selbst verschuldete, peremptorische Weise misslungen ist".

135 Cf. Mehring (2009) pp.475-478.

136 Schmitt (2009) p.168.

motivating force behind a grand-scale descent into a massified, techno-industrial dystopia; the watchword – a commonplace in conservative critique that does not appear as such in Löwith's work – that is applied here is “planning”:¹³⁷

Today, all human beings who *plan* and attempt to unite the masses behind their plans engage in some form of philosophy of history. They accept the factum of the means of destruction, which modern science provides to every person in power. But the question as to what kind of people these means are to be reasonably applied to is obviously no natural scientific question. ... Today, it is posed and answered only by means of the philosophy of history.¹³⁸

Schmitt suggest that the utopian philosophy of history that operates behind the processes of planning and massification has a violent, totalitarian streak, because it inevitably punishes those who – by its own account – fall on the ‘wrong side of history’. All “mass propaganda searches for its justification in proving that it is on the side of the things to come.” He adds: “The faith of the masses is only the faith of being in the right, while the opponent is wrong, because time and future and progress work against him.”¹³⁹

Thus, a significant difference between Löwith's and Schmitt's critiques of progress comes to the fore: while the former dismisses progress (and decline) as a persistent illusion that conceals the meaninglessness of history, the latter is driven by a genuine concern with the eschatological outcome of the historical process. Schmitt frames his aversion to progress against the backdrop of *his own eschatological thought*. This unveils ‘progress’ as a demonic force that has to be countered by assuming the role of the katechon.¹⁴⁰ Unlike Löwith, Schmitt is not simply dismissive of the ‘progressive’ tendency to portray history as a struggle between “the children of light” who shall inherit the Kingdom and “the children of darkness” who are condemned; on the contrary, he employs the same eschatological framework as his progressive enemies, but assumes the opposite role within it, as his alternative katechontic eschatology demonstrates.¹⁴¹

In ‘Three Possibilities’ Schmitt however remains silent about this underlying disagreement between him and Löwith. In fact, Schmitt's focus on the presumed common ground with Löwith soon tips over into misrepresentation, as e.g., Joe-Paul Kroll and Mehring have noted.¹⁴² What Schmitt aims to establish with his exhibition of the ‘three possibilities for a Christian conception of history’ is essentially at odds with Löwith's endeavor: the former argues that it is only from a position of (Christian) faith that one can obtain a genuine historical consciousness. He therefore has to exclude the position of Greek antiquity as a viable alternative in this respect, which he does by invoking the voice of Löwith:

Following Karl Löwith, we are convinced that paganism is not at all capable of any form of historical thought because it is cyclical. The historical loses its specific meaning within the cycles of an eternal recurrence. We know that the Enlightenment and the positivist belief in progress was only secularized Judaism and Christianity, and that it obtained its ‘*eschata*’ from these sources. We also see that we are dealing with in reality today: neither the one, nor the other; neither cyclical, nor eschatological

137 Schmitt (2009) pp.167-168; *ibid.* (2005b) pp.845-847; Mehring (1996) p.236. Cf. Kroll (2010) p.180.

138 Schmitt (2009) p.167 (emphasis added, translation modified)/*ibid.* (1950) p.927.

139 Schmitt (2009) p.167 (translation modified)/*ibid.* (1950) p.927.

140 Meier (2012) pp.240-261; Mehring (1996).

141 Löwith (1949) p.44. Cf. Meier (1995) pp.48-49, 81-83.

142 Kroll (2010) pp.178-183; Mehring (1996) pp.236-238. Cf. Ifergan (2010) p.167.

convictions, but rather motivations [*Sinngebungen*] or, even more fitting: constructed justifications [*Sinn-Setzungen*] for large acts of planning, which are imposed by human beings on other human beings, constructed justifications, which consequently become yet again a component of major acts of planning [*Groß-planungen*]. This is how we interpret the infinitely meaningful propositions by Löwith: the further we go back from today into the history of human historical thinking, the more the conception of an act of planning ceases to exist. Divine providence, which the human being can recalculate or even predict, is after all also just a human act of planning.¹⁴³

This amounts to a misrepresentation of Löwith's position for (at least) two reasons: first, Löwith regarded the 'Greek' view of history to be the most truthful precisely *because* it described history as devoid of an intrinsic meaning, whereas Schmitt wishes to discredit it because of this reason. Schmitt's hidden assumption is that a type of historical thought that cannot perceive of history as meaningful is not really 'historical thought'. Secondly, he forcefully steers Löwith's point towards his own by equating historical *teleological* thought in general with 'planning', a notion that plays no role of significance in *Meaning in History*. This move allows Schmitt to disconnect what he considers to be the 'genuine', *non-teleological* eschatological thought, which focusses on the singularity of the event within the opacity of history, from the teleological thought that resides in both 'providence' and modern 'progress'.¹⁴⁴ Schmitt hereby glosses over the fact that Löwith rejects *any* notion of a 'meaning in history', be it eschatological, providential, teleological or not, progressive or retrogressive.

Schmitt buttresses his account by drawing on Löwith's critique of 'progress' while rejecting the latter's underlying negation of all meaning in history. Schmitt's concept of the katechon – as we have seen – is subsequently introduced in order to solve a problem that presses on Schmitt, which is that the type of undiluted eschatology that Löwith uses as a standard of measurement in *Meaning in History* necessarily stifles the possibility of 'meaning in history', specifically in terms of meaningful political decisions. He asks "the question of whether eschatological faith and historical consciousness can coexist. The answer to this question is almost always negative."¹⁴⁵ Schmitt continues:

The vivid expectation of an imminent end seems to take away the meaning from all of history, and it causes an eschatological paralysis for which there are many historical examples. And yet there is the possibility of a bridge. ... The bridge consists in the conception of a force, which defers the end and suppresses the evil one. This is the *katechon* of the mysterious passage of Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians.¹⁴⁶

In opposition to Löwith, Schmitt employs the concept of the katechon to ensure that eschatology does not preclude the possibility of meaningful actions in the historical sphere. The next step for Schmitt is to renegotiate the definition of the term '*meaning*' – which Löwith identifies in *Meaning in History* with the teleological concept of 'purpose' – by instead dissociating it from

143 Schmitt (2009) p.168/ibid. (1950) p.928. Cf. Mehring (1996) p.237; Kroll (2010) pp.177-188.

144 Cf. Kesting (1959) pp.123, 146, 320. It should be noted that planning and teleology are equated by Schmitt with Prometheus (as a personification of foresight) – which makes enlightened, liberal modernity an essentially Promethean age – and that it is in this respect that he juxtaposes this mode of thought with its antithesis, represented by Epimetheus (a personification of hindsight). Cf. Kroll (2010) pp.182-183; Groh (1998) pp.126-128.

145 Schmitt (2009) p.169. Cf. ibid. *Nomos of the Earth* (2006) p.60.

146 Schmitt (2009) p.169. Cf. ibid. (2006) pp.60-62; (2005b) p.850.

teleology.¹⁴⁷ To Schmitt, the Christian Epimetheus points towards a non-teleological meaning in history. It discloses history as a dark sphere of struggle in which sparse shimmers of transcendence can be observed: this, Schmitt asserts, is “the dark meaning of our history” [*dunkle Sinn unserer Geschichte*], or its “dark truth” [*dunkle Wahrheit*].¹⁴⁸

Recapitulating, Schmitt affirms that “[a]ll of this – the great parallel, the *kat-echon*, and the Christian Epimetheus – becomes for us an ardent theme because of Karl Löwith’s *Meaning in History*.”¹⁴⁹ He concludes with an esoteric, ill-translatable vision of the ‘dark truth’ that Löwith supposedly helped him reveal:

Wir ziehen konkrete Folgerungen aus dem großen Eindruck seiner [i.e., Löwith’s] kritischen Analyse und wagen es, wieder von einer Geschichte zu sprechen, die nicht nur ein Archiv des Gewesenen ist, aber auch keine humanistische Selbstbespiegelung und auch kein bloßes Stück insichselbstkreisender Natur, sondern eine in große Zeugnisse stürmende, in starken Kreaturierungen wachsende Einstückung des Ewigen in den Ablauf der Zeiten, ein Wurzelschlagen im Sinnreich der Erde, durch Mangel und Ohnmacht die Hoffnung und Ehre unseres Daseins.¹⁵⁰

This quote gives us an impression of the more implicit way in which Schmitt positions himself *over against* Löwith, despite the explicit – and largely exaggerated – points of convergence that he displays between them. Even though Schmitt can agree with Löwith in his rejection of both the ‘antiquarian history’ of historicism and the humanistic self-projection of progressivism, they part ways when Schmitt also discards the ‘natural’ or ‘Stoic’ view of history, in which the human domain has no meaning of itself but is rather subjugated to the eternal recurrence of the cosmic order, i.e., as a “bloßes Stück insichselbstkreisender Natur”.¹⁵¹ Indeed, we have already seen that Schmitt modifies Löwith’s definition of ‘meaning’ so that it no longer coincides with ‘purpose’. Thus Schmitt is able to posit an eschatological conception of history that does allow for ‘meaning’ but which is not teleological. Schmitt therefore defends his own eschatology not only against the ‘false’ eschatologies of progress but also against the stoic naturalism of Löwith.¹⁵²

There is reason to believe that this is a conscious strategy of Schmitt: i.e., to evoke Löwith only in as far as their views seemingly converge and to gloss over the fact that he applies their joint disdain of ‘progressive’ eschatologies to serve a totally different point, namely the defense of *another* type of eschatology. In the ‘Three Possibilities’ there is only one explicit mention of a point of disagreement, which concerns the definition of ‘Christianity’. While Löwith – following protestant theologians such as Oscar Cullmann – negates any meaningful connection between history and the Christian idea of transcendence, Schmitt rather claims that *only* Christian faith enables a genuine conception of historicity.¹⁵³ Schmitt directly takes issue with Löwith’s conception of Christianity when introducing his third possibility: “Let us take as our departure a passage (p. 196) of Löwith’s book, where he writes that the message

147 Löwith (1949) p.5.

148 Schmitt (2009) p.169-170/ibid. (1950) pp. 930-931.

149 Schmitt (2009) p.170.

150 Schmitt (1950) p.931. Cf. ibid. (2005b) p.852. Especially in this instance one can sense a certain proximity between Schmitt’s conception of history and the one put forward by Walter Benjamin in his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (2007, pp.253-264). On the Schmitt-Benjamin connection, see: De Wilde (2008).

151 Cf. Schmitt (2005b) pp.848-849; Löwith (1960) pp.152-178.

152 Cf. Mehring (2009) p.477.

153 On Löwith’s indebtedness to Cullmann, cf. Ruh (1980) pp.257-258.

of the *New Testament* does not consist in a call to a historical deed but in a call to repentance.¹⁵⁴ He suggests that “in order to clarify our thought” it is necessary to “*juxtapose Löwith’s proposition with a different one*” that should “keep us from any philosophical, ethical and other neutralizations and let us dare to suggest: Christianity is in its essence ... a historical event of infinite, non-appropriable, non-occupiable singularity.” That is, it is “the incarnation in the Virgin Mary.”¹⁵⁵

Following this line of thought we can observe a hidden antagonism behind Schmitt’s appropriation of Löwith’s theory. As an astute hermeneutic, Schmitt must have been well aware of the philosophical differences between him and the Jewish ‘émigré’. Löwith’s book might have benefited Schmitt in clarifying his own point of view, as he indicates, but it is important to bear in mind that this only true *ex negativo*; Löwith functioned as a negative mirror image through which he could better understand his own position. And indeed, save from their shared rejection of progress, it is clear that Löwith’s and Schmitt’s positions diverge considerably. When Schmitt claims that he is able to conceive of his three possibilities for a Christian conception of history on the basis of *Meaning in History*, he is only able to do this after first renegotiating the definitions of key concepts in Löwith’s analysis, i.e., of ‘meaning’, ‘history’, ‘Christianity’ and ‘eschatology’. Evidently, Löwith could not agree with Schmitt’s “dark truth” – his esoteric insight into the eschatological significance of history as a mortal struggle – and would instead favor the vision of the world as “a piece of nature circling around itself.”¹⁵⁶

Löwith versus Schmitt: Antithetical Theologies

In their afterword to the Schmitt-Blumenberg *Briefwechsel* (2007), Alexander Schmitz and Marcel Lepper explain why Schmitt deemed it necessary to defend his Christian credentials against Löwith, and why he regarded the latter’s criticisms not only as an affront to the authenticity of his religious beliefs – as my reconstruction confirms – but also as an attack on the possibility of a ‘political theology’.¹⁵⁷ They trace the origins of the Löwith-Schmitt polemic to the 1935 article ‘Occasional Decisionism’ and, significantly, also to a publication by the theologian Erik Peterson from the same year, titled *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem*.¹⁵⁸ Peterson attempted to demonstrate, with a historical case-study (the contrast between the imperial theology of Eusebius and Augustine’s doctrine of the two kingdoms), “die *theologische Unmöglichkeit* einer ‘politischen Theologie’.”¹⁵⁹ He argued that the Christian dogma of the Trinity precludes the possibility of a simple identification between a worldly ruler and the Christian image of God, which entails that, ultimately, Christian theology cannot be used for the legitimation of absolutist politics. Moreover, Peterson claims that Christian faith in the

154 Schmitt (2009) p.169 (translation modified)/*ibid.* (1950) p.930. Cf. Löwith (1949) p.196-197: the emphasis here lies on eschatology’s radical negation of history as a sphere of meaning.

155 Schmitt (2009) p.169 (emphasis added, translation modified)/*ibid.* (1950) p.930. The phrase “in order to clarify our point, let us juxtapose ...” is telling, because it illustrates how Schmitt uses an antithetical positions in order to obtain self-understanding. Cf. *Political Theology II* (2014, p.127) where Schmitt exaggerates Blumenberg’s vision of modernity, admitting that he “projects a counter-image ... in order to understand my own position more sharply.”

156 Schmitt (2009) p.160.

157 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.262-293.

158 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.265-285. Cf. Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) pp.119, 127, 138; Peterson (1951) pp.49-147.

159 Peterson (1951) p.147 fn.168 (emphasis added); Schmitt (2014) p.132. Cf. Hoelzl and Ward (2014) p.9; Motschenbacher (2000) pp.212-224.

eschaton necessarily relativizes any political promise of worldly salvation; political reality has to be met with an “eschatological reservation”.¹⁶⁰ In opposition to Schmitt, Peterson affirmed the reading of Augustine that asserts a rigid distinction between the two cities, and concludes that political theology, which seeks to abolish this distinction, is impossible from an authentically Christian perspective.¹⁶¹ Schmitt regarded this as a ‘Parthian attack’ on himself and on his own political theology that, it is suggested, wounded him deeply. This finally made him launch the wholesale counter-attack that is *Political Theology II* (1970).¹⁶²

A thorough investigation of the Schmitt-*Nachlaß* leads Schmitz and Lepper to the conclusion that Schmitt evidently placed Löwith in the same line of offence with Peterson, and both, finally, with Blumenberg.¹⁶³ Schmitt suspected that these three authors formed a united ‘front’ against him, joined by the desire for the neutralization or *Erledigung* (‘closure’ or ‘execution’) of his political theology.¹⁶⁴ The subtitle of his *Politische Theologie II* refers to this endeavor: *die Legende von der Erledigung jeder Politischen Theologie* (translated as *The Myth of the Closure of any Political Theology*). At this stage I restrict my scope to the perceived Peterson-Löwith connection, leaving Blumenberg’s involvement to the next chapter. In a letter to Blumenberg, Schmitt expressed his suspicion that Löwith’s critique is nothing more than a reiteration of Peterson’s:

Karl Löwith kenne ich nicht aus persönlicher Begegnung ... Jedenfalls ist es nötig, dass Sie einen unauffälligen Beteiligten näher kennen, Erik Peterson. Er ist der Mystagoge Löwiths, obwohl er in dem christlichen Intermezzo ‘Meaning in History’ (trotz sonstiger kompletter Peterson-Rezeption durch Löwith) nur auf Seite 177 und 196 ... nominativ zitiert ist. Von Donoso Cortés wusste Löwith bestimmt nicht mehr als er bei mir gelesen hat.¹⁶⁵

A seemingly minor accusation, that Löwith fails to state his full indebtedness to Peterson, actually unveils a larger claim, which is that an uncritical and “kompletter Peterson-Rezeption durch Löwith” renders the latter a mouthpiece of the ‘mystagogue’ Peterson.¹⁶⁶ Löwith is taken to be an accomplice in a larger conspiracy against political theology.

This indicates that Schmitt interpreted Löwith’s offensive as a *theological* attack on his political theology, which entails that, to him, the decisive factor of the latter’s critique is not an accusation of “occasionalism” or even of a halfhearted faith, but the allegation that his political theology is flawed from a theological perspective. It is thus likely that Schmitt not only suspected Peterson’s presence – and hence a theological critique – behind *Meaning in History* (as his letter to Blumenberg shows) but also behind Löwith’s polemical writings from 1935 and 1940/1964. The letter to Blumenberg moreover indicates that Blumenberg had the Peterson-Löwith connection in mind when he composed his declaration of faith – ‘Three Possibilities’ – because his reference to page 196 in this article, also mentioned in the letter, is the *one* occasion in which Schmitt explicitly distances himself from Löwith. On this page of *Meaning in History*, Löwith not only forecloses the possibility of meaningful political action for Christian believers, he also (indirectly) refers to Peterson’s conception of

160 Hoelzl and Ward (2014) p.9. Cf. Peterson (1951) pp.103-105; Motschenbacher (2000) p.213.

161 Schmitt (2014) p.132; Geréby (2008) pp.27-33.

162 Hoelzl and Ward (2014) pp.9-10; Schmitt (2014) p.32.

163 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.265, 275-85. Cf. Meier (2012) p.291.

164 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.140-141, 265, 277, 282-285. Cf. Schmitt (2014) pp.34-59, 116-130.

165 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.138.

166 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.138. Cf. Schmitz (2007) pp.380-381.

the Church as a transcendent, apolitical coalition of Gentiles and Jews, which in the 1930's had already been a contested subject between the latter and Schmitt.¹⁶⁷

From Schmitt's perspective, his polemic with Löwith constituted a clash between two antithetical theologies. And indeed, it can indeed be maintained that although Löwith himself was not a believer, he did have a clearly defined idea as to what an authentic Christian faith consisted of: his ideal-typical notion of 'faith' functions as a standard of measurement not only in his *Meaning in History* (1949) but also already in his 'Occasional Decisionism' (1935) and much later again in his 1964 'Max Weber und Carl Schmitt' (1964). One way of conceptualizing this distinction is put forward by Theo de Wit, that is, as a difference between a typically 'protestant-Augustinian' emphasis on the rigid *separation* between immanence and transcendence – or the 'invisible' spiritual Church and the 'visible' worldly state – on the one hand, and a 'Catholic' insistence on the *representation* ("zichtbaarmaking") of the divine *in* the world, through the authorization of the state or sovereign by means of legitimate secularization, on the other.¹⁶⁸ To Löwith, not only 'faith' but *also* 'reason' are timeless orientation points that cannot be exhausted in collective, historical, and political attempts at 'realizing' them. Whereas Schmitt believed that he operated under the command – and a complete mandate – to act on God's behalf in the world, be it under what Groh calls a *blinde Vorgebot*; a total absence of foreknowledge.¹⁶⁹ Similarly, Löwith emphasized the separation of *Heilsgeschehen* from *Weltgeschichte*, while Schmitt rather insisted on an essential continuity between them, guaranteed by the figure of the catechon.

Schmitt abhorred Löwith's and Peterson's emphasis on 'separation', because an absolute discontinuity between the two spheres – transcendence and immanence, salvation history and world history – would make meaningful 'representation' impossible. Hence we can sense an analogy between Schmitt's two books on *Political Theology* (1922 and 1970) on the one hand and his 'Three Possibilities' (1950) on the other. Schmitz and Lepper point out that Schmitt transposes the "die soeveranitätstheoretische Figur ins Geschichtstheoretische." There is an essential analogy between the "Gesetzkraft des Souveräns" and the "Geschichtskraft" of the catechon.¹⁷⁰ Both figures, the sovereign and the catechon, form a 'bridge', an instance of inter-mediation, between the reality-in-crisis of political-historical immanence and a transcendent orientation point that without mediation would otherwise either render the one meaningless

167 Löwith (1949) pp.195-196, cf. pp.177, 183, 250, fn.12, fn.2. See also: Peterson (1951) p.261: "Synagoge und Ekklesia gehören ... bis zum Jüngsten Tag zusammen." Motschenbacher (2000, p.220) quotes Schmitt's derisive response: "Wen Sie [Peterson] die Juden in die Kirche nehmen, können Sie die Synagoge mit in den Begriff des Paradieses nehmen." In his *My Life* (1994, p.98), Löwith also refers to Peterson's *Die Kirche aus Juden und Heiden* but in this instance he states that it "does not lack a Christian anti-Semitic tone. The fact that I sided with neither the Jewish faith or Christianity was a mystery that disquieted him".

168 De Wit (1992) pp.388-403. To be sure, Peterson also believed in the representation of the invisible Church in the visible Church, but Schmitt added an extra step, i.e., of the 'transposition' of the sacred dignity of the Church to the secular state. Cf. Mehring (2009) p.555: The book *Politische Monotheismus* by Peterson (a converted Catholic) is regarded in this respect by Schmitt's friend d'Ors as a relapse into Barthian Protestantism. Peterson's "Buch von 1935 ist ... eine Rückkehr zum Protestantismus in seinen pietistischen Ursprüngen ...; est ist die Friedenserklärung mit Karl Barth". I should add that this 'Protestant/Catholic' distinction is more of a tentative hermeneutical tool than an comprehensive theory. In Chapter 6 we will discover that the Lutheran Friedrich Gogarten is best placed on Schmitt's side of the argument, whereas the Catholic Romano Guardini displays some proximity to Löwith's position.

169 Groh (1998) p.118. Cf. Timm (1967, pp.187-192) emphasizes that 'faith and reason', 'transcendence and cosmos', are functionally and structurally analogous in Löwith's theory. He suggests: "Durch die Ereignisse von 1933 ist Löwith – theologisch betrachtet – zum 'Barthianer' geworden" (p.288).

170 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) p.292; Schmitt (1950) p.930.

or would make the other tyrannical in its immediate realization.¹⁷¹ Schmitt thus renounces the denial he detects in Peterson and Löwith of the need for mediation – by a decision-making instance – between the spheres.¹⁷² In the conclusion of *Political Theology II*, Schmitt explicitly opposes this Augustinian clear-cut separation by emphasizing the murkiness of life in the “*res mixtae*”. He notes that within politics and history, this separation is necessarily preceded by an *interpretation* of what should fall on which side of the divide, and that the separation itself is always a *decision* on the part of worldly agents, such as the sovereign:

Until the Day of Judgement, the Augustinian teaching on the two kingdoms will have to face the twofold open question: *Quis iudicabit? Quis interpretabitur?* [‘Who will decide? Who will interpret?’] Who answers *in concreto*, on behalf of the concrete, autonomously acting human being, the question of what is spiritual, what is worldly and what is the case with the *res mixtae*, which, in the interval between the first and the second arrival of the Lord, constitute, as a matter of fact, the entire earthly existence of this spiritual-worldly, spiritual-temporal, double-creature called a human being?¹⁷³

Conclusion

In sum, it can be surmised that the polemic between Löwith and Schmitt is a controversy that ‘did not take place’ (to invoke Alexander Schmitz) as a singular discussion in a delineated time span, but that it ‘*did* take place’ as a comprehensive polemic that gradually developed, stretching throughout years and across a wide range of writings, from ‘Occasional Decisionism’ (1935) to *Political Theology II* (1970) and the Schmitt-Blumenberg *Briefwechsel*. For both authors there was much at stake: Löwith tried to explain philosophically, with Schmitt as a concrete example, the rise of “European nihilism” and its catastrophic consequences, while expelling his own youthful affinity with the patriarch of nihilism, Friedrich Nietzsche. Whereas for Schmitt this polemic concerned the very *raison d’être* of his political theology and his identity as a Catholic. To Schmitt, Löwith represented a kind of Protestant-Jewish conspiracy against political theology, whereas to Löwith, Schmitt represented the “nihilistic revolution” behind totalitarianism.¹⁷⁴

In this chapter I have demonstrated that Löwith’s initial critique already addressed, at an early stage in the reception of Schmitt’s work, the problem of ‘groundlessness’ in his political theology and elucidated its political implications. Via Ruth Groh’s reflection on “theological nihilism” I have shown that a “theological corrective” à la Heinrich Meier does not suffice in removing the sting from this line of criticism. I suggest that, at bottom, Löwith does not merely object that Schmitt is disingenuous in his reference to Christian sources in the substantiation of his decisionism, but that, theologically speaking, his political theology is *inauthentic* if compared to the resolute unworldliness of early- (i.e., proper) Christianity. A close reading of ‘Occasional Decisionism’ indicates that what ultimately matters to Löwith is not whether Schmitt’s decisionism is inextricably defined by theological beliefs, but whether these beliefs can function as fixed moral touchstones by which to judge courses of action.

To Schmitt, Löwith’s insistence on ‘timeless truths’ as orientation points ignores the essential darkness that characterizes historical life, where such an orientation is impossible in the

171 Schmitt (2014) pp.114-130; Cf. *ibid.*, *Tyranny of Values* (1996b) pp.27-28.

172 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) p.282; Schmitt (2014) p.115; *ibid.* (1963) p.122.

173 Schmitt (2014) p.115.

174 This notion of a ‘Protestant-Jewish conspiracy against political theology’ will be discussed in the next chapter.

opacity of the *res mixtae*.¹⁷⁵ In his view, Peterson and Löwith ignore not only the murkiness of the historical sphere but they also ignore the divine call to action, the commandment to ‘realize’ or ‘represent’ the divine in history. Although Schmitt-scholarship remains divided as to whether his vision of the divine resembles an orthodox one or whether it springs from his “katholisierende Privatmythologie”, it was clear to Löwith, as it was to Peterson, that it does not correspond with the negativistic Augustinianism they identified with authentic faith. In opposition to their tendency to stress the separation of the divine from the world, Schmitt emphasized the necessity of a mediating instance between the two realms – in juridical-political terms, the sovereign, in historical-eschatological terms, the katechon. He adds that, if such a distinction is made, it is done *in* this world, by a historical agent who makes a political decision about who belongs to the “children of darkness” and who belongs to the “children of light”. Schmitt raises the question, of course, “who decides?/who interprets?”, while Löwith’s critique however evokes another question, that is, whether this decision is completely *blind*, one that “emanates out of nothingness”, or whether it is possible instead to guide one’s decision on the basis of pre-given norms or fixed orientation points.

In the introduction I mentioned that this analysis of the Löwith-Schmitt polemic can yield a greater understanding of both, given that their critical appraisal of each other highlights elements in their philosophies that could otherwise remain unnoticed. In the case of Löwith this is most evident: not only does his polemic with Schmitt shed light on the ‘theological’ dimension of his thought – i.e., his clear and explicitly normative ideas on authentic faith, as a delineation of an option he himself declined – it also illuminates, as e.g. Jeffrey Barash has noted, the *political* implications of his theory. Schmitt, after all, reminds us that an apolitical outlook is also a political position. And indeed, his critique of Schmitt (and of Gogarten, Heidegger and the entire movement of European nihilism) suggests that Löwith places great value on the existence of stable anchor points that could help one withstand the relativizing and disorientating effect of the flux of history. Hence his reverence for the immutability and essential *otherness* of the cosmos. However, at this stage it can also be conceded that, as e.g. Habermas suggests, this political dimension remains rather limited, in that Löwith more or less abstained from formulating a positive political philosophy.¹⁷⁶ It is not difficult to see why he might have been unable to do so: the ‘cosmos’ or ‘nature’ tends to function as a negative reference point in Löwith’s philosophy, as the ‘totally Other’, an absolute yardstick for critique, rather than as a positive ground from which to draw moral rules and ethical guidelines or, for that matter, a platonic blueprint of the ideal polis.¹⁷⁷

175 Cf. Löwith (1960) p.100.

176 Habermas (1983) pp.81-96. Löwith (1960, p.144) refers to Plato to indicate that the human order must be based on knowledge of the cosmos: “Was Schmitt vertritt, ist eine Politik der souveränen Entscheidung, für die sich aber der Inhalt nur aus der zufälligen occasio der jeweils gegebenen politischen Situation ergibt und gerade nicht, ‘aus der Kraft eines integren Wissens’ um das ursprünglich Richtige und Gerechte, wie in Platons Begriff vom Wesen der Politik, woraus eine Ordnung der menschlichen Dinge entsteht.” (emphasis added)

177 Riesterer (1969) pp.54-55, 76-78; Gadamer (1987) p.174; Habermas (1983) p.88; Timm (1967) pp.586-594.

Chapter 4

The Blumenberg-Schmitt Debate and the 'Front Against Political Theology'

Although Karl Löwith suggested otherwise, one could argue that Carl Schmitt did adhere to the Christian commandment 'love your enemies' after all, albeit not in the obvious sense. Schmitt's existentialist antagonism entails that he loved engaging with enemies – that is, intellectual opponents – because these polemics formed opportunities for self-identification. Löwith's apparent reluctance to directly respond to Schmitt's highly personal and evocative 'Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History' (1950) touched a sore spot in that sense.¹ Hans Blumenberg however had different ideas about engaging with people with radically opposite views and dubious political pasts, as a letter to Jacob Taubes from 1977 illustrates. Here, he objects to Taubes's suggestion that unsavory figures such as Schmitt should be more or less ostracized from public and academic life:

Ich sage nichts gegen den unüberwindlichen persönlichen Widerstand [against e.g. Heidegger or Schmitt], den jemand da empfindet und mit dem er sich abfinden muß; im Gegenteil, ich respektiere auch die Unfähigkeit, vergessen zu können. Aber das intellektuelle Spiel mit diesem Widerstand, die Einbringung in das intellektuelle Schiedsgehaben des Wer-noch? und Wer-nicht-mehr?, widert mich an. ... Ich möchte Ihnen daher auch das nackte Faktum mitteilen, dass ich 1971 den Kontakt zu Carl Schmitt gesucht und gefunden habe. Darüber wird viel später mehr zu sagen sein.²

Blumenberg's willingness to interact with Schmitt – not only via their 1971-1978 *Briefwechsel* but also through various publications – makes that the Blumenberg-Schmitt debate comprises a larger amount of material compared to the latter's interaction with Löwith. Blumenberg launched his initial critique of political theology in the first edition of *Legitimität der Neuzeit* (1966), to which Schmitt responded with a counterattack in the postscript of *Politische Theologie II* (1970). Blumenberg in turn not only replied with a new chapter, 'Political Theology I and II', in the second edition of *Legitimacy* (1974), he also devoted a chapter to Schmitt's reading of the "extraordinary saying" in *Arbeit am Mythos* (1979).³

This abundance of material is reflected by a profusion of secondary literature on the

1 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.120.

2 Blumenberg-Taubes, *Briefwechsel* (2013) p.174.

3 With the 1974 version of *Legitimacy* I refer to the revised first part of the book, published as *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung*. The full revised version appeared in 1976, and was translated into English in 1983.

Schmitt-Blumenberg debate. Scholars such as Jan-Werner Müller, Pini Ifergan, Heinrich Meier, Ruth Groh, and Joe-Paul Kroll have already dealt extensively with this polemic and its far-reaching philosophical significance.⁴ Furthermore, Alexander Schmitz and Marcel Lepper not only draw on the available published material but also on previously undisclosed material from the *Nachlaß* of Schmitt and Blumenberg in their study ‘Logik der Differenzen und Spuren des Gemeinsamen’ (published in 2007 as the editorial afterword of the *Briefwechsel*), an analysis that Schmitz largely reiterates in his more recent article, ‘Legitimacy of the Modern Age?’, published in the *Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt* (2016).⁵ Amongst these various commentators – who are otherwise not always in agreement – there seems to be a general consensus on the great significance of the Schmitt-Blumenberg debate. Especially in Schmitt-scholarship it is argued that the Postscript of *Political Theology II*, which is aimed at Blumenberg, should be understood as Schmitt’s intellectual “testament” or “his last word on political theology”.⁶ Indeed, an overview of the secondary literature gives rise to the impression that, in terms of their reception-histories, the Blumenberg-Schmitt polemic has largely overshadowed the latter’s debate with Löwith.

The abundance of commentary on the Schmitt-Blumenberg debate ensures that it is not strictly necessary to mount another step-by-step analysis of the central texts, *Political Theology II* and the revised edition of *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, not in the last place because we have also already discussed them to some extent. Instead, I will pay special attention to certain aspects of their debate that have been mis- or underrepresented in my view. Many commentators for instance tend to fixate on Blumenberg’s more direct and elaborate attack on Schmitt in the 1974 edition of *Legitimacy*, assuming that the 1966 edition merely features the political theologian as a generic example of the broader “secularization theorem”.⁷ My analysis shows, instead, that Schmitt is already treated in isolation in the 1966 edition of *Legitimacy*. Moreover, there is a significant progression – both a continuity and a discontinuity – to be discerned between the first and second iterations of Blumenberg’s critique. We will find that the political implications of Schmitt’s “secularization theory” are placed at the forefront in both instances, and that Blumenberg’s revised critique approximates Löwith’s in several respects.

Another way in which this analysis is meant to distinguish itself is in its involvement of different material. I will for instance draw on Alexander Schmitz’ and Marcel Lepper’s extensive investigation of the *Nachlaß*-material, and with regard to Blumenberg I involve a hitherto largely neglected text, ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie’ (1968/1969), which offers a rare glimpse into his political philosophy. This approach will not only shed further light on the – already widely acknowledged – differences between Schmitt and Blumenberg but, significantly, it also uncovers certain less evident but consequential commonalities between them. This not only brings out the often implicit political dimension of Blumenberg’s thought, it will also unveil a notable vulnerability in Schmitt’s political theology, which is that the potential for neutralization and detheologization is already present in his own theory. Finally, this line of interpretation enables further reflection on how Schmitt, Blumenberg and Löwith should

4 Müller (2003) pp.156-180; Ifergan (2010); Meier (2012) pp. 269-300; Groh (1998) pp.156-184; Kroll (2010) pp.237-285.

5 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.253-306; Schmitz (2016).

6 Schmitz (2016) p.707; Müller (2003) p.157. Cf. Mehring (2009) p.552; Meier (2012) p.273.

7 Ifergan (2010, p.154) states that in the 1966 edition of *Legitimacy*, Schmitt is mentioned “only in passing; ...in the first edition Schmitt is but one in a long line of philosophers for whom secularization is a fundamental category in their analysis of the modern era.” Cf. Meier (2012) pp.270-272. It should be noted that both Schmitt and Blumenberg gave rise to the impression that the former is not treated in isolation in the 1966 edition of *Legitimacy*. Schmitt (2014) p.117; Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) pp.105-107. I argue instead that Blumenberg does treat Schmitt as a special case in the 1966 edition.

be understood – philosophically, politically, and ‘theologically’ – over against each other. I propose that whereas Blumenberg and Löwith are in several respects united in their aversion to the position Schmitt represents, the suggestion that they form a ‘united front’ can easily become misleading if it is taken as a “grundsätzlichen Positionsidentität”, in the words of Odo Marquard.⁸ My reconstruction rather points out that there are different lines of agreement as well as different lines of contestation that can be discerned between the three authors.

In this chapter I first briefly sketch the exchange between the two editions of *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966 and 1974) and *Political Theology II* (1970). Subsequently, I will reconstruct the background that informed the respective standpoints of Blumenberg and Schmitt by drawing on a variety of additional material. In the case of Schmitt I will further explore his conception of a united front against political theology and how he perceived Blumenberg’s role in it. With regard to Blumenberg, I will focus in on his ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie’ before investigating the reappearance of his political philosophy, be it more implicitly, in his later *Work on Myth* and adjacent writings. In the final part of this chapter I subsequently reflect on the question how Blumenberg, Schmitt and Löwith should be positioned over against each other in order to obtain an adequate understanding of their debate.

Exchange: ‘Legitimacy of the Modern Age’ versus ‘Political Theology’

Blumenberg’s First Critique (1966)

The first edition of *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* initiated Blumenberg’s offensive against the political theology of Schmitt. Many commentators contend, however, that in terms of the debate with Schmitt this first edition of *Legitimacy* is somewhat of a false start, because ‘political theology’ is supposedly only mentioned here as one among many applications of the general ‘secularization theorem’.⁹ The first chapter cites the formula from *Political Theology* (1922) – “alle prägnanten Begriffe der modernen Staatslehre sind säkularisierte theologische Begriffe” – alongside other presumed instances of secularization, such as the transformation of eschatology into “politische Heilserwartungen vom Typus des *Kommunistischen Manifests*”.¹⁰ However, a closer examination of the 1966 version of *Legitimacy* shows that Schmitt was already treated as a special case in the second chapter of the book.¹¹ By briefly zooming in on this initial critique of Schmitt we will discover that, already from the outset of this polemic, Blumenberg not only focused on the political implications of ‘secularization’ but that he was also keenly aware of the intricacies and inherent vulnerabilities of the former’s political theology.

In the second chapter of *Legitimacy* (1966), Blumenberg reflects on what constitutes the “appearance of secularization”, proposing that it often amounts to a linguistic continuity in which an old sacrosanct language is used in order to legitimize distinctly *modern* endeavors.¹² “Die sakrale Sprachwelt überlebt die sakrale Sachwelt, ängstlich konserviert und als Deckung gerade dort vorgezogen, wo philosophisch, wissenschaftlich und politisch Neues gedacht

8 Marquard (1983) p.79.

9 Ifergan (2010), pp.153-154; Kroll (2010) pp.240-241; Müller (2003) pp.159-161; Meier (2012) pp.269-271.

10 Blumenberg (1966) p.18/Schmitt (1934) p.49. In *Political Theology II* (2014, p.117), Schmitt confirms the impression that his theory had been lumped together by Blumenberg with “with all sorts of confused parallels between religious, eschatological and political ideas”. Cf. Blumenberg (1983) p.98.

11 Blumenberg (1966) pp.56-61. Cf. *ibid.* (1983) pp.89-91.

12 Blumenberg (1966) pp.41-61.

wird.”¹³ This linguistic continuity signifies an underlying constancy of epoch-specific “carry over questions” rather than a constancy of substance: “Die Konstanz der Sprache indiziert die Konstanz der Bewußtseinsfunktion, aber nicht die Identität der Bedeutung.”¹⁴ Proponents of the ‘secularization theorem’ do not recognize this substantive discontinuity – concealed by a linguistic continuity – and proclaim that, substantively speaking, modernity is subjugated to its Christian past. Near the end of this chapter it becomes apparent that Blumenberg is working towards a confrontation with Schmitt. The latter’s political theology is held to exemplify the political implications of the concept of ‘secularization’: that is, it can be used as an instrument for *political* subjugation, in support of ‘political absolutism’.¹⁵

Blumenberg contends that it is not a coincidence that political absolutism tends to borrow the language of *theological* absolutism in order to legitimize its claims. Evidently, the sovereignty of God constitutes a desirable model for absolutist rulers. It is suggested that, in political terms, contemporary secularization theorists such as Schmitt similarly attempt to legitimize political claims to power, namely through the assertion of an essential continuity between the theological and the political.¹⁶ This is could be due to a misunderstanding, a “wieder beim Wort ... nehmen, was metaphorisch gemeint war”, i.e., by confusing linguistic continuity with substantive continuity.¹⁷ However, there could also be something more nefarious at play:

Sicher wäre es übertrieben zu sagen, die Absolutismen der politische Theorie seien insgesamt aus solchem Beim-Wort-Nehmen von säkularisierten Stilmitteln der neuzeitlichen Staatstheorie hervorgegangen. Genauso plausibel ist die Erklärung, daß die Sprache des theologischen Absolutismus die Sache des politischen Absolutismus dem Bewußtsein nur in die Sphäre des Vertrauten und Sanktionierten, des als Fatalität Hinzunehmenden habe rücken wollen. Die säkularisierte Ausdrucksschicht als ‘Trojanisches Pferd von Ideen, die in nackter Unmittelbarkeit für unzumutbar gehalten worden wären ...’¹⁸

In other words, talk of ‘secularization’ could either originate in a genuine misunderstanding or in the attempt to legitimize absolutist claims with a theologizing rhetoric, masking political interests as “Fatalität”.

Blumenberg proceeds to a direct confrontation by addressing Schmitt’s theory of the origin of the modern state. The latter believed that the modern, absolutist state – exemplified in the “political theology” of Hobbes – should be regarded as the legitimate successor of the medieval Catholic church.¹⁹ Blumenberg adopts a similar historical narrative, but instead frames it in terms of *neutralization*. Schmitt and Blumenberg concur that the modern state posed a solution to the problem of the religious civil wars that followed the Reformation. But whereas Schmitt interprets this ‘solution’ as the transferal of divine authority from the church to the state, Blumenberg argues that the victory of the secular state is the result of the

13 Blumenberg (1966) p.51, cf. pp.50-61.

14 Blumenberg (1966) p.58. On “carry over questions”, see: *ibid.* (1983) pp.64-66.

15 Blumenberg (1966) p.59.

16 Blumenberg (1966) pp.59-61.

17 Blumenberg (1966) p.58.

18 Blumenberg (1966) pp.58-59 (emphasis added). In the revised edition, Blumenberg (1983, p.89) comments on his earlier phrasing: “Here I would no longer speak of the ‘Trojan horse’ of a stratum of expressions; this demonizes the natural disposition of traditional linguistic means into a cunning of the reason employing them, which cannot be asserted without stronger evidence.”

19 Cf. Schmitt (1965) pp.51-69; *ibid.* (2005) pp.36-52; (2014) pp.72, 101, 117; (1996) pp.52-53; (2008).

neutralization of theology, a process that must be brought to completion.²⁰ Blumenberg gives a brief genealogy of the modern state in which the process of neutralization is identified with the diminution of *absolutism*. This process manifests itself in the political sphere as the transposition of “der absolute Charakter der Freund-Feind-Kategorie” from the internal civil war between religious factions to the outward sphere of international politics. “Die Überbietung der absoluten Charaktere einer inneren Krise durch die Absolutersetzung einer äußeren ist eine Besonderheit des historischen Bildes der Neuzeit bis in die Gegenwart”.²¹

Blumenberg expects that the notion of absolute enmity – transposed to international politics – finally dissipates altogether, after a “kurzfristiges Zwischenspiel” that is the “Ost-West-Dualismus” of the Cold War.²² This account suggests that the neutralization of enmity is driven by a growing awareness that life under absolutism is unbearable: theological absolutism first evinced its “humanen Unerträglichkeit in der politischen Auswirkung seiner konfessionellen Pluralisierung”, before thinkers such as Hobbes realized that internal religious divisions should be neutralized.²³ Hence, absolute enmity shifts to the relation between states: “faktisch wurde die Unerträglichkeit der innerstaatlichen absoluten Faktionierung dadurch aufgefangen, daß der absoluten Charakter der Freund-Feind-Kategorie auf das Verhältnis der sich integrierenden Nationalstaaten untereinander projiziert wurde.”²⁴ However, as soon as it is acknowledged that this external option has its own calamitous consequences, there is reason to believe, according to Blumenberg, that this option too will be abandoned. Blumenberg expects that this engenders a disenchanting, neutralized, and anti-absolutist attitude to politics that forms the death-blow to the decisionist political theology Schmitt represents:

Wenn nicht mehr daran geglaubt werden kann, daß die *Entscheidung zwischen Gut und Böse in der Geschichte unmittelbar bevorsteht*, daß *jeder politische Akt an dieser Entscheidung teilnimmt*, verliert sich die Suggestion des Ausnahmezustandes als der Normalität des Politischen, dessen Technik dem Typus der großen Verwaltungen ähnlicher wird als den Blitzen des Zeus und den Dekreten der Prädestination.²⁵

Blumenberg hopes that the type of politics which models itself after theological voluntarism will become replaced by a more modest variety, in which the “Zumutungen des unbegrenzten Opfersinns” of “great politics” are replaced by a pragmatist preoccupation with human self-preservation.²⁶

Blumenberg concludes that the formula “[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts” raises the suspicion that Schmitt

20 Blumenberg (1966) pp.58-61; *ibid.* (1983) pp.90-91. Blumenberg uses the phrase ‘neutralization’ only occasionally, but Marquard (1983, pp.80-84) suggests that his theory can be interpreted as an affirmation of this Schmittian concept, i.e. as detheologization and a reduction of absolutism. Cf. Böckenförde (1967) pp.75-94; Lübbe (1983) pp.49-53.

21 Blumenberg (1966) p.59. Cf. Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) pp.167-171.

22 Blumenberg (1966) p.60: “Mit den so dem Nationalstaat übereigneten pseudomorphen Qualitäten wird drei Jahrhunderte später ein analoger Vorgang nötig, nach dem auch die äußere Projektion der Feindschaftskategorie auf das Verhältnis der Staaten wenigstens und zunächst in kontinentalen Konflikträumen nicht mehr gelingen kann; daß die nochmalige Überbietung durch einen singulären Gegensatz dieser Kategorie mit dem Ost-West-Dualismus nur ein kurzfristiges Zwischenspiel sein konnte, war abzusehen.”

23 Blumenberg (1966) p.59.

24 Blumenberg (1966) p.59.

25 Blumenberg (1966) p.60 (emphasis added).

26 Blumenberg (1966) p.60. Cf. “Höhepunkte der große Politik”: Schmitt (1933) pp.48-49; Meier (1995) p.28.

is not talking about modernity but rather defends a pre-modern residue, symptomatic of the “Dauerhaftigkeit des Noch-Nicht-Neuzeitlichen in der Neuzeit, die gründliche Verspätung der Aufklärung.”²⁷ It is suggested that those phenomena Schmitt deploras, neutralization and the elimination of transcendence, should be regarded as the *merits* of the Enlightenment and modernity. If ‘neutralization’ entails the elimination of absolutism in politics and existential dread in individual life, then it is implied that this should be welcomed as a positive feature of the modern epoch.²⁸ The immanentized ‘worldliness’ that Schmitt dreads is elevated by Blumenberg to the status of a normative ideal: “Die ‘Weltlichkeit’ der Neuzeit ist nicht ihr gesichertes historisches Merkmal, sondern ihr dauerndes kritisches Officium.”²⁹

Reply: ‘Political Theology II’ (1970)

Schmitt reciprocated four years later, in the famous and widely discussed Postscript of *Political Theology II*. Blumenberg’s appearance in this book is significant, because it places him squarely on one line with that other enemy of political theology, Erik Peterson.³⁰ Before I can expound on this appraisal of Blumenberg’s role in the ‘front against political theology’, however, we must zoom in on Schmitt’s defense against the objections leveled against him in *Legitimacy*. First of all, Schmitt emphasizes the difference between his account on the one hand and the discredited ‘secularization theorem’ on the other. Schmitt complains that his theory had been unjustly lumped together by Blumenberg “with all sorts of confused parallels between religious, eschatological and political ideas”. This “could give rise to misunderstandings”, e.g., that his political theology is “grounded in a diffuse metaphysics.”³¹ Schmitt’s political theology – he states, assuming the role of a humble jurist – instead “bring[s] to light *the classical case of a transposition [Umbesetzung]*” between church and state or, generally speaking, between the theological and the juridical or political spheres. He thus presents his earlier statements on a “systematic analogy between theological and juristic concepts” in explicitly Blumenbergian terms that avert any suspicion of substantialism.³² Schmitt obfuscates the fact that ‘secularization’ operates as a more multifaceted concept in his theory, and instead presents his systematic, ‘sociological’ notion of secularization as the one he had maintained all along.³³

27 Blumenberg (1966) pp.60-61.

28 Blumenberg (1966) p.61. Cf. Marquard (1983) pp.81-82.

29 Blumenberg (1966) p.61.

30 Meier (2012) p.291; Schmitz and Lepper (2007) p.265; Groh (1998) pp.157-158.

31 Schmitt (2014) p.117. Cf. Blumenberg (1983) p.98.

32 Schmitt (2014) p.117 (emphasis added)/*ibid.* (1970) p.110; (2005) p.42.

33 Cf. Meier (2012, pp.269-299) argues that Blumenberg first mistook Schmitt’s concept of secularization for a diachronic claim of historical derivation, denoting illegitimacy, and later for a mere assertion of a structural analogy that signifies legitimacy. Meier claims that Blumenberg is wrong on both accounts, and that Schmitt rather uses the concept of secularization “um die neuzeitliche Entwicklung an die göttliche Offenbarung zurückzubinden, um die Möglichkeiten eines christlichen Geschichtsbildes auf sie anzuwenden und im in ihren aktuellen ‘Stadium’ dem Versuch der Entpolitisierung und Enttheologisierung ‘geschichtlich-konkret’ handelnd zu begegnen.” (pp.285-286) ‘Secularization’ is supposed to signify more than what Blumenberg takes it to mean on both occasions, in that both definitions can indeed be found in Schmitt’s thought, but they are interconnected and tied to a metaphysical background that Blumenberg largely ignores. Admittedly, Blumenberg indeed ignored the multifacetedness of this concept of secularization. However, contra Meier I propose that a close reading of Blumenberg’s 1966 critique indicates that he was indeed aware of the general outlines of Schmitt’s political theology – even though he glossed over the specificities of his concept of secularization – and that the main criticism is political-philosophical in nature rather than merely methodological.

By reframing ‘secularization’ as a concept that denotes legitimacy and continuity – the transfer of authority from the church to the state – Schmitt launches another counter-argument, which is that Blumenberg confuses legitimacy with legality.³⁴ Since Blumenberg himself had “hoisted a juridical flag with his booktitle”, Schmitt deemed it necessary to clarify this confusion. He claims that ‘legitimacy’ actually signifies the rightful transfer of power, and thus establishes a relation of continuity between past and present. “In other words, it [‘legitimacy’] was a justification of continuity, tradition, upbringing and heritage”.³⁵ Since Blumenberg presumably vindicates modernity on the basis of its rationality, invoking reason as a universal *lam*, Schmitt suggests that he invokes the paradigm of legality rather than legitimacy. The genesis of modernity is modelled after scientific invention, which emerges ex nihilo, as a Cartesian self-discovery of rationality or the “self-assertion of reason”. Blumenberg ignores the ‘legalistic’ nature of this argument, according to Schmitt, and mistakenly identifies legitimacy with “eine Rechtfertigung vom Neuen her.”³⁶

The excursion on legality serves as a preamble to a critique of Blumenberg’s theory of modernity. Schmitt suggests that to Blumenberg, ‘modernity’ not only denies all history and tradition, but ultimately denies everything outside of itself, especially any notion of transcendence. Schmitt declares: “Autism is inherent in this argument. Its immanence, directed polemically against a theological transcendence, is nothing but self-empowerment.”³⁷ Groh observes in this respect that ‘self-empowerment’ (*Selbstermächtigung*), a term that Blumenberg indeed uses in *Legitimacy*, is a powerful concept that carries the connotation of illegitimate revolt and disobedience.³⁸ It is indicated by Schmitt that this ultimately entails a revolt against God, in which humankind turns against its creator and withdraws into itself, resulting in a condition of complete solipsism. He then paints a dystopian picture with seven so-called ‘theses’ that he presents to Blumenberg as the ultimate consequence of this type of thought, an “entirely de-theologised counter-image”.³⁹ It is an image of an immanentized world that has become completely self-referential, which negates any extra-human element. It does this by creating systems – normative, juridical, scientific and technological – that operate autonomously and progressively eliminate any kind of interruption from the outside.⁴⁰ It is against

34 Schmitt (2014) pp.118-121. By introducing this conceptual duo, Schmitt refers back to his 1932 book *Legalität und Legitimität*, in which he criticizes Weimar’s formal and impersonalist “rule of law”-notion of legality in favor of a decisionist conception of legitimacy.

35 Schmitt (2014) p.118. Incidentally, Habermas (2019, pp.66-67) concurs that ‘legitimacy’ is an inherently political term. He however notes that Blumenberg hereby invokes the notion of modernity’s ‘sovereignty’ (rather than ‘legality’), comparable to the sovereignty of states. Habermas interprets Blumenberg’s choice for the concept ‘legitimacy’ as an assertion of discontinuity, be it one that he deems unjustified: “In dieser semantischen Anleihe bei der politischen Theorie verrät sich eine Merkwürdige Beunruhigung über den tatsächlich bestehenden, aber unschädlichen genealogischen Zusammenhang der Moderne mit einer Vergangenheit, die im Laufe eines Bildungsprozesses auch dann, wenn eine bewusste Ablösung stattgefunden hat, noch als die überwundene eigene Vergangenheit für die Gegenwart ein prägendes Faktum bleibt.”

36 Schmitt (1970) p.111. Cf. *ibid.* (2014) pp.118-121; Pifergan (2010) pp.158-159. Schmitt is correct in his assertion that there is a strong juridical dimension in *Legitimacy*, especially with regard to Blumenberg’s critique of ‘secularization’, as is also noted by Zabel (1968).

37 Schmitt (2014) p.120.

38 Groh (1998) pp.164, 172-173. Cf. Müller (2003) p.163; Hübener (1983) p.74. Blumenberg uses the term in a positive sense in (1966) pp.515-516, and again in: *ibid.* (1983, p.541), even though in this later edition he denies elsewhere (p.97) that he applies this term in this sense.

39 Schmitt (2014) p.128. Cf. De Wit (1992) pp.445-452.

40 Schmitt (2014) pp.128-130. Cf. Blumenberg (1966, p.61): he quotes Schmitt, “*Der Rationalismus der Aufklärung verwarf den Ausnahmefall in jeder Form*”, adding that this signifies the Enlightenment’s “Aufgabe, die immer noch besteht, die absolute Qualifizierung politischer Situationen als Anachronismen zu destruieren”.

this counter-image that Schmitt launches his so-called ‘stasiology’, which is meant to affirm that any unity – i.e., Blumenberg’s immanent modernity – always contains a duality, the possibility of uproar. Hence, Schmitt finally suggests that the attempt at total immanentization and de-politicization will always be in vain, because keeping the enemy – or ‘otherness’ – outside does not eliminate the enemy – ‘the other’ – within.⁴¹ Stasiology implies that the possibility of the interruption of an immanent order is contained in its very unity.

Blumenberg's Revised Critique (1974)

When Blumenberg rewrote the first part of *Legitimacy – Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung* – another four years later he added a chapter that is entirely devoted to Schmitt, ‘Political Theology I and II’. This chapter directly responds to Schmitt’s criticisms, but it also preserves a significant part of the initial critique from 1966.⁴² For instance, the quasi-Schmittian account of the origin of the modern state, be it with a positive appraisal of neutralization as the diminution of absolutism, is maintained. Blumenberg even explicates that there is a “mirror-image correspondence of political to theological absolutism.”⁴³ With regard to the new elements in this chapter it is significant to note first of all that Blumenberg deemed it necessary to defend his account against the accusation of legalism, given its connotations of “self-empowerment” and illegitimacy. Blumenberg declared that, “[a]s a criticism this could hardly be stronger.”⁴⁴ In response, Blumenberg introduces the distinction between the *logic* or validity of modern rationality, which indeed does not require external justification, and the historical reason why modern rationality had to be asserted, namely to support human self-preservation against the external pressure of theological absolutism. The legitimacy of modernity is thus asserted in terms of the reasons behind the invention of modern rationality, not in terms of the rationality itself, the validity of which does not depend on historical factors.⁴⁵ Hence as far as the legitimacy of modernity is concerned Blumenberg avoids the term “self-empowerment” and instead emphasizes the legitimacy of “self-assertion”. The latter term does not signify a hubristic attempt at self-creation *ex nihilo* but self-defense against absolutism: “the legitimacy of the modern age is not derived from the accomplishments of reason but rather from the necessity of those accomplishments.”⁴⁶

This new chapter in *Legitimacy*, ‘Political Theology I and II’, explicates Blumenberg’s appraisal of Schmitt’s intentions and of the purported function of his political theology. Blumenberg now portrays Schmitt as a Machiavellian pragmatist who has no intrinsic interest in theology itself, but who utilizes it in order to legitimize a political constellation that in all actuality is based on an irrational and amoral decisionism.⁴⁷ Rather than asserting the primacy of theology, this theory amounts to nothing more than “theology as politics”, Blumenberg claims.⁴⁸ The political theologian freely appropriates older sanctified rhetoric, theological analogies and religious metaphors in order to substantiate claims to power, avoiding contemporary demands of rational accountability. Blumenberg now explicates his suspicion – already

41 Schmitt (2014) pp.122-130. Cf. Meier (2012) pp.277-281; De Wit (1992) pp.447-451.

42 Blumenberg (1983) pp.89-91 is structurally similar – save for a few modifications – to: *ibid.* (1966) pp.58-60.

43 Blumenberg (1983) p.90.

44 Blumenberg (1983) pp.96-97. Cf. Kroll (2010) p.264.

45 Blumenberg (1983) p.97. (See Chapter 1)

46 Blumenberg (1983) p.99. Cf.: Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.106.

47 Blumenberg (1983) pp.90, 92, 99-101. Cf. Meier (2012) p.286; Müller (2003) p.164.

48 Blumenberg (1983) p.98.

implied in his 1966 critique – that the concept of ‘secularization’ can be used to legitimize ‘irrational’ politics that hypostasizes enmity and is preoccupied with the “extreme case”. This entails that Schmitt’s concept of secularization as legitimate ‘reoccupation’ is merely a political instrument: “The enviable position in which the ‘political theologian’ places himself by means of his assertion of secularization consists in the fact that he finds his stock of images ready to hand and thus avoids the cynicism of an open ‘theological politics’.”⁴⁹

In this instance, Blumenberg concedes that ‘secularization’ functions as a category of legitimacy for Schmitt, and he is willing to go along with the latter’s insistence on the “structural analogy” between politics and theology; however, he adds that this does not prove a genetic derivation. “Analogies, after all, are precisely not transformations.”⁵⁰ In short, Blumenberg questions whether the assertion of a *mere* analogy can do the work that Schmitt wants it to do. Commentators such as Ulrich Ruh, Groh, Meier and Kroll have noted in this regard that Blumenberg interprets the notion of “a structural analogy” too narrowly in this instance, and that he fails to grasp the sense in which it is informed by covert metaphysical presuppositions.⁵¹ Meier for instance contends that whereas in the first instance Blumenberg regarded Schmitt as a generic proponent of the secularization theorem, according to which secularization entails a historical-genetic claim to illegitimacy, in the second instance he is rather depicted as a Machiavellian who only applies the concept of secularization as a “theologische Bemäntelung einer politischen Parteinahme.”⁵² However, having analyzed Blumenberg’s criticism from 1966 we can assert that there is some continuity with the 1974 critique that Meier has overlooked. We will find that it is on the basis of this continuity that we can obtain a proper understanding of Blumenberg’s reading of Schmitt.

Indeed, a closer examination of Blumenberg’s 1966 critique shows that, in this instance, he already placed Schmitt in the context of political absolutism, where ‘secularization’ is used as a way of legitimating a form of political power that is unjustifiable by the standards of modern rationality.⁵³ The biggest difference between the 1966 and 1974 versions of this critique is that the latter places more emphasis on this point. Similarly, Blumenberg now expels any possible doubts as to what Schmitt’s intentions supposedly are. Whereas based on the 1966 version it would still have been possible to interpret Schmitt as an unconscious promotor of pre-modern elements in the modern age, in the 1974 version Schmitt features as a self-consciously pragmatic and decisionist politician, who simply uses theology to further his own ends without genuine commitment to it – one can even say, echoing Löwith, that Schmitt is accused of an ‘occasionalistic’ use of theology. Indeed, this reading suggests something that is generally ignored by commentators (and which will be addressed by the end of this chapter), which is that Blumenberg hereby approximates Löwith’s critique from 1935.

What remains constant in Blumenberg’s critique is his disdain of ‘secularization’ as a political instrument. Just as the cultural-theological secularization theorem can be used to assert modernity’s dependency on Christianity by creating a false sense of continuity, so can it be used in the realm of politics as a means of legitimizing authority with the cloak of tradition.⁵⁴ It can be inferred that Blumenberg was less concerned with substantialism or (il)legitimacy

49 Blumenberg (1983) p.101. Cf. Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014, pp.87-88, 123-146) on how Blumenberg perceives modern political myths and ‘prefigurations’ as means in the legitimation of political decision-making.

50 Blumenberg (1983) p.93, cf. pp.94-95. Cf. Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.120.

51 Ruh (1980) p.299; Groh (1998) p.170; Kroll (2010) p.265; Meier (2012) pp. 269-299. Cf. Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.111.

52 Meier (2012) p.286, cf. pp.285-287.

53 Blumenberg (1966) pp.58-61.

54 Blumenberg (1966) pp.58-61; *ibid.* (1983) pp.89-101.

than with the assertion of false continuities that create a relation of dependency, or in political terms, which establish a relation of subjugation.⁵⁵ In the 1974 version of *Legitimacy* he admits that Schmitt's secularization thesis is formal in nature, as it boils down to "the concept of structural analogy." This "makes something visible – and is consequently by no means without value – but no longer implies any assertion about the derivation of the one structure from the other".⁵⁶ Admittedly, scholars such as Meier are correct that by reducing Schmitt's secularization theory to this narrow, synchronic and/or systematic concept, Blumenberg ignores the multifaceted nature of this theory. However, it should also be noted that Blumenberg appears less concerned with the methodological specificities of the concept of secularization when it comes to Schmitt, as he focusses instead on its underlying function, i.e., the legitimization of political 'absolutism' that itself forms a "mirror-image" of theological absolutism.⁵⁷ In this respect, Blumenberg's critique has remained constant between 1966 and 1974.

My analysis of Schmitt's secularization theory (in Chapter 2) confirms that it would indeed be difficult to detect a clear instance of 'substantialism' in any version of his multifaceted concept of secularization. This also explains the ease with which Schmitt can appropriate the Blumenbergian, anti-substantialist term "*Umbesetzung*" for his own theory.⁵⁸ What seems to be more important to Blumenberg is that Schmitt's political theology appears to represent the general motivation he suspects *behind* the secularization theorem, namely the attempt to reject the purported autonomy of modernity in favor of an assertion of heteronomy – which in Schmitt's case is used to justify his affiliation with authoritarian politics. Blumenberg arguably places this moral-political dimension more to the forefront of his critique of Schmitt (e.g. in comparison to his portrayal of Löwith), and thus seems unconcerned whether Schmitt's ambiguous conception of secularization fits into the methodological framework of expropriation and substantialism. This indicates that Blumenberg's methodological objections to the secularization theorem are of secondary importance in relation to his underlying philosophical critique of these anti-Enlightenment narratives.⁵⁹

Another constant factor is the background-narrative of the neutralization of absolutism. Even though the 1974 version portrays Schmitt as a modern nihilist rather than as a remnant of a pre-modern age, in both versions it is evident to Blumenberg that Schmitt is drawn to *absolutism*, both theological and political, and that 'secularization' is meant to buttress political absolutism by establishing a connection with its theological "mirror-image".⁶⁰ Blumenberg suggests that the concept of secularization is not only meant to establish a false historical continuity, but that it also illuminates a *real* analogy between these two forms of absolutism, in which the arbitrary rule of the sovereign is mirrored by the "Blitzen des Zeus und den Dekreten der Prädestination". Both absolutisms are essentially averse to the modest human

55 Groh (1998) p.277; Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.294-299.

56 Blumenberg (1983) p.94. Cf. Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.120.

57 Blumenberg (1983) p.90.

58 Schmitt (1970) p.110 /ibid. (2014) p.117. Cf. Meier (2012) pp.273-274.

59 Blumenberg is under the impression that Schmitt tries to achieve the same as the substantialist secularization theorem but without its concomitant substantialist-genetic claims of origin, ownership and expropriation of a 'possession', using only the notion of a "structural analogy" between politics and theology. Hence Blumenberg (1983, p.94) asks: "is this already sufficient to justify talk, on the side of political theory, of a 'political theology'?" In the eyes of Blumenberg, this means that political theology is "only the sum of a set of metaphors". While to Blumenberg the assertion of a structural analogy is only metaphorical, Schmitt rather regards it in terms of the representation of the one sphere in the other. It is (only) in this sense that Schmitt can answer Blumenberg's question with a decisive "Ja", as he did in a letter to him (Schmitt-Blumenberg, 2007, p.120). Cf. Meier (2012) p.289.

60 Groh (1998) p.277. Cf. Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) pp.167-171.

“self-assertion of reason”.⁶¹ In sum, this brief sketch of the major outlines of the exchange between *Legitimacy* and *Political Theology II* demonstrates that the primary issues that both authors considered to be central to their polemic – namely, absolutism versus anti-absolutism, decisionism versus rationalism, or transcendence versus neutralization – were already present at the outset of their debate.

Schmitt: A United Front Against Political Theology?

As mentioned, it is telling that in *Political Theology II* Schmitt ascribes to Blumenberg a role that is akin to Peterson’s (and hence Löwith’s), as it provides an insight in what, in Schmitt’s mind, was the real nature of Blumenberg’s undertaking: i.e., the “closure [*Erledigung*] of any political theology.”⁶² In this sense, Blumenberg was perceived as the final or true *Gestalt* of the enemy that Schmitt had already recognized in Peterson and Löwith. In order to obtain a deeper understanding of Schmitt’s opposition to Löwith and Blumenberg – which will subsequently illuminate how these three philosophers should be situated over against each other – it is necessary to briefly follow this train of thought, that is, the sense in which the former believed that there was a ‘united front’ against his political theology. In doing so, I will largely take my cue from the work of Marcel Lepper and Alexander Schmitz, ‘Logik der Differenzen und Spuren des Gemeinsamen’ (2007), which is based on an comprehensive analysis of the *Nachlaß*-material of Schmitt and Blumenberg and which explicates the anti-Judaic dimension of this line of thought.⁶³

Schmitt envisioned a single front of opposition against his political theology, one that threatens the notion of stasiological unity and the structural identity of the political and the theological.⁶⁴ Whereas Peterson and Löwith assumedly wish to separate the political from the theological in the name of orthodoxy, Blumenberg rather seeks to eliminate the latter and instead establish a new, counterfeit unity of pure immanence. Schmitz and Lepper note: “während die theologische Erledigung politischer Theologie die strikte Trennung von *civitas dei* und *civitas terrena* proklamiert ... benötigt die wissenschaftliche Erledigung, für die Hans Blumenberg steht, nicht einmal mehr diese Unterscheidung. Sie konstatiert die Selbstgenügsamkeit der Immanenz.”⁶⁵ Even though the ‘orthodox’ insistence on a strict separation between transcendence and immanence appears distinct from the atheist proclamation of the self-sufficiency of immanence, to Schmitt they are part of the same movement of neutralization and depoliticization; the one is a preliminary stage to the other.⁶⁶

That Schmitt perceived this link between Peterson, Löwith and Blumenberg is evinced by his *Briefwechsel* with the latter. Not only does Peterson feature as the “Mystagoge Löwiths”, as we have seen, but Löwith’s figure itself looms large throughout the various letters.⁶⁷ For

61 Blumenberg (1983) pp.90, 100, 135-137, 152 (et cetera).

62 Schmitt (2014) pp.34-36, 117. Cf. Meier (2012) pp.290-291; Schmitz (2016) pp.707-719.

63 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.285-293. Cf. Schmitz (2016) pp.707-719; Strong (2008) pp.xi-xxvi.

64 I propose that Schmitt juxtaposes his own notion of a stasiological unity to both a false, homogenous unity and a detrimental (Augustinian) dualism. Cf. Schmitt (2014) pp.116-130; *ibid.* (2008) pp.10-11; (1950b) pp.841-852; Motschenbacher (2000) pp.286-288.

65 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) p.264. Cf. Schmitt (2014) pp.34-35.

66 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.264-265, 277, 282-285. Admittedly, Blumenberg’s *Legitimacy* does allow for a comparable interpretation: the genesis of modernity is brought about via the late-medieval transcendentalization of God and subsequent de-divinization of the world that, by means of the *Gestalt*-switch of self-assertion, becomes the disenchanted world of modern self-assertion. Cf. Griffioen (2016) pp.191-208.

67 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.138, cf. p.126.

instance, after having received the 1974 edition of *Legitimacy*, Schmitt asks Blumenberg whether the latter's Löwith-reception had changed. Schmitt suspects that Löwith's role has been reduced in comparison to the 1966 edition – a change that is mirrored by the increased prominence of his *own* place in the revised version of Blumenberg's book, as he probably realized – which leads him to ask:

Warum ist Karl Löwith mit seinem 'Meaning in History' (1949) ... in der neuen Gestaltung eliminiert? Oder ist er es nicht? Die Frage gehört zur Fragestellung meiner Pol. Theol. II, weil Erik Peterson damals in Rom (1935/36) mit Karl Löwith eine 'Einübung im Christentum' vorgenommen hat.⁶⁸

The reasons for Blumenberg's answer, which is that Löwith had not been 'eliminated' but that his role is admittedly diminished in the new edition, is not pertinent at this stage.⁶⁹ More significant is that the *Briefwechsel* shows that Schmitt not only saw a link between Löwith and Peterson but that he extended this connection to Blumenberg. Schmitt responded to the revised edition of *Legitimacy* by sending Blumenberg a copy of his 'Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History' (1950).⁷⁰ This paper was, as we have seen, written as a testimony of faith against Löwith's attack on the authenticity of his 'theology', but it was also a counterattack against the latter's rigid separation of 'salvation history' from 'world history'. It is presumably not accidental that Schmitt resorted to the same text when confronted with the critique of Blumenberg, which, after all, also questions the authenticity of the theological component of his theory.

By directing Blumenberg's attention to his 'Three Possibilities', Schmitt introduces the figure of the catechon to their polemic. He writes: "Seit über 40 Jahren sammle ich Material zu dem Problem 'Κατέχων' bzw. 'Κατέχον' (Thess. 2,2,6); eben-solange suche ich ein Menschenohr das diese Frage – für mich die Kernfrage der (meiner) Politischen Theologie – hört und versteht." He adds that his earlier attempt "bei Löwith dafür einem Sinn zu finden, auf eine vielleicht von mir selbst verschuldete, peremptorische Weise misslungen ist".⁷¹ We have seen that the catechon represents Schmitt's attempt, in opposition to Peterson and Löwith, to emphasize the essential connectedness of *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschehen* and, by analogy, the essential continuity between politics and theology, or immanence and transcendence in general. To Schmitt, Löwith could only assert the discontinuity between the eschatology and history by ignoring the catechon.⁷² In *Legitimacy*, Blumenberg similarly rejects the possibility of a substantive continuity between early-Christian eschatology and later conceptions of historical progress. Here, *Nabernwartung* creates the same "eschatological paralysis" Schmitt recognized as the problem to which the catechon forms the solution.⁷³ Pini Ifergan states in this respect that, "[u]nlike Schmitt, Blumenberg espoused a view somewhat reminiscent of Löwith's, whereby historical consciousness and eschatological belief are beyond reconciliation."⁷⁴ Although this

68 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.126, cf. p.127: Schmitt regards *Meaning in History* a "komplette, völlig unkritische ... Rezeption von Petersons 'Monotheismus'".

69 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) pp.134-135. In short, Blumenberg complains that Löwith's review (1968) is solely based on the 1962 lecture 'Säkularisation: Kritik einer Kategorie historischer Illegitimität' (1964), rather than on *Legitimacy*. Löwith thereby 'obstructed' the possibility of constructive discussion, according to Blumenberg. Cf. Blumenberg (1983) pp.28-29, 599 fn.2-5.

70 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) pp.118-128.

71 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.120 (emphasis added). Cf. Schmitt (1991) p.63.

72 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.282-284.

73 Blumenberg (1983) pp.42-43; Schmitt (2009) p.169; Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) pp.131-132.

74 Ifergan (2010) p.168. Cf. Ruh (1980) pp.253-254.

could merely signify a superficial overlap between Löwith's and Blumenberg's ideas on eschatology and history, Schmitt instead may have perceived it as proof that their positions are essentially identical in light of his political theology.

Lepper and Schmitz note that Löwith's omission of the katechon in *Meaning in History* had a neutralizing effect in Schmitt's view, because it removed the eschaton from history just as Peterson had attempted to separate theology from politics. The upshot is that the historical, immanent sphere becomes closed off from outside intervention by either God or his placeholder, the sovereign.⁷⁵ Hence, Alexander Schmitz argues (in a different article) that:

For Schmitt, Blumenberg's position, i.e., the destruction of the cohesion between spiritual and secular levels, rests on a double exclusion. In order to formulate his dismissal thesis, Peterson leaves aside the figure of the *katechon*, within which *civitas terrena* and *civitates dei* intersect. In this only limitedly valid form, Schmitt argues, Peterson's reflection was adapted from Löwith. Blumenberg, in his critique of Löwith, can then undermine the spiritual-secular cohesion that has been distorted and weakened in a double sense, thus arriving at a radically immanent, purely scientific rebuttal of political theology: in short, a neutralization process.⁷⁶

In other words, it is because Löwith and Peterson enforced a clear-cut separation between world history and eschatology and between politics and theology – by respectively denying the proper role of the katechon and of the sovereign – that Blumenberg is able to finally eliminate any reference to eschatology or theology in his defense of a purely immanent, scientific-rational modernity.

Schmitz and Lepper propose that Schmitt's suspicion of a conspiracy against his political theology – according to which Peterson, Löwith, and Blumenberg share a single agenda of neutralization and depoliticization – should be interpreted in light of his antisemitism.⁷⁷ Schmitt's 1938 book, *Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes*, provides insight in how an anti-Judaic bias informed his political theology. Hobbes, he argues, attempted “a faithful restoration of the original unity of life”, that is, between theology and politics, while a nefarious “Jewish front” is held responsible for “the revolutionary state-destroying distinction between religion and politics”.⁷⁸ In this book, Schmitt differentiates between “Judenchristen” and “Heidenchristen”: the first type is supposedly in league with the “Jewish front” against the “natural unity” of religion and politics by seeking to separate the two spheres – church and state, or *civitas Dei* and *civitas terrena* – while the latter type affirms the essential political-theological unity of the “*civitas Christiana*”, established by the divinely authorized sovereign under Hobbes' minimalist creed that “Jesus is the Christ”.⁷⁹ This ties in with Schmitt's critique of Blumenberg in *Political Theology II*. Schmitt's theory follows a general pattern that becomes explicated in the Postscript, which is that he not only takes aim against the “judenchristliche Zerstörung der natürlichen Einheit”, noted in 1938, but that he fears above all its *replacement* by a counterfeit unity, i.e., the “completely de-theologised and modern-scientific” vision of

75 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.282-293.

76 Schmitz (2016) p.716. Cf. Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.284-285.

77 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.285-293.

78 Schmitt, *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (2008) pp.70, 11, 10. Cf. Groh (1998) pp.25-73; De Wilde (2008) p.113

79 Schmitt (2008) p.14 fn.12. Cf. *ibid* (1991) p.243; (1963) pp.122-123; Motschenbacher (2000) pp.286-288; Groh (2008) p.29.

modernity that Blumenberg represents.⁸⁰ The quasi-Augustinian emphasis on the separation between transcendence and immanence is seen as a preamble to Blumenberg's affirmation of a fully immanent, scientific-rational modernity, which to Schmitt confirmed the suspicion he formulated in 1938, that the "Jewish front" forms the "providential enemy" of the Leviathan, i.e., the theological-political unity of the state.⁸¹

In his Postscript Schmitt depicts Blumenberg's *Legitimacy* as a defense of a fully immanent, hermetically closed system of rationality and legality. Lepper and Schmitz point out that this legalistic portrayal also has an anti-Semitic undertone, as is evinced by a formula that Schmitt had penned down on his personal copy of the 1966 edition of *Legitimacy*.⁸² The formula is "*Tantum novitatem in Israel non invenit*" ("I have not found such great novelty in Israel"), which derives from the New Testament-phrase "I have not found such great faith in Israel" that became paradigmatic of the anti-Judaic topos of the 'blindness of the synagogue'.⁸³ Reinhard Mehring points in this respect to a description of the sculpted figures 'Ecclesia and Synagogue' of the Strasbourg cathedral, which reads: "Die Synagoge, die Personifizierung des alten Bundes und des Judentums wendet sich ab, als sei sie geblendet vom Glanze des siegreichen Macht. Ein Schleier bedeckt ihre Augen, sie vermag das Heil und die Wahrheit nicht zu schauen."⁸⁴ Schmitt's formula asserts that it is only through Christian faith that one can grasp the true meaning of transcendence and subsequently of *novelty*; in his mind, the Jewish people is predestined to remain blind to this truth.⁸⁵ This sheds light on the fact that the Postscript depicts Blumenberg's conception of modernity as 'autistic'. Because legalistic rationalism denies anything beyond itself, it remains self-referential and cannot conceive of the truly new: "This is the opposite of creation *out* of nothing, because it is the creation *of* nothingness as the condition for the possibility of the self-creation of an ever new worldliness."⁸⁶ His 'Three Possibilities' was meant to posit a true conception of novelty, expressed in the singularity of the event, over against two "blind" and fully immanentized counter-images: Löwith's "piece of nature circling around itself" and Blumenberg's autistic "humanistic self-mirroring".⁸⁷ Alexander Schmitz notes:

The model of the momentous event that Schmitt portrays as Christian is in his view not accessible to Judaism. He asserts that Blumenberg's philosophy of legitimacy refers constantly to the new, but cannot think the new. According to Schmitt, even after Blumenberg's exegesis, the synagogue remains blind to the breakthrough of eschatological time.⁸⁸

80 Quoted in: Groh (1998) p.30/Schmitt (2008) p.10; *ibid.* (2014) p.128. The implication of Schmitt's distinction is, as Motschenbacher (2000, pp.286-295) suggests, that while *Judenchristen* destroy the heterogeneous unity of the two spheres, Jews themselves seek to replace it with a counterfeit, homogenous unity.

81 Cf. Schmitt (1996) p.68; *ibid.* (2008) pp.8-11; (1991) p.18; (2014) pp.1280-130.

82 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) p.286. Cf. Motschenbacher (2000, pp.288-290) on the anti-Semitic connotations of his anti-legalism.

83 Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.285-293.

84 Quoted in: Mehring (2009) p.32.

85 Schmitz (2016) pp.716-719; Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.285-293. Cf. Müller (2003) pp.162-163; Schmitt (2009) pp.169-170; *ibid.* (2014) pp.128-130.

86 Schmitt (2014) p.129.

87 Schmitt (2009) p.170.

88 Schmitz (2016) p.719.

Blumenberg: A 'Weak Decisionism' and Turn to Polytheism

'Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie'

Whereas Schmitt had secretly barred Blumenberg from understanding the truth of his katechontic eschatology, the latter meanwhile drew inspiration from their polemic to further reflect on the political implications of his defense of modernity. Several commentators have pointed out that although there is a political dimension to be discerned in Blumenberg's philosophy it generally remains implicit, leaving its explication to likeminded spirits such as Odo Marquard.⁸⁹ One clear exception to this rule is Blumenberg's article 'Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie', written in the tumultuous year of 1968.⁹⁰ This rare insight into his political philosophy, largely overlooked in Blumenberg-scholarship, not only forms a bridge between the main themes of his 1966 *Legitimacy* and his later *Work on Myth* (1979), it also sheds light on the nature of his political thought in terms of its relation to Schmitt's political theology. 'Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie' exemplifies further what was already alluded to in *Legitimacy*, which is that, apart from obvious differences, there is also some overlap between Blumenberg's political thought and Schmitt's. Their relation can be characterized as such: in terms of his political views, Blumenberg maintains a formal framework that is comparable to Schmitt's, but he critically inverts the valuation of key concepts and positions within this shared frame.⁹¹ Using 'Wirklichkeitsbegriff' as a reference point I first explain how Blumenberg's and Schmitt's political philosophies simultaneously overlap and diverge from each other, before turning to the former's defense of polytheism as a bulwark against the theological absolutism that Schmitt represents.

As noted, the 1966 and 1974 editions of *Legitimacy* convey, in concise form, the outlines for a theory of the modern state. Blumenberg views the modern state in terms of the positive neutralization of religious strife and he considers the essence of modern politics to be the beneficial diminishment of absolute enmity; these tenets of his political philosophy are formulated in clear opposition to Schmitt. Blumenberg's first letter to Schmitt, written in 1971, confirms that their ideas on politics gravitate towards different aims: whereas to Schmitt the leading question is "[w]o liegt der extreme Zustand?", Blumenberg rather asks "[w]ie kann dies sich erhalten?", highlighting the centrality of individual self-preservation ("Selbsterhaltung").⁹² It is this general framework of the neutralization or reduction of absolutism, combined with the aim of self-preservation, which form the key ingredients of

89 Keller (2015) pp.88-101. Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014, p.104) note: "Explizite Äußerungen zur politischen Philosophie sind im Werk Hans Blumenbergs äußerst selten." Cf. Tabas (2012) p.152 fn.65.

90 The paper appeared in 1968/1969. Cf. Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014) p.104; Nicholls (2014) pp.210-215. Keller (2015, pp.92-96) suggests that the student revolt of 1968 was a true "Schock" for Blumenberg, one that made him become more conservative and anti-revolutionary in his later years.

91 I largely take my cue from Marquard (1983, pp.81-82; 1984, pp.31-36) in this respect, who suggests that Blumenberg adopts Schmitt's neutralization-narrative while inverting its valuation. The decline of religion and "great politics" are lauded as quintessential achievements of modernity by Blumenberg and Marquard. Faber (1983, pp. 88-99) also asserts a structural compatibility between Schmitt and Blumenberg, as he points out the anti-revolutionary inclination in both philosophies, which is contrasted with the 'new' political theology of e.g. Benjamin and Taubes. It has been noted that there is an intellectual affinity between Blumenberg and members of the Ritter-school (e.g. Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, Hermann Lübke and Marquard) who, as Dirk van Laak and Müller note, similarly appropriated insights from Schmitt's political theology while 'neutralizing' them in the service of a modest *Liberalconservatismus*. Cf. Van Laak (1993) pp.192-200; Müller (2003) pp.116-132; Keller (2015) pp.88-99.

92 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.106. Cf. Wetters (2012) p.105.

Blumenberg's 'Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie'.⁹³ As the title suggests, this article reconstructs the interconnection of metaphysical conceptions of reality with different theories of state. Blumenberg hereby already affirms what he would later concede to Schmitt (in the 1974 version of *Legitimacy*), which is that a focus on the "structural analogy" between metaphysics and politics is "by no means without value".⁹⁴

In 'Wirklichkeitsbegriff' Blumenberg establishes a clear notion of what separates a modern worldview and conception of the political from pre- or anti-modern theories of state. Thomas More and Niccolò Machiavelli are presented as paradigmatic examples of modern political thought, who are contrasted with Plato and the general cosmic-theological worldview of Antiquity and the Middle Ages.⁹⁵ According to Blumenberg, both Machiavellianism and Utopianism break with the Platonic and Aristotelian theory of state as a reflection of a cosmic order:

sie sind nicht mehr auf den natürlichen Kosmos bezogen, weder auf den der Ideen noch auf sein Abbild in den Erscheinungen noch auf die Teleologie einer sich im Staat erfüllenden Natur des Menschen. Die politische Realität, wie sie sich beiden Autoren des 16. Jahrhunderts darstellt, ist nicht die Fortsetzung der physischen Realität 'mit anderen Mitteln'.⁹⁶

More and Machiavelli are distinctly modern because they separate the realm of politics from the natural-cosmic order. Blumenberg emphasizes the artificiality of More's Utopia, a constructed island-state that is "kein natürliches Gebilde", let alone a reflection of a transcendent Form, but a human invention, "durch künstliche Abtrennung vom Festland entstanden."⁹⁷ Machiavelli, in turn, is responsible for the irrevocable separation of politics from morality, leading to the typically modern "Autonomisierung des Politischen".⁹⁸ Both exemplify a modern view of politics as something that occurs in a distinct, historical-immanent realm which is not entrenched in a larger, preexistent moral-ontic order. This 'disembedding' not only happened due to a shift in worldviews, i.e., the disenchantment of the world, but also because More and Machiavelli could no longer share Plato's confidence in the ability of human reason to access the cosmic logos and derive a blueprint of the ideal state from it. Even More's Utopia is presented as a human experiment (be it idealized) that, as such, cannot be invoked as a transcendent Form.⁹⁹ As is also explained in *Legitimacy*, this renunciation of absolute knowledge has a unburdening effect: it creates an open-ended view of the human world, in which a modest conception of infinite progress serves a critical function and ensures human liberty.¹⁰⁰ Conversely, the fact that Plato's state leaves no room for improvement because it is based on a

93 Blumenberg (1968/9) pp.121-145, fn.4.

94 Blumenberg (1983) p.94. Cf. Schmitz and Lepper (2007) pp.293-306. I suggest that this structural analogy is significant to Blumenberg in light of his anthropology; i.e., that any absolutism – regardless of whether it becomes manifest in the abstract, in theology, or concretely in the sphere of politics – is essentially averse to human self-assertion and self-preservation.

95 Blumeberg (1968/9) pp.123-129

96 Blumeberg (1968/9) p.126.

97 Blumeberg (1968/9) p.128.

98 Blumeberg (1968/9) p.124, cf. pp.137-138. Cf. Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014) pp.105-106. The demoralization of politics has as a positive effect that the political enemy is no longer 'demonized', i.e., treated as essentially evil. This is also the upshot of Schmitt's (1996) 'regional' conception of the political (as opposed to the 'model of intensity').

99 Blumenberg (1968/9) pp.125-127. 'Disembedding' is a term I borrow from Taylor, *Secular Age* (2007).

100 Cf. Blumenberg (1983) pp.30-34, 202, 391.

secure and final knowledge of the immutable cosmic order makes it essentially hostile to human freedom. This is what gives it a violent and tyrannical streak, according to Blumenberg.¹⁰¹

The irrefutable “Evidenz” with which Plato presents his blueprint for the ideal state precludes skepticism or rational dissent.¹⁰² It is subsequently against Plato’s famous aversion to *rhetoric* as mere sophistry that Blumenberg elevates this non-contemplative mode of public reasoning, fabrication and persuasion to the status of the essence of modern politics. The reliance on rhetoric rather than a secure, Platonic “Evidenz” is presented as a consequence of the fact that we lack absolute knowledge while actions and decisions in the political realm remain necessary.¹⁰³ In a different article, ‘Anthropologische Annäherung an die Aktualität der Rhetorik’ (1981), Blumenberg notes that our situation is characterized by “Evidenzmangel und Handlungszwang”.¹⁰⁴ This condition creates the need for “Entscheidungshilfen”: e.g., metaphors, myths, societal institutions, cultural traditions or a “provisional morality”. They remedy our lack of knowledge of reality by offering cultural templates through which we can deal with this reality nonetheless, be it in an essentially indirect manner.¹⁰⁵ Blumenberg hereby vindicates (as we have seen in Chapter 1) the artificiality of the human world as the only world that is inhabitable for the individual as *Mängelwesen*. In ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff’, it is argued that modern political thought is premised on the recognition that the human order cannot be based on knowledge of a natural or cosmic order.¹⁰⁶ There is nothing that grounds the human order beyond a human need for self-preservation and the political acts of self-assertion that answer this need. This is what More already demonstrated, according to Blumenberg: “Der Staat Utopia beruht also nicht auf dem Fundament ewig geltender Ideen und ihrer physischen Nachbildung, sondern *auf einem Akt entschlossener Loslösung* von den Vorgegebenheiten der Natur.”¹⁰⁷

Blumenberg argues that the human order is self-foundational. It is based on human action rather than on a pre-given natural or metaphysical ground, analogous to how the Modern Age is encapsulated in the human act of self-assertion. In this sense I propose that Blumenberg can be seen to espouse a ‘weak decisionism’, similar to that of e.g. Hermann Lübbe, that is placed in direct opposition to the ‘sharpened’ type of decisionism we find in Schmitt.¹⁰⁸ From this perspective it is apparent that the opposition between sharpened and weakened decisionism stems from different attitudes to the problem of absolutism. Blumenberg’s anti-absolutism suggests that the proper function of culture lies in its ability to create a safe distance between humanity and “the absolutism of reality”, that is, to aid humans in the “Entlastung vom Absoluten”, whereas Schmitt instead tries to reproduce this primordial absolutism of reality within the sphere of politics.¹⁰⁹ Because Blumenberg wants to move away from the “extreme case” that Schmitt is focused on, he proposes that the modern idea of politics no longer centers on the friend-enemy distinction but on “Eskalationsverzögerung”. It should be aimed at neutralization of conflict and at preserving normality rather than on enmity and the state

101 Blumenberg (1968/9) pp.124, 142. This is evidently reminiscent of Karl Popper’s critique of Plato in his *Open Society and its Enemies*. Popper however places utopianism in the camp of the ‘enemies’ of the modern open society (2005, pp.166-178).

102 Blumenberg (1968/9) pp.127-129, 142; *ibid.* (1987) pp.431-433.

103 Blumenberg (1968/9) pp.125-130, 136-142; *ibid.* (1987) pp.432-435

104 Blumenberg (1981) p.117/*ibid.* (1987) p.441.

105 Blumenberg (2014) p.9; *ibid.* (1987) pp.434-437, 447-452; Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014) p.136. Cf. Tabas (2012) pp.137-153.

106 Blumenberg (1968/9) pp.123-142.

107 Blumenberg (1968/9) p.128 (emphasis added).

108 Cf. Schmitz (2016) pp.722-723; Keller (2015) pp.96-103; Müller (2003) pp.116-132; Lübbe (1965) pp.118-140.

109 Marquard (2016); *ibid.* (1991b); Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) pp.167-171.

of exception. As Angus Nicholls and Felix Heidenreich formulate it: “Mit einem neuzeitlichen Wirklichkeitsbegriff harmoniere nur eine Politikkonzeption, die Rhetorik als strukturierten und damit entschleunigenden Umgang mit Unsicherheiten akzeptiere.”¹¹⁰

Blumenberg acknowledges a “Handlungszwang” in the political sphere that is negatively determined by an “Evidenzmangel”.¹¹¹ However, Blumenberg adds that is not only possible but desirable to gradually replace the grand (and violent) political actions of yore with more harmless “language acts”. Machiavelli already believed in the efficacy of political rhetoric as a practical replacement of violent interventions. “Der Übergang in die verbale Modalität setzt voraus, daß Handlungen auf diesem Felde [i.e. politics] nicht mehr so heilig sein können, daß sie nicht durch Quasi-Handlungen ‘umbesetzt’ werden könnten.”¹¹² Blumenberg suggests that if we abandon the Platonic distinction between mere words or appearances and the things themselves, we can begin to recognize that our world is constructed by language. This recognition contains a neutralizing and a pacifying potential:

die Transformationen innerer und äußerer Konflikte, Störungen, Bedrohungen, Aggressionen auf die Ebene des Wortes ist anthropologisch längst vertrauter Sachverhalt, und wir beginnen uns daran zu gewöhnen, daß die oft geschmähte ‘endlose Diskussion’ sehr wohl die momentane Entladung eines Konflikts ersetzen und übersetzen kann.¹¹³

Debate and rhetoric replace violent political acts. This indicates, according to Blumenberg, that the key to modern politics is the avoidance of real conflict through language, or: “How to do nothing with words”.¹¹⁴

Blumenberg further elaborates on his earlier remarks in *Legitimacy*, which is that he expects that ‘politics’ in the *strong* sense, as a phenomenon that connotes power, force, submission and violence, will gradually disappear. This occurs in favor of political rhetoric, deliberation and planning. The aim of modern politics is not *gloire* or immortal legacy but rather the satisfaction and regulation of individual desires through science, economics and technology. Safety and economic prosperity become the proper political desiderata rather than a realization of destiny or the representation of the divine.¹¹⁵ Blumenberg suggests that the “Grenzvorstellung” of this conception of politics is analogous to that of technicity, which is a picture of self-sufficient immanence:

Jedenfalls ist es eine Grenzvorstellung aller Technizität, ihrer Funktion aus der sachlichen Immanenz zu genügen. Nehmen wir einmal an, wir könnten uns diesem Grenzwert der immanenten Regulation nähern, so würde der Satz zunehmend Geltung Erlangen, politisches Handeln sei am zweckmäßigsten dort, wo es die klassische Qualität der ‘Entscheidungsfreude’ vielleicht nur noch zur Beruhigung von Funktionsgelüsten und endogenen Unzufriedenheiten simuliert.¹¹⁶

110 Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014) p.105. Cf. Blumenberg (1968/9) p.145 fn.4; Faber (1983) p.91

111 Blumenberg (1981) p.117/ibid. (1987) p.441, cf. pp.447-448: “The axiom of all rhetoric is the principle of insufficient reason”. Cf. Keller (2015) pp.99-103.

112 Blumenberg (1968/9) p.138. Cf. ibid. (1987) p.443; Schmitt (1926) p.61.

113 Blumenberg (1968/9) p.137. Schmitt takes issue with this liberal notion of an ‘endless discussion’ e.g. in *Political Romanticism* (2017), *Political Theology* (2005, e.g. p.63) and *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus* (1926, pp.45-46, 58-61).

114 Blumenberg (1968/9) p.138. This is a play on Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*.

115 Blumenberg (1968/9) pp.129-145; ibid. (1966) pp.60-61.

116 Blumenberg (1968/9) p.130, cf. pp.138-140; Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014) p.105; Schmitt (2005b) p.848.

By reducing the purview of politics to a mere ‘satisfaction of endogenous desires’, Blumenberg appoints economics as the proper subject of contemporary political concerns, leaving the ideological differences of party politics behind as an outdated affair.¹¹⁷ Above all, this entails a farewell to the “great politics” Schmitt desires. Blumenberg thereby strikes the same tone as the 1966 version of *Legitimacy*: when the decision between good and evil is no longer held to take place in the historical-political sphere, then politics becomes governance, modelled after “der großen Verwaltungen” rather than “den Blitzen des Zeus und den Dekreten der Prädestination.”¹¹⁸

In sum, ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie’ explicates further the political position Blumenberg occupies over against Schmitt. First, it demonstrates that they both assert the ‘self-foundational’ nature of the human order. Both portray it as a sphere that relies on human *action* rather than on *knowledge* of natural law, divine will, or transcendent Ideas. However, whereas Schmitt celebrates the pure decision that “emanates from nothingness” and is aimed at the extremities of life, Blumenberg rather turns to culture – myths, metaphors, rhetoric and institutions – as a mediating instance in this decision-making process, favoring those decisions that avoid such extremities.¹¹⁹ This suggests that *Legitimacy* and ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff’ attest to a structural familiarity between Blumenberg’s political thought and Schmitt’s, albeit with inverted evaluations of the significant concepts that are at play. Odo Marquard gives an impression of how this might be possible. He claims that Blumenberg adopts Schmitt’s theory of modernity as the ‘age of neutralizations’, but with a crucial “Umkehrung des Bewertungsakzents”, which is that neutralizations are perceived as a “Positivphänomen”. Based on Schmitt’s theory, Blumenberg thus draws the following conclusion according to Marquard: “*Die Neuzeit ... als Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen* ist die bewahrenswerteste der für uns historisch-lebensmäßig erreichbaren Welten.”¹²⁰

Myth and Liberal Polytheism

Around the time when Blumenberg wrote ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie’ he also initiated his ‘work on myth’, a process that culminated in his tome *Arbeit am Mythos* (1979) a decade later.¹²¹ Nicholls and Heidenreich note that Blumenberg’s *Work on Myth* is “ein latent politisches Buch” that transposes important themes from his political essay to his reflections on the mythic worldview.¹²² There are two significant ways in which Blumenberg’s political ideas are carried into his work on myth: first, ‘myth’ fulfills the function of ‘rhetoric’, namely as a way of constructing a humanly bearable reality and avoiding the “extreme case”. Myth enables the individual to come to terms with a hostile external reality by creating an essential distance to it, and, as a playful and adaptive mode of narration, it has a way of alleviating existential fear and neutralizing violence.¹²³ Second, ‘polytheism’ – or the ‘mythic worldview’ – forms a solution to the problem of theological and political absolutism Blumenberg had detected in the Platonic-theological concept of politics, since, rather than subjecting the entire

117 Blumenberg (1968/9) p.135.

118 Blumenberg (1966) p.60; *ibid.* (1968/9) p.139.

119 Cf. Tabas (2012); Wetters (2012).

120 Marquard (1983) pp.82-83 (emphasis added). Cf. *ibid.* (1984) pp.31-36; Schmitz (2016) p.723.

121 English translation: Blumenberg, *Work on Myth* (1985). Cf. *ibid.*, ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos’ (1971) pp.11-66.

122 Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014) pp.103-107.

123 Cf. Blumenberg (1971) p.21: “Die Liberalität der Mythologie überlebte nur in den Übungsstücken der Rhetorik”. Tabas (2012) pp.137-153; Wetters (2012) pp.105-118.

human order to one divine will or immutable Idea of the good, the mythic outlook represents a “Dissipation des Absoluten” in a plurality of competing powers.¹²⁴

Work on Myth also forms a continuation of the polemic with Schmitt, because it contains a separate chapter on Goethe’s “extraordinary saying” (“*nemo contra deum nisi deus ipse*”), the formula that figured prominently in the Postscript of *Political Theology II* as a stasiological proof. The *Nachlaß*-material that has been disclosed in recent years provides further indications as to how Blumenberg’s turn to polytheism can in part be understood as the formulation of a counter-position to Schmitt’s political theology.¹²⁵ For example, the first letter Blumenberg addressed to Schmitt, in 1971, already places doubt on the latter’s insistence that the saying has a Christological origin.¹²⁶ In a letter from 1975, Blumenberg elaborates on this claim, and presents what would be the main argument of *Work on Myth* against Schmitt in embryonic form:

Goethes Apophthegma ergreift die Allgemeinheit der Bedeutung des Polytheismus als seine Gewaltenteilung, seine Verhinderung der absoluten Macht und jeder Religion als Gefühls der schlechthinnigen Abhängigkeit von ihr. Götter, indem es viele sind, stehen immer schon einer gegen den andern. Begrenzen kann einen Gott immer nur wiederum ein Gott. Das ist die Pointe des Prometheus-Mythologems, die im Apophthegma ausgesprochen ist.¹²⁷

The first element of Blumenberg’s turn to myth as a counter-position to Schmitt’s is introduced in a paper titled ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos’ (written around the same time as ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie’). This paper was presented to the fourth *Poetik und Hermeneutik* conference – *Terror und Spiel: Probleme der Mythenrezeption*, held in 1968 – and it contains many important themes and concepts that would later take center stage in *Work on Myth*.¹²⁸ Here, myth is depicted an existential-therapeutic method of alleviating primordial terror – termed “the absolutism of reality” in *Work on Myth* – by generating distance through poetry, play and fabulation. “Der Bezug der Mythologie zur Erhebung und Erfüllung des menschlichen Daseins scheint ... gerade darin zu bestehen, daß sie Entlastung von jenem Ernst, Freiheit der Imagination im Umgang mit Geschichten von einst Übermächtigen ist.”¹²⁹ The result is a world characterized by “Liberalität” and “Humanität”.¹³⁰ “Die Humanität des Mythos” is however not its point of departure but the result of a process of neutralization of primordial fear. It is “etwas Spätes, schon Verlust der Unmittelbarkeit zu den ursprünglichen Schrecknissen, deren in Riten erstarrte Abwehr, Verzögerung und Beschwörung gleichsam auf einer ersten Stufe von Allegorese ins Erzählbare umgedeutet werden.”¹³¹ Myth thereby ad-

124 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.169. Cf. Wetters (2012) pp.104-107; Marquard (1983) pp.82-84. I propose that it is possible to differentiate in Blumenberg’s theory between myth as a narrative mode and the ‘mythic outlook’ (e.g., classical polytheism). This differentiation explains how modern “re-mythisierungen”, e.g. in the 20th century, can employ myth as a narrative mode while promoting a very different outlook, one that is not as ‘humane’ or ‘liberal’ as the classical mythic worldview was.

125 Blumenberg (1985) pp.523-556; cf. *ibid.* *Präfiguration* (2014); Blumenberg-Schmitt, *Briefwechsel (1971-1978) und weitere Materialien* (2007); Nicholls (2014) pp.205-217.

126 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) pp.106-107.

127 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.133. Cf. Blumenberg (1985) pp.528-531, 545.

128 Blumenberg (1971) pp.11-66. Blumenberg submitted his paper, but he was absent during the conference itself due to illness. Cf. Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.156-157.

129 Blumenberg (1971) p.23. On the ‘therapeutic’ topos of “unburdening”, cf. Müller (2003) pp.120-129; Marquard (2016); *ibid.* (1991) pp.8-28.

130 Blumenberg (1971) pp.21/43 (Liberalität), 33 (Humanität).

131 Blumenberg (1971) p.33.

vances in the opposite direction from theology: whereas myth moves away from the Absolute, theology and metaphysics rather seeks to reproduce it within the human world. In contradistinction to the liberty of the mythic worldview, dogma and theology desires submission to a person or power that is put in place of the original, undefined “absolutism of reality”.¹³²

The second element of Blumenberg’s reflections on myth that is significant – the ‘dissipation of absolutism’ in the polytheistic worldview – comes to the fore most clearly in *Work on Myth*, where it appears as the political-philosophical conclusion of his earlier ideas on the liberality of the mythic outlook. The direct occasion for this defense of a liberal polytheism is, as we have seen, his disagreement with Schmitt on the correct reading of Goethe’s “extraordinary saying”.¹³³ The chapter devoted to Schmitt, ‘Ways of Reading the ‘Extraordinary Saying’’, first aims to demonstrate that Goethe did not advocate a stasiological theology in which only God himself can withstand God. Rather, Blumenberg points out that Goethe’s formula signifies a pantheistic conception of nature and a polytheistic conception of “Dichtung”.¹³⁴ But what is more significant is that this formula manifests an “original schema [*Urschema*] of man’s liberation from anxiety”.¹³⁵ The formula represents a scheme of balance and the separation of powers, which constitutes a whole that does not collapse into inner strife because it is unified by an encompassing structure, i.e., fate or nature. Invoking Goethe’s *Pandora*, Blumenberg notes how the image of competing titans represents the “principle of ‘balance’, the deeply polytheistic fundamental idea that the restricting counteraction must always be a different power. It is the mythical principle of the separation of powers.” Apart from the polytheistic component, it also demonstrates “the pantheistic possibility of reconciliation, which sees everything individual and each particular power as, in its turn, a specification of the whole, which restricts itself in the process of realizing itself.”¹³⁶

To be sure, by resorting to a pantheistic notion of an encompassing order, Blumenberg does not approximate Löwith’s quasi-classical veneration of the cosmos. The image of polytheistic balance and pantheistic reconciliation is rather presented as a cultural invention, meant to ensure a humane existence, that must be projected unto an essentially meaningless and indifferent universe.¹³⁷ It is a therapeutic and a political scheme rather than a ‘theoretical’ one: the “absolutism of reality” represents a Hobbesian “status naturalis” that must be avoided, polytheism represents a “separation of powers”, i.e., a differentiation of original absolutism, while the pantheistic or cosmic meta-structure ensures that the struggle between the gods cannot escalate in real conflict.¹³⁸ The power of the gods, representing political and societal forces, must be curbed or kept in check in order to protect the individual human being. Blumenberg thus takes issue with Schmitt on what the “extraordinary saying” actually means and on what its political implications are:

It is not God’s dissension with himself that is conceived as the limiting case of the absolute ... but rather the original schema of man’s liberation from anxiety in the

132 Blumenberg (1971) p.23: “Der Mythos tendiert nicht ins Absolute, sondern in der Gegenrichtung den Kategorien, die Religion und Metaphysik bestimmen.” cf. pp.15-17 42-47; *ibid.* (1985) pp.223-224; Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014) p.121; Wetters (2012) pp.116-117.

133 Cf. Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) p.196.

134 Blumenberg (1985) p.539, cf. pp.524-555; Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014) pp.107-117.

135 Blumenberg (1985) p.550/*ibid.* (1979) 597. Cf. Müller (2003) pp.164-165.

136 Blumenberg (1985) p.530. Cf. *ibid.* (1971) pp.18, 63.

137 Cf. Tabas (2012) p.47; Palti (2010) p.205.

138 Blumenberg (1985) pp.3-32, 530-538; Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014) p.104. Cf. Faber (1983) pp.94-96; Tabas (2102) p.153.

face of all the powers that he cannot comprehend, insofar as these seem to stand only against man, and must consequently be thought of as being turned aside by opposition to one another. Since they are originally forces and powers, they are, like forces and powers, in their nature unrestricted, unless other forces and powers restrict them. Because – and that is a reason for the dominant god’s jealousy – a god is never curbed except by another god.¹³⁹

The dichotomy between “Terror und Spiel” indicates that, to Blumenberg, polytheism engenders a reduction of existential seriousness: “Gods can play, God is serious”.¹⁴⁰ Hence, the idea of the division of power that Blumenberg recognizes in polytheism and in Goethe’s thought is very different from the stern Christological stasiology that Schmitt distills from the extraordinary saying. Blumenberg for instance contrast the seriousness of the Incarnation with the playfulness of the metamorphosis of pagan gods:

The Incarnation of the God who withholds himself carries no weight against the ubiquity of the pagan gods, against the small comfort of their ability to appear, the comfort that metamorphosis, despite its unseriousness in comparison to the great seriousness of the Incarnation, still furnishes.¹⁴¹

By opting for “Spiel” against “Terror”, Blumenberg also rejects the great hopes for salvation as well as the great fears for damnation – both of which are contained in Schmitt’s stasiology. Instead, he favors the modest, Epicurean hedonism of fulfilling ‘endogenous desires’ and aspiring to the “small comfort” of the lesser gods, and he embraces the levity typical of the mythic outlook. This entails that the “heilige Ernst” that Schmitt identifies as the precondition for meaning is sacrificed in favor of relative liberty, play and a sense of security. Blumenberg hereby also distances himself from *Löwith*, namely by depicting the classical Greek worldview in terms of a playful anthropomorphization of nature through culture rather than in terms of a “heilige Scheu vor jedem Eingriff in die Mächte der Natur”.¹⁴²

Work on Myth portrays gods as anthropomorphized personifications of blind, originally hostile forces that, taken together, represent the primordial terror of the absolutism of reality. The existence of one God – a singular and all-powerful representation of this hostile Absolute – would be simply unbearable to human life.¹⁴³ This depiction is consistent with the portrayal of theological absolutism in *Legitimacy* where the sovereignty of the voluntarist God necessarily suffocates any other power in its reach, including human self-assertion.¹⁴⁴ In *Work on Myth*, Blumenberg presents his reflections on the hostility of monotheism and the benevolence of polytheism as a final response to Schmitt’s political theology. He declares that *any* attempt at making the one God present in the world creates an existential threat to human life and liberty. Blumenberg thus accepts a significant feature of Schmitt’s political theology, which is that there is an essential “mirror-image correspondence” between abstract theological absolutism

139 Blumenberg (1985) p.550. Cf. *ibid.* (1971) pp.42-43, 63.

140 Blumenberg (1985) pp.545-546. Cf. *ibid.* (1971) pp.13-57; Kopp-Oberstebrink (2012).

141 Blumenberg (1985) p.546, cf. pp.553-556. Cf. Kroll (2010) p.274; Wetters (2012) pp.116-117.

142 Löwith (1964) p.28; Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.133. Cf. Kroll (2010) pp.274-278; Kopp-Oberstebrink (2012) p.120; Wetters (2012) pp.116-117. The figure of Prometheus is important here: while in *Work on Myth* Blumenberg appoints Prometheus as an exemplar of modernity, both Löwith and Schmitt reject enlightened modernity for that reason.

143 Blumenberg (1985) pp.545-552; Taubes in: Blumenberg (1971) p.539.

144 Blumenberg (1983) pp.89-90, 136-203.

and real-life political terror. It is in this sense that Blumenberg instead defends polytheism as a mirror image of a modest, mildly conservative liberalism.¹⁴⁵

The chapter in *Work on Myth* on the “extraordinary saying” was meant to be Blumenberg’s “last word on political theology”.¹⁴⁶ It not only repudiates the political violence assumedly inherent in theological absolutism (similar to *Legitimacy* and ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie’), it also presents an alternative: a humane and liberal ‘political polytheism’.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, it is also a text in which Blumenberg appears to be willing to take Schmitt’s references to Christianity more seriously, perhaps as a result of the latter’s attempts to communicate in their personal correspondence that his theological beliefs are indeed genuine (e.g. by introducing the figure of the katechon). Significantly, *Work on Myth* demonstrates that Blumenberg does not reject Schmitt’s political theology because it is inauthentic or disingenuous. He rather condemns it for espousing a situation – absolutism – that is untenable to human existence.¹⁴⁸

The *Nachlaß*-material confirms the impression that the political-philosophical core of *Work on Myth* was intended as a final reply to Schmitt’s political theology. When Jacob Taubes invited Blumenberg for a colloquium on Schmitt’s political theology, the latter declined, noting: “Am 15. November erscheint ‘Arbeit am Mythos’, das alles enthält, was ich je noch zu einem Kolloquium zu sagen gehabt hätte.”¹⁴⁹ A small text survives in Blumenberg’s *Nachlaß* titled ‘Politische Theologie III’ (also the working title of Taubes’ colloquium), in which he expressed in very concise terms how he conceived of his own position over against Schmitt’s:

Wo von Theologie die Rede ist, hat man es mit dem ursprünglich nicht Erweichlichen zu tun, und wenn eine Theologie der Politik jemals Dienste anbietet oder leistet, wie nach Erik Petersons These der Monotheismus dem römischen Imperium, dann ist es die Qualität der Unerbittlichkeit, die sie ausleiht oder überträgt. Eine späte ‘politische Theologie’ ist dann womöglich nur noch ein Erinnerungsposten dafür, daß das Politische eine andere Qualität haben könnte als die, die es im Zustand *seiner freundlichen Reduktion* angenommen hat. ... Eine politische Theologie wird ihren Blick immer auf die Möglichkeit gerichtet halten, das herzustellen oder wieder herzustellen, was nun einmal theologische Zentralthema ist: das Absolute. Jener exemplarische Politische Monotheismus der Spätantike war doch nur möglich geworden, weil im Gegensatz zum paganen Pantheon *mit seiner Dissipation des Absoluten* eine exotische Theologie inmitten des Imperiums Fuß gefaßt hatte, die das Absolute in Reinkultur anzubieten schien und aller Gewalteinteilung im Pantheon abzuhelpen versprach.¹⁵⁰

A few pages later, he sketches in broad lines how throughout history human culture has gradually moved away from primordial terror. ‘Friendly reductions’ are offset in this history by foolish attempts at bringing this original fear to the fore once again, e.g. through 20th century political theologies such as Schmitt’s. However, and this signifies a cautiously optimistic undertone, Blumenberg suggests that the process of ‘neutralization’ and *Depotenzierung* of the Absolute ultimately prevails.

145 Cf. Faber (1983); Keller (2015); Marquard (1983); *ibid.* (1989) pp.87-109; Martin (2017).

146 This is Müller’s (2003, p.157) phrasing, which refers to Schmitt’s *Political Theology II*. Cf. Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.196-197, 203.

147 Marquard (1983); *ibid.* (1991) pp. 87-109.

148 Blumenberg (1985) pp.532-535, 552, 554. I suspect that the Schmitt-Blumenberg correspondence (2007, cf. pp.118-158) made Blumenberg realize that Schmitt’s references to theology and Catholicism were in earnest.

149 Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) p.203.

150 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) pp.168-169 (emphasis added). Cf. Kroll (2010) p.288; Nicholls (2014) pp.214-215.

Wenn die Anthropogenese selbst die Krise aller Krisen schon gewesen ist, weil sie die Nicht-Auslöschung des Menschen zur biologisch Inkonsequenz der Evolution gemacht hat, dann ist sie zugleich die Erzeugung von Lebensbedingungen, die den Titel eines Absolutismus verdienen, und zwar im allgemeinsten und theologisch ganz unbenannten Sinnen: dem eines *Absolutismus der Wirklichkeit* selbst. Der Mensch, einer Situation der Nahezu-Lebensunmöglichkeit entronnen, hatte die absolute Feindlichkeit der Natur gerade hinter sich ... Welche Absolutismen der Mensch in seiner Geschichte auch noch hervorbringen mochte, dieser seiner Entstehung war nicht zu überbieten. Alle anderen standen vielmehr im Dienste seiner Überwindung. Die Kreatur, die entstand, war ein Meister im Umgang mit dem Absoluten in seinen immer schon depotenzierten Formen.¹⁵¹

Assessment: a United Front or Different Lines of Contestation?

Similarities between Löwith's and Blumenberg's Critiques

At this stage it is finally possible to address an important question – one that also informed the previous chapter on Löwith and Schmitt – which is: how must one understand the positions of these three thinkers in relation to each other within the context of the German secularization debate? Are, as some commentators suggest, Löwith and Blumenberg more or less of one mind once they are positioned over against Schmitt?¹⁵² If this is the case, then it can be admitted that Schmitt's suspicion of there being a 'united front' against his political theology is at least partially justified. However, I have also suggested that Blumenberg has more in common with Schmitt than one might expect; would that imply that the more fundamental disagreement in this debate can be found between them on the one hand and Löwith on the other? In the following, I will argue that neither proposal presents the full picture of the Schmitt-Löwith-Blumenberg polemic. Instead, I will explain that their debate should be understood in terms of different lines of contestation. That is, whereas Löwith and Blumenberg both deny Schmitt's conception of secularization, Löwith and Schmitt are in turn united in their rejection of Blumenberg's defense of modern autonomy. Finally, Blumenberg and Schmitt share an aversion to the contemplative ideal of "theoria" that Löwith embraces, and instead opt for some kind of decisionism or "Diesseitsaktivismus".¹⁵³ Before I can elaborate on this representation of the debate it is necessary to first briefly reflect on the points of overlap between Löwith's and Blumenberg's critiques of Schmitt.

Political Theology II confirms that Schmitt, as we have seen, defends his thought against two 'counter-images': the one is represented by Peterson and Löwith, the other by Blumenberg. The first ("*judenchristliche*") counter-image is a position that assumedly seeks to destroy the "original unity" of religion and politics in the "*civitas Christiana*" by removing the transcendent *civitas Dei* from the historical-political sphere and denying any meaningful connection with it.¹⁵⁴ The second position is presumably conditioned on the first; that is, the separation of the divine from the world makes it possible to conceive of the world as a closed, immanent

151 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.171 (emphasis added). Cf. Wetters (2012) p.113-118.

152 Marquard (1983); *ibid.* in: Blumenberg (1971) p.530; Kroll (2010); Ifergan (2010) pp.167-171.

153 Groh (1998) pp.127-129; Schmitt (1963) p.93.

154 Schmitt (2008) pp.11, 14 fn.12; *ibid.* (2014) pp.115, 128.

system that is fully autonomous. This closing off of ‘the immanent frame’ would entail that politics and theology – as Schmitt conceives them – are replaced by governance and economy, sacrificing seriousness and meaning in favor of play and entertainment.¹⁵⁵

Notwithstanding the anti-Semitic connotations of this notion of a ‘united front’ against political theology, it can be conceded that it is indeed possible to perceive a certain continuity between Löwith’s and Blumenberg’s critiques of Schmitt; our analysis shows that both Löwith and Blumenberg fundamentally object to Schmitt’s theory of the essential intertwining of theology and politics and his concomitant conception of secularization. This however does not, as Marquard suggests, indicate that the positions of Löwith and Blumenberg are identical.¹⁵⁶ We will find that it rather points to a shared political aversion, a point of overlap between their philosophies that is however by no means exhaustive. Löwith and Blumenberg similarly renounce the “active nihilism” and “sharpened decisionism” that they recognize in Schmitt’s theory. ‘The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt’ (1935) and the two editions of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966 and 1974) portray Schmitt as a political thinker who attempts to disconnect the sovereign will from pre-given restraints, such as tradition or rationality, and who only refers to theology in order to legitimize an arbitrary will to power. It is in this sense that both Löwith and Blumenberg initially suggested that the theological component of Schmitt’s political theology is an inessential or “occasional” means to a political-authoritarian end.¹⁵⁷

Löwith and Blumenberg returned to their initial critiques in ‘Max Weber und Carl Schmitt’ (1964) and *Work on Myth* (1979) respectively; in both cases it can be surmised that in this instance they had become (at least partially) aware of the fact that Schmitt’s continued reference to theology and Catholicism betrayed something more than a mere “occasionalist” appropriation. Löwith, as we have seen, conceded in 1964 that Schmitt “also irgendwie auf das Heil seiner Seele bedacht war”.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, the letters Blumenberg wrote to Schmitt after 1974 as well as his earnest treatment in *Work on Myth* of the Christological interpretation of the “extraordinary saying” indicate a willingness to indulge the latter in theological matters.¹⁵⁹ What is significant is that, despite this concession to Schmitt’s Christianity, Löwith and Blumenberg otherwise did not alter their initial verdicts to a considerable extent: ‘Max Weber und Carl Schmitt’ and *Work on Myth* still characterize this political theology as a vehicle for a brand of political authoritarianism that eschews demands of measure and balance (that either stem from nature or the human lifeworld) and is oriented instead towards the “extreme case”. This contradicts Heinrich Meier’s claim that Blumenberg’s and Löwith’s critiques of Schmitt are contingent on the fact that they were assumedly oblivious to the “theological core” of his theory, which would imply that their readings can be dismissed as ungrounded misinterpretations.¹⁶⁰

The overlap between the two critiques extends to the very nature of Schmitt’s political theology, as he himself already suspected. We have seen that both Löwith and Blumenberg are essentially averse to any endeavor that amounts to theologizing politics or politicizing theology – which, to Schmitt, is more or less the same thing – and *Meaning in History* as well as *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* warn against political attempts at realizing theological aims (e.g. salvation) in history. Consequently, they both reject the possibility of ‘secularization’ as Schmitt

155 Cf. Schmitt (2014) pp.127-130; Meier (1995) pp.39-47.

156 Marquard (1983) p.79.

157 Cf. Motschenbacher (2000) pp.118-119.

158 Löwith (2007) p.374.

159 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) pp.130-135, 147-149.

160 Meier (1995) pp.7-8 fn.6, 61 fn.64; *ibid.* (2012) pp.269-300.

conceptualizes it in *Political Theology* (1922), i.e., as a legitimate transfer of divine authority to the worldly sovereign.¹⁶¹ It is in this joint rejection of the interconnection of politics and theology and, analogously, of history and eschatology, that Schmitt recognized the *Gestalt* of the enemy. Schmitt's 'Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History' was therefore meant to prove to Löwith – and on a later date to Blumenberg – that political theology constitutes a legitimate outlook in theological terms and that the presupposition of a transcendent orientation point in history need not lead to a passivist "eschatological paralysis".

The area of overlap between Löwith and Blumenberg vis-à-vis the possibility of political theology reaches thus far. However, if the reasons behind their aversion to political theology and to Schmitt's positive conception of secularization are taken into account it becomes apparent, once again, that their positions diverge considerably. To illustrate: in a letter to Schmitt from 1975, Blumenberg responds to 'Three Possibilities', admitting that, like Löwith, he too denies the possibility of reconciling "eschatological faith" with "historical consciousness", albeit for a very different reason.¹⁶² Whereas Löwith maintains an archetypical dichotomy between salvation and history that excludes their interaction, Blumenberg rather suggests that the katechon is an anti-eschatological figure that was introduced as an answer to the existential untenability of early-Christian eschatology. To Blumenberg, eschatology necessarily implies a gnostic "Dualismus zwischen dem Schöpfer und dem Richter" of the world, in which "die Schrecken des Endes" involves "die Diskriminierung des Anfangs".¹⁶³ The katechon does not represent theological absolutism (i.e., eschatology) in history, it rather neutralizes its inherent terror. This indicates that Blumenberg does not object to political theology on the basis of theological considerations. He rejects it because the representation of the Absolute – either in history or in politics – necessarily entails a replication of "die Schrecken des Endes", be it in weakened form, that devalues the existing order and humanity's place in it.¹⁶⁴ While Löwith casts a verdict on the heterodoxy of Schmitt's political theology – even though the former does not himself identify with orthodox faith – Blumenberg instead suggests that all forms of theological absolutism, heterodox or not, make life unbearable for the human individual. As mentioned, Blumenberg thus accepts at least one tenet of political theology, which is that he assumes an essential "mirror-image correspondence of political to theological absolutism", both of which represent the primordial terror of "the absolutism of reality". This explains his own preference for polytheism and the dissipation of the Absolute.

The Question of 'Opposition' and Hidden Similarities between Schmitt and Blumenberg

The notion of a 'united front against political theology' has a limited explanatory range; it elucidates a shared aversion to the interconnection of theology and politics and the representation of eschatology in history, but it does not disclose the different motivations behind this denunciation. It is important to take note of this, because the impression that there is such a united front is congruent with a widespread misunderstanding I have attempted to dispel in Chapter 1, which is that Löwith's and Blumenberg's positions are more or less similar and that their "Säkularisierungskontroverse" is by and large "inszeniert zur bloßen Tarnung [of their]

161 Löwith (1995) pp.137-159, 271-281; Blumenberg (1983) pp.89- 101.

162 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.131

163 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.132. Cf. Blumenberg (1985) pp.551-553; Groh (1998) p.174.

164 Cf. Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) pp.167-171; Wetters (2012) pp.113-118. In this case, one should regard the "Schrecken des Endes" are a replication of the primordial terror of the absolutism of reality.

grundsätzlichen Positionsideutität”, in the words of Marquard.¹⁶⁵ In ‘Politischer Polytheismus – auch eine politische Theologie?’ (1983) for instance, the latter claims that while Schmitt advocates an essentially anti-modern position of theological absolutism, Blumenberg and Löwith are actually in agreement in their anti-absolutist skepticism that, to Marquard, constitutes the hallmark of modernity.¹⁶⁶ Joe-Paul Kroll’s thorough study of the polemic between Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt, *A Human End to History?* (2010), is more attentive to the philosophical differences between the first two thinkers, but he does concur with Marquard that the differences between Löwith and Blumenberg are negligible in light of their united opposition to Schmitt.¹⁶⁷ Kroll notes that:

Although the debate [on secularization] may at first have seemed like one between Löwith and Blumenberg, the latter’s confrontation with Schmitt has since come to stand at the center of attention – not least because ... the positions of Löwith and Blumenberg were closer than either cared to admit, whereas those of Blumenberg and Schmitt proved to be irreconcilable.¹⁶⁸

Hence, “Carl Schmitt came to replace Löwith as Blumenberg’s main philosophical adversary.”¹⁶⁹ Assumedly, the Schmitt-Blumenberg polemic constitutes the ‘real’ debate on secularization because it is here that one can find the strongest opposition between positions. Kroll’s and Marquard’s suggestion that the Löwith-Blumenberg debate is merely “staged”, masking roughly identical standpoints, is coterminous with the tendency in secondary literature to neglect Löwith’s critique of Schmitt and primarily focus on the latter’s more extensive polemic with Blumenberg.¹⁷⁰

Evidently, in terms of the historical development of the polemic around *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* it is indeed the case that Schmitt’s role as an interlocutor of Blumenberg became more prominent while the role of Löwith, who refrained from further involvement aside from a negative review of *Legitimacy*, diminished. The claim that is at stake here is however not only historical but also philosophical: the polemic between Blumenberg and Schmitt assumedly constitutes the *real* debate on secularization because their philosophical disagreements run deeper than the former’s more superficial quarrel with Löwith.¹⁷¹ This line of interpretation not only ignores genuine differences between Löwith and Blumenberg (which I have disclosed in Chapter 1), I argue here that it also risks ignoring certain less conspicuous points of agreement between the latter and Schmitt that I alluded to above. To further understand the sense in which the positions of Schmitt and Blumenberg relate to each other, and by extension to Löwith’s, it hence necessary to briefly enumerate and reflect on these points of agreement.

Christian Keller has recently investigated the intellectual proximity of Blumenberg to the ‘Ritter school’, the (after 1968 increasingly conservative) group of liberal thinkers that

165 Marquard (1983) p.79. Cf. *ibid.* (1982) pp.14-18, 68, 179 fn.4.; Kroll (2010) p.131.

166 Marquard (1983) pp.78-80. Cf. *ibid.* (1982) pp.135-144.

167 Kroll (2010) pp.17-21, 131, 237-238, 259.

168 Kroll (2010) p.17.

169 Kroll (2010) p.20.

170 Kroll (2010) pp.237-238. Cf. Ifergan (2010) pp.167-171. I suggest that Löwith – and not Blumenberg – mainly emphasizes the ‘emptiness’ and ‘heterodoxy’ of Schmitt’s political theology, even though *both* object to the latter’s predisposition for the “extreme case” and the “state of exception”.

171 See Chapter 1. Also, it should be pointed out that the frequency with which Löwith’s name appears in the Schmitt-Blumenberg *Briefwechsel* (2007, pp.120, 126, 132-135, 138), indicates that the former’s position in the debate maintained a certain significance even though he himself had withdrawn from an active discussion.

included Marquard, Böckenförde and Lübke.¹⁷² The Ritter school is known for adopting key tenets from Schmitt's thought (e.g. decisionism) in service of a neutralizing-liberalist agenda, which means that they abandon the more extreme, authoritarian implications of his political theology.¹⁷³ Schmitt is "liberal rezipiert" by Böckenförde, Marquard and Lübke. They are similarly averse to universalism and acknowledge the need for decision-making under the "principle of insufficient reason" in political affairs. However, contrary to Schmitt they are emphatically concerned with maintaining 'state of normalcy' rather than focusing solely on the state of exception and the pure decision.¹⁷⁴ I propose, in short, that both editions of *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* as well as *Work on Myth* indicate significant parallels with this liberal Schmitt-reception, which testifies to Blumenberg's intellectual kinship with the members of the Ritter school, as analyzed by Keller.¹⁷⁵

Already in the 1966 edition of *Legitimacy* Blumenberg can be seen to subscribe, as Marquard suggests, to Schmitt's account of modernity as an "age of neutralizations".¹⁷⁶ Blumenberg concurs that the modern state could only come about through the neutralization of theology – i.e., by relegating religion to the private sphere. In Schmitt's theory, this enables two possible routes of development: either the state will operate as the legitimate successor of the church and carrier of divine authority, or it continues the path of neutralization until the *Zivilreligion* that Hobbes established – under the minimalist creed "Jesus is the Christ" – has also become redundant and is replaced by an image of pure immanence, "liberal modernity".¹⁷⁷ Blumenberg, who conceives of the process of neutralization as the diminution of absolutism, evidently opts for the second route, similar to for instance Böckenförde and Lübke.¹⁷⁸ Texts such as 'Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie' and 'An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Relevance of Rhetoric' moreover indicate that Blumenberg endorses a form of 'weak decisionism'. He assumes that the political order is founded on actions or decisions rather than on knowledge of pre-given natural or transcendent truths, but contrary to Schmitt, Blumenberg takes recourse to cultural forms – myths and rhetoric – and societal institutions to mediate political decision-making processes. Hence he opts for a modest political pragmatism in contradistinction to a Schmittian existential antagonism.¹⁷⁹

It should furthermore be noted how well Schmitt and Blumenberg are able to recognize their *own* positions as sharpened 'counter-images' in *each other's* respective theories. Blumenberg envisions liberal modernity in 'Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie' as a condition in which Cromwellian aspirations of "great politics" are abandoned in favor of the modest, hedonistic goals of 'small politics', e.g., the satisfaction of desires and avoidance of conflicts. This image is not incongruent with Schmitt's description of the ultimate aim of liberalism: a fully depoliticized condition of "paradisiacal worldliness" in which true antagonism is glossed over by

172 Keller (2015) pp.88-103. Cf. Marquard (1989) pp.4-18.

173 Müller (2003) pp.116-132; Keller (2015) pp.96-97; Van Laak (1993) pp.192-200.

174 Keller (2015) pp.96-97; Blumenberg (1987) p.447. Cf. Marquard (1984) pp.31-36; Böckenförde (1983) pp.18-25; *ibid.* (1967); Lübke (1983) pp. 46-56; Müller (2003) pp.116-132.

175 Keller (2015) pp.88-103.

176 Blumenberg (1966) pp.58-61; Marquard (1984) pp.31-36; *ibid.* (1983) pp.80-84.

177 Blumenberg (1966) pp. 58-61; *ibid.* (1983) pp.89-92; Schmitt (1963) pp.121-123; *ibid.* (1965); Mehring (2003) pp.197-203; Müller (2003) pp.1, 156-168.

178 Böckenförde (1967) pp.75-94; Lübke (1983) pp.50-55.

179 Blumenberg (1968/9); *ibid.* (1987). Cf. Keller (2015) pp.88-103; Tabas (2012) pp.135-153. Another example of 'weak decisionism': Lübke, 'Zur Theorie der Entscheidung' (1965b) pp.118-140. Furthermore, Blumenberg's (1987, p.439) vindication of societal institutions shows his indebtedness to Arnold Gehlen.

discussion and consensus and where existential seriousness is replaced by ironic playfulness.¹⁸⁰ Although in the Postscript of *Political Theology II* Schmitt does exaggerate the “autism” of Blumenberg’s conception of modernity, it is admittedly true that the latter justifies humanity’s recourse to a self-referential cultural sphere of immanence as a legitimate response to the existential foreign threat of the absolutism of reality. This congruence is not incidental, because the primordial trauma that Blumenberg identifies in *Work on Myth* as the absolutism of reality is structurally analogous to Schmitt’s notion of transcendence: both are conceptualized as a foreign force that continuously breaks into the humanly constructed world of immanence. Whereas Blumenberg expresses the hope that humanity will improve its ongoing attempts at keeping the Absolute at bay, Schmitt rather takes solace in the expectation that it can never fully succeed.¹⁸¹ Conversely, Schmitt serves as a prime example to Blumenberg that the secularization theorem endangers the relative autonomy of modernity, and that abstract theological absolutism poses a very real threat in the political sphere, where it takes the form of authoritarian decisionism. In short, this implies that both philosophers are in agreement that enlightened modernity is fundamentally atheistic and that Christianity is fundamentally anti-humanistic. Moreover, Blumenberg’s acceptance of a “mirror-image correspondence of political to theological absolutism” arguably explains why he vindicates a form of liberal polytheism in *Work on Myth*; indeed, Marquard suggests that this text constitutes a defense of ‘political polytheism’ in direct response to Schmitt’s political monotheism.¹⁸²

Different Lines of Contestation

I have thus far argued that the notion of a ‘united front’ against Schmitt not only ignores the distinctness of Löwith’s and Blumenberg’s critiques, but that it can also lead one to oversee certain less than obvious points of agreement between Schmitt and Blumenberg. Schmitt was preoccupied with finding the true face of the enemy, his own “Frage als Gestalt”, and because Blumenberg’s position indeed resonates with his own counter-image of full-blown detheologization and depoliticization it is tempting to assume that the real opposition lies here. What such a Schmittian perspective on intellectual enmity however ignores is that a meaningful opposition first requires a certain agreement on the basic terms of the debate and the concepts that are used within it, e.g. on the essential antagonism between enlightened modernity and theological absolutism. This tacit agreement between Schmitt and Blumenberg in turn reveals a distance between their positions on the one hand and Löwith’s on the other.

To exemplify, although Löwith did not develop a political philosophy of his own it is possible to explicate the political ramifications of his thought, as for instance Jeffry Barash has shown.¹⁸³ Doing so indicates that his self-professed ‘classical’ approach to political affairs

180 Schmitt (2005) p.65. Cf. *ibid.* (2014) pp.34, 128-130; (1991) p.264. Blumenberg (1968/9, pp.129-145) moreover defends science, planning, economy and technology as legitimate preoccupations of modern, disenchanting politics, all of which is an affront to Schmitt’s conception of the political.

181 Blumenberg (1985) p.490: “Reality turns out to be that which, in an aesthetically conceived life of exclusively internal consistency – a self-created life with Promethean pretensions – breaks in, as something foreign, from outside.” Cf. Wetters (2012) p.105; Tabas (2012) p.137. In this sense, there is a mirror-image correspondence to be discerned between Schmitt’s Postscript of *Political Theology II* and Blumenberg’s brief text, ‘Politische Theologie III’, which is that both are declarations of hope: the one hopes that ‘the political’ is ineradicable while the other hopes that neutralization will succeed and that any historical iteration of absolutism is already a weakened form of primordial terror.

182 Blumenberg (1983) p.90; Marquard (1983); *ibid.* (1989) pp.17, 91-105.

183 Barash (1998).

– which hinges on a disinterested notion of “*theoria*” – is indeed far removed from the presumably more ‘modern’ perspectives of Schmitt and Blumenberg, both of which rather assert the primacy of human *action* in absence of secure knowledge of an immutable order.¹⁸⁴ Already in his 1935 article on Schmitt’s ‘Occasional Decisionism’, Löwith suggests that the institution of the *polis* should be the result “of the power of integral knowledge” about “what is primordially correct and just, as it is in Plato’s concept of the essence of politics, where such knowledge grounds an order of human affairs.”¹⁸⁵ As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is difficult to say what this “order of human affairs” would consist of according to Löwith.¹⁸⁶ It is evident however that Löwith’s concept of nature fulfills an essentially critical function vis-à-vis the human order and the modern idea of politics, as this quote from ‘Welt und Menschenwelt’ (1960) demonstrates:

Ein solche exzentrische Betrachtung der Welt, worin der Mensch kein Mittelpunkt ist ... ist heute aus zweierlei Gründen unzeitgemäß: erstens, weil sie überhaupt eine *Betrachtung* ist, d.h. die Haltung der ‘Theorie’ oder der reinen Ansicht, im Unterschied zur Umsicht der alltäglichen Praxis, voraussetzt und zweitens, weil die von ihr betrachtete immerwährende Welt nicht diejenige ist, deren zeitgeschichtlicher Andrang uns täglich bedrängt, sondern eine Welt, die uns scheinbar nichts angeht, weil sie nicht eine Welt *für uns* ist.¹⁸⁷

It is suggested on the one hand that nature provides an awareness of balance, measure and proportion that function as timeless theoretical benchmarks for the human order. On the other hand, this quote also shows that Löwith is critical of any anthropocentric attempt to relate nature to the human order, as this would imply that the world exists ‘for us’. Hence, whether it is indeed possible to establish a polis that is “kosmosartig” in the Modern Age, or at any time, is left unanswered.¹⁸⁸

Löwith distinguishes two characteristics of a classical, ‘untimely’ conception of the relation between “Welt und Menschenwelt”: it is theoretical and cosmocentric. This helps further understand the difference between him and both Schmitt and Blumenberg. First, Löwith’s rejection of modern anthropocentrism not only touches on Blumenberg’s historical interpretation of modernity as an age of human “self-assertion”, it also involves the latter’s depiction of myth as playful anthropomorphization of reality instead of as a testimony of a “*heilige Scheu*” for nature.¹⁸⁹ Schmitt’s decisionism – which Löwith depicts as a derived form of theological occasionalism – is similarly anthropocentric, because despite its non-compliance with substantive Christian principles it is nonetheless premised on the Christian idea of the essential contingency of the natural world and of the centrality of the human being – to Schmitt: the sovereign – in creation. Löwith’s critique of the modern conception of reality hence also applies to Schmitt’s political thought: it suggests a “creation without Creator”, i.e., a devalued natural world that lacks not only a reality of its own but now also a divine stamp of approval.¹⁹⁰ Second, Löwith’s prioritization of *theoria* over *praxis* entails an indictment of both the extreme, authoritarian decisionism of Schmitt and of the moderate and mediated decisionism of Blumenberg.

184 Cf. Löwith (1960) pp.228-255; *ibid.* (1958) pp.49-86; Schmitz and Lepper (2007) p.304, fn.75.

185 Löwith (1995) p.114, cf. p.146; Schmitt (1993) p.142.

186 Cf. Habermas (1983).

187 Löwith (1960) p.243.

188 Löwith (1960) p.234, cf. p.231.

189 Löwith (1964) p.28; Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) pp.132-134.

190 Löwith (1949) p.200. Cf. *ibid.* (1958) pp.59-62, 68-79

Schmitt and Blumenberg in turn reject the assumption that humans have access to this “integrative knowledge” of an eternal order. Instead they argue that decisions in the political sphere must be made in conformity with a simultaneous “Evidenzmangel” and “Handlungszwang”. We have seen that Blumenberg’s and Schmitt’s perspectives diverge in that the former seeks cultural mediation and compensation for this lack of “Evidenz”, whereas the latter rather regards the pure decision *ex nihilo* to be the truest manifestation of the structural analogy between genuine theism and political sovereignty. However, even though Blumenberg is oriented towards the ‘state of normalcy’ instead of the ‘state of exception’, it can be maintained that, from Löwith’s perspective, this pragmatic conception of politics is just as empty and unfounded (in a ‘theoretical’ sense) as Schmitt’s more extremist political theology is.¹⁹¹

This is however not to suggest that the *actual* opposition should be situated between Löwith on the one hand and Blumenberg and Schmitt on the other. A discussion between multiple interlocutors generally does not result in a two-dimensional scale on which the positions at the extreme ends automatically constitute the deepest and thus the most meaningful opposition philosophically speaking, not in the last place because *meaningful* opposition first requires a tacit agreement – and hence some kind of approximation – on the terms of the debate. Schmitt might have believed that Löwith only occupied an intermediary position on a single scale that ends in Blumenberg’s purported vindication of full-blown neutralization, but we have seen that this line of interpretation risks generalizations that obscure genuine differences between respective standpoints.¹⁹² Based on our earlier analyses I therefore propose, in sum, a more complex and multifaceted conception of the debate between Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt, whereby all three authors are separated and united by different intersecting lines of contestation.

Based on our investigation of Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt in these last few chapters it is possible to distinguish three of these lines. First, we have seen that the views of Löwith and Blumenberg overlap in their joint rejection of the core ideas of Schmitt’s political theology, that is, the essential connectedness of religion and politics and the notion that the divine must be represented in this world. Second, Blumenberg and Schmitt are in agreement when it comes to the priority of praxis over *theoria*, in other words, they both assume that the human order rests on individual or collective action rather than on an “integrative knowledge” of a transcendent reality, which sets them apart from Löwith. Third, and this connection has remained more implicit so far, it can be asserted that Schmitt and Löwith both take issue with the self-proclaimed autonomy of modernity and of the modern individual, and thus tend to portray the enlightened Modern Age as an essentially hubristic epoch.¹⁹³ Blumenberg instead defends a relative autonomy of the human being as a legitimate act of self-assertion against claims to heteronomy, i.e., against attempts at belittling human freedom in light of a “schlechtthinnige Abhängigkeitsgefühl” vis-à-vis an iteration of the Absolute, whether it is Schmitt’s conception of the divine or Löwith’s image of an eternal and indifferent cosmos.¹⁹⁴ However, we can also surmise that while these different oppositions both divide and unite the three authors in different constellations, it should be noted that none of the ‘camps’ this interpretation creates (e.g. heteronomy versus autonomy) points to an essential identity in positions. The areas of overlap I discern between these thinkers are not exhaustive; after all, we have seen

191 Cf. Löwith (1958) pp.26-86. It can be surmised that Löwith would situate Blumenberg’s hope for a good outcome of the human struggle against the Absolute more in the proximity of a (post-)Christian *Verzweiflung* rather than of a classical Skepsis.

192 Cf. Schmitz and Lepper (2007).

193 This shared aversion to modern Prometheanism is most overt in Schmitt’s (2009) ‘Three Possibilities’.

194 Cf. Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.113.

for instance that Löwith has different reasons for rejecting the idea of modern autonomy than Schmitt, and that his aversion to political theology is of a different nature to Blumenberg's. Likewise, it would be a mistake to overemphasize the continuity between Blumenberg's and Schmitt's decisionism while ignoring the glaring differences between them.

This image of intersecting lines of opposition, which create different constellations depending on what area of contestation is highlighted (e.g., connection versus separation of theology and politics, or a prioritization of praxis or theoria), raises the question whether it is possible to tell which one of these themes is more important than the others. I suggest that while it might be possible to propose such a hierarchy – which would prioritize one opposition and make the others of secondary importance – it should also be noted that any proposition to this effect is contestable. The problem, in my view, with such a proposition does not reside in the difference that it identifies between two authors but in the other differences it ignores; if, for example, it is argued that the debate essentially centers on the question of the legitimacy of modernity – which places Blumenberg in one camp and Schmitt and Löwith in another – then this creates an obliviousness to the quite substantive differences between the latter two. Hence, I believe that an image that does the most justice to all three authors is one that sets them apart as unique interlocutors whose views might overlap on some levels but not on others.

It is admittedly less problematic to speculate on which opposition in this debate would be deemed the most important according to the participants themselves. I suggest that in all three cases it can be assumed on the basis of my analysis that the opposition that sets the author in question apart from the other two would be considered the most important by that individual author. To illustrate, it can be argued that Blumenberg's main concern in *Legitimacy* and *Work on Myth* was to mount a defense of the relative autonomy of the human lifeworld against its infringement from outside; this explains his rejection of the 'secularization theorem' (Löwith) and of political and theological absolutisms (Schmitt). Löwith, in turn, especially condemned the type of a-theoretical, groundless mode of existence that characterizes modern historical consciousness – both in its moderate (Blumenberg) and extreme forms (Schmitt). We have seen that Schmitt himself, lastly, felt that he had to defend his political theology against attempts at separating the world from the divine, both in the guise of Augustinian orthodoxy (Löwith, following Peterson) and of atheistic philosophies of pure immanence (Blumenberg). Evidently, each author has his own idea on what constitutes the most fundamental issue of the debate, whether it is the natural unity of religion and politics, the legitimacy of modernity, or a return to 'cosmic consciousness'.

Conclusion

To recapitulate the findings of this chapter it is worth noting, first of all, that the debate between Blumenberg and Schmitt appears less clouded by mutual misunderstanding than the former's initial discussion with Löwith was.¹⁹⁵ Clearly this is a result of the fact that Schmitt and Blumenberg found willing opponents in each other; both recognized a positive potential for self-exploration in intellectual opposition. As Blumenberg wrote to Schmitt: "ein 'Gegner' dieser Dignität ist es, was ich ein Denker über alle Zustimmungen hinaus wünschen muß."¹⁹⁶ We have seen that already from the start of their polemic in the first edition of *Legitimacy*,

195 For example, a significant part of the Schmitt-Blumenberg *Briefwechsel* (2007, pp.106, 111, 131, 149) revolves around the question (posed by Blumenberg) what the main difference between their philosophies is and how it must be understood.

196 Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.134.

Blumenberg had quite a clear view of what the focal point of his opposition to Schmitt was: the political implications of theological absolutism. His later ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie’, that rare direct insight into Blumenberg’s political philosophy, confirms the impression that where Schmitt lamented neutralization and depoliticization, he rather embraced it in terms of the progress towards small politics and freedom from existential terror. ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos’ and *Work on Myth* thematized this train of thought by projecting – in a political-theological fashion – a liberal conception of the separation of powers and of politics as “Eskalationsverzögerung” unto the pagan pantheon and the world of myth.¹⁹⁷ Schmitt, in turn, recognized in Blumenberg the final expression of a single line of offence against his political theology, a “front” that seeks to destroy the original unity of politics and theology through separation and the ultimate denial of the theological component. We have seen that Schmitt’s “katholisierende Privatmythologie” attributes an anti-Semitic dimension to this argument, suggesting that Blumenberg and Löwith are part of a larger conspiracy and that they are *predestined* to remain blind to the true nature of transcendence.

I have argued that whereas the idea of a single front against political theology does elucidate points of overlap between Löwith’s and Blumenberg’s critiques it should not be confused with an identity between their positions. The overlap is significant nonetheless because it sheds a new light on the relatively recent tendency to ‘theologize’ Schmitt. That is, both Löwith and Blumenberg became aware of the inextricable nature of the theological components of his thought, but they did not conceive this as a reason to adjust their earlier judgements of Schmitt. Both still condemn him as an advocate of active nihilism and arbitrary authoritarianism who eschews either the needs of the human lifeworld or the “integrative knowledge” of the natural order.¹⁹⁸ Subsequently, I have shown that the reasons behind Löwith’s and Blumenberg’s condemnation of Schmitt are quite different and that this divergence points towards a less conspicuous proximity between the latter two thinkers.

In conclusion, my reconstruction suggests that Blumenberg, Löwith and Schmitt can best be understood as representing three distinct viewpoints in this debate, which – despite points of overlap – are not fully reducible to one ‘camp’ or another. Löwith’s and Blumenberg’s reasons for rejecting political theology ultimately relate to their diverging philosophical anthropologies (as is also discussed in Chapter 1), which evokes either an ‘eccentric’ or ‘anthropocentric’ philosophical anthropology. Furthermore, it can be observed that the confrontation between Löwith and Blumenberg on the one hand and Schmitt on the other is illuminating because it provides insight into the political dimension of the philosophies of the first two thinkers – both of whom are generally known for being apolitical or simply silent on political matters. It also shows that, contrary to Löwith, Blumenberg was able to formulate a positive political philosophy, namely a modest, pragmatic conservative-liberalism aimed at avoiding the state of exception on which Schmitt was focused. The polemic with Blumenberg is also indicative of a certain vulnerability in Schmitt’s thought, which is that his theory of politics and the modern state contains the potential for its own denial, i.e., the affirmation of neutralization and detheologization.¹⁹⁹ By admitting that the modern state could only come about through the neutralization of theology, Schmitt in fact paved the way for Blumenberg’s

197 Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014) p.105.

198 In other words, I believe that this confirms the interpretation of e.g. Kroll (2010), Müller (1999) and Groh (1998), who assert that, while it is necessary to take the theological components of Schmitt’s thought seriously on the one hand, it is a mistake to subsequently portray him as a more or less moderate Catholic thinker on the other hand, as e.g. Meier (2012) appears to do.

199 Cf. Marquard (1983); *ibid.* (1984).

political philosophy, which seeks to bring the process of neutralization and detheologization to a conclusion. Indeed, it is not unlikely that Blumenberg formulated his political views in opposition to – and partially in accord with – this contentious political theologian.

PART III

Three Perspectives on the Broader Secularization Debate

Chapter 5

Historiography: The Secularization Debate as 'Ideenpolitik'

Introduction

After having discussed the polemics between Löwith, Schmitt and Blumenberg in the previous chapters we proceed to a reconstruction of the broader secularization debate. 'Secularization' was a fashionable topic in German academia from the 1950's onwards, one that resonated with a general cultural discourse on how the recent past should be understood in light of a purported alienation from religion.¹ The present study, as mentioned, situates the Löwith-Blumenberg-Schmitt discussion at the center of this broader secularization debate. Placing the former in the context of the latter assumedly increases our understanding both of what is contextualized as well of the context itself. We will discover in these next few chapters that the contributions of Blumenberg, Schmitt and Löwith indeed exerted an enduring influence on academic discourse, and that crucial themes, concepts and templates that were intensively explored and problematized in their polemics reoccur throughout this broader debate and continue to bear their imprints.² In the remainder of this book we shall find that the contextualization of Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt in a broader discourse not only confirms their widespread influence but that it moreover helps achieve an insight into how their accounts in turn are emblematic of a greater cultural or intellectual endeavor: that is, their contributions signify a general intellectual need, widely perceived, for 'coming to terms with the past' and achieving a diagnosis of the present condition.³

In the next three chapters, I offer a reconstruction of the German secularization discourse by approaching it from three perspectives: historiography, theology and political philosophy. The present chapter deals with the historiographical perspective. It is worth bearing in mind that the philosophies of Schmitt, Blumenberg and Löwith, who are firmly entrenched in the German continental philosophical tradition, do not form ahistorical theories but that

1 For contemporary overviews of the secularization debate, cf.: Nijk (1968); Zabel (1968); Lübbe (1965); Kamlah (1969); Stallmann (1960).

2 Ruh (1980, pp.199-236) and Zabel (1968, pp.194-242) note Löwith's influence on theology, for instance. Schmitt's influence on academic discourse is reflected upon by, e.g., Müller (2003) and Mehring (2009). I suggest that Blumenberg's influence on the development of the secularization debate is best observed in the reception of his work in the Anglophone world; cf. Wallace (1981); Rorty (1983); Fleming (2017).

3 I refer to the term "Vergangenheitsbewältigung". Cf. Lübbe (1965) pp.109-130. See Chapter 8.

they constitute philosophical-historical narratives of some sort, e.g., on the origin of modernity or on the cause of contemporary nihilism. Hence it is not surprising that the accounts of Schmitt, Löwith and Blumenberg resonated in the field of historiography. We will discover in this chapter that the philosophical-historical narratives of the three philosophers can be related to historiography in at least two significant ways.

First, we will discover that Schmitt, Löwith and Blumenberg have provided conceptual material for others to adopt and employ in their own (philosophical-)historical accounts on modernity and secularization. Early works of Reinhart Koselleck and Hanno Kesting exemplify how the philosophies of Schmitt and Löwith formed a source of inspiration for other interlocutors. Kesting and Koselleck formulated specialized “*Geistesgeschichten*” – understood in this context as philosophical-historical narratives – that were implicitly or explicitly framed as continuations of the research program put forward by Schmitt, and to a lesser extent by Löwith.⁴ Blumenberg also gained a following in the field of historiography. Wilhelm Kamlah used the secularization debate as an occasion to clarify and restructure the conceptual framework that underlie historiographical accounts of secularization. This was meant to dispel the conceptual confusion regarding issues such as eschatology, progress and secularization, and to lend support to a Blumenbergian defense of modernity. Walter Jaeschke, in his *Die Suche nach den eschatologischen Wurzeln der Geschichtsphilosophie* (1976), went in a different direction; rather than operating mainly on a conceptual level he instead attempted to buttress Blumenberg’s thesis with more specialized historical research. He sought to verify with historical evidence Blumenberg’s methodological and philosophical critique of the secularization theorem.

Second, such accounts are contrasted by ones that instead contextualize and critically reflect on the contemporary philosophical-historical accounts of secularization. The works of Hermann Lübbe and Hermann Zabel reveal how a concept’s current usage can itself be prone to historical contingency. They demonstrate the semantic flexibility of the concept of secularization through a reconstruction of the history of its use. Their contributions give rise to the impression that the secularization debate on which they reflect revolves around attempts, by different ideological camps, at fixating the open-ended concept of secularization and claiming it for single ideological-political purposes. Zabel also mounted a historical critique of Blumenberg’s theory that requires some attention because, we will find, it sheds further light on the adequacy of the latter’s critique of the ‘secularization theorem’.

Before we commence this investigation I submit two remarks: although the following three chapters are thematically organized, they are not altogether disconnected from a chronological line of development, in that the first two chapters of this three-part series (historiography and theology) mainly focus on works from the 1950’s and the 1960’s.⁵ (Walter Jaeschke’s book, from 1976, forms an exception.) This is significant because it marks a period in the course of the secularization debate when Carl Schmitt’s presence in academic discourse was more inconspicuous than it would be at a later date, for instance after the publication of his *Political Theology II* (1970).⁶ The second edition of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1974) illustrates that Schmitt moved more to the forefront of the debate after 1970, but in the 1950’s and 1960’s he was still more a ‘hidden’ presence than an active interlocutor.⁷ This accounts for the fact that Schmitt plays more a secondary role in the latter half of the present chapter

4 In Chapter 8 I will return to this notion of *Geistesgeschichte*, which I borrow from Rorty (1984).

5 The third part (Chapter 7), on political philosophy, mainly focusses on publications from the 1970’s and early 1980’s.

6 For instance, Schmitt is not mentioned in the overviews of Nijk (1968), Kamlah (1969), Zabel (1968), Stallmann (1960), whereas Lübbe (1965, p.72) only mentions him in passing.

7 Cf. Müller (2003, e.g. pp.51-155) and Van Laak (1993) on the ‘hidden influence’ of Schmitt.

and in large parts of the next one. Second, we will find that the chapters on historiography and theology (the current and the next one) provide an occasion to further analyze Blumenberg's critique of Löwith as a representative of the 'secularization theorem'. Zabel and Ulrich Ruh have already noted that Blumenberg's critique of Löwith is misdirected and should rather be aimed at authors who have appropriated the latter's formula – 'progress is secularized eschatology' – for different purposes. Moreover, as Ruh suggests, this raises the question whether it is indeed appropriate to speak of a single 'secularization theorem' in the first place.⁸ I suggest that it is not, and this chapter aims to demonstrate that it is better to conceive of the secularization debate as revolving around different 'camps' that are themselves heterogeneous in nature rather than as centering on a monolithic secularization theorem.

The Anti-Enlightenment Camp: Kesting and Koselleck as Followers of Schmitt and Löwith

Koselleck: Attack on Enlightened Modernity

Blumenberg noted in the first edition of *Legitimacy* (1966) that Löwith's *Meaning in History* has had a "dogmatizing" effect" on academic discourse. Löwith's main thesis, that progress is secularized eschatology, belongs to "den geläufigen Aussagen, die in der zweiten Generation [of secularization theorists] schon schlicht und knapp als 'bekannt' bezeichnet werden können".⁹ What Blumenberg meant by this assertion was that 'second generation secularization theorists' simply accepted Löwith's thesis as an established fact, one that required no further argumentation. This amounted to an uncritical reception of the thesis that the secular idea of progress is genetically derived from a theological origin. In the case of Reinhart Koselleck and Hanno Kesting, two former students of Löwith, we will discover that once can indeed discern such an uncritical reception of Löwith's thesis, but that this does not amount to a 'dogmatic' acceptance of the latter's overall philosophy. On the contrary, Koselleck and Kesting employ Löwith's thesis in the service of a philosophical program that is primarily indebted to Schmitt.¹⁰

In his extensive study on the 'covert reception' of Schmitt in West-Germany from the 1950's onwards, *Gespräche in der Sicherheit des Schweigens* (1993), Dirk van Laak notes that Kesting and Koselleck were part of an "Enklave" of Heidelberg students "die Züge eines 'Carl Schmitt-Fanclubs' annahm".¹¹ While under the official auspices of Heidelberg professors such as Löwith and Gadamer, a number of young intellectuals became increasingly drawn to the work of Schmitt – who at that time was not *salonfähig*. Van Laak suggests that Schmitt's attraction on young scholars such as Kesting and Koselleck should be understood as a "Suche nach einem geistigen Gegengewicht gegen eine als allzu liberal und konfliktlos empfundene Ausrichtung der

8 Ruh (1980) pp.65-78, 200-236, 265-267; Zabel (1968) pp.231-243.

9 Blumenberg (1966) p.23. Cf. *ibid.* (1983) p.27; (1964) p.243; Löwith (1968) p.453. Kroll (2010, pp.146-147) explains that this particular formulation created confusion and resentment between Löwith and Blumenberg. Apparently, Löwith thought that Blumenberg had accused him of making a dogmatic claim, while the terms "well-known" (*bekannt*) and "dogmatizing effect" were actually meant to refer to the *reception* of Löwith's thesis by second generation secularization theorists. Blumenberg (1983, pp.28, 599 fn.4) thought that the "vehement" of Löwith's review (1968) was caused by this misreading. In a letter to Löwith, Blumenberg wrote "that the tangible disdain with which you treat my work is the result of an upset which could be undone by re-reading a few lines" (cited in Kroll, 2010 p.147). Cf. Flasch (2017) pp.476-478.

10 Müller (2003) pp.104-115; Kroll (2010) pp.121-125; Olsen (2012) pp.21-26, 52-57; Van Laak (1993) pp.186-192, 271-276; Habermas (1960).

11 Van Laak (1993) p.188.

Sozialwissenschaften.”¹² The two books that form the focus of this section, Koselleck’s *Kritik und Krise* and Kesting’s *Geschichtsphilosophie und Weltbürgerkrieg* (which both appeared in 1959), were regarded as a “Doppelschlag” for a “von Schmitt inspirierten Geschichtsdeutung”.¹³ A contemporary review of both works by Jürgen Habermas indicates that Kesting and Koselleck were regarded by critics as mere mouthpieces of Schmitt. Habermas concludes his review with the remark: “Immerhin sind wir dankbar, von so gescheiterten Autoren zu erfahren, wie Carl Schmitt, ein so denkender Spezialist, die Lage heute beurteilt.”¹⁴ The dual question that concerns us is hence how Löwith’s thesis had a “dogmatizing effect” and how, simultaneously, the influence of Schmitt is discernable in the works of Kesting and Koselleck.

Kritik und Krise appeared in 1959 as a modified version of Koselleck’s 1954 dissertation, of which Löwith had been the second examiner.¹⁵ Its subtitle, *ein Beitrag zur Pathogenese der Bürgerlichen Welt*, indicates what it is at stake: the book contains a historical narrative that pivots on what he would later call the “*Sattelzeit*” (roughly the period 1750-1850), i.e., the point to which “the pathogenesis of modern society” can be traced back. Modernity’s affliction is caused by a dialectic between ‘critique’ and ‘crisis’.¹⁶ This dialectic is contingent on and exacerbated by the modern philosophy of history, that is, the faith in progress that originates in the 18th century and which has distinctively Christian roots. The point where “eschatology recoils into Utopianism” marks the beginning of a process that ultimately leads to the “Weltbürgerkrieg” that is the Cold War.¹⁷ As he writes in the introduction:

the present tension between two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, is a result of European history ... [that] has become world history and will run its course as that, having allowed the whole world to drift into a state of permanent crisis. As bourgeois society was the first to cover the globe, the present crisis stems from a mainly Utopian self-conception on the part of the philosophers of history – Utopian because modern man is destined to be at home everywhere and nowhere.¹⁸

To briefly expound on this notion of critique and crisis: Koselleck begins his historical narrative in the post-1648 political European order, where the political doctrine of absolutism was established as an answer to the unrest of the religious wars that followed the Reformation. The theory of Hobbes functions as a paradigm for Koselleck in this respect, as it does for Schmitt.¹⁹ A Hobbesian political absolutism functioned as a pacifying agent, Koselleck argues, because it relegated matters of faith and morality to the private sphere and installed the state as the sole executor of political power in the public sphere. Thus, absolutism brought about a divide between politics and society, power and morality, thereby enabling the coexistence of multiple creeds under the guardianship of one state.²⁰ The ‘critique’ that Koselleck posits

12 Van Laak (1993) p.188; Fillafer (2007) p.330.

13 Van Laak (1993) p.274. Cf. Müller (2003) pp.104-115; Olsen (2012) pp.80-87.

14 Habermas (1960) p.477. Cf. Kuhn (1961) p.668; Schilling (1960) pp.147-153; Olsen (2012) pp.81-83.

15 Olsen (2012) p.22. I will use the English translation, *Critique and Crisis* (1988).

16 Koselleck (1988) pp.5-15. Müller (2003, p.107) writes that “Koselleck ... initially intended to call his study *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment* – until he realized that the title already existed.”

17 Koselleck (1988) p.11, cf. pp.130-131, 177. On the notion of “Weltbürgerkrieg”, cf.: Müller (2003) pp.90-109; Olsen (2012) pp.69-74.

18 Koselleck (1988) p.5.

19 Koselleck (1988) pp.23-40. Müller (2003, p.106) notes that *Critique and Crisis* should be regarded as a continuation of Schmitt’s 1938 book *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (2008). Cf. *ibid.* (1965); Specter (2016) pp.432-434.

20 Koselleck (1988) pp.15-50; Fillafer (2007) p.326.

as the point of departure of the pathogenesis of modern society emerges from the politics/morality division of absolutism. Indeed, although Koselleck clearly favors early-modern absolutism over modern bourgeois utopianism, he does admit that “bourgeois Utopia was the ‘natural child’ of Absolutist sovereignty.”²¹ It is namely from out of the originally privatized moral sphere – conceived of as a sphere of ‘inwardness’ in *Critique and Crisis* – that there developed a rigid, universalist morality in the intellectual climate of the Enlightenment. This universalist morality necessarily casts an unfavorable light on the actual political praxis of the *ancien régime*, the ‘outside world’. What was meant to be an *amoral* political sphere was now regarded as *immoral* by the Enlightenment philosophes, because it could not live up to the new universalistic and totalizing norms that were set by the new enlightened morality. Enlightenment thought projected a utopian ideal on society, based on notions of freedom, morality and rationality. This ideal manifested itself – in contrast to what it opposed – in a thoroughly (that is, seemingly) ‘unpolitical’ manner. After all, it was perceived as a necessary outcome of reason or morality rather as something that required a preceding political decision.²²

Here we see a Schmittian notion of “depoliticization” coming to the fore. Similar to Schmitt, Koselleck wields a concept of ‘the political’ as an evaluative standard. Put briefly, ‘the political’ does not so much operate as a placeholder for transcendence, as it does in Schmitt, it rather implies an affirmation of the historical contingency of any given situation. It moreover denotes a lack of complete or secure knowledge and it signifies the concomitant need to make *decisions* in such situations.²³ (Blumenberg would refer to this as a combined “Evidenzmangel” and “Handlungszwang”.) These decisions cannot be made on the basis of pre-given universalistic guidelines that already predetermine what is to be decided. Hence, there is always a certain degree of irreducible arbitrariness and subjectivity to each decision. ‘The political’ serves both as a descriptive and as a prescriptive category: it is descriptive in as far as it points to the ineradicable decisionist core of any political endeavor and because it depicts politics as an autonomous sphere that centers on particularist *interests* rather than on universalist norms or truths. Indeed, Koselleck echoes Schmitt in reiterating the Hobbesian phrase “auctoritas, non veritas facit legem”.²⁴ And the concept is *prescriptive* in the sense that, supposedly, a recognition of the true nature of the political will bring about a more ‘realistic’ and a healthier society.²⁵

The universal-moralistic anti-political ‘critique’ of the Enlightenment eventually created a pervasive sense of ‘crisis’, according to Koselleck. This crisis occurred because of the rift that opened up between a morality that *demand*ed realization – due to its necessitarian and universalistic claims – and a political reality that was incompatible with this new outlook. Eventually this provided the ground for revolution, the ultimate manifestation of crisis. Early revolutionaries “radicalized the antithesis” between politics and morality, “accomplishing a polarization that was to become the symptom as well as the instigator of the looming political crises.”²⁶ This radicalization of the rift between the real and the ideal and the concomitant experience of crisis engendered a whole age of revolutions, violence and chaos. Furthermore, this political violence now took on an unprecedented intensity because the revolution adopted the same universal and totalizing scope to which Enlightenment critique had laid claim. In contrast, the

21 Koselleck (1988) p.183. Cf. Schmitt (2008) pp.57-63.

22 Koselleck (1988) pp.15-40, 83; Specter (2016) p.433; Müller (2003) pp.106-107.

23 Koselleck (1988) pp.144-147; Olsen (2012) pp.42-57, 69-75.

24 Koselleck (1988) p.31.

25 Koselleck (1988) pp.11-12, 144-147. He does not explicitly elaborate on his concept of the political however. Cf.: Pankakoski (2010) pp.758-759. Olsen (2012, pp.52-56) notes that Koselleck does not necessarily idealize absolutism but rather advocates a ‘realistic’ liberal conservatism that separates the political from the moral.

26 Koselleck (1988) pp.60-61.

political doctrine of absolutism had an essentially *limited* scope, since it only dealt with law and the political sphere within a delineated physical territory, leaving morality and metaphysics aside. The new ‘unpolitical’ power of the Enlightenment meanwhile claimed the totality of reality as its proper jurisdiction. Koselleck suggests that the ensuing tendency towards totalization finally leads to the 20th century ‘total war’ and ‘total state’.²⁷

Löwith’s influence on Koselleck becomes clear when we focus on the role that modern philosophies of history play in this critique-crisis dialectic. Koselleck follows Löwith in two respects: first, in perceiving philosophy of history as ‘secularized eschatology’ and second, in the negative appraisal of this modern phenomenon. However, his rejection of speculative philosophy of history has different grounds than those of his former professor.²⁸ What is significant in light of our question of how Löwith’s formula was received by (what Blumenberg calls) ‘the second generation’ of secularization theorists is that Koselleck simply takes the formula as a given. That is, he assumes that the process of how “eschatology recoils into Utopianism” is simply “well-known”.²⁹ Koselleck’s precise phrasing is mirrored by Blumenberg’s, which is notable, because it suggests that this case might have served as a prime example of the “dogmatizing effect” of Löwith’s thesis in Blumenberg’s reading.

Bekannt ist der Vorgang der Säkularisierung, durch den die Eschatologie in eine fortschrittliche Geschichte transponiert wurde. Aber ebenso werden ... die Elemente des göttlichen Gerichts und des Jüngsten Tages, vor allem in der sich verschärfenden kritischen Situation, bewußt und absichtlich auf die Geschichte selbst angewandt.³⁰

However, this does not imply that in Koselleck’s theory the secularization of eschatology simply means the expropriation of a single substance, as Blumenberg suggests. Further on in *Critique and Crisis*, it becomes apparent that modern ‘philosophy of history’ is actually a compound that consists of multiple secularized phenomena:

Christian eschatology in its modified form of secular progress, Gnostic-Manichean elements submerged in the dualism of morality and politics, ancient theories of circularity, and finally the application of the new laws of natural history to history itself – all contributed to the development of the eighteenth-century historico-philosophical consciousness. The Freemasons were also in the vanguard of those who sought to supplant theology by the philosophy of history and religion by morality.³¹

Hence, not only is Löwith’s emphasis on the connection between progress and eschatology adopted (unreflectively), it is also embedded in a broader notion of secularization in which philosophy of history functions as a system, albeit a heterogeneous one, that adopts the *place*

27 Koselleck (1988) pp.164-165; Fillafer (2007) p.325. This harkens back to Schmitt’s ‘regional’ conception of the political, discussed in previous chapters, which prescribes the limitation of politics. This conception of the political allows Schmitt to claim that the moralization of politics (which leads to the demonization of the enemy) eventually leads to the idea of the total state and total, globalized warfare.

28 Olsen (2012) pp.52-57; Kroll (2010) pp.120-125.

29 Koselleck (1988) p.11. Cf. Blumenberg (1966) p.22; *ibid.* (1983) p.27.

30 Koselleck (1959) p.7 (emphasis added). Cf. Blumenberg (1966) p.22: “Zu den geläufigen Aussagen, die in der zweiten Generation schlicht und knapp als ‘bekannt’ bezeichnet werden können ...” Blumenberg also quotes Koselleck’s *Kritik und Krise* in the second edition of *Legitimacy* (1983, pp.31-32, 599 fn.7-8, 10) to illustrate the rhetoric of the secularization theorem.

31 Koselleck (1988) p.130. It is interesting to note that there are two explicit references to Löwith in the German version of the book (1959, p.197 fn.10, 12) at this point that are absent in the English translation.

and *function* of theology. God's providence is replaced by a trans-historical logic, the eschaton by the post-historical utopia, and "world history is transformed into Judgement Day".³²

However, for the purpose of Koselleck's own narrative it is not the precise nature of secularization – and the exact relation between eschatology and progress – that is of primary importance, but rather the function of its final product, philosophy of history. We can see that, compared to Löwith, Koselleck offers different grounds for his negative appraisal of philosophy of history. Rather than rejecting it for its deviation from 'faith' and 'reason', belief in progress is condemned for its involvement in the critique/crisis dialectic. As mentioned, Enlightenment 'critique' evoked a 'crisis' by creating a discrepancy between a moral ideal and the political reality, a rift that demanded to be bridged by a revolutionary act. However, this revolution had to be presented as something that was *necessary*, as the only possible outcome of an universal rationality, rather than as the outcome of a contingent, historical and political decision of a particular group of people, namely the bourgeois intellectuals of the 18th century. Significantly, it was the modern philosophy of history that concealed this situation and thus legitimized the revolution: "[t]he philosophy of history seemed to bridge the gap between the moral position and the power that was aspired to."³³ It concealed the fact that the revolution consisted of a political decision made by historical agents (with their own particular interests) and it enabled revolutionaries to portray their rejection of the absolutist state as an 'unpolitical' critique that stems from universalist morality. The philosophy of history functioned, according to Koselleck, as a mechanism that disguised the particularity and contingency of Enlightenment beliefs as apodictic truths. It legitimized the act of revolution as a necessary step in a grand historical process where actors are mere vehicles of progress, rather than political agents.³⁴

In short, Koselleck portrays progressive philosophy of history as a secularized faith in historical providence which, as such, motivates its believers, legitimizes their actions, and allows them to ignore the *political nature* of their doings. It adopts the function of theology by concealing the contingency of political decisions under a cover of preordination, which is concomitant with its postulation of claims about the – either hidden or overt – course of history and its expected end. Furthermore, it creates an encompassing justificatory narrative for the Enlightenment's moralization of politics, namely by presenting history as a Manichean struggle between the "children of darkness" and "the children of light".³⁵ Or as Schmitt phrased it in "Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History": philosophy of history is meant to provide justification that the perceived protagonists of its grand narrative are "on the side of the things to come." It is "a faith to be on the right, while the opponent is in the wrong, because time, and the future, and progress work against him."³⁶ Koselleck is however less interested in the Christian roots of 'progress' than he is in the 'unmasking' rhetorical effect of the concept of secularization: he ultimately aims to unveil the false self-consciousness of the Enlightenment by portraying it as a political position that masks its political nature, and as a political agenda that was hatched and executed in and by secret societies of 'initiates' (Freemasons and Illuminati) rather than as a timeless paradigm of reason, transparency and Öffentlichkeit.³⁷

32 Koselleck (1988) pp.177, 131-133.

33 Koselleck (1988) p.130.

34 Koselleck (1988) pp.127-137, 158-186.

35 Löwith (1949) p.44. Cf. Koselleck (1988) 127-133, 152-153, 177; Fillafer (2007) pp.331-333.

36 Schmitt (2009) p.167 (translation modified)/ibid. (1950) p.927.

37 Koselleck (1988) pp.62, 70-71, 83-85, 94-95, 121, 147, 166, 185. Cf. Specter (2016) pp.432-434; Müller (2003) 107.

Kesting: *Global Civil War and Alternative Eschatology*

“Where Koselleck left off, Kesting continued”, Jan-Werner Müller notes. Kesting’s *Geschichtsphilosophie und Weltbürgerkrieg* “complemented his tableau of the dialectic of the Enlightenment by drawing a direct line from philosophies of history as a part of the pernicious legacy of the Enlightenment to the global civil wars of the mid-twentieth century.”³⁸ Kesting’s book makes an argument similar to *Critique and Crisis*, but it focuses less on the pivotal point of the *Sattelzeit* and more on a philosophical-historical explanation – derived from the post-war writings of Schmitt – for the contemporary malaise of the Cold War. Koselleck suggests that this condition is defined both by depoliticization and the permanent crisis of a global civil war.³⁹ Kesting thus builds on Koselleck’s work: whereas the latter traces “the pathogenesis of modern society”, the former rather follows this thread to its perceived end point, the current *Weltbürgerkrieg*. This notion of global civil war, which we have encountered earlier, is a significant Schmittian concept that requires some unpacking. Schmitt’s concept of the political, especially according to his “regional model”, entails the essentially *limited* nature of a political unity.⁴⁰ The Enlightenment however engenders a universalist claim to power that aims to unite the entire world under one (apolitical) rule – whether it is Kant’s cosmopolitanism or Marx’s world revolution. The Cold War denotes a situation in which two powers are locked in a stalemate over their mutually exclusive claims to world domination. Because the political unity that is postulated by both rivalling powers is the *entire world* it follows that we must speak of a ‘global civil war’. And to Schmitt, *any* civil war is potentially catastrophic because it can involve the dissolution of all meaningful political differentiations: between the interior and exterior of a political unity, morality and politics, and between a political enemy and a demonized *foe*. The result is chaos and a totalization of violence.⁴¹ It is for this reason that, for instance in ‘Die Einheit der Welt’ (1950), Schmitt conceives of a global civil war in decidedly apocalyptic terms.⁴²

Geschichtsphilosophie und Weltbürgerkrieg expands on this diagnosis of the global civil war and the danger of the dual process of depoliticization and universalization.⁴³ Kesting portrays the Cold War as a conflict between two philosophies of history that inevitably leads to an unprecedented clash. “Die fortgeschrittene Menschheit versinkt in der elementaren Angst des Atomzeitalters ... Die Einheit der Welt als die Einheit des geschichtsphilosophischen Weltbildes verschwindet in der atomaren Zweiheit des Weltbürgerkriegs.”⁴⁴ Each philosophy of history assures its protagonists that they are on the ‘right side of history’, just as it supposedly justifies the extermination of those who fall ‘on the wrong side’.

Es zeigt sich, daß die diskriminierende Aufspaltungskraft des amerikanischen Fortschritts- und Sendungsbewußtseins kaum weniger stark ist, als die des Bolschewismus, so verschiedenartig beide im übrigen sein mögen. Beide verwandeln

38 Müller (2003) p.108. Cf. Fillafer (2007) pp.329-330.

39 Kesting (1959) pp.271-320; Van Laak (1993) pp.221-224, 272-275; Olsen (2012) pp.69-74; Pankakoski (2010) pp.761-763.

40 Meier (2012) pp.192-194; De Wit (1992) pp.108-112.

41 Cf. Meier (1995) pp.21-28. Meier notes that Schmitt’s “model of intensity” leads to a potential totalization of politics, which eradicates the distinction between enemy and foe and introduces the prospects of civil war and revolution into the conceptual horizon of ‘the political’. ‘Foe’ signifies ‘absolute enmity’: De Wit (1992) p.475.

42 Schmitt (2005b) pp.841-852. Cf. Kesting (1956) pp.263, 309-311.

43 Kesting (1956) pp.6-22, 164, 233, 315; Van Laak (1993) pp.221-225, 271-276.

44 Kesting (1956) p.263, cf. p.248.

den Krieg in einen Kreuzzug und in einen Bürgerkrieg – die Bolschewisten bewußt, die Amerikaner unbewußt. Beide appellieren an das Volk gegen die Regierung, denn beide vertreten die Partei des ‘Menschen’ gegen die des ‘Unmenschen’, womit sie die Unterscheidung von Feind und Verbrecher aufheben und die Auseinandersetzung vergiften. *Im Westen wie im Osten wird die Geschichtsphilosophie des europäischen Bürgerkrieges aufgegriffen, weitergeführt und in die praktische Politik eingebracht.* Damit bahnt sich die Erweiterung des europäischen zu einem globalen Bürgerkrieg an ...⁴⁵

Kesting’s narrative traces the development of modern progressive thought, from the 18th century to the present, through the works of the usual suspects (who for instance also appear in Löwith’s *Meaning in History*), e.g., Saint-Simon, Hegel, Marx and Toynbee.⁴⁶ Similar to Koselleck, Kesting frames this development as a regressive negation of ‘the political’ that is caused by the moralizing and universalizing tendencies of the Enlightenment.⁴⁷ Modern ideas of progress – on both sides of the iron curtain – are conceptualized as the overcoming of the political itself. Assumedly, American progressivism is less conspicuous than the Bolshevik variety because the United States hides its imperialism under the cloak of economy instead of using direct force. This means that American political success can be presented as a victory for peace, prosperity or of ‘progress itself’: “die Politik als solchen ist hier überwunden.” Progress entails a “raum- und zeitlosen Optimismus, der das Reich des Friedens abgebrochen glaubt, ohne sich klar zu machen, daß die Abschaffung des Krieges ... die Verwandlung des Krieges in den Bürgerkrieg zu Folge haben wird.”⁴⁸

Unlike Koselleck’s *Critique and Crisis*, Kesting’s study hints at an *alternative* to the progressive Enlightenment tradition that both authors repudiate. *Geschichtsphilosophie und Weltbürgerkrieg* points towards a historical counter-tradition of conservative or pessimistic counter-revolutionary thought that is pitted against the progressive depoliticization of the Enlightenment.⁴⁹ Kesting identifies this counter-tradition as the ‘prognostication of catastrophe’, comprising a wide variety of authors from the 19th and 20th centuries who have all warned against the dangers of modernization. The most important figures in this tradition are counter-revolutionaries such as de Maistre, de Bonald and Donoso Cortés, literary figures like Baudelaire and Dostoyevsky, but also Spengler and Nietzsche, and of course Schmitt himself.⁵⁰ Kesting does not so much focus on the divergence that exists within this tradition but more on how each figure contributes to the development of what he calls, approvingly, an “eschatologische Geschichtsdenken” that is ultimately elevated as the one true antidote to progressive historical philosophies.⁵¹

Admittedly, the eschatological mode of thought that Kesting puts forward as an alternative to ‘progress’ remains rather undefined. It appears to be mainly defined by what it is not, i.e., an optimistic utopian futurism. Kesting for instance echoes Schmitt’s conception of history in his treatment of Donoso Cortés: “Es handelt sich für Donoso Cortés nicht um Fortschritt und Perfektion, sondern, im Gegenteil, um das Hereinbrechen eines Verhängnisses.”⁵² However,

45 Kesting (1959) pp.232-233 (emphasis original). Cf. Habermas (1960) pp.469, 473-475.

46 Kesting (1959) pp.24-78, 273-285; Löwith (1949) pp.33-114.

47 Kesting (1959) pp.6-25, 157-269.

48 Kesting (1959) p.164. Cf. Müller (2003) pp.108-109.

49 Kesting (1959) pp.27-31, 84-88, 111-155, 307-310; Van Laak (1993) p.273; Habermas (1960) pp.474-475.

50 Kesting (1959) pp.111-123, 139-155, 181, 307-309, 320.

51 Kesting (1959) pp.146, 320, cf. pp.304-319. This conception of ‘eschatology’ displays Kesting’s indebtedness to Schmitt’s ‘Three Possibilities’ (2009) and ‘Einheit der Welt’ (2005b). Cf. Habermas (1960) p.475.

52 Kesting (1959) p.85-86. Cf. Schmitt (2009) pp.169-170; *ibid.* (2005b) pp.851-852.

Kesting does not appear to invoke underlying notions of transcendence, divine decrees or a trans-historical katechontic force, as Schmitt does in ‘Three Possibilities’. What Schmitt calls an eschatological insight into the “dark truth” of history is for Kesting above all a somber recognition of the catastrophic outcome of history, which can be expressed in both a religious and in a secular fashion.⁵³ The heterogeneous counter-tradition of genuine eschatological thought is united by “die Voraussage einer Katastrophe, eine pessimistische Prognose.” In this tradition “ersteht die Eschatologie neu: Bei de Maistre and Donoso Cortés die christliche, bei den übrigen [e.g. Nietzsche and Spengler] eine weltliche und innerweltliche.” In other words, the “gegen die Utopie gerichtete eschatologische Prognose” simply denotes an expectation of catastrophe and the attempt at making sense of it; it does not appear to amount to a comprehensive “Christian conception of history” as Schmitt envisions it.⁵⁴

The concept of eschatology brings us to Kesting’s relation to Löwith. Kesting had been responsible for the German translation of *Meaning in History*, and it is indeed possible to recognize a certain influence of this book on Kesting’s work.⁵⁵ Like Koselleck, Kesting accepts it as a given – as simply “well-known” – that historical philosophy is the product of secularized theology; Müller calls this his “completely unexamined starting point”.⁵⁶ Kesting notes that “Löwith hat gezeigt, daß die Geschichtsphilosophie entsteht mit der *Ersetzung der göttlichen Providenz*, der Vorsehung, als des die Welt beherrschenden Prinzips *durch den Fortschritt*”.⁵⁷ He thereby labels progress as secularized providence rather than eschatology. Later on, he does mention Christian eschatology as a precursor to the philosophy of progress, but refrains from assuming a substantive continuity between the two. Rather, he suggests that progress is secularized eschatology only in a ‘formal’ sense, because it adopts the formal notion of an ultimate goal. In this sense, history-as-progress does become a form of *Heilsgeschichte*, but, it appears, not by continuing Christian eschatology substantively with secular means, but rather by its *Überwindung* and replacement, albeit within the same teleological frame.⁵⁸ In arguing for a formal rather than a substantive continuity between eschatology and progress, Kesting appears to follow Löwith’s lead, but, as becomes clear, he does this for his own reasons. He wants to *separate* eschatology from philosophy of history in order to propose his own ‘eschatological historical thought’ over against the idea of progress. Kesting hereby reiterates Schmitt’s reception of Löwith’s thesis in ‘Three Possibilities’, in that both accept the latter’s critique of a teleological conception of history while exempting, against Löwith’s intention, a supposedly more genuine, non-teleological eschatology from this criticism.⁵⁹

The question posed at the beginning of this section, that can now be addressed, is in what sense Löwith’s thesis had a “dogmatizing effect” on Kesting and Koselleck, and how Schmitt’s influence is discernable in their works. First of all, it is indeed the case that Kesting and Koselleck appear to accept Löwith’s thesis as a given, as simply “bekannt”. They are also more or less in agreement with their former professor when it comes to Löwith’s disdain of

53 Kesting (1959) pp.85-89, 114, 123, 146, 230.

54 Kesting (1959) p.123.

55 Schmitt had suggested Kesting for this task. Cf. Mehring (2009) p.475; Van Laak (1993) p.272.

56 Müller (2003) p.109. Cf. Kroll (2010) pp.121-125.

57 Kesting (1959) p.viii (emphasis original).

58 Kesting (1959) pp. viii, 3-4, 8-9. For instance on page 3 we read: “*Formal* ist der Gedanke eines Fortschritts der Menschheit eine Säkularisierung der ... Eschatologie. Das Ziel ... wird gewonnen aus der Verweltlichung des jenseitigen und außergeschichtlichen ‘eschaton’.” And on page 9: “Ob dieses Ziel und Ende nun definitive oder nur annäherungsweise erreicht werden soll, ist unerheblich im Vergleich mit der Tatsache, daß die christliche Eschatologie überwunden und die Zukunft als solche ... erhellt und grenzenlos optimistisch verklärt wird.” (emphasis added.)

59 See Chapters 2 and 3 on Schmitt’s politico-theological reception of Löwith’s critique of progress.

secular-progressive conceptions of history and of the promethean hubris of enlightened modernity, exemplified in utopianism.⁶⁰ However, a closer inspection of *Critique and Crisis* and *Geschichtsphilosophie und Weltbürgerkrieg* indicates that – as critics such as Habermas had already noticed – Kesting and Koselleck operated more in the spirit of Schmitt than of Löwith.⁶¹ In this sense I propose that, when talking about the “dogmatizing effect” that Löwith had on young scholars such as Kesting and Koselleck it is necessary to add a significant provision. This is that they are more likely to have been influenced by *Schmitt’s reception* of Löwith’s *Meaning in History* – e.g., in ‘Three Possibilities’ – than by Löwith’s actual philosophy.

However, this is not to concur with Habermas that Kesting and Koselleck operated as mere mouthpieces of Schmitt. First of all, it can be conceded that both Kesting and Koselleck accepted Schmitt’s insights only selectively; for instance, they only accept his “regional model” of the political, while glossing over the fact that Schmitt’s “model of intensity” had enabled him to endorse the kind of totalitarianism that they consider to be the legacy of the Enlightenment.⁶² Furthermore, neither Kesting nor Koselleck views ‘the political’ in terms of the representation of the divine in the secular sphere. They envision it as an acceptance of the essential contingency of historical reality rather than as a metaphysical or ‘theological’ insight. Various commentators hasten to assert that Koselleck – evidently the most well-known philosopher of the two – did not blindly accept Schmitt’s political views, but that he actually endorsed a ‘realistic’ conservative liberalism. Contrary to Schmitt, Koselleck does not want to return to political absolutism and unlike Löwith he does not condemn modernity as such.⁶³ Kesting’s relation to Schmitt was slightly different however, as Müller for instance notes:

Unlike Koselleck who steadily moved away from Schmitt’s condemnation of modernity ... Kesting increasingly fell under Schmitt’s spell – and, in addition, adopted Schmitt’s spitefulness. In the face of rebelling students in the late 1960s, he openly pointed to Franco’s Spain, and in particular Salazar’s Portugal, as models for other European states.⁶⁴

Indeed, Kesting does appear to accept the more extreme implications of Schmitt’s anti-liberalism. For example, he suggests that ‘democracy’ is an illusion, which makes that an honorable, commissarial dictatorship is preferable over the ‘tyranny’ of the Enlightenment.⁶⁵ However, it appears that even Kesting is not fully on board with Schmitt’s more esoteric-apocalyptic insights, as is evinced by the fact that, to him, ‘alternative eschatology’ only amounts to an immanent expectation of catastrophe rather than an authentic “christliches Geschichtsbild”. In effect, it can be argued that both Kesting and Koselleck ‘secularize’ Schmitt’s political theology; they employ its critical function and subscribe to some of its political implications, while ultimately abandoning his “katholisierende Privatmythologie”.

In sum, the works of Kesting and Koselleck provide a first indication of how to conceive of the secularization debate and of the ideological-political positions and ‘camps’ that can be found within it. The reception of Löwith’s thesis on progress and eschatology – taken through

60 Olsen (2012) pp.21-23, 52-57; Kroll (2010) pp.120-126 .

61 Habermas (1960); Kuhn (1961) p.668.

62 Koselleck and Kesting were mainly influenced by Schmitt’s post-war writings, in which the latter had moved away from the ‘model of intensity’ and revisited the ‘regional’ conception of the political that he had developed before 1933. Cf. Olsen (2012) p.25; Müller (2003) p.108; Van Laak (1993) pp.186-192, 271-276.

63 Olsen (2012) pp.53-57, 77; Müller (2003) pp.111-112.

64 Müller (2003) p.112. Cf. Van Laak (1993) p.275.

65 Kesting (1959) pp.88-89, 302-303. Cf. Habermas (1960) pp.474-477

the filter of Schmitt's political thought – for instance already demonstrates that the 'anti-Enlightenment camp', which loosely unites Löwith, Schmitt, Kesting and Koselleck, is not as monolithic as Blumenberg's critique would suggest. That is, while the latter three authors confirm that 'progress is secularized eschatology', they do not thereby adopt a comprehensive and substantive theory on the nature of modernity – centering on expropriation of a theological substance – but instead they utilize this formula as an underdetermined template (invoking merely the *suggestion* of illegitimacy and false-self-consciousness) in order to provide rhetorical auxiliary support to claims that do not ultimately rely on a delineated conception of secularization. What matters most to Kesting and Koselleck is not that 'progress' has Christian roots but that it is a vehicle for depoliticization. Koselleck's claim that the Enlightenment is 'actually' its opposite, i.e., a political program that relies on obscurity and the concealment of its intentions, and Kesting's accusation that democratic liberalism 'actually' amounts to a "Diktatur des Dolches" do not necessarily require, analytically speaking, a recourse to the secularization theorem.⁶⁶ The fact that they *did* use a Löwithian thesis suggest that they benefitted more from its rhetorical efficacy as an evocative but underdetermined narrative template rather than from the theoretical claims that it is held to contain by Blumenberg. If, however, we do zoom in on what theoretical claims *can* be distilled from their use of the Löwithian formula it becomes apparent that they are more or less in agreement on secularization being a process of reoccupation rather than substantive expropriation.

The Pro-Enlightenment Camp: Kamlah and Jaeschke as Followers of Blumenberg

Kamlah: Positivistic Defense of Modernity

The struggle over secularization also involved defenders of the Enlightenment, that is, authors who sought to counterbalance the abundance of conservative *Verfallsgeschichten* with optimistic historiographies that rather emphasize the relative autonomy of modernity and the accomplishments of secular-rational thought. It is in this 'pro-Enlightenment camp' where we can find scholars who either directly affiliate themselves with Blumenberg's project or whose works run parallel to it in an obvious sense. In this section, Wilhelm Kamlah's *Utopie, Eschatologie, Geschichtsteologie* (1969) and Walter Jaeschke's *Die Suche nach den eschatologischen Wurzeln der Geschichtsphilosophie* (1976) will serve as the main examples of how the Blumenbergian appraisal of modernity and concomitant critique of the secularization theorem are adopted or approximated by other scholars in this debate.⁶⁷ The two authors have different approaches, however: Kamlah's account operates on a theoretical-conceptual level, in that he analyzes the terminology and conceptual framework that precedes historical investigation. His work thus serves as a kind of addition to, and at times a sharpening

66 Kesting (1959) p.88; Koselleck (1988) pp.62-166.

67 Ruh (1980, pp.200-202, 251-253, 259-267) confirms that the contributions of Jaeschke and Kamlah should be placed along the same line as Blumenberg's defense of modernity. Jaeschke (1976, cf. pp.34-42) explicitly admits that he sides with Blumenberg in his critique of the secularization theorem, whereas this proximity to Blumenberg is conceded in a more indirect manner by Kamlah (1969, cf. p.53 fn.2). Both Kamlah and Jaeschke univocally condemn the 'secularization theorem' and hold Löwith to be its most important representative; neither author mentions Schmitt, however.

and clarification of, the broader and more complex theory of Blumenberg's *Legitimacy*.⁶⁸ Jaeschke, on the other hand, explicitly distances himself from this purely conceptual approach and rather attempts to offer historical evidence for the theoretical claims that are made by Blumenberg. In this sense, he also follows Blumenberg's lead by seeking to *falsify* the theorem, attributed to Löwith, that progress is secularized eschatology, be it from an empirical-historical perspective.

As the title of Kamlah's book suggests, *Utopie, Eschatologie, Geschichtsteologie: kritische Untersuchungen zum Ursprung und zum futuristischen Denken der Neuzeit*, it forms a critical investigation of the relation between utopian and eschatological thought, in other words of the differences that exist *within* the horizon of 'futurism'. This horizon encompasses philosophy of history, theology of history as well as the modest conception of rational progress.⁶⁹ Concerning his methodology and aims, he presents his first chapter as "terminologische und historische Aufräumungsarbeiten im Umkreis der praktischen Philosophie".⁷⁰ This '*Aufräumungsarbeit*' consist of offering clear definitions and distinctions in the conceptual framework of history and philosophy, e.g. between 'utopianism' and 'eschatology', or between 'profanization' and 'secularization'. On the last two chapters of his book, which deal with the nature of modernity as opposed to its Christian past, he states that these "Untersuchungen befassen sich kritisch mit der Wegräumung von Hindernissen", i.e., "von Fehlinterpretationen des Ursprungs der neuzeitlichen Vernunft und der Neuzeit selbst."⁷¹ Kamlah seeks to show that conceptual confusions (a failure to distinguish either between eschatology and utopianism or secularization and profanization) are to blame for most misunderstandings of the relation between modernity and religion. Hence, he claims that the 'secularization theorem' is erroneous because it is based on a muddled conceptual framework. Kamlah's work is meant to offer a neat conceptual frame for future historical and historical-philosophical research. The implication is that as soon as the correct distinctions are made and once the terminological and conceptual instrumentarium is cleaned up, it becomes evident what the *actual relation* is between, e.g., eschatology and utopianism, or indeed between Christianity and modernity itself – a relation that other scholars can then further investigate.⁷²

The basic idea that underlies the clarifying conceptual distinctions that Kamlah offers is that modernity can be identified with 'logos', manifest above all in science, whereas the religious past that precedes the Modern Age is the domain of 'mythos'. The "nova scientia" forms the proper ground of modernity, in other words, "Neuzeit heißt soviel wie: die neue Physik und ihre Folgen".⁷³

Die Ablösung des Mittelalters durch die Neuzeit erfolgt nun, weiterhin profan-historisch gesehen ... dadurch, daß der christliche Mythos als herrschende geistige Macht abgelöst wird durch die neue Physik. Anerkennung der Herrschaft Christi in allen

68 Kamlah (1969, p.53) references Blumenberg only once explicitly, however, but Ruh (1980, pp.251-252) confirms the impression that Kamlah's contribution to the debate was meant to buttress a Blumenbergian conceptual approach to 'secularization' and modernity.

69 Kamlah (1969) pp.13-69, 90-95. Kamlah's methodological approach is steeped in his prior work on logic and ordinary language philosophy, which culminated in his 1967 work *Logische Propädeutik*, co-written by Paul Lorenzen.

70 Kamlah (1969) p.7.

71 Kamlah (1969) p.8, cf. pp.73-106.

72 Kamlah (1969) pp.7-9, 16, 49.

73 Kamlah (1969) p.8, cf. pp.60-62, 97-102.

Lebensbereichen, das ist Mittelalter. Autonome mythosfremde Wissenschaft und ihre Folgen, das ist die Neuzeit, the modern times.⁷⁴

This unambiguous assertion informs the rest of Kamlah's account, such as his first distinction between 'utopianism' and 'eschatology': briefly put, it is argued that utopianism is a philosophical endeavor that originates in Greek thought, which – by means of human rationality – attempts to improve existing institutions or which proposes alternatives that are necessarily achievable within the range of human action and understanding. By contrast, eschatology is essentially a matter of *faith*, based on revelation rather than reason, which expects a new world beyond the limits of the current one.⁷⁵ Kamlah then argues that the multiple versions of modern futurism – ranging from modest ideas of scientific progress to grand historical philosophies – are ultimately based on the utopian, rational mode of thought, which is explained by their origin in modern science, rather than on faith-inspired eschatological expectations.⁷⁶ Kamlah argues that this means that the modern, "geschichtlich voranschreitende und vorausdenkende Mensch" in fact translates (übersetzt) "Geschichtstheologie in Geschichtsphilosophie".⁷⁷ This however does not imply that the one is a 'secularized' version of the other, on the contrary.

This brings us to Kamlah's second distinction, namely between secularization and what he calls 'profanization'. The concept of 'profanization', which should be understood in terms of Max Weber's 'disenchantment', signifies a historical development in which any orientation – in thought and action – towards 'the holy' disappears with the concomitant advance of science and Enlightenment.⁷⁸ Hence, 'profanization' bears no substantive connection with that which it eliminates, i.e., religion or more specifically Christianity. 'Secularization', on the other hand, is defined by Kamlah in a manner that closely resembles Blumenberg's substantialist definition. This category *does* entail a transformation and a conservation of 'something' Christian: "'Säkularisierung' in übertragenen Sinne findet statt, wo ... 'geistig-sittliche' Güter in der Umwandlung erhalten bleiben", namely in a manner that is analogous to the material expropriation of ecclesiastical goods by the secular state.⁷⁹ There are genuine instances of secularization that can be observed, according to Kamlah, especially within societal ethics, such as the condemnation of suicide and marital divorce. These norms and values persist even though there are no 'profane' grounds for them.⁸⁰ He adds that for each individual instance of 'secularization' it has to be *demonstrated* through close examination that there is a Christian idea or norm that is preserved in its profanization, but that this can never apply to modernity as whole.⁸¹

74 Kamlah (1969) p.97. Kamlah suggests, in short, that Judeo-Christian monotheism belongs to the domain of mythos. This contradicts the contention – expressed by Blumenberg in *Work on Myth* (1985) as well as by many others, e.g., Jacob Taubes and Odo Marquard – that monotheism brought an end to the mythic worldview, and that there is a significant difference to be discerned between monotheistic dogma and polytheistic myth.

75 Kamlah (1969) pp.15-35. Incidentally, this too is contradicted by Blumenberg. He argues (1968/1969, pp.126-129) that utopianism – in as far as it harkens back to More's *Utopia* – is a distinctly modern phenomenon that constitutes a radical break with the cosmic thought of Greek antiquity.

76 Kamlah (1969) pp.31-52.

77 Kamlah (1969) p.42.

78 Kamlah (1969) pp.53-70, 97.

79 Kamlah (1969) p.66, cf. pp.53, 64-70. The allusion to "expropriation" of ecclesiastical goods by the state is a reference to Lübke (1965, pp.23-33) who employs this model as a paradigm for secularization. Kamlah's distinction between profanization and secularization is analogous to a distinction that is put forward by Hermann Zabel (1968, pp.29-30), namely between an 'intransitive' and a 'transitive' conception of secularization.

80 Kamlah (1969) p.64-70. He also concedes a residual significance of the notion of 'Christian freedom' for modern liberalism.

81 Kamlah (1969) pp.59-66. This assertion is mainly directed against Friedrich Gogarten.

By introducing this distinction, Kamlah directs his criticism to Löwith and what Blumenberg refers to as the “secularization theorem”. Similar to Blumenberg, Kamlah also considers Löwith to be the most prominent proponent of a widely shared misconception, i.e., the ‘secularized’ nature of modernity.⁸² Kamlah argues that this misunderstanding stems from a tendency to confuse distinct and limited cases of ‘secularization’ with the general process of profanization. This creates the erroneous impression that modernity as a whole is substantively derived from a Christian origin. Once Kamlah’s distinction is applied to what he calls the “Dilthey-Löwithsche Säkularisierungsthese” it assumedly becomes clear that progress cannot be ‘secularized’ eschatology, because there is no preservation of a Christian idea that can be observed in the succession of these modes of thought.⁸³ Both phenomena however do share a common horizon of ‘futurism’, and Kamlah concedes that this horizon first originated in a Judeo-Christian context, but this does not change the fact that there is no substantive continuity between them.⁸⁴ This succession should therefore be seen as an instance of profanization, not as secularization. In the grand historical narratives of the 18th and 19th century it is moreover possible to discern a “pathetische Überschwenglichkeit” of optimistic expectation that becomes so fervent that it approximates eschatological enthusiasm. However, this apparent proximity is only caused by the fact that philosophy of history tries to compensate for the loss of eschatology by taking on a similar function, Kamlah suggests.⁸⁵ By demonstrating a substantive discontinuity between eschatology and modern philosophies of progress – and given his strict substantialistic interpretation of Löwith’s thesis – Kamlah can assert: “Die Säkularisierungsthese von Dilthey und Löwith läßt sich als *genereller Satz* nicht halten.”⁸⁶

In sum, as for instance Ulrich Ruh claims, Kamlah’s theory can indeed be read in line with Blumenberg’s. Both argue that modernity originated independently from Christianity. This independent origin absolves it from accusations of a substantive indebtedness to a religious past.⁸⁷ They claim that progress or modern utopianism emerged from a different source than the Christian tradition, and that progress – hypostasized in speculative philosophies of history – can only be a functional reoccupation rather than a substantive continuation of eschatology. This implies that both authors necessarily identify the secularization theorem with substantialism, as we have seen, and subsequently interpret Löwith’s thesis solely in this manner. Moreover, both authors reserve an important role for modern science in the genesis of modernity. However, whereas Kamlah does this in accordance with a rather simplistic logos-mythos distinction in which modernization is equal to scientific disenchantment, Blumenberg rather sees science as a manifestation of something prior, namely the existential stance of human self-assertion that was forced into existence to unburden humans from theological absolutism. This arguably more profound historical-philosophical conception of an epochal ‘dialogue’ is absent from Kamlah’s account, which instead seems to rely on a simpler notion of Enlightenment as progressive ‘*entmythisierung*’.⁸⁸

82 Kamlah (1969) pp.44-49, 57-59, 66-67, 106. Cf. Ruh (1980) pp.236, 251-253. That is, Blumenberg portrays Löwith as the main proponent of the secularization theorem in his initial paper on secularization (1964) and in the first edition of *Legitimacy* (1966).

83 Kamlah (1969) pp.57-59, 66-67. It is claimed that Löwith’s thesis is derived from Dilthey, but “Löwith erwähnt ihn erstaunlicherweise nicht” (p.58 fn.5).

84 Kamlah (1969) p.44.

85 Kamlah (1969) pp.45-46.

86 Kamlah (1969) p.49.

87 Ruh (1980) pp.251-253.

88 Again, this logos-mythos distinction is more or less explicitly rejected by Blumenberg in *Work on Myth* (1985). Here and in ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkunspotential des Mythos’ (1971), Blumenberg argues that the mythic outlook is more far more *reasonable* (or ‘rational’) than the monotheistic dogmatic outlook.

This is not to imply that Kamlah's account is merely a more meager version of Blumenberg's. It can be argued that Kamlah makes certain valuable additions to the conceptual framework of *Legitimacy*, most notably the conceptual distinction between profanization and secularization.⁸⁹ This distinction is useful in the context of the German secularization debate, since it enables one to speak of 'secularization' intransitively – i.e., as '*profanization*' – or in a more neutral sense, without the added connotations of illegitimacy, expropriation and substantialism that it acquired in the German setting.⁹⁰ With this distinction, Kamlah can also be less dismissive of the other type of 'secularization' than Blumenberg. After having demonstrated that, generally speaking, modernity is not the product of secularization but rather of the more neutral, anonymous process of rationalization and disenchantment, Kamlah admits that limited, singular instances of 'secularization' (in a substantive sense) can indeed occur. Unlike Blumenberg, Kamlah is thus able to explain how 'post-Christian' elements (such as certain ethical or societal mores, which still bear the imprint of its religious origin) can coexist with non-religious elements in an overall 'profane' world. This more nuanced view of secularization corresponds with the conception of modernity that *Utopie, Eschatologie, Geschichtsteologie* puts forward, namely a self-conscious and self-critical Modern Age in which 'reason' not only critiques the authority of past traditions but also its own scope and ability. Kamlah thus advocates the conservation of certain elements from past traditions that could still be deemed valuable, be it strictly on modern terms.⁹¹ At least in *Legitimacy*, Blumenberg does not appear to recognize the option of a positive but tentative preservation of elements from the past. This in turn raises the question how the modern individual should relate him/herself to the "mortgage" of carry-over questions that modernity has inherited.⁹² We will discover next that this is a problem in Blumenberg's theory that Jaeschke already addressed.

Jaeschke: Historical Support for Blumenberg's Defense of Modernity

While Kamlah attempts a conceptual-theoretical '*Aufräumungsarbeit*', meant to prepare a philosophical groundwork for future historical-empirical research, Walter Jaeschke's study – *Die Suche nach den eschatologischen Wurzeln der Geschichtsphilosophie: eine historische Kritik der Säkularisierungsthese* (1976) – instead dismisses such a theoretical approach as void if it lacks any empirical support. His aim is to employ Blumenberg's philosophical framework in historical-empirical research, in order to substantiate the latter's defense of modernity and critique of the secularization theorem.⁹³ This implies that, similar to Blumenberg (and to a lesser extent Kamlah), Jaeschke assumes the existence of a singular 'secularization thesis' that he recognizes in the work of theologians such as Friedrich Gogarten and Rudolf Bultmann and, most prominently, in the philosophy of Löwith. He argues that at first sight, it might seem

89 Cf. Zabel (1968) pp.29-31; De Vriese (2016) p.37.

90 It is in this more 'neutral', 'intransitive' or 'quantitative' sense that secularization is usually understood in Anglophone sociological secularization research from the 1960's onwards. Cf. De Vriese (2016) pp.35-37. On occasion Blumenberg (1983, pp.4, 16-18) does concede that it is possible to maintain a quantitative or intransitive notion of secularization, but generally speaking he only takes it to refer to its transitive, qualitative meaning.

91 Kamlah (1969) pp.35, 68-70, 106.

92 On Blumenberg and the metaphor of a "mortgage" or "*Hypothek*", cf.: Blumenberg (1966) p.35; *ibid.* (1983) p.48; De Vriese (2016); Buch (2012); Flasch (2017) pp.476-477.

93 In this exposition I will mainly focus on the polemical sections of Jaeschke's book (1976, esp. pp.13-51, 325-331) rather than on the historical investigations themselves. Cf. Ruh (1980) pp.200-201, 265-267.

that the secularization theorem is a heterogenous construct that harbors a variety of different positions and claims, but this is mere appearance. Ultimately, the theorem boils down to a single claim, which is that modernity is essentially indebted to Christianity because it draws on a substance over which it does not have ownership, as it is derived from a theological source.⁹⁴

Blumenberg sieht dieses Implikat schärfer als die theologischen Behandlungen der Problematik, weil er die bisher nicht zu Wort gekommene ideenpolitische Position repräsentiert, die naturgemäß mit einem feineren Sensorium für den im Säkularisierungsbegriff implizierten Vorwurf ausgestattet ist. Die ideenpolitische Ambivalenz ist bloßer Schein: auch wenn der Säkularisierungsbegriff nicht notwendig Rückkehr in den Ursprung fordere ..., so bleibe doch nicht zweifelhaft, daß die Legitimität des Ideenbesitzes allein auf Seiten der historisch fixierbaren Substanz gegenüber ihren Modifikationen liege.⁹⁵

Jaeschke appears to place even more emphasis than Blumenberg on ‘substantialism’ as the essence of the secularization theorem. The implication is that the underlying metaphorical structure of ‘secularization’ – the metaphor of ‘ownership’ and illegitimate ‘modification’ – can only work if it involves a substance, and that the removal of this substance can only be grasped by a genetical claim that traces the relationship between the original property and its future modifications.⁹⁶ Consequently, Jaeschke argues that the validity of the secularization theorem relies on genealogical evidence that it structurally fails to provide.⁹⁷ It cannot provide this, because the secularization theorem depends on a “für historisches Erkennen unzugängliches substanzontologisches Geschichtsmodell”.⁹⁸ The functionalist thesis of Blumenberg on the other hand only requires a demonstration of structural analogies rather than substantive transformations – this is achievable through historical research.⁹⁹ Jaeschke claims that by successfully demonstrating the impossibility of a genealogical connection, and in providing the functionalist scheme of ‘*Umsetzung*’, Blumenberg has delivered the deathblow to the secularization theorem and its accusation of illegitimacy:

Der Umsetzungs-begriff beseitigt den im Begriff der Umsetzung der Substanz liegenden Illegitimitätsverdacht, indem er die Basis des in der Enteignungsmetapher liegenden Anspruchs auf Weiterverfügung über die Substanz auch in ihren Metamorphosen aufhebt ... in einer stringenten geschichtstheoretischen Argumentation; er befreit vom permanenten Druck zur Legitimierung neuzeitlicher Theoriebildung gegenüber substantialistischen Ansprüchen ...¹⁰⁰

Löwith is named as the most important representative of the substantialist theorem. Confirming Blumenberg’s contention that Löwith’s thesis had a “dogmatizing effect”, Jaeschke

94 Jaeschke (1976) pp.12-38, 325-331. Jaeschke thus takes aim at theologians such as Bultmann, Gogarten or Pannenberg, who claim to legitimize modernity (or typically modern accomplishments such as historical consciousness or liberalism) from a theological perspective.

95 Jaeschke (1967) p.34, cf. pp.34-42; Blumenberg (1966) p.77.

96 Jaeschke (1976) pp.35-36, 179, 313, 329. Cf. Blumenberg (1983) p.16.

97 Jaeschke (1976) pp.42-45, 50, 272. Cf. Blumenberg (1964) pp.241-243; Flasch (2017) pp.474-476.

98 Jaeschke (1976) p.35.

99 Jaeschke (1976) pp.45-47.

100 Jaeschke (1976) p.35.

suggests that secularization theorists never bothered to put it to the test – by subjecting it to historical examination – because it was considered self-evident. Löwith's study was so firmly established in academic consensus that criticism could only be expressed in "Nebensätzen".¹⁰¹ Jaeschke admits that Löwith had protested, in his review of *Legitimacy*, against the reproach of substantialism, but he is not persuaded by this attempt at self-exoneration.¹⁰² It is argued that Löwith's attempt to forgo substantialism is inconsistent with his ultimate aim, that is, to assert the *illegitimacy* of modernity. If Löwith abandons substantialism this means that he also has to abandon this aim, because: "die Legitimität des 'Säkularisats' kann nicht mehr bestritten werden, weil es keine Substanz gibt, die Ansprüche auf es stellen könnte."¹⁰³ It is suggested that Löwith especially betrays his substantialist tendencies in his reference to modernity as an 'escaped slave' who runs away from his 'estranged master', which appears in Kesting's German translation of *Meaning in History*.¹⁰⁴ This metaphor ties in with a host of templates – modernity as a 'Christian heresy', as 'apostasy' or as a 'bastard child' of Christianity – that have all been 'scientifically disqualified' by Blumenberg's functionalist reoccupational model, Jaeschke concludes.¹⁰⁵

However, Jaeschke goes on to argue that even though Blumenberg has succeeded in defeating the secularization theorem, his own account eventually falters in the subsequent defense of the Modern Age due to a lack of historical support. First of all, Jaeschke notes that Blumenberg simply adopts the same historical scope that is provided by the secularization theorem, while only replacing *Umsetzung* with *Umbesetzung*, thus failing to get the objective picture.¹⁰⁶ Blumenberg's account moreover lacks sound historical 'verification', which Jaeschke does intend to offer. Jaeschke hence takes on a more 'empiricist' stance than Blumenberg. He argues that one can determine through historical investigation whether a phenomenon is a 'reoccupation' of a vacant 'question-position', or whether it is an novel position that is, as such, properly modern.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, it is claimed that by staying on a theoretical level, Blumenberg's account leads to an impasse, namely that it cannot differentiate *within* the 'mortgage' (*Hypothek*) of question-positions – i.e., the inheritance of the medieval-Christian thought – between desirable and

101 Jaeschke (1976) p.43, cf. pp.12, 23, 35-43, 221, 330. Cf. Zabel (1968) pp.194-196.

102 Löwith (1968) p.458: He stated that "[m]an kann dem Verfasser [i.e. Blumenberg] nur zustimmen, wenn er ... die Idee des Fortschritts ... einen Versuch nennt, einer Frage gerecht zu werden, die gleichsam herrenlos und ungesättigt im Raumen stehen geblieben war, nachdem die Theologie sie virulent gemacht hatte." Cf. Jaeschke (1976) pp.35-37, 43-45.

103 Jaeschke (1976) p.36. In Chapter 1 I have attempted to repudiate this reading of Löwith. For now, two retorts against Jaeschke's critique should suffice: first of all, it is not entirely clear why any claim to (il)legitimacy necessarily relies on substantialism – can there not be an expropriation (or illegitimate use) of a pattern, form or a function? And second, Jaeschke ignores Löwith's (1968, p.459) explicit claim that he does not argue for the 'illegitimacy' of anything, given the inappropriateness of this juridical notion in the field of history. This confirms my suggestion that strictly speaking 'secularization' does not function as a normative category in Löwith's narrative.

104 Löwith (1953) p.83. This phrase however does not appear in the original English version (1949, see: p.48). Cf. Ruh (1980) p.259.

105 Jaeschke (1976) p.37.

106 Jaeschke (1976) p.41.

107 Jaeschke (1976) p.44: "Allein durch historische Einsicht in die Geschichte eschatologischen Denkens können Konstanz und Variabilität des formalen Welterklärungsschemas erkannt, interne Umbesetzungsvorgänge kontrolliert und anachronistische oder idealtypische Konstruktionen vermieden werden; allein dadurch kann entschieden werden, ob neuzeitliches Geschichtsverständnis als Neubesetzung freigewordener Valenzen des überkommenden Schemas oder als Schaffung neuer Positionen eines weitgehend modifizierten Welterklärungssystems zu verstehen sei." cf. pp.215-216.

undesirable questions.¹⁰⁸ A more historical approach can alleviate this problem, Jaeschke claims:

Die historische Erkenntnis bietet die einzige Chance, Einsicht in die Umbesetzungsprozesse und damit in den Haushalt menschlichen Wissensbedürfnisses und Entscheidungshilfen für das Verhalten gegenüber dem Welterklärungsschema zu gewinnen: weder mit der aktuellen Antwort zugleich die Frageposition preiszugeben noch blindlings zu versuchen, jede freigewordene Stelle mit neuen Antworten zu besetzen, noch auch, momentan nicht reell beantwortbare Fragen bestehen zu lassen, ohne der drohenden Korrumption neu errungener Evidenzen gewärtig zu sein.¹⁰⁹

Jaeschke attempts to provide a historical-empirical verification of Blumenberg's historical-philosophical thesis. Not only does he thereby claim that it is possible to induce, on the basis of historical evidence, when and how reoccupation occurs, he also suggests that one can thus discern between those questions that deserve preservation and those that are potentially harmful. The details of his historical account fall beyond our scope of interest, but for now it suffices to note that after a broad investigation into early-Christian eschatology, patristic theology and finally the modern philosophies of Lessing and Hegel, Jaeschke concludes that not only is a genealogical connection absent, there is also not a full-blown functional continuity that can be found between eschatology and progress.¹¹⁰ Rather, modern philosophies of history partly tap into a later Hellenistic-Christian model of progress as a continuous 'education' (*Erziehung*) of humankind. This model stems from a later era than early-Christian eschatology and hence cannot be a 'secularization' of a pure, authentically Christian 'substance'. The continuity that Jaeschke does find is one of a "Problemkonstanz" which centers on the relation between human freedom and providence, which one can already find in patristic texts as well as in the historical philosophy of Hegel – this however falls short of asserting a single substantive continuity.¹¹¹

Some concluding remarks on the accounts of Jaeschke and Kamlah are in order. I contend that Jaeschke's contribution to the debate can be considered valuable in at least two ways. First, he emphasizes the importance of historical research over against the more conceptual approach of both Löwith and Blumenberg. Jaeschke suggests that theoretical theses that purport to relate to history remain void if they are not supported or accompanied by historical investigation. This raises the question whether such a debate can ever reach valid conclusions when it is only waged on an abstract level, or if it instead requires the involvement of historical research, e.g., through a constructive relationship with a more empirically oriented branch of historiography. This is a fair point, which has been raised by other commentators as well.¹¹² Secondly, Jaeschke also detects a genuine problem in Blumenberg's theory, i.e., how modernity should relate itself towards the 'mortgage' of carry-over questions that it inherited from the system it had overcome. In Chapter 1 we have seen that Blumenberg can differentiate between

108 Jaeschke (1976) p.41-44. I have already addressed this issue to some extent in Chapter 1. In short, I suggest that it is possible to distinguish in Blumenberg's theory between epoch-specific carry-over questions that can be dismissed and legitimate "residual needs" that should be understood in terms of his philosophical anthropology.

109 Jaeschke (1976) pp.41-42.

110 Jaeschke (1976) e.g. pp.212-2225, 264-276, 312-331.

111 Jaeschke (1976) p.316.

112 Adam (2001) pp.147-149; Ruh (1980) pp.353-361; Zabel (1968) pp.266-267; Kamlah (1969) pp.102-104. I will return to this question in Chapter 8.

desirable and undesirable carry-over questions on the basis on the basis of his philosophical anthropology, but it can be conceded that this distinction is not fully elaborated in *Legitimacy*. Jaeschke proposes a nuanced stance to these questions by arguing that we should neither attempt to outright abandon or blindly answer all inherited questions from the outset. Such a critical but tentatively ‘open’ stance towards a selective preservation of elements from the past is similar to Kamlah’s, as we have seen. The problem, however, is that it is unclear on what basis we should judge which question-positions should be abandoned and which should not. Whereas Kamlah suggests that a self-critical *Vernunft* can fulfill this role, Jaeschke rather places his trust in historical investigation.

Indeed, Jaeschke not only suggests that historical research can demonstrate when and how a reoccupation occurs, he also asserts that it can discern when a position should be abandoned because it is deemed undesirable by modern standards – indeed, empirical research can both verify and falsify theories by a direct access to the historical facts.¹¹³ This historical ‘empiricism’ is mirrored by Kamlah’s conceptual optimism, whose logos/mythos distinction entails that mythos will simply dissipate when placed under scientific scrutiny. One possible problem of both approaches is that both authors arguably fail to reflect on the conceptual bias of their positions: Jaeschke and Kamlah do not take into account that their conception of the ‘secularization theorem’ is already dependent on Blumenberg’s construction of it, which makes that both unreflectively identify ‘secularization’ with substantialism and expropriation, and regard Löwith as its prime representative. Presumably, this indicates that Blumenberg’s theory too had a “dogmatizing effect”. I suggest that the reduction of a variety of accounts – e.g., those of Löwith, Schmitt, Kesting and Koselleck – to a single, monolithic ‘secularization theorem’ obscures the protean character of the German secularization debate.¹¹⁴ It is indeed possible to discern certain loosely organized ‘camps’ that are situated over against each other in this discourse, but these fronts are themselves usually more or less heterogeneous in nature. In the case of Kesting and Koselleck we have already seen that something like the Löwithian formula ‘progress is secularized eschatology’ operates more as a rhetorical instrument in this political-ideological struggle over ‘secularization’ than as a clear-cut theoretical hypothesis or as an article of faith. Furthermore, it can be noted that the ‘substantialism’ that Blumenberg, Kamlah and Jaeschke assume to be the essence of the secularization theorem is more or less absent in the theories of purported ‘secularization theorists’ such as Kesting, Koselleck, Löwith and Schmitt.¹¹⁵

113 Gordon (2019, p.169) criticizes Blumenberg in this respect for assuming that normative-philosophical points can be distilled from historical evidence. “Unlike Blumenberg, however, Kant ... understood that the mere facts of history are not to be confused with the postulates that guide human action. This is why no genealogical exposure of historical fact can suffice to invalidate our normative aspirations.” Surely this critique would also apply to Jaeschke, who is more explicit about stating the essentially empirical nature of his enterprise.

114 Cf. Ruh (1980) pp.200-201, 265-267, 351-358.

115 Blumenberg (1983) pp.8-17, 28-29; Kamlah (1969) pp.46, 64-70; Jaeschke (1976) pp.34-50, 313-330; Cf. Ruh (1980) pp.122, 239-266.

Investigating and Problematizing ‘Secularization’: Lübbe and Zabel

Lübbe: ‘Ideenpolitik’ and Expropriation

As mentioned, the issue of ‘secularization’ was widely discussed in German academia throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s.¹¹⁶ The popularity of this issue engendered a profusion of different accounts on how ‘secularization’ should be understood, varying from the anti-Enlightenment narratives of Kesting and Koselleck to the critical counter-narratives of Kamlah and Jaeschke. Whereas many interlocutors thereby presented their own particular conceptions of ‘secularization’ – occasionally drawing on Löwith, Schmitt and Blumenberg – there were also scholars in this debate – e.g. Hermann Lübbe and Hermann Zabel – who instead reflected on the wide divergence of these accounts and on the difficulties that arise in these attempts at fixing one definite reading of the secularization concept over against a multitude of other, seemingly equally reasonable interpretations. An analysis of this alternative approach to ‘secularization’ will help shed further light on the dynamics of the debate. We will find that this approach can for instance illuminate the interplay between a definition of a concept, its function in a narrative, and the normative position of the author who employs it. In this section I discuss the work of Lübbe and Zabel, because they have not only reflected on the contentious nature of the secularization debate but, by virtue of doing so, they also became involved in the very polemic on which they commented.¹¹⁷ Lübbe, we will discover, plays a double role in the development of the secularization debate. Whereas on the one hand he was sensitive to the wide divergence in the different usages of the “essentially contested concept” of secularization, on the other hand he also paved the way for Blumenberg’s more *restrictive* interpretation of ‘secularization’, i.e., as a narrowly defined juridical concept that centers on substantialism and expropriation.¹¹⁸ Zabel, in turn, criticizes Blumenberg for this reductionism and seeks to promote to the more equivocal reading that one can also find in Lübbe.

Lübbe was a household name in German academia. Müller notes that “Hermann Lübbe has been one of the philosophers most present in the German public sphere – perhaps, leaving aside Jürgen Habermas, *the* philosopher most present in the public sphere.”¹¹⁹ It is hence not surprising that his work on the topic of secularization, especially his 1965 book

116 Nijk (1968); Zabel (1968); Lübbe (1965); Stallmann (1960). Cf. Flasch (2017) pp.471-482. Flasch (p.472) notes that the pervasiveness of ‘secularization’ as a cultural-conservative explanatory topos of *Verfallsgeschichte* was in fact already in decline when Blumenberg published his *Legitimacy* in 1966. Lübbe’s 1965 publication hence already served as a retrospective overview. “Als Blumenberg sein Buch vorbereitete, blickte Hermann Lübbe 1965 schon historistisch auf die Säkularisierungsdebatte zurück”. Evidently, I do not agree that the secularization debate was already finished before Blumenberg intervened; his contribution rather signified a shift in its development. The debate moved away from the aura of self-evidence with which ‘secularization’ was employed from the late 1940’s to the early 1960’s by (conservative) Christian thinkers, as it met resistance by the younger generation of Blumenberg, Jaeschke and Odo Marquard. In Chapter 7 we will discover, however, that the secularization debate took yet another turn after 1968 (especially in the 1970’s and early 1980’s), when it became increasingly politicized – partly under the influence of Schmitt – in the struggle between the ‘New Left’ (represented in this study by Jacob Taubes) and conservative liberalism.

117 In short, I focus on Zabel (1968) and Lübbe (1964; 1965; 1981) as their contributions also became part of the polemic on which they reflected, mainly because Blumenberg used Lübbe’s theory in support of his own and because he amended certain theoretical claims in response to Zabel’s criticism. Ruh’s *Säkularisierung als Interpretationskategorie* (1980), for example, also provides a valuable critical reflection on the debate but did not contribute in a direct sense to its further development.

118 In Chapter 8 I will return to this notion of ‘secularization’ as an essentially contested concept.

119 Müller (2003) p.124, cf. pp.116-120, 124-129.

Säkularisierung: Geschichte eines ideenpolitischen Begriffs, functioned as a touchstone for various other studies on this subject.¹²⁰ Lübbe in a sense prepared much of the conceptual groundwork for the developing polemic because he popularized the idea that ‘secularization’ was a genealogical concept that signifies a “Herkunftsbeziehung”. In this vein, he consolidated the ‘juridical’ model of secularization, involving notions of (il)legitimate ownership and expropriation.¹²¹ In the first edition of *Legitimacy* (1966) Blumenberg would explicitly draw on this juridical model of secularization as expropriation in his critique of the secularization theorem.¹²² However, whereas Blumenberg rejected the concept as tendentious and crypto-theological, we will find that this does not necessarily reflect Lübbe’s own intentions.

In the introductory chapter of *Säkularisierung*, Lübbe states that he does not seek to convey another secularization narrative. Instead, he wants to analyze how the use of the concept ‘secularization’ has changed throughout the years, while also reflecting on the conditions of its application, on its explanatory merits and on its possible limitations.¹²³ Lübbe’s methodology is defined by the notion, alluded to in the subtitle, of “*Ideenpolitik*”. This means that he interprets the changing conception of ‘secularization’ in terms of its use by different ideological-political factions, focusing on the role it fulfills in the substantiation and promotion of certain normative or ideological claims. As such, the concept is regarded as a “*Kampfbegriff*” that is underdetermined, because it can be used in support of a variety of (incompatible) narratives, but which also contains an implicit normativity in and of itself.¹²⁴ This creates a tension in Lübbe’s account that remains unresolved, we will discover. On the one hand it appears that regardless of how and why it is used, ‘secularization’ will retain the tacit connotation of ‘expropriation’. On the other hand, however, Lübbe suggests that the underdetermined nature of the concept also makes it possible to conceive of a neutral sense of the term. The objective of Lübbe’s study is to escape ideological quarrels and salvage the concept for “rein wissenschaftsimmanenten Gebrauch”, as a term that can uncover (in a descriptive manner) genetic connections between modern phenomena and religious counterparts. He writes:

Die Absicht dieser Arbeit ist Aufklärung. Sie geht davon aus, daß der Gebrauch ideenpolitisch aktueller Begriffe nicht folgenlos ist. Man gesellt sich dadurch Gruppen zu und reiht sich in Fronten ein. Man wird Agent in ‘geistigen Kämpfen der Zeit’. Wer das nicht will, weil er, durchaus in Übereinstimmung mit den Einsichten und Absichten der jüngsten Säkularisierungstheologie, an der Neutralisierung dieser Kämpfe interessiert ist, sollte also den Begriff der Säkularisierung nicht unversehens gebrauchen. Eben das wird durch seine genetisch-funktionale Aufklärung erleichtert, und es wird möglich, einen rein wissenschaftsimmanenten Gebrauch des Säkularisierungsbegriffs auszugrenzen.¹²⁵

120 Lübbe’s 1965 book expands on his 1962 paper – presented at the *Fortschritt*-conference that ignited the Löwith-Blumenberg debate – ‘Säkularisierung als geschichtsphilosophische Kategorie’ (1964), a reworked version of which appeared in 1966: ‘Das Theorem der säkularisierten Gesellschaft’ (republished in 1981). We can find references to Lübbe’s work on secularization in: Kamlah (1969); Zabel (1968); Ruh (1980); Blumenberg (1983); Jaeschke (1976); Nijk (1968).

121 Lübbe (1965) p.86, cf. pp.9-55. Blumenberg (1966, pp.12-20) adopts this juridical model, and as such it even reappears (without explicit reference to Lübbe) in Schmitt’s *Political Theology II* (2014, pp.118-119).

122 Blumenberg (1966) pp.16-20. Cf. *ibid.* (1983) pp.10-11, 597 fn.1, 5, 598 fn.5.

123 Lübbe (1965) pp.7, 18-22.

124 Lübbe (1981) p.52. Cf. *ibid.* (1952) pp.31-39, 86-89. This notion of “Ideenpolitik” and the framework of discursive antagonism betrays an intellectual affinity Lübbe has for Schmitt, as is noted by e.g. Muller (2003, pp.124-129).

125 Lübbe (1965) pp.7-8, cf. pp.18-22, 56-72.

I will briefly discuss Lübke's historical account of the development of the secularization concept before we turn to his conceptual contribution to the contemporary debate. The point of departure of his historical narrative is the year 1803, when a vast number of ecclesiastical estates were relegated to secular control. This event, deplored by Catholics as a banal 'theft' by the state, formed the paradigm case for the subsequent development of the secularization concept, according to Lübke. The concept thus acquired the juridical connotation of property ownership that remained attached to it up until the contemporary polemic on this issue.¹²⁶ From this point onward, the concept could imply either legitimate transferal *or* illegitimate expropriation of a possession. However, the answer to the question as to whether this occurrence should be valued either positively or negatively was not necessarily predetermined in the proliferation of this scheme; that is, the juridical framework was maintained, but the normative assertion that one could make within this frame was not. Hence, after serving as a "shibboleth" for disgruntled Catholics and other conservatives during the 19th century *Kulturkampf*, who regarded the 'secularization' of church goods as exemplary for societal decline, it could also come to serve as a "parole" for the defenders of secular culture, as a watchword for emancipation. This occurred in the circle of the *Deutsche Gemeinschaft für ethische Kultur*, the German pendant of the English *Secular Society*, which strived for an emancipation of culture and ethics from ecclesiastical control. Dubbing this emancipation 'secularization' meant, Lübke suggests, an oppositional revaluation of the term, albeit within the same juridical framework.¹²⁷

It was only later that the juridical framework moved more to the background and that 'secularization' was first used in scientific discourse as a sociological or historical-philosophical concept. Especially in the work of Ferdinand Tönnies and Max Weber, Lübke recognizes a notable (albeit temporary) neutralization of the term.¹²⁸ It entailed that the concept gained a normative ambivalence hitherto unknown to it, as is apparent in the work of Tönnies: whereas on the one hand he was a firm believer in scientific and societal progress, he also suggested that the transformation from the traditional *Gemeinschaft* to the modern, rationalized *Gesellschaft* entailed some kind of a loss or alienation.¹²⁹ Weber, in a similar vein, describes the ongoing rationalization and disenchantment of the world in a 'value-free' manner, seemingly without judgment, while on the other hand his whole account seems permeated with an ominous sense that "die entzauberte Rationalität der säkularisierten europäischen Zivilisation ein unabwendbares geschichtliches Schicksal ist".¹³⁰ This ambivalence in Weber and Tönnies, which denotes both progress and a sense of loss, is held by Lübke to represent a general intellectual ambiguity towards the modern world. This feeling of "*Unbehagen*" would now be added to the range of possible connotations that 'secularization' accommodates.¹³¹

Ernst Troeltsch, in his *Die Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die Entstehung der Modernen Welt* (1911), drew the concept of secularization back into a theological context, according to Lübke.¹³² Due to its prior neutralization the term 'secularization' no longer implied a "Parole

126 Lübke (1965) pp.28-30; *ibid.* (1981) pp.51-52. On 'secularization' as expropriation of ecclesiastical property, cf.: Stallmann (1960) pp.5-12; Delekat (1958) p.5.

127 Lübke (1965) pp.25-33, 39-54.; *ibid.* (1981) p.52. For a critique of Lübke's depiction of the DGEK, cf.: Zabel (1968) pp.17-21.

128 Lübke (1965) pp.56-72; *ibid.* (1964) pp.227-229. Lübke argues that 'secularization' does not appear in a recognizable form in 19th century philosophy of e.g. Hegel and Marx.

129 Lübke (1965) pp.62-67.

130 Lübke (1965) p.70. Cf. *ibid.* (1981) p.55; Stallmann (1960) pp.13-14.

131 Lübke (1965) p.73.

132 Lübke (1965) pp.73-85. We will return to Troeltsch's *Bedeutung des Protestantismus* (1911) at a later stage of this study. Cf. Stallmann (1960) p.14; Zabel (1968) pp.132-156.

eines kämpferischen Fortschritts”, which meant that it could now be used as a legitimate historical category, also when placed in the service of a liberal-protestant narrative such as the one Troeltsch provided.¹³³ Modernization, in this account, is still regarded as a gradual emancipation from ecclesiastical authority, but in Troeltsch’s work this movement remains determined – both in its orientation as well as in its effect – by that from which it originated, Christianity. This process is regarded as a beneficial continuation of an inner-Christian development, namely from a monolithic religious culture to a differentiation of creeds and societal spheres under the banner of freedom and rationality. In short, modernity is seen by Troeltsch as the legitimate product of Protestantism, especially in as far as it centers on a Protestant conception of individual liberty.¹³⁴ However, this assertion also implies that Troeltsch imposes boundaries for the development of the modern world; the implication is that modernity should remain *rooted* in Christian culture. If modernity becomes disconnected from Christianity this would mean that the modern idea of freedom, rooted as it is in the essence of Protestantism, will be endangered by societal and political processes that instead lead to a “neuen Hörigkeit”. Modernity cannot do without the “fruchtbare Boden des Freiheitsgedankens” that Protestantism provides.¹³⁵ This Troeltschian notion of secularization as legitimate continuity reappears in the theology of Friedrich Gogarten, who also plays an important role in Lübke’s narrative, but who will be discussed to some extent in the next chapter. There we will also find that the metaphor of ‘fertile soil’ and ‘rootedness’, which encompasses both the notion of legitimate development (as in growth) and of deracination (uprooting), is widely used in the secularization debate, especially in theological circles.

At this stage in the history of the secularization concept it has become a multi-applicable notion. Lübke gives an overview of its various possible uses: it could be utilized to signify a fortunate *overcoming* of the past (as it was perceived by members of the DGEK), as an assertion of a beneficial continuance of the past (as in the work of Troeltsch), but it could also be used for pessimistic-conservative *Verfallsgeschichten* that reprimand modernity for apostasy.¹³⁶ The latter variety can be found in the civilization-critiques of the interbellum, especially those mounted by the conservative ‘practical theology’ that perceived a causal relation between the decline of religion and societal catastrophe.¹³⁷ Lübke suggests on one occasion that ‘secularization’ thereby returned to its original, ‘primary’ connotation of ‘illegitimacy’.¹³⁸ It was after the Second World War that the concept of secularization gained a particular urgency. In this period it became involved in the societal-intellectual project of ‘coming to terms with the past’ (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). In this context it functioned as a key concept (“Schlüsselbegriff”) that allowed one to ‘unlock’, i.e., understand, evaluate and explain, the recent disastrous events by placing it in a larger meaningful narrative.¹³⁹ It is useful to reiterate

133 Lübke (1965) pp.59, 73, 84.

134 Troeltsch (1911) pp.46-103; Lübke (1965) pp.73-85.

135 Troeltsch (1911) p.102: “Die moderne Kultur ist jedenfalls durch eine ungeheure Ausbreitung und Intensität des Freiheits- und Persönlichkeitsgedankens charakterisiert, und wir erblicken darin ihren besten Gehalt.

Dieser Gedanke ist von allen Lebensgebieten her unter der besonderen Konstellation der Umstände spontan entwickelt worden und hat vom Protestantismus nur ein überaus mächtiges, übrigens für sich selbst unabhängiges religiös-metaphysisches Fundament erhalten. Es ist die Frage, ob jene Konstellation der Umstände und damit der von ihnen gegebene fruchtbare Boden des Freiheitsgedankens dauernd sich behaupten wird. Das ist schwerlich der Fall. Unsere wirtschaftliche Entwicklung steuert eher einer neuen Hörigkeit zu ...” Lübke (1965) pp.73-85; *ibid.* (1964) pp.230-231.

136 Lübke (1965) pp.86-87.

137 Lübke (1965) pp.87-89, 92-95.

138 Lübke (1981) p.232. Cf. *ibid.* (1965) p.87.

139 Lübke (1965) pp.109-117; *ibid.* (1964) pp.235-237; (1981) pp.62-65. Cf. Flasch (2017) pp.474, 481.

Lübbe's reflections on the post-war function of the secularization theorem because, as will become clear, they relate to earlier allusions to the connection between the secularization debate on the one hand and '1933' and the Second World War on the other.

Lübbe argues that in the post-war context, e.g., in the conservative-critical narratives of Alfred Müller-Armack and Romano Guardini, the concept of secularization was applied to explain the Second World War in terms of a general bankruptcy of modernity. The recent crisis could now be understood as a symptom of the purported apostasy of modern culture from Christianity. This application served multiple functions, which Lübbe goes on to enumerate in his two smaller essays on this topic.¹⁴⁰ I will reproduce Lübbe's list of functions while also adding some authors he does not discuss:

- 1) The concept of secularization allowed its users to situate its assumed outcome, the war, in a general European perspective. Lübbe argues that this helped alleviate the specifically German sense of guilt that was felt among the intelligentsia – as Karl Jaspers's *Die Schuldfrage* (1946) demonstrates – but which was also reinforced by Allied powers. Thus, over against this narrative of German guilt, secularization-narratives could fulfill the function of an "Entlastung", a de-burdening of collective guilt, by invoking a larger European context.¹⁴¹
- 2) In a related sense, Lübbe suggests that 'secularization' provided a template of generalized decline in which Nazism could be subsumed under the same category as Communism, as manifestations of a singular crisis of modernity or as a necessary outcome of the Enlightenment.
- 3) Moreover, this general Enlightenment-critique allowed its users to salvage the tradition of the counter-Enlightenment from its 'corruption' during the Nazi-era and thus gloss over the fact that this tradition had also been implicated. Instead, this tradition is now presented as an antidote to totalitarianism, as Kesting's *Geschichtsphilosophie und Weltbürgerkrieg* and the post-war writings of Schmitt indicate.¹⁴²
- 4) From the perspective of a pan-European "Schicksal", Lübbe argues that differences between religious creeds become less important. Instead, Catholicism and different Protestant creeds can band together in a general attempt at 're-rooting' modernity in Christianity.¹⁴³
- 5) Lastly, Nazism and Communism can be denounced as demagogic mass-movements that emerged out of spiritual destitution. This legitimizes the post-war establishment of a rechristianized conservative "Ordo-Liberalismus".¹⁴⁴

140 Lübbe (1964) pp.235-237; *ibid.* (1981) pp.62-63. The lists are not identical however; I will mainly follow the first one (1964), as it is more elaborate.

141 The therapeutic concept of 'Entlastung' reappears in the work of Blumenberg (e.g., 'Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos', 1971) as a philosophical-anthropological desideratum. Especially Marquard (2016; 1991, pp.8-28) thematized this concept as a core principle of both his own and Blumenberg's philosophy.

142 Kesting (1959) pp.xvii-xviii, 114-123; e.g. Schmitt, *Donoso Cortés* (1950b). Cf. Habermas (1960) pp.474-477; Müller (2003) pp.23-24, 53, 105-115; Van Laak (1993) pp.219-229, 273-275.

143 Cf. Böckenförde (1967) pp.91-94.

144 Lübbe (1981) p.62; *ibid.* (1964) p.236; (1965) pp.112-117.

Lübbe concludes his historical overview with a positive appraisal of Friedrich Gogarten's theology of secularization. This new theology is represented as a reconciliation of Christianity with secular culture, because Gogarten legitimizes the process of secularization from a theological perspective. He argues in a similar vein to Troeltsch that the emancipation of the 'world' (society, culture and economy) from ecclesiastical control is a direct and positive result of the Christian freedom represented in Protestantism.¹⁴⁵ Lübbe situates this theology of secularization in the post-war political order, in which the establishment of a moderate liberalism coincides with the establishment of the 'Christian Democracy', and where a "Neuen Geborgenheit" marked the atmosphere of restoration.¹⁴⁶ Finally, Lübbe suggests in his 1965 book that, with this contemporary modification of 'secularization', the concept has come closest to its 'actual' meaning, or at least its most fruitful definition. 'Secularization' has come to mean a simple affirmation of the 'worldliness' of the world, that does justice to both the world as well as to the Christian faith, which, after all, should refrain from becoming worldly itself:

Er [i.e. the secularization concept] hat hier die Funktion gewonnen, Glaube und Kirche mit der modernen Welt zu versöhnen, indem er einerseits diese Welt in ihrer Säkularität legitimiert und bestätigt und dabei andererseits Glaube und Kirche aus dem hoffnungslosen Gegnerschaftsverhältnis zu ihr befreit, um sie für sie frei zu machen.¹⁴⁷

The conclusion of his investigation, that 'secularization' has finally approached its most fruitful definition, is mirrored by his statement in the introduction that the scientific neutralization of the concept makes it "durchaus in Übereinstimmung mit den Einsichten und Absichten der jüngsten Säkularisierungstheologie", by which he refers to Gogarten.¹⁴⁸

After this survey of Lübbe's historical overview it becomes possible to assess his theoretical contribution to the secularization debate. First of all, there is a tension in Lübbe's account that can now be addressed. We have seen that the meaning of the concept 'secularization' changes throughout the history of its use, and that this meaning depends on how it is used by different ideological-political factions.¹⁴⁹ However, this begs the question how undetermined the concept actually is, the answer to which greatly defines the value of this concept within philosophical discourse. That is, whereas on the one hand Lübbe suggests that the concept has no fixed meaning, which implies that it can be used both as a weapon in a political-ideological struggle and as a neutral, descriptive scientific term, on the other hand he also implies that there is *one* definition of 'secularization' that is the most correct. This is the one that was used by the moderate members of the DGEK as well as in the post-war secularization theology: in this instance, 'secularization' signifies the affirmation of the worldliness of the world and consequently also of the spirituality of the spiritual domain.¹⁵⁰ It is apparent that Lübbe favors this definition and tends to identify it as its 'actual' meaning, but it is unclear on what grounds he can make this assertion. In any case, this contention contradicts another impression he gives, which is that the concept is ever-changing and that it is impossible to attribute it a fixed meaning that would be objectively better than others.¹⁵¹

145 Lübbe (1965) pp.119-123; *ibid.* (1981) p.63.

146 Lübbe (1965) p.117. For a critique on this reading of Gogarten, cf.: Zabel (1968) p.166.

147 Lübbe (1965) p.126.

148 Lübbe (1965) p.8 (emphasis added).

149 Lübbe (1965) pp.7-8, 31-39, 86-89.

150 Lübbe (1981) p.66.

151 Lübbe (1965) pp.7-22; *ibid.* (1964) p.239.

Another definition of ‘secularization’ also emerges from Lübbe’s account, one that seems to contradict the possibility of neutralizing it for scientific use. That is, Lübbe suggests on multiple occasions that the notion of expropriation and illegitimacy is somehow irreducibly ingrained in the concept. This would imply that it only has a polemical rather than also a descriptive function. Indeed, Lübbe comments in his 1962 paper on his findings that:

Diese Hinweise werden aber für den Eindruck ausgereicht haben, daß die Kategorie der Säkularisierung keine Kategorie von hohen spekulativen Würden ist. Ihre Geschichte erweist sie überhaupt weniger als eine Kategorie, durch die man begreift, denn als Funktion, ja gelegentlich als Parole in den ideenpolitischen Auseinandersetzung zwischen Glauben und moderner Welt.¹⁵²

This impression is confirmed by a statement Lübbe makes at the beginning of his historical overview in *Säkularisierung* (1965), which is that ‘illegitimacy’ forms the ‘*proprium*’ of secularization. Such an assertion suggest that (although it is not essential to it) ‘illegitimacy’ is at least irreducibly connected to this concept.¹⁵³ That would explain why for instance in the civilization-critique of the 1920’s ‘secularization’ can regain its “*primäre Bedeutung einer Illegitimitätserklärung*”, as Lübbe states.¹⁵⁴ In short, there is an ambiguity in Lübbe’s definition, or rather in his perception of the underdetermined nature of the concept of secularization: it is either fully undetermined, or it can be salvaged in order to approximate its most truthful, scientific definition, or it possess an irreducible inclination towards a polemic declaration of illegitimacy, which would make it ultimately unsuitable for scientific ends. This ambiguity cannot be resolved on the basis of Lübbe’s account, but it does explain the persistence of the association between secularization and illegitimacy in this context.

Indeed, Blumenberg saw the connection Lübbe made between secularization and expropriation as a confirmation of his theory. He already refers to Lübbe’s observations in the paper that initiated the Löwith-Blumenberg debate, “Säkularisation: Kritik einer Kategorie historischer Illegitimität” (1964), and in both versions of *Legitimacy* (1966/1974) Blumenberg quotes the aforementioned claim that the “Eigenschaft der Illegitimität” constitutes the “*Proprium des Säkularisierungs-Begriffs*”. Thus, Blumenberg approvingly concludes: “Das wesentliche Element der Kategorie ‘Säkularisierung’ ist die Übertragung dieses Momentes der Unrechtmäßigkeit”.¹⁵⁵ However, Blumenberg was also aware of Lübbe’s desire to neutralize the concept; this is dismissed as a dead end, because the intrinsic crypto-theological content of the concept assumedly makes it unsuitable for scientific purposes.¹⁵⁶

Jaeschke follows Blumenberg’s reading of Lübbe by stating that ‘secularization’ cannot be neutralized. Doing so would only imply a concealment of the theological, ideological-political positions that precede it rather than their dissolution. Instead, Jaeschke reads Lübbe’s account as suggesting that *behind* the surface level ambivalence of the secularization concept, which is apparent e.g. in the works of Tönnies and Weber, there is always an irreducible

152 Lübbe (1964) p.239.

153 Lübbe (1965) p.29. Cf. *ibid.* (1964) p.222; Blumenberg (1966) p.20/*ibid.* (1983) p.20. I thank my colleague Bianca Bosman for explaining to me how to understand the term ‘*proprium*’ in this context.

154 Lübbe (1962) p.232 (emphasis added).

155 Blumenberg (1966) p.20, cf. pp.16-20; *ibid.* (1964) pp.140-141; (1983) pp.10-11, 20.

156 Blumenberg (1966) p.16. “Man mag fragen, ob solche Konvergenz des Interesses nicht genau dort ihre Grenze haben muß, wo ‘Aufklärung’, die nach der Definition von C.H. Ratschow nichts anderes als *akute Säkularisation* ist, die Säkularisierung des Begriffs des Säkularisierung angeht, und das heißt: die Möglichkeit seiner Wissenschaftsimmanenz in Frage stellt.” *Ibid.* (1983) pp.10-11. Cf. Zabel (1968) p.241.

inclination towards an assertion of illegitimacy. The proper task should not be to neutralize ‘secularization’ but rather to repudiate it altogether.¹⁵⁷ This rejection of the secularization theorem *in toto* can find support in a selective reading of Lübke’s account, but it ignores the ambivalence of his interpretation. Furthermore, it precludes the other options of conceptualizing ‘secularization’; i.e., as open-ended and multi-applicable or as a neutralized, descriptive concept. This ambivalence notwithstanding, it can be conceded that Lübke offered an insightful overview of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of ‘secularization’ that clarifies above all the contested nature of this concept. It is ironic that Lübke’s analysis of the essential equivocality of the concept gave rise to the univocal interpretation of ‘secularization’, endorsed by Blumenberg, Kamlah and Jaeschke, as a claim of illegitimate expropriation.¹⁵⁸ We will find that Hermann Zabel’s analysis functions as a corrective of the reception of Lübke’s account in this respect, because it aims to reaffirm the relative flexibility and open-endedness of the concept of secularization by disconnecting it from the exclusively juristic metaphor of illegitimate expropriation.

Zabel: Corrective of Lübke and Critique of Blumenberg and Löwith

The study *Verveltlichung/Säkularisierung: Zur Geschichte einer Interpretationskategorie*, Zabel’s dissertation from 1968, constitutes a historical analysis of ‘secularization’ along the same lines as Lübke, but it also functions as a critique of the latter’s juristic reading of ‘secularization’ and of Blumenberg’s subsequent attack on the ‘secularization theorem’. Zabel however not only casts doubt on Blumenberg’s portrayal of Löwith as a proponent of the secularization theorem, but he also subjects the latter to criticism. This study is especially significant for our purposes because Blumenberg took note of Zabel’s critical observations and responded to it in the 1974 edition of *Legitimacy*.¹⁵⁹ Let us first look at Zabel’s historical critique of Lübke before turning to his reflections on the contemporary secularization debate.

A large part of *Verveltlichung/Säkularisierung* is devoted to a critical dialogue with Lübke, whose work is described as “ohne Zweifel den bisher fruchtbarsten Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte des geistesgeschichtlichen Säkularisierungsbegriffs”, but who is also held responsible for a structural and far-reaching misreading of the concept of secularization, i.e., the reduction of ‘secularization’ to ‘expropriation’.¹⁶⁰ Zabel more or less neglects the ambivalence in Lübke’s definition of secularization and instead interprets him as the principal advocate (alongside Blumenberg) of the ‘juridical’ model, according to which the concept becomes a signifier of ‘illegitimate expropriation’ or ‘legitimate dispossession’. Subjecting this ‘juridical’ model of secularization to historical scrutiny ultimately leads Zabel to the conclusion that Lübke and Blumenberg have contributed to an unacceptable simplification of the definition, range and historical development of the term.¹⁶¹

157 Jaeschke (1976) pp.20-21, 44-50. Cf. Adam (2001) pp.147-149.

158 Kamlah’s *Utopie, Eschatologie, Geschichtssteleologie* (1969, cf. pp.43-70) also frames secularization (as opposed to profanization) in exclusively substantialist-transitive terms, but contrary to Blumenberg and Lübke he does not emphasize the juridical implications of this ‘background metaphor’.

159 Blumenberg (1983) pp.18-25, 46-47, 598 fn.8-9. I suggest that Blumenberg’s revision (pp.27-30) of his reading of Löwith in the second edition of *Legitimacy* might have been influenced by Zabel (1968, pp.196-231). In this second instance Blumenberg portrays Löwith as a Nietzschean *Verfallshistoriker* in a fashion similar to how Zabel interprets the latter. Cf. Ruh (1980) pp.71-72, 238.

160 Zabel (1968) p.35.

161 Zabel (1968) pp.12-24, 233, 261-267. Zabel also mentions Stallmann’s *Was ist Säkularisierung?* (1960) as an example of the narrow, juridical interpretation of secularization.

Zabel raises a number of objections to Lübbe's historical account of 'secularization', for example with regard to his portrayal of the DGEK and of the theories of Tönnies, Weber and Troeltsch.¹⁶² But his main criticisms are of a more structural nature, which can be summed up as follows: first, Zabel claims that Lübbe takes the contemporary, fixed definition of 'secularization' as 'expropriation' and projects it back unto history. This means that the 'transitive' meaning of the word – x is a secularized (i.e., transformed) version of y – that has become commonplace in the German discourse only since the 1930's, is privileged over against the more general 'intransitive' definition – x is disconnected from y – that was also widely used, even *before* the time period Lübbe focusses on. Hence, the intransitive form becomes overshadowed in Lübbe's account by the transitive definition, the latter of which is now regarded as the original, historical form.¹⁶³

Second, Zabel takes issue with Lübbe's tendency to view the secularization debate through the (we might say, Schmittian) lens of antagonism and "Ideenpolitik":

Lübbes Studie zeigt ... die Gefahren, die sich aus der Einbeziehung soziologisch-politischer Gesichtspunkte in die begriffsgeschichtliche Forschung ergeben, wenn dies in dem Ausmaß geschieht, wie es bei Lübbe der Fall ist. Der zu untersuchende Begriff ordnet sich völlig in die politischen und ideologisch-geistige Kämpfe der Zeit ein.¹⁶⁴

Zabel argues that by reducing secularization to a *Kampfbegriff* it can never be anything more than a reflection of the contemporary political situation – the concept thus loses its descriptive power. This reduction engenders a blindness to the non-political content that might be conveyed with the concept.¹⁶⁵ The fact that Lübbe mostly ignores the non-polemical use of the 'secularization' is held to explain why he glossed over the historical development of the German term "*Verweltlichung*", a word that only later became a synonym for "*Säkularisierung*". Zabel notes that "*Verweltlichung*" did not have the same narrow juridical connotations that "*Säkularisierung*" would acquire after the 1930's; instead, it denoted an intransitive process in which the world becomes "ever more worldly".¹⁶⁶ Zabel intends to offer an alternative historical account of 'secularization' that, it is suggested, is premised on the de-essentialization of the concept and on the widening of its meaning to involve the term *Verweltlichung*.¹⁶⁷

Whereas Lübbe suggests that 'secularization' only became commonplace by the end of the 19th century as a polemical concept, and that '*Verweltlichung*' only appeared later, as a German translation of the first term, Zabel rather states that *Verweltlichung* already appeared in the 17th century and had become common in the early 19th century.¹⁶⁸ Significantly, in this early stage it was not used in a transitive sense, which means that it was not used juristically,

162 Zabel (1968) pp.17-19, 23-25, 151-156. In short, Zabel notes that 'secularization' was hardly used in the DGEK, that it is absent in the work of Tönnies, and that there is therefore no continuity (as Lübbe suggests) with its usage by Weber and Troeltsch.

163 Zabel (1968) pp.15-39, 155-156, 235-238, 263-264. Blumenberg mentions this and the analogous distinction between quantitative/qualitative secularization on occasion in the second edition of *Legitimacy* (1983, pp.3-8, 16-23) with reference to Zabel. Evidently, these distinctions are similar to Kamlah's differentiation between profanization and secularization.

164 Zabel (1968) p.37, cf. pp.16-22, 166.

165 Zabel (1968) pp.22, 37-38. Zabel (cf. pp.157-193) claims that Lübbe's (1965, pp.118-126) portrayal of Gogarten is too predetermined by the decision to make him a representative of the post-war climate of the CDU. He thus ignores the latter's affinity with the dialectical theology of the interbellum.

166 Blumenberg (1983) p.3, cf. pp.4-8; Zabel (1968) pp.27-132.

167 Zabel (1968) pp.15-39.

168 Lübbe (1965) pp.23-41; *ibid.* (1964) pp.223-225; Zabel (1968) pp.32-33.

to stake a claim to legitimate ownership or to assert an illegitimate dispossession. Instead, it functioned as an interpretive category, to denote a general process of a 'becoming more worldly' of culture or society, rather than a specific withdrawal of one substance. Zabel notes that the term gained prominence in the field of protestant church history, where it was applied to describe the accommodation of the classical or medieval church to secular powers.¹⁶⁹ He then goes on to show that the term already entered philosophical discourse with Hegel, who uses '*Verweltlichung*' in the pejorative-intransitive, church-historical sense.¹⁷⁰ His followers however soon adopted the term and made it suitable for the purposes of philosophical diagnosis. In this context it became a concept that pertains to the relation between theology and philosophy, or to the relation between 'idea' and 'reality'.¹⁷¹ This appearance of the term in a Hegelian setting implies that the concept became part of the philosophical conceptual depository much earlier than Lübke suggests.¹⁷² And indeed, it soon proved to be a multi-applicable concept: for instance, Hegel's student Karl Ludwig Michelet regarded *Verweltlichung* as the 'realization' of Christianity, which he saw in a Hegelian sense as the *Aufhebung* of theology. Feuerbach on the other hand rather sought to break the "Mesalliance" between theology and philosophy. Feuerbach equally thought of *Verweltlichung* in terms of the 'realization' of reason, which would also mean an "Aufhebung der Theologie durch die Philosophie", but contrary to Michelet he believed that this does not lead to an "Integration, sonder zur Überwindung des Christlichen."¹⁷³

Zabel continues to trace the development of the concept in the works of Marx, Nietzsche, Dilthey and Troeltsch, and concludes that even though there are occasions in which 'secularization' is applied in a transitive sense, this was not the predominant form.¹⁷⁴ It functioned primarily as a category of interpretation rather than as a juridical claim of dispossession. By problematizing Lübke's *juristic* conceptualization of 'secularization', Zabel's proceeds to a rebuttal of Blumenberg's attempt to falsify the secularization theorem. It is argued that Blumenberg's explicit critique of the secularization theorem depends primarily on the "Rückführung des geistesgeschichtlichen Säkularisierungsbegriffs auf den historisch-rechtlichen Begriff der Säkularisation".¹⁷⁵ Any deviation from this strict juridical notion – and its three characteristics of expropriation: identification of the expropriated substance, legitimate original ownership of the substance, and the one-sidedness of the withdrawal – is subsequently dismissed by Blumenberg as 'imprecise use' and as ignorance with regard to the 'burden of proof' that 'secularization' implies.¹⁷⁶ Zabel states that Blumenberg thereby not only fails to do justice to the way the concept is actually used by the authors he criticizes, most notably Löwith, but he also suggests that his reduction of 'secularization' to its juristic meaning is questionable from a historical perspective, since it ignores the historical line of thought where it was applied in an intransitive-interpretative sense.¹⁷⁷

169 Zabel (1968) pp.27-35.

170 Zabel (1968) pp.31-35.

171 Zabel (1968) pp.40-96.

172 Lübke (1965, pp.37-40) argues that Hegel could not use the term 'secularization' in a philosophical sense because it still possessed only the narrow juristic meaning, and hence that a philosophical-diagnostic meaning of the term was not yet available. This was only possible after its appropriation by the DGEK and its neutralization by Tönnies and Weber. Zabel (1968, pp.40-54) demonstrates that Hegel *did* use the term *Verweltlichung* and suggests that the fact that Lübke overlooks this shows his reductionist interpretation of the concept.

173 Zabel (1968) p.70, cf. pp.54-59, 68-70.

174 Zabel (1968) pp.71-97, 118-156.

175 Zabel (1968) p.233, cf. pp.232-246.

176 Blumenberg (1964) pp.242-243; *ibid.* (1983) p.64.

177 Zabel (1968) pp.198-246. Cf. Gadamer (1968) pp.201-206; Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.266-269.

This critique of Blumenberg's conception of secularization involves his representation of Löwith as the primary representative of the secularization theorem. Zabel does not wish to defend Löwith's account however; on the contrary, there are numerous instances where *Meaning in History* is criticized by Zabel for being too one-sided, reductionistic, or overly simplistic.¹⁷⁸ For instance, Zabel notes that modern historical thought cannot simply be reduced to faith in progress or futurism, and that Löwith's subsequent derivation of modern historical philosophy from Christian eschatology – purely on the basis of a shared futurism – is a dubious assertion, for which no conclusive historical evidence has been provided. "Das historische Nacheinander von Geschichtstheologie und Geschichtsphilosophie sagt nicht aus über die Gründe der Ablösung".¹⁷⁹ Löwith's account is also described as too 'idealistic':

Löwiths These läßt die sachlichen Gründe für den Fortschritt weitgehend außer acht. Die Geschichte des Fortschrittsglaubens kann aber nicht ausschließlich als ein geistesgeschichtliches Geschehen verstanden werden, sondern muß die allgemeinen Veränderungen im Bewußtsein der Menschheit und ihre Ursachen berücksichtigen.¹⁸⁰

Zabel interprets Löwith's account as a simple, mono-linear *Verfallsgeschichte* in which every historical occurrence is articulated as an "Abfall von einem Ursprünglichen".¹⁸¹ As a true *Verfallshistoriker* along the lines of Nietzsche, Löwith supposedly envisages secularization as a historical development of the depletion of modernity, which finally results in an 'overcoming' of modern historical consciousness at the conclusion of this decline, according to Zabel's reading. This would imply a final emancipation from the modern indebtedness to Christianity, and a neo-classical restoration of a proper relation to nature or the cosmos.¹⁸² Regardless of Zabel's unfavorable reading of Löwith – which, as my analysis in Chapter 1 suggests, depreciates Löwith's own critique of Nietzsche and of *Verfallsgeschichte*¹⁸³ – he does conclude that Blumenberg's critique of him is unjustified: "So exakt und methodisch durchdacht Blumenbergs Kritik der Löwithschen Säkularisierungsthese auch sein mag, der Verwendung der Interpretationskategorie Säkularisierung durch Löwith wird sie nicht gerecht."¹⁸⁴ Indeed, Zabel asserts that there is no evidence that Löwith uses 'secularization' in a juristic, transitive sense. It is argued that Löwith instead refers to secularization as an automatic historical process – instead of as an expropriation of a substance by 'the world' – and

178 Zabel (1968) pp.199-239.

179 Zabel (1968) p.200.

180 Zabel (1968) p.221. Cf. Wallace (1981) p.66.

181 Zabel (1968) pp.208, cf. pp.228-230.

182 Zabel (1968) pp.223-231. He especially refers to Löwith's 'Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus' (1952).

183 Zabel's (1968) interpretation of Löwith contradicts my own reconstruction (provided in Chapter 1) in several respects. I contend that Zabel is mistaken in portraying Löwith as a Nietzschean because he thereby ignores the fact that Nietzsche also falls under Löwith's critique of modern philosophy of history. I would say, in short, that Löwith wants to leave the pathos of active nihilism, historical relativism and the quasi-religious 'enthusiasm' of Nietzsche's 19th century pathos behind and instead seeks to emulate a Stoic-Epicurean attitude. Zabel also interprets Löwith's account in substantialistic terms (pp.200, 229), whereas I have argued that there are no clear instances of substantialism to be found in *Meaning in History*. Furthermore, Löwith's concept of secularization still functions in Zabel's reading as a claim to illegitimacy (pp.208, 226-230), albeit not in a direct juridical fashion, but more in the *Verfallsgeschichtliche* sense where secularization entails the alienation from an authentic origin. According to my reconstruction this would imply a conflation of Löwith's normative claim with his more *descriptive* account of secularization.

184 Zabel (1968) p.237.

thereby writes himself in line with Marx and Feuerbach, who have used the term in a similar, intransitive sense.¹⁸⁵

Zabel notes that Löwith's thesis was especially popular in theological circles, and that Blumenberg has subsequently confused this favorable reception with the intention behind *Meaning in History*. Instead of refuting Löwith's account Blumenberg has thereby rather 'thematized' the *theological reception* of this thesis. In this sense it is deemed "fragwürdig ... die Löwithsche Säkularisierungsthese mit geheimen theologische Ambitionen des Verfassers in Verbindung bringen zu wollen", even when "die bereitwillige Rezeption seiner Ableitung durch die Theologie eine solche Vermutung nahelegt."¹⁸⁶ Blumenberg's suggestion that the secularization theorem is nothing but an expression of the rancor of a 'dispossessed' theology, which makes the theorem itself the "final *theologumenon*", is more applicable to the theological reception of Löwith's thesis than to the thesis itself.¹⁸⁷ (In the next chapter we will find that Löwith's formula was indeed accepted among theological authors.) Zabel argues that Löwith's use of the formula contradicts the aim of these theologians: to Löwith, secularization was actually a positive phenomenon because it prepared the stage for a final overcoming of Christianity.¹⁸⁸ Zabel's final objection is that Blumenberg inclines to reductionism (not dissimilar to the reductionism of the secularization theorem he himself criticizes) by suggesting that any account that is indebted to theology is automatically illegitimate. Uncovering the purported theological nature of the secularization theorem is not a sufficient refutation of it.¹⁸⁹

Zabel's multifaceted and extensive critique of Blumenberg did not go unnoticed. In the revised version of *Legitimacy*, Blumenberg offered an elaborate rebuttal. He first of all clarifies the intended function of his derivation of 'secularization' from the expropriation model:

I myself have made use of the license of hermeneutics to uncover an implication that is hidden from the contemporary understanding in referring, for the sharper definition of the concept of secularization, to *its latent metaphorical content*. This attempt neither was meant as nor presupposed a history of the concept, and it can be made neither meaningless nor meaningful by a demonstration that the use of the term 'secularization' in the history of ideas does not take the term's political/legal or canon-law uses as its point of departure; *it is entirely independent of such evidence*. It is perfectly possible ... that the concept of secularization was introduced in a purely

185 Zabel (1968) pp.229-230, 237-238.

186 Zabel (1968) pp.239, 242-243, cf. p.231; Ruh (1980) pp.236-238, 261-262. Flasch (2017, p.549) inverts this claim by stating that Löwith was never Blumenberg's primary target: "Blumenbergs Hauptmotiv war nicht die Auseinandersetzung mit Löwith sondern die Abwehr der theologisch und kirchenpolitisch motivierten Kritik an der Moderne." I contend instead that even though Blumenberg's main target was the 'secularization theorem', he did choose Löwith as one of its primary representatives in the first iterations of his critique (1964; 1966); although admittedly Löwith's role diminished in the second edition of *Legitimacy* (1974), as Schmitt had noticed (cf. Blumenberg-Schmitt, 2007, pp.126, 134-135). Moreover, in the reception-history of Blumenberg's book Löwith maintained a prominent place as a principal opponent, as e.g. Jaeschke's (1976) study testifies. (Cf. Wallace, 1981.)

187 Blumenberg (1983) p.119, cf. pp.74-75, 114-120; *ibid.* (1964) pp.264-265.

188 Zabel (1968) p.243. In the second edition of *Legitimacy* (1983, p.28), Blumenberg responded to criticisms such as Zabel's by revising his reading of Löwith. He concedes that that Löwith wants to bring about a "renaissance of cyclical cosmology" instead of arguing for a return to a more genuine Christianity. Nonetheless, Blumenberg continues to interpret Löwith in terms of the secularization theorem, implying that 'secularization' equals an claim to illegitimacy: "The autonomy of [the modern] historical consciousness as an ultimate category is exposed as its self-deception as soon as it is recognized, in accordance with the secularization theorem, as existing by the grace of Christianity."

189 Zabel (1968) p.266.

descriptive sense and was only associatively and occasionally supplemented by a reference to political expropriation of ecclesiastical goods. Only I believe that I am able to observe that this historical association impelled the development of increased precision in the term's use in a particular direction.¹⁹⁰

Blumenberg contends that his critique of the secularization theorem does not depend on a genealogical claim of historical derivation, but rather on a “methodical-heuristic” analysis. The implicit logic of a concept or metaphor is analytically disconnected from its actual historical use. This inherent logic implies that if the concept is used in a precise manner it will automatically reveal its true metaphorical form, i.e., that of illegitimate expropriation. However, if this true form does not appear then Blumenberg can declare its formulation ambiguous and imprecise.¹⁹¹ Zabel may not have decisively refuted Blumenberg, but it did force the latter to discard pretensions of historical accuracy and instead rely on a more ahistorical hermeneutical approach that investigates “latent metaphorical content” that is separated from historical usage. In the next chapter I will suggest that such a hermeneutical approach can also be seen to yield different results than the model of expropriation.

Incidentally, Blumenberg's response to Zabel that his analysis of ‘secularization’ was not meant to be strictly historical, ties in with a similar retort he directed at Hans-Georg Gadamer in the 1974 version of *Legitimacy*. Gadamer had written a review of *Legitimacy* in 1968 in which he insisted that ‘secularization’ serves a “legitimate hermeneutische Funktion ... Er bringt dem Selbstverständnis des Gewordenen und Gegenwärtigen eine ganze Dimension verborgenen Sinnes zu und zeigt auf diese Weise, daß das Gegenwärtige weit mehr ist und bedeutet, als es von sich weiß.”¹⁹² In response, Blumenberg noted in 1974 that this hermeneutical idea of “a dimension of hidden meaning” simply indulges the theological claims to modernity's illegitimacy in terms of the hidden heteronomy ‘secularization’ supposedly unveils. Admitting the existence of a ‘hidden dimension’ is a concession to ‘theology’, that “can only mean ... that by the concept of secularization the self-comprehension of the modern age as worldliness has to be explained as a superficial, foreground appearance.”¹⁹³ Gadamer plays into the hands of theologians who seek to subjugate modernity to its past, Blumenberg states, because it presents the Modern Age as something that is determined by a substance of foreign origin, which it can neither disclose, due to its own false self-consciousness, nor dissolve.¹⁹⁴ This indicates that, ultimately, Blumenberg does not reject (transitive) ‘secularization’ as a hermeneutical concept that purports to provide historical understanding but as an ideological-political instrument that serves the purpose of binding the present to the past. The secularization theorem “does not allow the product of secularization to detach itself from the process of secularization and make itself autonomous”, i.e., it precludes attempts at emancipation from the past.¹⁹⁵ In short, Zabel's and Gadamer's critiques illustrate that Blumenberg's primary aim is normative and philosophical, not necessarily purely historical; his objective is a philosophical defense of the legitimacy of modern self-assertion, not ‘historical understanding’ along the lines of

190 Blumenberg (1983) p.18 (emphasis added).

191 Blumenberg (1983) pp.13-25. Ruh (1980, pp.71-72) notes that Blumenberg's recourse to a hidden “Hintergrundmetaphorik” is consistent with his earlier work, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (2010).

192 Gadamer (1968) pp.201-202. Cf. Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.266-270.

193 Blumenberg (1983) p.17

194 Blumenberg (1983) pp.17-18, 113-120. Blumenberg relates this to the Heideggerian notion of *Seinsvergessenheit*. Modernity's hidden theological substance is both “essential to it and yet ... hidden and withdrawn from it” (p.17).

195 Blumenberg (1983) p.18.

Gadamer, nor for that matter to offer a historical reconstruction of past usage of the secularization concept, as Zabel intends.

Unlike Gadamer, it is however not Zabel's intention to rehabilitate the secularization theorem. One of the objectives of Zabel's study was to analyze the "*Tragfähigkeit*" (literally: 'load bearing capacity') of the concept of secularization, and by the end of his investigation he does not appear convinced that it has much (although he does not elaborate to great extent on the reasons behind this judgement).¹⁹⁶ He suggests that although 'secularization' cannot be reduced to the narrow juristic definition, the concept does possess a natural inclination towards conservative histories of decline. In other words, although 'secularization' does not necessarily amount to a juridical allegation of 'debt', it does easily lend itself to more general claims that the present possesses some kind of 'guilt' vis-à-vis its past. Zabel hence expresses doubt as to whether the concept has any use beyond this sphere and also whether it possesses any historical viability. The concept displays "eine Affinität zu verfallsgeschichtlichen Modellen historischer Illegitimität, die bereits für den kirchengeschichtlichen Begriff typisch ist. Gefragt werden muß, inwieweit solche Konstruktionen geistesgeschichtlich verifizierbar sind. Diese Frage ist auch an Löwith's Ableitung des modernen geschichtlichen Denkens zu stellen."¹⁹⁷

In sum, we can observe that the aim of Zabel's project is similar to Lübke's, in that both trace the historical development of the concept of secularization and, by being attentive to its wide range of applicability, subsequently de-essentialize it. They both show that the meaning of 'secularization' is by no means fixed or unchangeable. Zabel's *critique* of Lübke also stems from this approach: he corrects the latter by showing that 'secularization' has an even wider scope of application than has been suggested. However, in both cases this de-essentialization has its limits: whereas Lübke ultimately concedes that 'secularization' carries irreducible connotations of illegitimate expropriation, Zabel, who contests this view, nonetheless doubts whether the concept can be used beyond the scope of conservative *Verfallsgeschichten*. In Chapter 7 we will find that the secularization concept can however also be used for progressive or revolutionary narratives of emancipation, as the work of Jacob Taubes demonstrates. Regarding the historical reflection on the concept of secularization Zabel has raised an important issue, namely the question of the empirical *Tragfähigkeit* of secularization theories. Zabel thereby approximates the concerns of Jaeschke and others, in expressing doubts whether a theoretical or abstract discussion about the history of secularization can or should exist without the support of historical research.¹⁹⁸ It has been suggested that such theories require some sort of an 'empirical verification', although, as we have seen with Jaeschke, this in turn might lead to a positivistic conception of historical research, according to which 'theories' can be tested by direct access to theory-free 'historical facts'. Zabel, who does not seem to endorse this view, nonetheless does not explain what the relevant criteria of *Tragfähigkeit* might be and thus what the relationship between historical theory and historical investigation should look like.¹⁹⁹

Conclusion

The purpose of these three chapters is to demonstrate the influence that the philosophical contributions of Löwith, Schmitt and Blumenberg exerted on the broader secularization

196 Zabel (1968) pp.157, 231.

197 Zabel (1968) p.266.

198 Zabel (1968) pp.265-267; Kamlah (1969) p.49, Jaeschke (1976) pp.12-50; Ruh (1980) pp.351-362; Adam (2001) pp.147-149.

199 This question will be addressed further in Chapter 8.

debate. The current chapter focused especially on the way in which these contributions were drawn into a historiographical discourse on the applicability of the concept of secularization in historical accounts on the origin of modernity. This investigation also sheds light on how ‘philosophy’ and ‘historiography’ as academic disciplines interact and moreover prove themselves to be intertwined in such a context. Kesting and Koselleck, named “Schmitt’s historians” by Müller, actually convey philosophical-historical *Geistesgeschichten* rather than purely descriptive historical accounts.²⁰⁰ In this respect they are similar in nature to the accounts of Löwith and Schmitt, but they have a narrower scope and a more precise explanatory function: Koselleck traces the terminus a quo of a current malaise to the *philosophes* and the secret societies of the Enlightenment, and Kesting is more concerned with the terminus ad quem of this development, namely the latent “Weltbürgerkrieg” of the Cold War. Jaeschke, by contrast, purportedly espouses a less ‘speculative’ approach to historical research, but he does intend to contribute to a philosophical debate: his goal is to lend empirical support to Blumenberg’s philosophical defense of modernity. It can be argued that Kesting, Koselleck and Jaeschke thereby operate in a similar fashion: they adopt a general philosophical-historical thesis or a particular definition of a concept (‘secularization’ or ‘the political’) provided by Löwith, Schmitt or Blumenberg, and seek to ‘apply’ it to history, by writing more specialized historical accounts that further thematize and expand the philosophical debate between the primary three authors. Kamlah also positively expands on a particular philosophical approach to history, but he does this primarily by further clarifying the conceptual framework that assumedly precedes historical investigation, i.e., by offering conceptual distinctions between eschatology and utopianism and between (transitive) secularization and (intransitive) profanization.

My reconstruction suggests that Lübbe and Zabel – who also operate on the intersection between philosophy and history – move in a different direction: rather than *applying* a particular definition of the concept of secularization in historical research they attempt to de-essentialize the concept itself through historical analysis. By recounting the history of its use and noting its broad range of applicability and its semantic flexibility they in effect reveal the contingency and contestability of its current usage. Zabel goes further in this than Lübbe; whereas the latter’s ambivalence gives rise to the impression that the concept can be fixated in its juridical application, thus providing ammunition for Blumenberg, Zabel rejects the suggestion that ‘secularization’ is essentially a juridical concept that denotes illegitimate expropriation. But also Zabel does not give free rein to the concept of secularization. The concept might not necessarily imply ‘debt’, but it does appear to be most at home in conservative-pessimistic narratives of modernity’s assumed ‘guilt’, he suggests. However, whereas this is the case in the German secularization debate of the 1950’s and 1960’s it arguably does not encompass the concept’s full range: not only does Zabel ignore the way it is used in Anglo-American sociology of religion from the 1960’s up until the so-called ‘post-secular turn’ – i.e., as an intransitive, seemingly value-neutral concept – he also did not foresee the option of envisaging ‘secularization’ as a positive realization of a kind of revolutionary potential in religious traditions, that is, the way in which it would be espoused authors such as Jacob Taubes (who will be discussed in Chapter 7).²⁰¹

The contributions of Lübbe and Zabel are also significant because they enable a further understanding of how Löwith and Blumenberg relate to ‘history’ – both as a dimension of reality and as an academic discipline. Zabel’s claim that Löwith is essentially a Nietzschean *Verfallshistoriker* who strives for a historical overcoming of historical consciousness has already

200 Müller (2003) pp.104-115.

201 Cf. De Vriese (2016) pp.33-37.

been countered in Chapter 1. In short, it should suffice to note here that whereas Zabel points to a real pitfall for Löwith, it is one that the latter thought he could avoid by emphasizing that history is neither characterized by progress or decline, and that ‘truth’ is not determined by the historicity of the person who utters it.²⁰² We have also seen that Lübke’s analysis of ‘secularization’ helped Blumenberg consolidate his claim that ‘theology’ aims to undermine modernity by asserting illegitimate ownership of a religious substance. When Zabel casted doubt on the historical veracity of this reduction of ‘secularization’ to ‘expropriation’, Blumenberg abandoned the (more or less implicit) suggestion that this was a historical claim and instead placed the full weight of his methodological argument on the assertion that ‘secularization’ has a “latent metaphorical content” with an inherent logic that can be separated from its actual historical use. Zabel’s contention that the concept also has a certain (be it limited) interpretative potential was further explicated by Gadamer, who stated that ‘secularization’ has a legitimate function in unveiling a “dimension of hidden meaning” in the multilayered historicity of the present condition. Blumenberg rejected this proposal, albeit it not necessarily on hermeneutic grounds; he rather deplors talk of this “dimension” because it is supposedly placed beyond the reach of modern human self-assertion. Seen from Blumenberg’s perspective, Gadamer’s (crypto-Heideggerian) veneration of historicity is on par with Löwith’s deference to the immutable cosmos or, for that matter, theological notions of transcendence. All are seen as attempts to subjugate the human individual to something *other*, attempts which are meant to diminish the modest instruments of self-assertion: scientific rationality and culture-building through myths and metaphors. Blumenberg’s response to Zabel’s critique indicates, in sum, that ‘historical evidence’ does not have the final word in his defense of modernity, just as his reaction to Gadamer suggests that he was not after “historical understanding” in the latter’s sense.

I conclude with a brief reflection on the purported efficacy of a Löwithian ‘secularization theorem’ in the secularization debate. Blumenberg suggests that it is possible to differentiate between an ideal-typical ‘secularization theorem’ on the one hand and the actual, historical usage of the concept of secularization on the other. The extent to which the ideal-type reveals itself then depends on how precisely the concept is used. In this respect I suggest that if one *does* focus on the actual use of ‘secularization’ by authors in this debate – for instance, by Koselleck and Kesting – it is not evident that they are indebted to this ideal-type, especially not if the ‘secularization theorem’ is understood in a narrow sense, as a clearly defined hypothesis of historical derivation in terms of the illegitimate expropriation of a theological substance. Blumenberg and Jaeschke denounce any use that deviates from this ideal-type as imprecise, but I propose a different view: Kesting’s and Koselleck’s application of Löwith’s formula (‘progress is secularized eschatology’) illustrates that ‘secularization’ often had more of a rhetorical purpose than that it comprised a theoretical claim. Kesting and Koselleck used Löwith’s formula not only because it was “well-known”, but also because it evoked a vague, undefined sense of modernity’s purported ‘guilt’ and since – when removed from the original intention of its author – it was flexible enough to lend support to a Schmitt-inspired critique of enlightened modernity. However, regardless of their differences, neither Löwith, Schmitt, Kesting nor Koselleck placed the full normative weight of their arguments on the purportedly ‘secularized’ nature of modern progress and the philosophy of history, as Blumenberg’s depiction of the ‘secularization theorem’ suggests. Moreover, it can be noted that the fact that Kesting and Koselleck, despite being presented as faithful students of Schmitt, also differed in significant

202 Cf. Löwith’s response to Gadamer in ‘Vermittlung und Unmittelbarkeit bei Hegel, Marx und Feuerbach’ (1966b, pp.215-220).

respects from their teacher is a further indication that the secularization debate was centered more on loosely organized ‘camps’ or temporary alliances than that it consisted of a struggle between a single ‘secularization theorem’ and its opponents. Zabel argues that Blumenberg’s critique of ‘secularization’ is more applicable to the theological reception of Löwith’s thesis than to Löwith himself. In the next chapter we will discover that there is something to be said for this, especially because it is in these accounts that ‘secularization’ *does* fulfill a more clearly defined normative function. It is also here that we will find true instances of ‘substantialism’, albeit in a way that suggests different “background metaphors” than that of expropriation.

Chapter 6

Theology: The Roots of Modernity and the Metaphorics of Secularization

Introduction

The critique of the ‘secularization theorem’ already indicates that *theology* plays an important role in the secularization debate, if only as an ideal-typical antithesis to the pro-Enlightenment narratives that Hans Blumenberg, Walter Jaeschke and Wilhelm Kamlah have put forward. These authors portray ‘theology’ as a position of rancor and destitution, a stance that bemoans its own obsolescence and therefore attempts to deprive counter-positions of legitimacy. They accuse other authors, such as Löwith, of occupying positions that are ‘crypto-theological’ because they rely on a “für historisches Erkennen unzugängliches substanzontologisches Geschichtsmodell”.¹ Regardless of who is counted as a ‘theologian’ and who as a ‘crypto-theologian’ it is assumed that they wield the same agenda, encapsulated by the secularization theorem. Meanwhile, while a commentator such as Hermann Zabel has questioned the existence of a single secularization theorem he nonetheless assumes that theologically informed secularization narratives have a natural penchant for anti-modern conservatism.² In short, even though ‘secularization’ *can* be used in a variety of ways according to Zabel, he does confirm the impression – advanced by Jaeschke and Blumenberg – that ‘theology’ is a more or less homogeneous polemical position.

In line with the previous chapter, the current chapter will demonstrate that this is not necessarily the case, i.e., that although it is possible to speak of different ‘camps’ in the secularization debate, where similar concepts and rhetorical instruments are used (such as Löwith’s formula ‘progress is secularized eschatology’), each camp itself contains a variety of different positions. We will find that there are indeed some points of overlap to be discerned between the theories of Löwith and Schmitt on the one hand and the theological authors that will be discussed in this chapter on the other, which especially come to the fore when contrasted with Blumenberg’s. However, this overlap should not cause one to overlook the significant differences. Moreover, I will argue that the theological perspective cannot simply be equated with anti-modernism; various theologians addressed here expressly claim to be pro-modern. The question, of course, is *which* ‘modernity’ they thereby endorse.

1 Jaeschke (1976) p.35. Cf. Blumenberg (1964) pp.251-265; *ibid.* (1983) pp.107-120; Kamlah (1969) pp.53-70; Zabel (1968) pp.239, 266; Flasch (2017) pp.471-486, 558-581.

2 Zabel (1968) pp.265-267.

One important reason why it will prove worthwhile to investigate the theological perspective is because it gives us further insight into how the polemics between Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt resonate in different provinces of the broader secularization debate. In this case I trace this resonance in theological writings of the 1950's and early 1960's. This allows for a fuller understanding of the reception history of Löwith's thesis. We have seen that whereas Schmitt, Koselleck and Kesting adopt Löwith's idea that 'progress is secularized eschatology', they do not place the full normative weight of their arguments on this claim. Ulrich Ruh, Zabel and Jaeschke have observed that a greater significance was attributed to Löwith's theory in theological circles. We will find that 'secularization' indeed fulfills a more clearly normative function in narratives on secularization that are theologically informed.³ Some authors in this context explicitly reference *Meaning in History*, such as Rudolf Bultmann in *History and Eschatology* (1957), Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker in *The Relevance of Science* (1964), and finally Eric Voegelin in *The New Science of Politics* (1952). However, other voices in this debate – e.g., Friedrich Delekat, Alfred Müller-Armack, Romano Guardini and Friedrich Gogarten – make similar claims about the Christian origins of modern (historical or progressive) thought without mentioning Löwith.⁴ Regardless of whether Löwith is explicitly referred to or not, we will discover that the basic claim of modernity's purported 'indebtedness' to Christianity has an important function in these theological narratives, more important than in Koselleck's and Kesting's for instance, but that it does not necessarily amount to a (substantialist) claim of illegitimacy. This chapter not only focusses on the efficacy of Löwith's thesis and how it became disconnected from his own areligious philosophy. It will also shed light on Schmitt's intellectual proximity to certain prominent theologians, most notably Gogarten and Bultmann, and to a lesser extent Guardini. These theologians can be seen to espouse some form of 'theological decisionism' that is comparable to Schmitt's political theology and which, we will find, is thus susceptible to a similar line of criticism. Lastly, this investigation will help appreciate further the adequacy of Blumenberg's critique of the secularization theorem. It highlights anew the issue of 'substantialism' and it will allow for a reflection on whether Blumenberg's juridical interpretation – centering on the model of 'expropriation' – of 'secularization' is indeed justified.

The present chapter is organized as follows: first, we discuss different conceptions of 'secularization' on the basis of the works of Delekat, Müller-Armack, Guardini and Gogarten. I subsequently address the theme of 'modernity' from the theological perspective by zooming in on Voegelin's *New Science of Politics* – a text that itself is not explicitly theological in nature but which does provide better insight in the conceptual framework behind the theological works under discussion – after which I do the same with the theme of 'history' by focusing on Bultmann's *History and Eschatology*. After this investigation of the most important theological contributions and themes in this debate it becomes possible to provide a general overview of

3 Ruh (1980) pp.199-210, 236-238, 265-267; Zabel (1968) pp.196, 231, 242-243; Jaeschke (1976) pp.14-50; Timm (1967); *ibid.* (1977).

4 With regard to Gogarten, I mainly focus on his most important work in this context, *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit* (originally published in 1953, I use the 1966 edition), where Löwith is not mentioned. He is however mentioned in Gogarten's paper 'Das abendländische Geschichtsdenken' (1954, pp.336-359). Gogarten concurs that the secularist idea of progress is a deviated form of eschatology, but he disagrees with Löwith's 'gnostic' conception of Christianity. It should moreover be noted that while this chapter deals with the 'theological perspective' on the German secularization debate this does not mean that each author addressed here is a professional theologian. For instance, Müller-Armack is commonly known as an economist and Von Weizsäcker as a physicist and philosopher. Rather, I have selected prominent authors who in one way or another occupy a consciously theistic or theologically informed position in this debate, and who thereby maintain a conception of 'Christianity' as a normative ground on the basis of which 'modernity' is evaluated.

these polemics. Doing so I first reflect on how these theological accounts can be related to the perspectives of Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt, while focusing especially on the various dissimilarities and points of overlap between the different authors in question. This leads to an analysis of what constitutes this interplay of similarities and differences: namely, an essential disagreement on how the key concepts that occur in each narrative – secularization, Christianity and modernity – should be interpreted and evaluated. In conclusion I make some observations on what should arguably be seen as the determining “background metaphors” of the theological secularization debate. I distinguish two narrative templates: first, that of ‘uprooting’, ‘deracination’ or, in short, the ‘organic metaphor’, and second, the template of ‘idolatry’.

Theological Views on Secularization

Delekat: Secularization as Deracination

The protestant theologian Friedrich Delekat held his *Rektoratsrede* in 1957 at the university of Mainz, titled *Über den Begriff der Säkularisation* (published in 1958), at a time when theological reflections on ‘secularization’ were in great demand.⁵ This lecture offered what could be regarded as the nearest thing to Blumenberg’s portrayal of the ‘secularization theorem’, which is why his work forms a good starting point for our discussion of the theological perspective. Moreover, this poignant account will provide us with an valuable insight into the “latent metaphorical content” of comparable theological views on secularization. Delekat is well-known – mainly via Blumenberg’s critique of him – for noting that modernity possesses an “objektive Kulturschuld” towards Christianity. This phrase has been quoted in *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* as proof of the ineradicable juridical connotations of ‘secularization’.⁶ Ruh suggests that Delekat has thereby provided the formula that best encapsulates the secularization-as-expropriation format that Blumenberg employs.⁷ Indeed, Delekat’s contribution can be regarded as an unambiguously negative assessment of modernity – in so far as it is characterized by anti-Christian secularization – from a conservative-Christian point of view. He argues that the depletion of a Christian substance in the process of modernization hails the downfall of Western culture. Modernity is portrayed as a state of uncertainty, aimlessness and meaninglessness, i.e., nihilism.⁸ This is, according to Delekat, essentially an effect of human hubris:

Atheismus, Antihumanismus und Nihilismus kennzeichnen sowohl den Grad wie den Charakter der Verweltlichung, in der sich unsere heutige Welt befindet. ... Sie möchte eine Welt ohne Gott sein und wird zu einer entmenschlichten Welt. In ihr möchte der Mensch die Herrschaft über die Welt haben und verliert dabei die Herrschaft über sich selbst. In ihr strebt er nach Sicherheit und geht ständig einher am Rande des Nichts, begleitet von der Angst von ihrer Vernichtung.⁹

This malaise is a specifically *post*-Christian phenomenon, Delekat argues. That is, Christianity formed the necessary precondition for modern secular nihilism. This raises the question, first,

5 Nijk (1968) p.84; Stallmann (1960) p.26.

6 Blumenberg (1964) p.242. Cf. *ibid.* (1983) pp.24-25; Delekat (1958) p.60; Jaeschke (1976) pp.33-34; Ruh (1980) pp.75, 358; Kroll (2010) p.136.

7 Ruh (1980) p.75. Cf. Delekat (1958) pp.50-73; Blumenberg (1983) p.598 fn.15-16.

8 Delekat (1958) pp.8, 37-38, 64.

9 Delekat (1958) p.38.

how an originally Christian culture could become corrupted and transform into its counterpart, and second, what kind of a response this necessitates according to Delekat.¹⁰

With regard to the first question, Delekat offers a definition of ‘secularization’ and one of ‘Christianization’ to explain this process. In his account, ‘secularization’ can take on three interconnected forms that relate to successive stages of a single development: first there is secularization as the “Entdämonisierung” or simply ‘disenchantment’ of the world.¹¹ This occurs when Christianity is introduced to what is called a pre- or outer-Christian culture, e.g., the Greco-Roman world of Antiquity or the non-Western world in modern times. It implies an end to polytheism, animism or a general divinization of the cosmos, and as such this process can be called ‘secularization’ because it discloses the worldliness of the world. Moreover, Delekat claims that it enables a ‘Christian freedom’ over against this world. The second form of secularization is the *Verweltlichung* of the church, which entails the incorporation of non-Christian elements into Christian thought, for instance in the Middle Ages, as the direct result of the church’s attempt to further Christianize the post-classical world.¹² And thirdly, secularization takes on its modern anti-Christian form, Delekat argues, when a formerly Christian world detaches itself from its Christian roots.¹³ The turning point occurs when the world – having been disclosed by Christianity as ‘worldly’ but only by the grace of its otherness from ‘the spiritual’ – comes to identify itself primarily as worldly ‘unto itself’, neglecting its in-built reference to otherworldliness. If ‘secularization’ serves “zur Kennzeichnung einer Welt, die einmal christlich gewesen, jetzt aber weitgehend achristlich bzw. anti-christlich geworden ist, so ist gemeint, daß die Weltlichkeit der Welt zum Bewußtsein ihrer selbst gelangt ist.”¹⁴

The shift from worldliness *unto the spiritual* to worldliness *unto itself* is the result of a tension that comes into existence whenever Christianity interacts with the world. Delekat thematizes the adage that Christianity should be ‘in the world, not of the world’, which means that it should strike a precarious balance between an affirmative and a negative stance towards the world. This is where Delekat’s definition of Christianization comes into play: that is, he introduces a division between two forms of Christianization, namely an inauthentic “Christianisierung” and a genuine “Verchristlichung”.¹⁵ While the former variety entails the expansion of worldly power under the thin veil of ‘Christendom’, it is only the latter form that signifies the true Christian mission. However, the genuine *Verchristlichung* also implies a certain degree of secularization, because the Church has to appropriate non-Christian elements in order to fulfill its mission. Hence, secularization is only interpreted negatively in relation to *Christianisierung*, because it draws the spiritual sphere (e.g., the church) into the worldly sphere, whereas in terms of *Verchristlichung* secularization is the result of a positive approximation of the church to the world, which results in the elevation of the world to a Christian moral standard. Delekat however warns that also the genuine *Verchristlichung* has its limits, because the two spheres cannot coincide, nor should this be attempted.¹⁶

It is not entirely clear from Delekat’s account where the turning point can be found where

10 Cf. Jaeschke (1976) p.34.

11 Delekat (1958) pp.18-22. The notion of ‘Entdämonisierung’ is comparable with Kamlah’s (1969, pp.53-58) notion of ‘profanization’ or the Weberian concept of disenchantment, but for Delekat the de-demonization of the world is essentially a consequence of Christianity. Cf.: Gogarten (1966) pp.13-24.

12 Delekat (1958) pp.25-33. Cf.: Zabel (1968, pp.27-35) on the church-historical use of “Verweltlichung” to denote the accommodation of the Church to secular powers in Antiquity or the Middle Ages.

13 Delekat (1958) pp.18-21, 33-34.

14 Delekat (1958) p.34. Cf. Jaeschke (1976) p.33.

15 Delekat (1958) pp.22-30.

16 Delekat (1958) pp.22-33. The notion that the spiritualization of the world can initiate a process of secularization is something we can also find in Löwith’s (1949, pp.145-159) analysis of Joachim of Fiore.

secularization becomes self-conscious and thus detrimental. It either takes place at the point where *Verchristlichung* turns into *Christianisierung*, i.e., where Christianity turns into a civilizational Christendom, or it occurs at the point where the process of *Verchristlichung* has reached its limit – as indicated by eschatology – and as a result somehow automatically inverts into its counterpart, a worldliness unto itself.¹⁷ In any case, Delekat makes it clear that the gradual alienation from the Christian foundation of Western culture coincides with a progressive decline towards the aforementioned state of nihilism: what begins with a negation of God becomes a negation of humanity, until finally every orientation or value disappears.¹⁸ This raises the question why atheism must necessarily lead to an all-encompassing malaise. Or in the words of Jaeschke, it remains unexplained why “die entgöttlichte Welt *notwendig* eine entmenschlichte sein müsse”.¹⁹

One possible answer can be distilled from *Über den Begriff der Säkularisation*, which has to do with the ‘substantialism’ that is, as Jaeschke and Blumenberg suspected, indeed inherent to Delekat’s narrative.²⁰ Throughout his presentation it becomes apparent that Delekat presupposes that Christianity is the sole source of humanity, morality and order. This means that any departure from it could only entail dehumanization, demoralization and disorder. However, this too has its limits, Delekat argues, because these anti-Christian developments remain *substantively* determined by its Christian origin. This leads him to ask the rhetorical question: “Was geschieht, wenn keinerlei christliche Substanz mehr da ist, die noch säkularisiert werden konnte?” To this the answer is ‘nothing’, because the entire development ends here: “Es ist doch naiv anzunehmen, daß sich schon irgendetwas Neues herausbilden werde, wenn das Alte zerfallen sei, z.B. eine neue Form der Familie oder eine neue Form der Demokratie oder neue gesellschaftliche Sitte.”²¹ The suggestion is that once the Christian substance – which acts as the sole productive cultural force – is depleted, it brings the process of secularization to a halt. Although this might evoke unfortunate “Rückfälle in primitive Magie und Zauberei” it can also form an occasion for a genuine “Besinnung” on the Christian roots of modernity.²² It is this call to reflection, a reorientation towards what is essential, that is the principal purpose of Delekat’s account. It functions as a diagnosis of a malaise – nihilism – that also prescribes the cure, namely a renewal of Christian religiosity. Only this will bring about the necessary revitalization of culture, Delekat claims.²³

Delekat’s idea that ‘secularization’ unveils an “objective cultural debt” of modernity towards Christianity has been put forward by Blumenberg as a paradigmatic formula for the secularization theorem: it invokes a juridical framework, and it centers on notions such as debt/guilt and the expropriation of a theological substance.²⁴ If we compare Delekat’s account to the characteristics of the ideal-typical ‘secularization theorem’ it becomes clear that there are indeed significant parallels. Delekat for instance notes – without referencing Löwith’s *Meaning in History* – that modern conceptions of ‘progress’ are secularized forms of belief in providence. On Marxist belief in the historical dialectic, he for instance states: “Theologisch gesehen ist dieser Glaube eine säkularisierte Form der christliche Idee des ‘Heilsplanes’.”²⁵ His

17 Delekat (1958) pp.33-40.

18 Delekat (1958) pp.7-8, 35-38, 58-59

19 Jaeschke (1976) p.34 (emphasis added). Cf. Walther (2001) pp.131-133.

20 Jaeschke (1976) pp.33-34; Blumenberg (1983) pp.24-25; Delekat (1958) pp.39-47, 58-60.

21 Delekat (1958) pp.40-41.

22 Delekat (1958) pp.40-41, cf. pp.12, 39-43, 64-65.

23 Delekat (1958) pp.12, 22, 41-43, 47, 64-65, 71. Cf. Lübke (1965) pp.112-117.

24 Blumenberg (1983) pp.25, 598 fn. 15; *ibid.* (1964) p.242.

25 Delekat (1958) p.54.

substantialism moreover engenders clear examples of a transitive use of ‘secularization’: nihilism is secularized eschatology, modern science operates as a secularized *Weltanschauung*, and ‘the declaration of the rights of man’ is nothing more than a secularized confession of faith.²⁶ Moreover, when Delekat explains why an awareness of the ‘true’ nature of secularization is necessary in the first place, he articulates a notion of a “dimension of hidden meaning”:

Die Aufdeckung und Bewußtmachung des Säkularisierungsvorgangs wahrt die Kontinuität zwischen Gegenwart und Vergangenheit. ... Es gibt eine Kontinuität des Geschichtlichen auch im *negative Verhältnis der Vergangenheit zur Gegenwart*. ... Die Wirklichkeit, in der wir tatsächlich leben, ist überdeckt von irreführenden Vorstellungen. Sie verhindern, daß die Situation, in der man sich befindet, so gesehen wird, wie sie ist.²⁷

By revealing the present situation “wie sie ist”, Delekat means to uncover an implicit *Schuld* with regard to the past. This is the type of rhetoric that Blumenberg found especially objectionable in Gadamer’s suggestion that ‘secularization’ can uncover “a dimension of hidden meaning”. To Blumenberg, Delekat’s theory offers a prime example of how ‘secularization’ is used to delegitimize modern areligious self-consciousness and to subsequently consolidate the position of ‘theology’ over against it.²⁸

However, it should be noted that the identification of Delekat’s account with the ideal-typical secularization theorem is not exhaustive. That is to say, not only is Delekat’s use of ‘secularization’ not consistently transitive or substantialist, he also does not solely rely on the “latent metaphorical content” of the expropriation model, as Blumenberg suggests.²⁹ It rather indicates the presence of another implicit metaphor that we will encounter throughout our discussion of the theological perspective. This is the ‘organic metaphor’ that already emerged from our brief discussion of Ernst Troeltsch, which prescribes that Christianity functions as a ‘fertile soil’ for culture to remain ‘rooted’ or ‘embedded’ in.³⁰ This template suggest that uprooting culture from this soil, i.e., secularization in its pejorative sense, would entail a withering away, a gradual decline into nothingness. The ‘substance’ implies a continuing presence of the productive force that derives from this ‘fertile soil’, but it is precisely this substance that becomes exhausted once the uprooting has taken place. This metaphor, rather than ‘expropriation’, explains why theologians such as Delekat (and Troeltsch) fear that ‘secularization’ will result in nihilism: once the roots are cut through, the vital life-force may linger for a limited time, but disconnected from its source it eventually becomes depleted.³¹

26 Delekat (1958) pp.6-8, 31, 37-38, 49-55.

27 Delekat (1958) pp.55-56 (emphasis added). Cf. Blumenberg (1983) pp.17, 25; Gadamer (1968) pp.201-202.

28 Blumenberg (1983) pp.16-25; Gadamer (1968) pp.201-202; Zabel (1968) p.235.

29 Blumenberg (1983) p.18. Cf. Delekat (1958) pp.12, 22, 34-43, 64-65. Delekat for instance also suggests that “Wissenschaft ... die Funktion übernehmen wird, die bis dahin das Dogma der Kirche ausgeübt hatte, nämlich die einer allgemeingeistigen Existenzsicherung.” (pp.49-50, emphasis added.)

30 Delekat (1958) pp.12, 22, 41-43, 64-65; Troeltsch (1911) p.102.

31 I contend that the expropriation model is less well equipped to explain how the expropriated substance remains tied to its origin. The proclamation of ownership rights over an estranged substance is not enough to suggest how this substance can remain intrinsically ‘Christian’ in nature despite its alienation from its source. Moreover, the organic metaphor can explain why secularization-as-deracination automatically results in nihilism according to authors such as Delekat. (Cf. Jaeschke, 1976, p.34.)

Müller-Armack: Deracination and Idolatry

This organic metaphor comes to the fore with a striking clarity in the book *Das Jahrhundert ohne Gott* (1948) by Alfred Müller-Armack, an economist and Christian-democratic politician. Hermann Lübke views Müller-Armack's work as a prime example of the post-war function of 'secularization': it operates as a "zeitdiagnostische Kategorie" and as a "Schlüsselbegriff, mit dem man sich das Verständnis der ungeheuerlichen Ereignisse zu eröffnen versuchte."³² Before we zoom in on the recurrence of the organic metaphor, some words on the general outline of his account. While Müller-Armack's work has a more delineated historical focus than Delekat's – its scope is limited to intellectual developments in the 19th century and how they led to the catastrophic events of the 1930's and 1940's – the underlying theory is very similar. He too regards secularization as an alienation from what is essential, resulting in a descent into nihilism, and he likewise pleads for a collective return to Christianity. What Müller-Armack however adds to this narrative is a creative appropriation of Max Weber's famous notion of 'modern polytheism', a concept that signifies the differentiation of modern society. In his *Science as Vocation*, Weber stated that in modern society, "the numerous gods of yore, divested of their magic and hence assuming the shape of impersonal forces, arise from their graves ... and resume their eternal struggle among themselves."³³ This notion is central to *Jahrhundert ohne Gott*, where it is interpreted *theologically*, as connected with the Christian topos of 'idolatry'.

Let us see how he arrives at this point; first, it is assumed that humanity is 'by nature' oriented towards transcendence. However, humans have also been created with a free will, which means that this natural inclination can either be used to turn to the divine, or instead to the world. The latter would however mean that the world becomes divinized, because the attributes of God are automatically transposed unto an alternative object of worship, i.e., an idol.³⁴

Die von ihrem Daseinsgrunde abgeschnittene religiöse Haltung schafft sich einen Ersatz, indem sie einen anderen Wert mit dem Attribut des Göttlichen ausstattet. Diese Idolbildung hat die rationalen wie die irrationalen Kräfte des 19. Jahrhunderts gespeist. Diese Zeit ist, so wenig sie es sich auch eingestehen wollte, eine Epoche säkularisierter Glaubenskämpfe.³⁵

Hence, the only choice that exists according to Müller-Armack is between true faith or idolatry. If the latter is chosen then a multitude of competing idols emerge as objects of worship, between which these "säkularisierter Glaubenskämpfe" ensue.³⁶ Throughout the 19th century, idols such as 'reason', 'Volk', 'nature', and 'art' made their appearance as a consequence of the modern *Glaubensabfall*.³⁷ We will discover that this notion of the detrimental 'divinization' of the world plays a prominent role in the theological conceptualization of secularization.³⁸

With regard to the aforementioned 'organic metaphor', it becomes clear in *Jahrhundert ohne Gott* that Christianity is perceived as the sole origin of cultural life – as the only viable

32 Lübke (1965) p.109. Cf. *ibid.* (1964) p.62; Nijk (1968) pp.50-52.

33 Weber (2004) p.24. Cf. Müller-Armack (1948) pp.59-65, 111. We will discover in the next chapter that Marquard (1983) also appropriates Weber's notion of modern polytheism, albeit for the purpose of a liberal-atheistic celebration of the pluralization of society.

34 Müller-Armack (1948) pp.54, 60.

35 Müller-Armack (1948) p.62.

36 Müller-Armack (1948) p.62, cf. pp.7, 54-69, 141-143.

37 Müller-Armack (1948) pp.55-69, 76-81, 106, 173-177.

38 Cf. Gogarten (1966) pp.15-26, 140-142.

soil for a culture to grow in – and that ‘secularization’ entails a severance of this lifeline. This is even more explicit than in Delekat’s account: not only does Müller-Armack refer to a severance of Christian ‘roots’, he also formulates the former’s plea for a “Besinnung” as a “*Neuermurzelung*”.³⁹ This formulation is moreover clearly ‘substantialistic’ in nature. It is argued that secularization essentially entails the depletion (*Erschöpfung*) of a Christian, life-giving substance:

So wie aller Glaubensabbau verurteilt ist, sich im ständigen Wechsel der Idole zu *erschöpfen* und in der *Substanz* aufzulösen, treibt auch unser Jahrhundert in immer schnellerem Wechsel seiner irdischen Idole einem Stadium endgültiger Preisgabe seiner letzten Substanz entgegen.⁴⁰

Müller-Armack assumes that any religious substance that is alienated from its roots has an expiration date.⁴¹ When this depletion or exhaustion is complete, it is only nothingness – i.e., nihilism – that remains.

Jahrhundert ohne Gott aims to demonstrate that National-Socialism is the ultimate consequence of this modern descent into nihilism.⁴² This is explained as follows: it is assumed that every secularized phenomenon remains substantively determined by its origin in Christianity, which also entails a correspondence between varieties of secularity and varieties of Christian faith. Secularized Calvinism produces a culture of rationalism and discipline, secularized Lutheranism creates an emphasis on civil obedience, and secularized Catholicism enables the promotion of a firm social order and a veneration of hierarchy. These three features remain benign when they are kept subordinate to a higher (i.e., transcendent) goal, but once they are maintained as ends in themselves they become corrupted. Thus, Müller-Armack states that when these three corrupted substances are taken together they produce the disastrous mixture that is Nazism, the ultimate idolatrous *Ersatzreligion*. Nazism is seen as a manifestation of nihilism because the objects of ‘worship’ – discipline, obedience and order – are hollow, having been depleted of their genuine Christian substance.⁴³

It is worth noting that, as Lübke argues, Müller-Armack’s *Jahrhundert ohne Gott* indeed provides a clear example of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The rise of Nazism can be explained by Müller-Armack as a “gesamteuropäische” event rather than as a specifically German occurrence, placing it in a more general narrative of civilizational decline. By arguing for a *Neuermurzelung* of modern society in Christian tradition, his narrative moreover serves as a justification – as Lübke also observed – of the German post-war project of restoration and the achievement of the “Neuen Geborgenheit” of a Christian, liberal-conservative democracy.⁴⁴ ‘Secularization’ not only helps to alleviate and explain away the *collective* guilt for the recent catastrophe, however. It might be argued that the therapeutic function of the concept,

39 Müller-Armack (1948) p.178 (emphasis added), cf. pp.60, 62, 101, 148-150, 181; Lübke (1965) p.84.

40 Müller-Armack (1948) p.119 (emphasis added), on substantialism cf. pp.35-36, 107-108, 140, 150.

41 For example, Müller-Armack (1948, p.107) also provides a decidedly substantialistic formulation of the theorem commonly associated with Löwith (whose *Meaning in History* however appeared one year after Müller-Armack’s book), i.e., that the modern conception of progress is a “neue Form eschatologischer Heilserwartung” in which an identical religious faith merely took on another shape.

42 Müller-Armack (1948) pp.101-111, 139-148, 171-173.

43 Müller-Armack (1948) pp.56-59, 120, 140-146. Cf. Lübke (1965) p.111.

44 Lübke (1965) p.117, cf. pp.109-132. “Man darf sagen, daß dieser Erklärung des deutsch-europäischen Unglücks als Säkularisierung-Folge in der Zeit unmittelbar nach Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs eine Entlastungs-Funktion erfüllte, und vor allem darin ist ihr außerordentlicher populärer Erfolg in Deutschland begründet” (p.112). Cf. Müller-Armack (1948) pp.145-146; Nijk (1968) pp.50-52; De Vriese (2016) p.40.

identified by Lübbe, also applies to Müller-Armack himself, for he himself had been a passive member of the NSDAP before he joined the CDU after 1945. Perhaps Müller-Armack's explanation for the wrong-turning of Western society was also a way to make sense of and excuse his own past indiscretions.⁴⁵

Guardini: Secularization and the Existential Either/Or

Das Ende der Neuzeit (1950) was written by Catholic priest and critic Romano Guardini. This book, like Müller-Armack's, was widely read in post-war Germany and it should equally be understood in light of its immediate historical context.⁴⁶ While it too aims to explain how the recent catastrophe came about and which route must be taken in the future, Guardini reaches a different verdict as to whether modern society can re-root itself in Christian soil. Joe-Paul Kroll suggests that Guardini's book is a prime example of how the recent war was perceived by some as definite proof of the irrevocable bankruptcy of modernity.⁴⁷ Guardini approximates the accounts of Müller-Armack and Delekat by arguing that the deadlock of modernity is caused by its depletion of Christian values. Unambiguously, he asserts that "all human values find their root in Revelation", and that modernity's "dishonesty" consists in the fact that "modern culture claimed those very values as its own foundation".⁴⁸ However, unlike Müller-Armack and Delekat, Guardini does not call for a re-rooting of modernity in Christianity but rather for a purification or de-secularization of Christianity. Ultimately, Guardini desires a clear-cut separation between Christian faith and 'worldly' culture and society.

'Modernity' is identified in Guardini's account as an unwholesome conglomerate of anti-Christian attitudes on the one hand – that manifests itself in a veneration of "Man, Nature and History" as ends in themselves – and of Christian values that have become separated from their proper source, i.e., revelation, on the other.⁴⁹ The inherent instability of this compound leads to the collapse of modernity, because without their foundation in revelation these values become void and hence unsustainable. Guardini especially focuses on the Christian notion of personhood, which is considered essential because it signifies the proper understanding of humanity and its relation to the world and God. This core notion of 'the person', an authentic individuality that can only be understood in light of Christian revelation, becomes secularized in modern culture.⁵⁰ This entails that "attitudes" such as human dignity, liberty and authenticity are venerated as absolute values without considering their original relatedness to the divine, Guardini argues. Thus, modernity has created an unsustainable, "uprooted" culture of personality:

45 Kroll (2010) p.173.

46 I will refer to the English translation: *The End of the Modern World* (1998). Cf. Kamlah (1969) pp.104-106; Ruh (1980) p.358; Pannenberg (1973) p.179; Schmidt-Biggeman (1986) pp.51-53.

47 Kroll (2010) pp.26-27. Kroll suggests that Guardini's book helped shape Blumenberg's conception of the 'secularization theorem'. Cf. Flasch (2017) pp.174-175, 571.

48 Guardini (1998) pp.97-98. Cf. Flasch (2017) p.174.

49 Guardini (1998) pp.x, 42-43, 51-53, 76-77. This interpretation of modernity as an inherently unstable – because inherently contradictory – amalgamate is comparable to Löwith's (1949, pp.165-166, 207). Both also adhere to a similarly strict 'Augustinian' conception of Christianity (although Löwith evidently does not identify with a position of faith) that emphasizes the clear-cut break between faith and reason or *Jenseits* and *Diesseits*. Both hence disqualify any notion of continuity between the two spheres as a dilution of pure faith.

50 Guardini (1998) pp.80, 93-109. Guardini is generally perceived as an adherent of 'personalism', a variety of existentialism that became especially popular in Catholic circles.

Not one of these attitudes can be viable, unless the Christian concept of the person is vigorously maintained. As soon as the true value of the person is lost, as soon as the Christian faith in the God-man relationship pales, all related attitudes and values begin to disappear. ... [Modernity] had denied Revelation although it drew everywhere upon its effects.⁵¹

The title of Guardini's book is not meant as an exaggeration: he does indeed envision an imminent "end of the modern world". This is where his account differs from those of Müller-Armack and Delekat, who suggest that modern society can be salvaged and revitalized by re-rooting it in Christianity. Guardini instead argues that modernity – defined as an unviable hybrid of anti-Christian attitude and Christian substance – will necessarily collapse in the near future and that it is not worth saving to begin with. The rise of Nazism and the ensuing Second World War are sure signs that this process has already begun.⁵² Hence, instead of attempting to reconnect modernity to Christianity, Guardini rather adopts the perspective of a Kierkegaardian decisionism: the collapse of modernity will bring the fundamental contradictions between Christian faith and 'the world' – which modernity had glossed over by secularizing tenets of Christianity while ignoring others – to light, and this will necessitate a *decision*, either for or against God. Worldly culture and society will have discarded its quasi-Christian appearance only to emerge in its purest, anti-Christian form. Meanwhile, Christianity will be given the chance to purify itself from the stains of worldliness, i.e., from the effects of its prior accommodations.⁵³ This entails a final crystallization of the previously dormant contradiction between two basic positions, that of the believer and the unbeliever:

As unbelievers deny Revelation more decisively ... it will become the more evident what it really means to be a Christian. At the same time, the unbeliever will emerge from the fogs of secularism. He will cease to reap benefit from the values and forces developed by the very Revelation he denies. He must learn to exist honestly without Christ ... Nietzsche has already warned us that the non-Christian of the modern world had no realization of what it truly meant to be without Christ. The last decades have suggested what life without Christ really is. The last decades were only the beginning.⁵⁴

The 'organic metaphor' also makes its appearance in Guardini's account: modernity is supposedly constituted by a Christian substance that is disconnected from its source, i.e., revelation, which causes it to dissipate.⁵⁵ Provided that we are dealing with an organic rather than a juridical model this gives us an indication of the *range* of the 'secularization-as-decimation' template. Müller-Armack and Delekat argue for a 're-rooting' of modernity in the soil of Christianity, by which they regard secularization as the estrangement from this foundation, whereas Guardini rather evaluates this separation positively, as the final evaporation of a confused modernity. It is confused because the Modern Age is ambivalent about its relation to Christianity, declaring itself to be non-Christian while still adorning itself

51 Guardini (1998) pp.99-100, cf. pp.43 62-65, 106-109.

52 Guardini (1998) pp.86, 90-91; Flasch (2017) pp.174-175.

53 Guardini (1998) pp.56-57, 64-79, 100-105.

54 Guardini (1998) p.101.

55 Guardini (1998) pp.97-98: "In truth, all human values find their root in Revelation; everything immediately human is related uniquely to Revelation. Man is related to God through Faith, but Faith is the effect of divine grace freely given and it draws the substance of all things human into itself."

with Christian values. In opposition to this, the new age will end this ambivalence in favor of a clear distinction: “[t]he world to come will be filled with animosity and danger, but it will be a world open and clean.”⁵⁶ The concept of ‘secularization’ operates in Guardini’s account as a signifier of the confused (anti-)Christian nature of modernity. Modernity’s collapse will entail that Christianity will “strip itself of all secularism”, but it also implies (as already indicated) that the “unbeliever will emerge from the fogs of secularism”. In this newly obtained clarity “the new age will declare that the secularized facets of Christianity are sentimentalities.”⁵⁷ Hence, while Guardini is in agreement with Delekat and Müller-Armack that the Christian substance in modern culture has become depleted, he disagrees with them on how modernity should relate to Christianity. To him, the ‘secularized’ nature of modernity does not suggest the need for a re-vitalization of modern culture but rather proves its self-contradictory character; this is why he celebrates its demise as an occasion to purify Christianity. Instead of wanting to ‘re-root’ modernity, Guardini rather affirms its *parasitic* nature – modernity is regarded as a malignant outgrowth of Christianity rather than as its legitimate fruit.

Gogarten: The Two-Tiered Evaluation of Secularization

When a theological position adopts a more permissive stance towards modernity this can give rise to a different theological evaluation of ‘secularization’. Indeed, the very notion of re-embedding modernity in Christianity, such as it appears in the accounts of Delekat and Müller-Armack, produces a dual definition of secularization that can signify both the transgression of the boundaries set by Christianity – i.e., the severance of Christian roots – as well as the legitimate operation of ‘worldly’ affairs *within* these boundaries. Our exposition of Carl Schmitt’s theory has already shown that this distinction allows for a theological conceptualization of ‘secularization’ as a legitimate continuity between Christianity and modernity.⁵⁸ In theology, this two-tiered interpretation of ‘secularization’ is most famously articulated by the Lutheran theologian Friedrich Gogarten. Gogarten is described by Zabel, Lübke and various other commentators as one of the most prominent voices, if not the most prominent theological voice, in the German secularization debate. Indeed, Gogarten appears to have been such an influential figure in his time that the absence of his name in Blumenberg’s *Legitimacy* is remarkable, as Ruh suggests.⁵⁹ Gogarten’s book *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit* (1953) not only distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate secularization, it even portrays legitimate secularization as the necessary realization of Christian faith.⁶⁰ It is only when ‘secularization’ “nicht in ihrer Zugehörigkeit zum christlichen Glauben erkannt wird” that it

56 Guardini (1998) p.105.

57 Guardini (1998) resp. pp.104, 101, 105.

58 That is, Schmitt’s *Political Theology I and II* indicate that the worldly sovereign is mandated to act as God in the world (without further need for ecclesiastical supervision), provided that he recognizes his role as such (i.e., presupposing the structural analogy between theology and the political) and thus remains within the boundaries set out by a particular authoritarian strand of political theology. In short, this engenders a ‘positive’ or ‘legitimate’ notion of secularization. (Cf. Meier, 2012, pp.285-286.) In the work of Delekat, Müller-Armack and Gogarten this option is expressed in a manner that is more straightforwardly cultural-conservative (and hence substantialistic) compared to Schmitt.

59 Ruh (1980) p.80. Cf. Zabel (1968) pp.11, 38-39, 183-193; Lübke (1965) pp.117-127; Stallmann (1960) pp.26-44; Nijk (1968) pp.52-79.

60 I refer to the 1966 edition: Gogarten (1966) pp.7-12, 102-106, 214. Cf. Zabel (1968) pp.11, 39, 192, 231; Lübke (1965) pp.117-126.

appears as the “heillosen Erscheinung” of an anti-religious ideology, or rather, as *secularism*.⁶¹

Gogarten’s work is more explicitly theological than Delekat’s and Müller-Armack’s. Whereas their works are presented as historical-cultural diagnoses, Gogarten relies more on biblical exegesis and overtly theological distinctions – such as ‘grace and law’ or ‘faith and works’ – than on cultural-conservative tropes such as ‘alienation’. Gogarten’s *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit* is a straightforwardly theological treatise, embedded in the conceptual language and rhetoric of Lutheran, dialectical and existentialist theology.⁶² Differences notwithstanding, Gogarten’s narrative displays a structure that is comparable to the accounts of Müller-Armack and Delekat, and there are also some parallels with Guardini to be found. This account can hence be considered a theological explication of certain themes already discussed in this chapter. Gogarten’s most significant contribution to this line of thought is that he conceived of a theological model, implicit in Müller-Armack’s and Delekat’s accounts (while absent in Guardini’s), which denotes that if modernity can be ‘re-rooted’ in Christianity it is possible to conceive of a legitimate continuity between Christian faith and ‘the world’. Gogarten thus provides a theological legitimation of ‘secularization’ on the one hand, while he also warns against its derogation into what he calls ‘secularism’ on the other.⁶³ To the dismay of Jaeschke, Lübke saw this new ‘secularization theology’ as a positive turn in the development of the secularization concept, and praised Gogarten for finally reconciling theology and modernity. He suggests that Gogarten offered theology an escape from the “Ressentiment-Winkel des Verlierers” of the secularization process.⁶⁴

Gogarten’s theory is based on a Paulinian-Lutheran distinction between ‘faith’ and ‘works’. The implication is that an individual cannot obtain salvation or ‘justification’ through his/her own actions, i.e., ‘works’, but only through divine grace, which requires ‘only faith’ – *sola fide*. The importance of ‘good works’ is not denied, however, but these works are removed from the center of Christian soteriology. Gogarten applies this theme to the relation between Christian faith and the world: he argues that whereas scripture demands that ‘good works’ be done within the world, it also indicates that they should not be seen as preconditions for salvation.⁶⁵ This has important ramifications, in that not only works themselves, but also the human rationality that is involved in these works and the sphere in which they are preformed, ‘the world’, are simultaneously separated from the economy of salvation and *legitimized* from a theological perspective. Hence, “Säkularisierung”, taken as the acknowledgement of the ‘worldliness of the world’, has “ihre Ansatz im Glauben selbst.”⁶⁶ This leads to an image of ‘the world’ as a semi-independent, de-divinized sphere in which individuals can exercise their God-given freedom.⁶⁷ The notion of freedom furthermore relates to a central concept in Gogarten’s theology, namely “Sohnschaft”. The ‘sonship’ of the believer signifies that the individual is free, but only via a relation to God; only through a special relation with the creator is the individual free vis-à-vis creation. This freedom moreover entails an essential *responsibility* because it implies that the human individual – who is justified through belief and elevated to a Christ-like status – is appointed as a care-taker of the world.⁶⁸ *Sohnschaft* implies both freedom and responsibility, as it signifies the relation between humans, God and world:

61 Gogarten (1966) p.11.

62 Ruh (1980) pp.31-45; Walther (2001); Falk (2014); Motschenbacher (2000) pp.240-249.

63 Gogarten (1966) pp.102-106, 143-144.

64 Lübke (1965) pp.118-119. Cf. Jaeschke (1976) pp.22-29.

65 Gogarten (1966) pp.84-85, 94-95.

66 Gogarten (1966) p.102. Cf. Lübke (1965) pp.119-122; Walther (2001) pp.118-123.

67 Gogarten (1966) pp.19-31, 95-102, 123.

68 Gogarten (1966) pp.19-32, 51, 122-124, 145; *ibid.* (1954) pp.341-350.

[Sohnschaft] ist darum nicht unwichtig, weil der Sohn im Unterschied zum Kind der Mündige und darum Selbständige ist. Nur wenn das beachtet wird, erkennt man, daß mit der Sohnschaft des Menschen nicht nur eine dieser entsprechende Beziehung zu Gott ausgesagt wird, sondern ebenso eine seinem Sohnsein Gott gegenüber entsprechende Beziehung zur Welt.⁶⁹

The concept of *Sohnschaft*, with its dual emphasis on freedom and responsibility, indicates that Gogarten's theology is informed by what is understood – e.g., by Löwith – as “theological decisionism”.⁷⁰ The individual believer has the responsibility to continuously discern, or rather *decide*, which works are edifying or expedient and which are not, or, more generally, how to relate him/herself to God and the world. The perceived relation between faith and works – and by analogy between creator and creation – is a tenuous one that is easily disturbed. It must be safeguarded by the conscience of the individual, who, as a free agent, constantly has to decide to prioritize either creator or creation.⁷¹ There is a constant danger, as Müller-Armack also notes, of creation taking the place of the creator as the object of worship. According to Gogarten, this occurs when the subject abuses his/her freedom *from* the world by choosing *for* the world.⁷² This severs the bond of *Sohnschaft* between the individual and God and thus relinquishes the human freedom vis-à-vis creation that was contingent on the connection with the creator. The consequence is that the individual becomes subjugated to his/her own works, i.e., to human constructions such as secularist ideologies.⁷³

‘Secularism’ amounts to the transgression of boundaries set by faith. It entails an abuse of freedom, and an attempt to obtain that which the individual cannot obtain by him/herself: salvation. Salvation implies fulfillment but also a vision of ‘the whole’. That is, the German *Heil* denotes both salvation and totality, which means that *Heil* also refers to the transcendent totality of reality to which the human subject has only a very limited, indirect access through faith. Gogarten claims that secularism is not content with the “fragendes Nichtwissen” to which human reason is relegated concerning matters of salvation.⁷⁴ Hence, the distinction between secularism and secularization can be summed up as follows:

Wir bezeichnen die eine Art der Säkularisierung als die, die im Säkularen bleibt. In ihr hält man es aus, daß die Welt ‘nur’ Welt ist; man erkennt in ihr nicht nur die Grenze der Vernunft, die dieser damit gesteckt ist, daß ihr zwar der Gedanke des Ganzen als der höchste ihr mögliche zu denken aufgegeben ist, daß sie aber die Frage, vor die sie damit gestellt ist, nicht zu beantworten vermag und daß sie mit diesem Gedanken über ein *fragendes Nichtwissen* nicht hinauskommt. Man bleibt in dieser Art der Säkularisierung bei dem Gebrauch der Vernunft dieser ihr nicht von außen, sondern in ihrem eigenen Wesen gesteckten Grenzen in der größten Wachsamkeit gewärtig. Die andere Art der Säkularisierung ... bezeichnet man am besten als *Säkularismus*. Sie entsteht, wenn jenes fragende Nichtwissen dem Gedanken der Ganzheit gegenüber nicht durchgehalten wird. Man gibt dann entweder das Nichtwissen oder die Frage preis.⁷⁵

69 Gogarten (1966) p.32.

70 Löwith (1995) pp.166-169; Falk (2014). Cf. Bultmann (1957) pp.153-154.

71 Gogarten (1966) p.67, 97, 136, 140-141; *ibid.* (1954) pp.344-346.

72 Gogarten (1966) pp.140-145; *ibid.* (1954) p.342; Müller-Armack (1948) p.62; Walther (2001) pp.122-129.

73 Gogarten (1966) pp.28-50, 142-145.

74 Gogarten (1966) pp.126, 143-146, 225.

75 Gogarten (1966) p.142-143 (emphasis added).

Gogarten argues that if humanity believes that it can answer those unanswerable questions, it will lead to the “Säkularismus der Heilslehren oder Ideologien, die in der Neuzeit in großer Zahl ... entstanden sind”. However, if one instead decides to reject those questions altogether, as “nutzlos und unsinnig”, then this will lead to the secularism of nihilism.⁷⁶ Secularism entails the construction (through works) of an earthly utopia of worldly salvation that usurps the otherworldly eschaton (only accessible through faith), or, alternatively, it entails the surrender of hope and a contentment with meaninglessness. In both cases this means that the connection with transcendence is severed and that the immanent sphere becomes absolutized.⁷⁷

Lübbe situates Gogarten in the same theological tradition as Ernst Troeltsch, in that both reconcile theology with the Modern Age – and with a modest liberalism – while also trying to ground the positive achievements of modernity in Christianity.⁷⁸ Indeed, whereas Gogarten’s stance towards modernity, individual freedom, secularity and historicity appears permissive and reconciliatory we can also see that he in effect tries to monopolize these phenomena by asserting their ineradicable Christian origins.⁷⁹ It is worth noting in this respect that Troeltsch had warned in 1911 that the disconnection of modernity from its Christian soil would bring about a “neuen Hörigkeit”, a total subjugation of the individual to the forces of the militarized state and the ‘steel cage’ of the economy. In the 1930’s, Gogarten instead claimed that the total subjugation of the individual to the state and the “Volk” is a divine decree; in 1932, he wrote that “Hörigkeit”, i.e., obedience to secular powers, is true Christian freedom.⁸⁰ In this period Gogarten agreed with Schmitt that the total state of Nazism represented a necessary response to the idolatrous evil of liberalism and Enlightenment.⁸¹ The discrepancy between Gogarten’s political thought in the 1930’s, where he advocated full obedience to worldly authority, and his theological underpinning of a conservative Christian-democratic ‘liberalism’ in the 1950’s, has been noted by several commentators. Manfred Walther points out in this respect that Gogarten reduces Christianity to a single core – either obedience to divine and secular authority or the primacy of the individual decision (which can amount to the same thing) – while undervaluing the substantive decrees that can also be found in the Christian tradition. This makes his theology especially flexible and accommodating to changing political constellations.⁸² Motschenbacher adds that Gogarten “nicht eine *Begrenzung* staatlicher Machtansprüche anvisiert, sondern eine *Begründung* der Obrigkeit unternimmt. Diese aber gerät schnell in die Gefahr, zur bloßen Rechtfertigung erfolgreicher Strömungen und zur theologischen Untermauerung einer Siegeregeschichte zu verkommen.”⁸³ This analysis lends support to Löwith’s critique of Gogarten as a proponent of the syndrome of active nihilism that he also recognized in Schmitt and Heidegger, and it casts doubt on the assertion that ‘theology’ is the only real bulwark against totalitarianism.⁸⁴

To return to the post-war theological conception of secularization, it has become apparent that Gogarten’s two-tiered interpretation can also be discerned in the works of Müller-Armack and Delekat, albeit more indirectly. This can best be explained with regard to the

76 Gogarten (1966) p.143. Cf. *ibid.* (1954) p.351.

77 Gogarten (1966) pp.127, 174-181.

78 Lübbe (1965) pp.117-123. Cf. *ibid.* (1981) pp.63-66; Ruh (1980) pp.36-37.

79 Jaeschke (1976) pp.22-29, 330; Walther (2001) pp.129-133. Walther (p.31) notes that Gogarten and likeminded theologians claim all positive accomplishments of modernity as “legitime Folgen des christlichen Glaubens” while all negative features of modernity are understood as the result of apostasy.

80 Troeltsch (1911) p.102; Walther (2001) pp.123-133; Motschenbacher (2000) pp.240-249.

81 Motschenbacher (2000) pp.240-249.

82 Walther (2001) pp.129-132. Cf. Löwith (1995) pp.167-169.

83 Motschenbacher (2000) pp.248-249. Cf. Walther (2001) pp.129-132.

84 Löwith (1995) pp.167-169; Walther (2001) pp.131-133.

perceived relation between Christianity and the pre-Christian worldview that it supplanted. Both Gogarten and Delekat claim that Christianity introduced a radically new outlook on the world. Gogarten explains that this is the case because Christianity elevated both God *and* the individual over against the ‘enchanted’ world of ‘primitive cultures’ or the divine cosmos of the Greeks. This entailed the ‘profanization’ or what Delekat calls the *Entdämonisierung* of the world.⁸⁵ This line of thought presupposes that only Christianity possesses an adequate conception of worldliness, because it engenders an idea of immanence that is only conceivable by virtue of a Christian idea of transcendence, namely as *otherness*.⁸⁶ Not only is it thereby assumed that the pre-Christian worldview was unable to conceive of a proper concept of ‘secularity’ because it could not juxtapose it to a purely transcendent otherness, but also that there is a connection between the pre-transcendent view of antiquity and the post-transcendent view of secularist modernity. Both worldviews – pre- and post-Christian – assumedly fail to grasp the true nature of immanence and transcendence and therefore produce a distorted image of reality.⁸⁷

Müller-Armack deals with this topic most explicitly, in that he refers – in Weberian vein – to modernity as an age of disenchanting polytheism where penultimate matters are absolutized and made into idols.⁸⁸ These three authors also agree that modern secularism does not simply entail a return to a naïve pre-Christian paganism. This road has been blocked, it is suggested, and any repudiation of Christian faith will now lead to a descent into nihilism and/or totalitarianism. All three accounts indicate that the prominent modern ideologies, which Gogarten dubs ‘secularisms’, are ultimately *Ersatzreligionen* that are simultaneously post-Christian in content and manifestations of the perennial sin of idolatry.⁸⁹ The immanence-transcendence relation explains why modern post-transcendent thought is not only deemed sinful, but also unsustainable and dangerous: if transcendence is abandoned this will lead to either an *absolutization* of immanence or to a total *relativization*.⁹⁰ As such, these three theologians agree that only Christianity can achieve an “Anerkenntnis der Welt in ihrer Weltlichkeit”, or what Gogarten calls ‘secularization’.⁹¹

Modernity and Christianity: Voegelin

This exhibition of the various theological accounts on secularization already demonstrates an interplay between corresponding *themes* – such as a concern for human hubris, alienation

85 Delekat (1958) pp.18-21, 34-40; Gogarten (1966) pp.11-25.

86 Müller-Armack (1948) pp.33-35, 152-181. Cf. Lübbe (1965) pp.53-54, 126.

87 Müller-Armack (1948) pp.34, 59; Delekat (1958) pp.18-21, 40; Gogarten (1966) pp.13-27, 140. This theological monopolization of transcendence (and for that matter of historicity) is something that we can also recognize in Schmitt’s ‘Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History’ (2009 pp.167-170).

88 Müller-Armack (1948) pp.59-65. Cf. Delekat (1958) pp.34-40; Gogarten (1966) pp.14-16. With regard to Guardini, Neuhaus writes in the introduction of *The End of the Modern World* that “Guardini is brutal in his demolition of sentimental faith in gods such as Man, Nature, and History” (1998, p.x). However, this notion of ‘idols’ is not so central to Guardini’s narrative as it is, for instance, for Müller-Armack. The position I have reconstructed here, which assumes the essential unviability of ‘pure immanentism’, does not seem prevalent in Guardini’s *The End of the Modern World*. Instead, the Nietzschean-nihilist viewpoint is presented as a *viable* and *sustainable* counter-position to the Kierkegaardian ‘knight of faith’. It is not a mere unsustainable derivative of the Christian position. It seems that Guardini prefers to strengthen both positions in order to make the necessary choice between them as clear as possible. Cf.: (1998) pp. 93-109.

89 Delekat (1958) p.48; Gogarten (1966) pp.143-144; Müller-Armack (1948) pp.62-65, 111, 117, 142.

90 Delekat (1958) pp.36-37; Müller-Armack (1948) pp.138-140. Cf. Gogarten (1966) pp.134-148

91 Lübbe (1965) p.126. Cf. Müller-Armack (1948) pp.150-151; Delekat (1958) pp.64-73.

or nihilism – and differing *valuations*, in that theological reflection on secularization can either be used to advocate a reconnection of worldly affairs with an otherworldly anchor point, as in Gogarten, or instead in a clear-cut, Kierkegaardian decision for or against the world, as in Guardini. Evidently, these variations on similar themes all revolve around the question of how modernity relates, or *should* be related, to Christianity and how this perceived relationship in turn ought to be interpreted in light of the immanence-transcendence distinction, which, as we have seen, is fundamental to theological and philosophical theories of modernity and religion.

Theological theories on the relation between modernity and Christianity had a certain cultural urgency, as Lübke's analysis demonstrates, because they pertained to the question of how post-war Germany should orientate itself.⁹² The 'solution' that Gogarten provided – to be both modern, secular, liberal *and* Christian – was widely hailed as a viable course, one that was explored by many other authors in his wake. For example, the younger Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg explicitly adopted Gogarten's standpoint in his article 'Die christliche Legitimität der Neuzeit' (1968). Here he argues against Blumenberg that, historically speaking, the Modern Age builds on the foundation of Christianity.⁹³ He states that the dogma of the incarnation, which Blumenberg mostly ignores, implied an essentially affirmative attitude towards creation, resulting in a modern appreciation of secular worldliness. Moreover, Pannenberg argues that the humanist-protestant concept of the person is the true precursor of the modern individual. Echoing Gogarten, he notes that "secularization is an expression of the coming of age of the Christian layman."⁹⁴ The physicist-philosopher Von Weizsäcker applies this affirmative relation between modernity and Christianity to science. In his lecture series *The Relevance of Science* (1964) he calls "modern science a legacy, I might even ... [say] a child, of Christianity".⁹⁵ Von Weizsäcker also approximates Gogarten in seeking to reconnect modernity with its Christian heritage, but the distinguishing feature of his account is that he advocates a revitalization of the *progressive* strand of Christianity. Von Weizsäcker divides Christianity into a progressive and a conservative variety – examples of which are revolutionary chiliasm on the one hand and ultramontanism on the other – and suggests that most progressive cultural developments in western history can be traced back to the former brand of Christianity. He then decries the fact that progressivism has become secularized and anti-religious, and that the religious camp is meanwhile under threat of being monopolized by conservatism.⁹⁶

However, in order to get a firm theoretical grasp of the perceived relation between modernity and Christianity I propose that we leave Von Weizsäcker and Pannenberg behind and proceed to a discussion of the work of Eric Voegelin. Admittedly, Voegelin is primarily known as a philosopher rather than as a theologian, but in his recourse to Platonic philosophy he approximates the Christianized Neoplatonic metaphysics that underlies a large part of western post-Augustinian theology. Moreover, we will discover that there are significant systematic analogies to be discerned between his thought and the more overtly theological accounts

92 Lübke (1965) pp.109-133; *ibid.* (1964) pp.235-239.

93 Pannenberg, 'Christianity as the Legitimacy of the Modern Age' (1973) pp.179-191. Cf. Flasch (2017) pp.570-578.

94 Pannenberg (1973) p.190, cf. pp.180-191.

95 Von Weizsäcker (1964) p.163.

96 Von Weizsäcker (1964) pp.82-83, 112, 155, 166-180. Incidentally, Von Weizsäcker (pp.162-173) refers to Löwith's *Meaning in History* with regard to the purported continuity between eschatology and modern progress. Blumenberg moreover criticizes him in *Legitimacy* (1983, pp.79-83) for assuming that the modern notion of 'infinity' is a secularized attribute of God.

of, e.g., Gogarten and Guardini, which makes Voegelin a suitable subject for analysis in this chapter. His book *The New Science of Politics* (1952) is moreover significant because it serves as an example of how Löwith's thesis was received, and because it formed a counter-position to Blumenberg's defense of modernity.⁹⁷ Contrary to Gogarten, *The New Science of Politics* conveys a decidedly negative appraisal of secular modernity. Voegelin suggests that the Modern Age is above all characterized by a corruption of its Christian heritage. Although this provides us with only one among multiple possible evaluations of the relation between Christianity and modernity, it is expedient to discuss Voegelin's work because it provides a philosophical thematization of the theological arguments we have already encountered in this chapter. These theological themes are philosophically conceptualized by Voegelin in terms of the abstract notions of transcendence and immanence. His philosophy can thus be seen to uncover a shared conceptual framework beneath the various theological narratives, in so far as concepts such as 'faith' and 'eschaton' or 'works' and 'history' function as placeholders for the more abstract concepts of transcendence and immanence.⁹⁸

If seen in the light of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate, Voegelin's *New Science of Politics* is doubtlessly most significant as reference point for Blumenberg's theory of modernity as a "second overcoming of Gnosticism", exhibited in the second part of *Legitimacy*.⁹⁹ We have seen that Müller-Armack, Delekat and Gogarten characterize modern secularism both as a return to the perennial pitfall of idolatry and as a specifically post-Christian phenomenon, which would make it a "Christian heresy". In *Legitimacy*, Blumenberg argues that the conception of modernity as a "Christian heresy" encapsulates the rancor of theology best, because it simultaneously stakes a Christian claim on the Modern Age while also condemning it as apostasy.¹⁰⁰ And when mentioning Christian heresies, Gnosticism is never far away. Blumenberg notes that "the Gnostic trauma of the early centuries of the Christian era" has played a major part in the definition of Christianity and its legacy.

He who says that the modern age 'would be better entitled the Gnostic age' is reminding us of the old enemy who did not come from without but was ensconced at Christianity's very roots, the enemy whose dangerousness resided in the evidence that it had on its side a more consistent systematization of the biblical premises.¹⁰¹

Blumenberg states that of all the attempts at condemning modernity as a Christian heresy, the "Gnosticism formulation deserves some consideration as the most significant of these attempts, and the most instructive in its implications."¹⁰² This refers to Voegelin, who famously claimed that modernity is essentially a "Gnostic age". He thereby solved the problem – contained in the transitive concept of secularization – of how modernity can be simultaneously Christian and anti-Christian, in other words, "whether contemporary phenomena should be classified as Christian because they are ... an outgrowth of Christian heresies of the Middle Ages or whether medieval [*sic*] phenomena should be classified as anti-Christian because they are ... the

97 Voegelin (1952) pp.111-121, 125; Blumenberg (1983) pp.125-226. On the relation between Löwith's and Voegelin's philosophies, cf.: Syse (2000) pp.253-261.

98 Voegelin (1952) pp.27-75. Voegelin is often identified with a Christian-theological standpoint, usually on the basis of *The New Science*, but he himself has indicated that this is not justified in a direct sense. His personal views in these matters remain unclear however, cf.: Jardine (1995) pp.581-605; Niemeier (1995) pp.91-104.

99 Blumenberg (1983) pp.125-226.

100 Blumenberg (1983) pp.125-126. Cf. Jaeschke (1976) pp.36-38.

101 Blumenberg (1983) p.126. Cf. Voegelin (1952) pp.107-132.

102 Blumenberg (1983) p.126.

origin of modern anti-Christianism.” The solution is “to drop such questions and to recognize the essence of modernity as the growth of gnosticism.”¹⁰³ It was in opposition to this theory that Blumenberg stated that “[t]he modern age is the second overcoming of Gnosticism”.¹⁰⁴ Not modernity but Christianity itself is described by Blumenberg as inextricably tied to and defined by Gnosticism, which is “ensconced at Christianity’s very roots” because it could solve the problem of evil better than orthodox Christianity itself. Gnosticism would continue to haunt it until late-medieval Christianity, having intensified ‘theological absolutism’ to its breaking point, effectively took on the attributes of Gnosticism by positing an unintelligible “hidden God” (*deus absconditus*) over against an uncertain, fearful world.¹⁰⁵

Unsurprisingly, Voegelin’s definition of Gnosticism is very different from Blumenberg’s, as is his evaluation of modernity.¹⁰⁶ In order to find out how he arrives at this evaluation we have to analyze his theory of human existence vis-à-vis the immanence/transcendence distinction. Voegelin defines human existence in Graeco-Christian terms as “existence-in-tension”, namely as essentially situated in-between the realms of immanence and transcendence, or what Plato called “the *metaxy*”.¹⁰⁷ Ancient Greek thought and Christian thought both function as exemplars in Voegelin’s narrative. These outlooks recognize, firstly, the crucial importance of maintaining an openness toward transcendence, the entrance to which lies in the individual soul, and secondly, the importance of “differentiating” between transcendence and immanence, i.e., of not confusing the one with the other and thus endangering the essential balance between them.¹⁰⁸ Christianity was especially proficient in this differentiation, not only because it ‘de-divinized’ the world by providing a clear-cut separation between God and creation, but more specifically because it had de-divinized the worldly sphere of political power, which meant that any continuity between the divine and the political dealings of humanity was rejected.¹⁰⁹

The danger of Gnosticism is what also defines modernity: that is, the gnostic (and hence the modern) disposition disturbs the balance between the immanent and the transcendent sphere by drawing the totality of reality into the domain of immanence. This can be demonstrated on the basis of Voegelin’s famous notion of the “immanentization of the Christian eschaton” – a concept that was developed in line with Löwith’s *Meaning in History*.¹¹⁰ First of all, Voegelin argues that the Christian de-divinization of politics also extends to the historical sphere. In agreement with Löwith, Voegelin transposes the Augustinian distinction between the “*civitas Dei*” and the “*civitas terrena*” to history, which engenders an analogous dichotomy between *Heilsgeschehen* and *Weltgeschichte*. This dichotomy implies that ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ can only be found in the history of salvation. The individual believer has only a limited, refracted insight in God’s salvation plan through faith, but not secure knowledge. The history of the world is meanwhile relegated to a state of meaninglessness; its only mode of being is

103 Voegelin (1952) p.126.

104 Blumenberg (1983) p.126

105 Blumenberg (1983) p.135, cf. pp.125-228; Kroll (2010) pp.164-172.

106 Jardine (1995, p.587) notes: “In his later work, Voegelin changed his conceptualization somewhat, largely abandoning the term gnosticism and speaking more generally of the modern attempt to deny human limitations and abolish the structure of reality.” Cf. Gray (2019) pp.73-75; Voegelin (2004) pp.64-65.

107 Raeder (2007) p.243. Cf. Voegelin (1952) pp.67-68, 157-160.

108 Voegelin (1952) p.79; Raeder (2007) pp.345-348.

109 Voegelin (1952) pp.102-108, 122. Voegelin (pp.102-106) thereby finds support in Erik Peterson’s thesis of the “theological impossibility of any political theology”, which was directed at Schmitt.

110 Voegelin (1952) pp.121, 163. Voegelin refers to Löwith’s *Meaning in History* in *The New Science* (pp. 111-112, 118-119, 225), drawing especially on the latter’s interpretation of Joachim of Fiore. Cf. Syse (2000) pp.253-261; Kroll (2010) pp.168-169.

“that of a *saeculum senescens*, of an age that grows old”.¹¹¹ Voegelin moreover follows Löwith in claiming that the work of Joachim of Fiore formed the pivotal point in the development that resulted in the immanentization of eschatology. The spiritualism of Joachim is the point of departure for the increasing “desire for a *re-divinization* of society” that heralded the coming of modern Gnosticism.¹¹² Indeed, the Joachitic conception of history, in which worldly history itself becomes the stage of salvation, functions as a foreshadowing of Hegelianism, Marxism and finally Nazism.¹¹³

The reason why this immanentization is labeled as ‘Gnosticism’ requires some further explanation. Although in *The New Science of Politics* the concept of Gnosticism is not very clearly delineated, it can be defined as follows: to Voegelin, Gnosticism signifies the urge to transcend the limitations and concomitant uncertainties intrinsic to the human condition through speculative knowledge, i.e., gnosis.¹¹⁴ The gnostic attitude is hence characterized by a dissatisfaction with reality and humanity’s place in it. This applies not only to the ancient gnostic image of the world as a prison cell, but also to the modern picture of the world as a malleable substrate that has to be shaped in accordance with humanity’s wishes; both views, modern and ancient Gnosticism, deny this world its ontological dignity and seek passage to the world to come, either by speculative gnosis or by actively trying to establish the next world within the current one.¹¹⁵ Applied to history, gnosis entailed that people claimed to possess knowledge about the end of history and the new world that lies behind it, by which they denied the essential unintelligibility and transcendent nature of the eschaton. This entailed an increasing immanentization of the eschaton – which in its modern stage is called “secularization” by Voegelin.¹¹⁶

[T]he course of history as an intelligible, meaningful whole must be assumed accessible to human knowledge, either through a direct revelation or through speculative gnosis. Hence, the Gnostic prophet or, in the later stages of secularization, the Gnostic intellectual becomes an appurtenance of modern civilization.¹¹⁷

With regard to the relationship between Gnosticism and Christianity, Voegelin might agree with Blumenberg that it “was ensconced at Christianity’s very roots”, or in his own words that “Gnosis was an accompaniment of Christianity from its very beginning”, but he could not concur with his critic that Christianity inevitably reverts into its heretic other.¹¹⁸ That being said, however, Voegelin does reflect on how Christianity formed the necessary precondition for ‘modern Gnosticism’ and thereby also helped shape it.¹¹⁹ The modern-gnostic search for certainty, for a new world that humanity would create after its own image, should be understood in relation to the ‘de-divinizing’ effect of Christianity. This “disappearance of order” evoked an uncertainty and existential anxiety that was unprecedented.¹²⁰

111 Voegelin (1952) p.118.

112 Voegelin (1952) p.110, cf. pp.110-132, 163; Löwith (1949) pp.145-159.

113 Voegelin (1952) pp.112-113, 132; *ibid.* (2004) pp.69-74. Cf. Löwith (1949) p.159.

114 Voegelin (1952) pp.112, 122-132; Jardine (1995) p.587; Raeder (2007) pp.348-355.

115 Voegelin (1952) pp.119-161; *ibid.* (2004) pp.64-68; Raeder (2007) pp.350-357.

116 Voegelin (1952) p.119.

117 Voegelin (1952) p.112.

118 Voegelin (1952) p.126; Blumenberg (1983) p.126.

119 Voegelin (1952) p.122-129; Raeder (2007) pp.350-351; Kroll (2010) pp.166-169.

120 The notion “loss of order” (*Ordnungsschwund*) is Blumenberg’s (1983, p.137). Cf. Voegelin (1952) pp.22, 97-110, 122, 162.

Uncertainty is the very essence of Christianity. The feeling of security in a ‘world full of gods’ is lost with the gods themselves; when the world is de-divinized, communication with the world-transcendent God is reduced to the tenuous bond of faith ... as the substance of things hoped for and of things unseen. ... The bond is tenuous, indeed, and it may snap easily. The life of the soul in openness toward God, the waiting, the periods of aridity and dullness, guilt and despondency, contrition and repentance, forsakenness and hope against hope, the silent stirrings of love and grace, trembling on the verge of a certainty which if gained is loss – the very lightness of this fabric may prove too heavy a burden for men who lust for massively possessive experience.¹²¹

The transition from Christianity to Gnosticism did not require a major leap, only the severance of the “tenuous bond of faith”. The Christian force of de-divinization rendered history, the political sphere and the cosmos intrinsically meaningless, and displaced the individual believer from these contexts into a state of unceasing existential uncertainty.¹²² Voegelin however does not suggest that the Christian position is unsustainable, which means that the shift to modern Gnosticism is not presented as a *necessary* development, as it is in Blumenberg’s work. Rather, it is portrayed as apostasy. But although this apostasy might not be inevitable, this does not imply that modernity itself can be salvaged; after all, modernity is *essentially* and irrevocably gnostic in nature according to Voegelin.¹²³ However, it is suggested that modernity itself is not all-encompassing, as it does not fully coincide with ‘Western culture’: “it must never be forgotten that Western society is not all modern but that modernity is a growth within it, in opposition to the classic and Christian tradition.”¹²⁴

Although Christianity does not automatically turn into Gnosticism in Voegelin’s narrative, this does not mean that it is exempted from criticism. Both Greek thought and Christian faith have contributed to the perceived differentiation of reality, which entails that they distinguished the “truth of the soul” from the “truth of society”. Christianity, however, has neglected the “truth of society” in favor of the “truth of the soul”. As a result, it failed to imbue society, history or the political domain with any meaning of its own; the entire sphere of immanence was radically devalued in light of transcendence.¹²⁵ What was needed, Voegelin argues, is a “civil theology” – examples of which can be found in Greek Antiquity, such as Plato’s philosophy – that attributes an independent meaning and dignity to the immanent sphere, while still affirming the hegemony of the transcendent. If a civil theology is constructed in support of the political order, it removes the need to draw the attributes of transcendence into the immanent domain, in other words, to absolutize the political order. Because if originally transcendent phenomena – such as the eschaton – do become immanentized, i.e., if Gnosticism is given the opportunity to construct a civil theology of its own, this does not lead to a stable political order that recognizes its limitations within a meaningful whole, but rather to an order that stakes its claim to the totality of reality. The concrete manifestation of this is modern totalitarianism.¹²⁶ Gnosticism ultimately destroys the “truth of the soul”, Voegelin

121 Voegelin (1952) p.122. An image similar to the “tenuous bond of faith” appears in Berger’s *Sacred Canopy* (1967, p.112): “Protestantism ... broke the continuity, cut the umbilical cord between heaven and earth, and thereby threw man back upon himself in a historically unprecedented manner.”

122 Voegelin (1952) p.119-129; Raeder (2007) pp.360-361.

123 Voegelin (1952) pp.126-161, 176.

124 Voegelin (1952) p.176.

125 Voegelin (1952) pp.97-110, 156-158.

126 Voegelin (1952) pp.113, 132, 155-164, 177, 186-187. Cf. Syse (2000) pp.253-261.

argues, because it closes off the opening towards transcendence. The catastrophic effects of this destruction are obvious in his view, if one recognizes the recent rise of Nazism as the ultimate resurgence of Gnosticism. The “German Revolution” of Nazism is a manifestation of “modernity without restraint” – restraint, that is, by the traditions of classical civil theology and a Christian care for the soul.¹²⁷

We can now recognize that Voegelin’s theory combines various themes and strands of argumentation that also pervade the theological accounts of Gogarten, Müller-Armack, Delekat and Guardini, drawing them together into one, more or less comprehensive and consistent philosophical system. This system describes how from a Christian-theological vantage point Christianity and modernity, orthodoxy and heresy, and immanence and transcendence relate to each other. The conceptual relationship between these distinctions is not a simple analogy, however; for instance, ‘immanence’ is not automatically taken to be a sphere of ‘heresy’. Most theological accounts assume that Christianity possesses a monopoly on the proper conception of the immanence/transcendence distinction. It is only the departure from this proper conception – e.g., when ‘immanence’ is regarded as a self-sufficient sphere – that leads to heresy, apostasy or catastrophe. ‘Immanence’ is hence not rejected outright in these accounts (although for instance Guardini and Voegelin predominantly emphasize the otherworldliness of Christianity), it is rather assumed that only a proper conception of transcendence (or faith) illuminates the true nature of immanence or of the world. This is exemplified by Gogarten’s theology: a special bond with the creator allows insight into the true nature of creation.¹²⁸ Ultimately this notion, which we encounter throughout the theological accounts, relates to the ‘metaxical’ condition of individual existence that is central to Voegelin’s theory. Viewed from this perspective, life is a matter of balance and proportionality, or in Voegelinian phrasing, “existence-in-tension”.¹²⁹ The individual must continuously keep his/her balance on the boundary between immanence and transcendence, without succumbing to the temptations of the former and without fallaciously believing that one can already take up residence in the latter.¹³⁰

This essential metaxical condition, assumedly inherent to the Christian faith, prescribes that any deviation from this delicate balance between retaining an openness to transcendence and coping with a life within immanence will be disastrous. If one interprets the accounts of Gogarten, Guardini and Delekat and Müller-Armack in terms of Voegelin’s philosophy it becomes apparent that the idolatrous tendency that all these authors detect in modern thought stems from an inability to maintain this balance. This results in the eclipse of transcendence and the absolutization of immanence. Why this immanentization would be harmful is explained by Gogarten’s notion, also present in Müller-Armack, that the individual loses his/her freedom over against the world once the transcendent bond that guarantees this freedom is severed. But it can also be explained in more Voegelinian terms, namely that humanity loses its defining feature, i.e., that it possesses an Archimedean point which enables an objective view of reality and of the limits of human reason. Its function is negation: acknowledging the place of the individual in-between immanence and transcendence implies that one is both aware of the transcendent truth as well as of its unattainability. This entails that human edifices and projections are seen for what they are, and are not confused with *the* truth or *the* structure of

127 Voegelin (1952) pp.163-166, 188-189.

128 Gogarten (1966) p.21.

129 Raeder (2007) p.345.

130 Guardini (1998) p.209: “Man does not belong exclusively to the world; rather he stands on its borders, at once in the world yet outside it, integrated into it yet simultaneously dealing with it because he is related directly to God.” Cf. Müller-Armack (1948) pp.32, 60.

reality.¹³¹ Gnosticism, taken by Voegelin as the heretical inversion of Christianity, projects its own view of reality unto the world and thereby precludes the possibility of negation and escape. In short, these authors suggest that a position of transcendence-orientedness has to be maintained as a safeguard against totalitarianism. Evidently, the question has been raised in this respect whether a Christian or metaphysical notion of transcendence is indeed necessary in order to acknowledge the finitude of human reason, or for that matter, the worldliness of the world.¹³² Not only Blumenberg but also (as we will discover in the following chapter) Odo Marquard adamantly contest this view, and instead insist that it is not the *lack* of a transcendent orientation point – i.e., the Absolute – but rather its *involvement* in human affairs that has disastrous political consequences.¹³³

History and Christianity: Bultmann

The philosophy of Voegelin however does not fully converge with the theologies of, e.g., Gogarten and Guardini in all respects. One significant difference between these perspectives is that Voegelin's depiction of Christianity endorses a passive fideist ideal – not dissimilar to Löwith's – according to which the believer must forgo a hubristic “Diesseits-Aktivismus” and instead turn towards the eternal “truth of the soul”. What is absent in Voegelin's conception of Christian faith is a positive evaluation of human action in the historical world, in contrast to the theological decisionism of Gogarten and Guardini.¹³⁴ Their theological decisionism relates to a special theological appreciation of *historicity*. At this stage we must proceed to an analysis of the theological conception of historicity – which I provide on the basis of the work of Rudolf Bultmann – because that will help elucidate how these theological discussions can be related to the philosophical positions of Schmitt, Löwith and Blumenberg. Hence, this analysis of the theological appraisal of history will serve as a stepping stone towards the comparative overview and evaluation that concludes this chapter.

The theological conception of historicity that can be found in the work of Gogarten and Bultmann is a modern phenomenon, which according to Jaeschke should be understood as theology's response to the problem that historicism posed to it from the 19th century onwards.¹³⁵ ‘History’ in this theological sense is not perceived as an autonomous, teleological process or as a meaningless sphere, but it is essentially regarded as a terrain of human action where decisions need to be made. These decisions acquire an eschatological dimension, because – in Kierkegaardian fashion – they relate to the salvation of the individual soul and/or the choice for God and against ‘the world’.¹³⁶ This depiction of ‘history’ is not far removed from how Schmitt conceived of it in his ‘Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History’ (1950): it situates human action within an eschatological framework that avoids the “eschatological paralysis” of pure expectation and also forgoes teleological notions of

131 Voegelin (1952) pp.67-68.

132 Walther (2001) pp.130-133.

133 Cf. Marquard (1991b) pp.25-26.

134 Gogarten (1966) pp.85-133; Guardini (1998) pp.50-109.

135 Jaeschke (1976) pp.77-84, 329-330. Jaeschke describes this rather unfavorably (p.330): “Dem Vorwurf, Theologie und Geschichte ... seien unvereinbar, begegnet die Theologie nicht anders als zur Zeit der Aufklärung dem Vorwurf, ihre Lehre sei widervernünftig.” He suggests that in response to the threat that the historicization of the human sciences posed to theology it began to claim that only theology allows a genuine understanding of historicity. Cf. Moltmann (2004) pp.7-29.

136 Moltmann (2004) pp.19-22; Löwith (1995) pp.168-169; Taubes (2004) p.66.

providence.¹³⁷ Similar to the decisionism of Schmitt (and that of Hanno Kesting and Reinhart Koselleck), these theologians tend to situate the individual in an existential void that has to be conquered by the sovereignty of the decision.¹³⁸ For Christian decisionism, there is a pre-ordained goal to any decision, namely God, salvation or ‘the good’. However, this goal only serves as an abstract orientation point and offers no substantive guidelines, let alone guarantees that each decision will serve this end. The decisionism that we encounter in Gogarten, Guardini and Bultmann prioritizes individual freedom, but it also emphasizes individual responsibility – as the idea of “Sohnschaft” illustrates. Theological decisionism thus presents history as *the* sphere where the individual, in his/her freedom, is faced with this responsibility of deciding between good and evil. Hence, it is asserted on the one hand that Christian faith can only be understood through a recognition of historicity and on the other hand it is claimed that only faith allows true insight into the nature of history.¹³⁹ In the next section we will find that this historicist-decisionist interpretation of Christianity contradicts other positions in the debate, such as Voegelin’s, but also those of Löwith and Blumenberg.

Rudolf Bultmann is perhaps the most important exponent of Christian historicism in this context. His Gifford lecture series, published in 1957 as *History and Eschatology*, provides a clear expression of a Christian decisionism articulated in light of Löwith’s reflection, in *Meaning in History*, on the relation between history and Christian eschatology. Bultmann draws heavily on Löwith’s theory on the origin of the modern idea of progress, but he also implicitly distances himself from the latter’s views on the nature of Christianity.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, Bultmann names Löwith at the very start of the series as an authority on the central question of his lecture series. This question is “the essence and meaning of History” in relation to Christian faith and individual life.¹⁴¹ Bultmann adopts Löwith’s thesis that progress is secularized eschatology, and formulates it a way that is reminiscent of Blumenberg’s depiction of the ‘secularization theorem’:

The general character of Enlightenment is the secularising of the whole of human life and thinking. The idea of teleology, however, remains and with it the question about meaning in history. ... [It is assumed that] there is a progress which is to lead to a Utopian state of perfection, the state of universal enlightenment under the rule of reason. To this extent the idea of eschatological perfection is retained in secularised form.¹⁴²

Gradually, however, this idea of a progressive meaningful history collapsed under the weight of historical calamities. It was subsequently replaced by a relativistic historicism. This meant that the central question of the meaning of history – in its teleological sense – became eclipsed, resulting in a debilitating and widespread sense of directionlessness and nihilism, Bultmann argues.¹⁴³

The question Bultmann posed at the beginning of the series, is therefore: “[c]an there be a salvation from nihilism?”¹⁴⁴ Bultmann argues that the essential historicity of the human being

137 Schmitt (2009) p.169.

138 Cf. Löwith (1995) pp.137-169, 214-215.

139 Bultmann (1957) pp.109, 136, 155; Gogarten (1966) pp.26-27, 104-107, 140-141; *ibid.* (1954) pp.338-354.

140 Bultmann (1957, pp.1, 16, 24, 56-80) explicitly refers to Löwith’s formula ‘progress is secularized eschatology’ on multiple occasions. Cf. Ruh (1980) pp.260-266.

141 Bultmann (1957) p.1.

142 Bultmann (1957) p.66, cf. pp.56-74. Blumenberg (1959, pp.163-166) had already criticized Bultmann in a review years before *Legitimacy*, where he indeed accuses him of substantialism and in which he bemoans the detrimental influence of Löwith (p.165).

143 Bultmann (1957) pp.10-11, 74-99.

144 Bultmann (1957) p.11.

– highlighted in historicism – must be acknowledged, and he also agrees with historicism that this acknowledgement should lead one to reject the question after a meaning *of* history in a teleological sense, because that would require an Archimedean point outside of history that is fundamentally inaccessible.¹⁴⁵ However, he regrets that historicism also discarded the question after a meaning *in* history, a question that was surrendered to an encroaching nihilism. In opposition to this tendency, he proposes that it is within the historicity of the human being that a meaning in history must be found. Rhetorically, he asks: “must we say that the historicity of man is not yet fully understood and must be thought out to its final conclusions in order to banish the conclusion of nihilism?”¹⁴⁶ Bultmann answers affirmatively; throughout the book it becomes apparent that a true understanding of historicity – and hence of what it means to be human – can only be obtained on the basis of Christian faith.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, Bultmann’s theology is premised on an essential relation between historicity, eschatology and faith.

Bultmann recounts how Christian eschatology developed out of Jewish historical thought and the originally Persian apocalyptic tradition. In Christianity, the Judaic notion of history as a process that is guided by a transcendent God was combined with an apocalyptic dualism that lauds the destruction of ‘the old world’ and heralds the arrival of the new.¹⁴⁸ In the early stage of Christianity this new world was expected to arrive imminently. However, it soon became apparent that the second coming was delayed indefinitely, and this raised several problems for Christian eschatology. For instance, it was unclear what would happen to the souls of the believers that had already died before the second coming and how Christianity was to relate to the world and its history in the meantime. Eventually, institutional Christendom developed a dogmatic system that could answer such questions with, respectively, notions of the after-life and an immanent-historical idea of providence – the latter of which, in turn, formed the theological roots of the secularized idea of progress.¹⁴⁹ Bultmann however does not want to salvage the dogmas of institutional Christianity. He rather wishes to revitalize a more ‘authentic’ Christian eschatology that he recognizes in the work of Paul and John. They also addressed these problems, but contrary to the later institutional collectivization and dogmatization of the Church, they did it by personalizing eschatology, by directing it inward, towards the individual soul. Bultmann can consequently be seen to eschew the dogmatized theological systems of Christian history in favor of an individualistic-Paulinian notion of Christian faith.¹⁵⁰

The Paulinian eschatology that Bultmann reconstructs is characterized by its reorientation of eschatology. It is turned inward, towards the soul of the individual, instead of to a ‘chosen people’ or an outward future ‘event’ such as the second coming. The incarnation of Christ entailed that life as a ‘new person’ has already been made possible here and now, and consequently that the old world has already been conquered. Bultmann states that this implies that the eschatological event – the victory over the old world and the old self – is moved to the present, and is perceived to occur within the life of the individual soul. However, the old world and the old self are also still present in Paul’s theology; simultaneously, the old world has already been vanquished *and* still has to be actively combatted. Bultmann calls this “a dialectical relation between the indicative and the imperative”. For instance, the imperative “[l]et not sin therefore reign in your mortal body” has its motivation in the indicative statement that “sin

145 Bultmann (1957) pp.138, 154-155.

146 Bultmann (1957) p.11, cf. pp.138-139.

147 Bultmann (1957) pp.149, 138-155.

148 Bultmann (1957) pp.21-30. Cf. Taubes (2009) pp.15-65.

149 Bultmann (1957) p.62. Cf. Ruh (1980) pp.102-106

150 Bultmann (1957) pp.44-47. Cf. Jaeschke (1976) pp.79-84; Moltmann (2004) pp.19-22.

will have no dominion over you”¹⁵¹ Hence, although on the one hand the decisive eschatological event has already occurred (indicative) on the other hand it has been continuously reiterated (imperative). This leads to a paradoxical co-existence of a new world and an old world, of the new and the old self. The struggle for the individual believer is then to *remain* “in Christ”, or in other words: to as it were ‘become who he/she already is’. This self-realization through grace is regarded by Bultmann as something that essentially happens through *decisions*. He states that the individual is called – by God – “to be himself in free decision. It belongs to the historicity of man that he gains his essence in his decisions.”¹⁵² Because the “*decisive event*” had already happened, this means that a providential world-history plays no role in the salvation of the individual, according to Bultmann, which means that the notion of God guiding the history of peoples loses its soteriological significance. *Historicity*, on the other hand, is all the more essential since it affirms the freedom and responsibility of the individual to reiterate his/her own self-realization through grace:

although the history of the nation and the world had lost interest for Paul, he brings to light another phenomenon, the historicity of man, the true historical life of the human being, the history which every one experiences for himself and by which he gains his real essence. This history of the human person comes into being in the encounters which man experiences ... and in the decisions he makes in them. In these decisions man becomes himself ...¹⁵³

Proceeding to Bultmann’s decisionism, we can see how he acknowledges historicism’s emphasis on historicity – with its concomitant rejection of a meta-historical Archimedean point or, for that matter, a trans-historical telos – without however surrendering the question of meaning in history. On the contrary, Bultmann asserts that the very idea of historicity, which has led to a skepticism towards grand historical-providential narratives, is originally Christian and can only be understood in relation to Christian faith. Paulinian eschatology for instance already entails a denial of a world-historical teleology in favor of a sole focus on the individual’s decisions, made in the quest for self-realization. Historicity should necessarily be understood on the basis of *freedom*, according to Bultmann, whereas modern historicism has surrendered this notion in favor of a fallacious historical determinism. Hence, modern historicism cannot “understand the present situation as the situation of decision”, because it sees the present solely as predetermined by the past.¹⁵⁴ However, the freedom that is required for a genuine life of historicity can only really be grasped as a divine gift, through grace, analogous to the Paulinian notion that the individual has already been set free from his/her old self, while he/she must struggle through decision-making to stay true to this eschatological accomplishment.¹⁵⁵ This continuous re-realization of the eschatological event comprises the meaning of history, Bultmann argues: although the question of the meaning of the *totality* of history cannot be answered, because “[m]an does not stand outside history”, “we can [now] say: *the meaning in history lies always in the present*, and when the present is conceived as the eschatological present by Christian faith the meaning in history is realized.”¹⁵⁶

151 Bultmann (1957) pp.46-47; Romans 6: 12.

152 Bultmann (1957) p.44, cf. pp.43-47, 136-154; Gogarten (1966) pp.67, 126-146.

153 Bultmann (1957) p.43. Cf. Congdon (2015) pp.7-10, 94-99, 135-137.

154 Bultmann (1957) p.141. Cf. Moltmann (2004) pp.19-22.

155 Bultmann (1957) p.150.

156 Bultmann (1957) pp.154-155. Cf.: Pannenberg (1973) pp.208-210; Moltmann (2004) pp.20-22. What Moltmann (p.21) calls ‘the eschatology of the eternal moment’ is something we will also encounter in Walter Benjamin’s work, albeit in a very different theoretical setting.

A comparable Christian decisionism also appears in the other theological accounts under discussion, as we can now see. For instance, Guardini's *End of the Modern World* welcomes the expected disintegration of modernity – taken as an unsustainable secularized-Christian hybrid – from the perspective of a Kierkegaardian decisionism, for it uncovers the actual opposition between worldly culture and Christian faith. This brings to light the existential decision that a “knight of faith” must make.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, this decisionism arises from Müller-Armack's account as well, because here the individual is continuously faced with the exclusive decision to worship either God or false idols. Underlying this emphasis on decision is a theological conception of freedom, reminiscent of both Bultmann's and Gogarten's theology, which implies that the individual is free through God but that he/she can surrender this freedom by choosing against him. Müller-Armack states: “Diese Freiheit zu Gott schließt aber die Freiheit, seinen Ruf nicht zu vernehmen oder sich vom Glauben abzuwenden, mit ein.” However, when this freedom is applied to refuse God, it will necessarily lead to a self-subjugation to earthly idols and hence to a negation of this freedom.¹⁵⁸

There is a clear affinity to be discerned between the theologies of Bultmann and Gogarten on the basis of their shared predilection for Christian decisionism. Bultmann quotes Gogarten, noting that “Sonship ... must be grasped ever and again in the decisions of life” and that the Christian faith in salvation “never takes man out of his concrete worldly existence. On the contrary, faith calls him into it with unique sobriety.”¹⁵⁹ Just as ‘works’ and ‘the world’ receive a theological legitimization in Gogarten's theory so is also the historical domain justified as the domain where the believer is called to exercise his/her God-given freedom. The individual is perceived as a being whose freedom, responsibility *and* fallibility imply that he/she will never fall into a condition of absolute stasis – precluding both determinism and perfectionism – and is therefore essentially a historical creature. It is *within history* “die sich zwischen Gott und dem Menschen ereignet” that the decision falls “über das Menschsein des Menschen”.¹⁶⁰

Gogarten concurs with Bultmann, but also with *Schmitt*, that one can only obtain a true understanding of history from the perspective of faith. The eschaton functions as a vital orientation point in Gogarten's theory, one that is required to obtain a true understanding of history and the present. Gogarten claims that unbelievers seek to undo the “nicht aufzuhellenden Dunkel der Zukunftsigkeit” (i.e., transcendence) by drawing this future into the light of the present (i.e., immanence).¹⁶¹ Faith decrees that the individual must act in the world, fulfilling the mission of *Sohnschaft*, albeit under what Schmitt calls a “blinde Vorgebot”, i.e., without real knowledge of the future. Secularist utopianism supplants the unknowable future with a human projection, and seeks to eradicate the essential blindness of the believer through the hubris of *‘planning’*, a typically modern sin that is also condemned by Schmitt.¹⁶² Gogarten suggests that it is only through faith that the dark “Unheil” of the future can appear as “das von Gott vollbrachte Heil”, and hence that the tenuous balance between the affirmation and the relativization of history can be maintained.¹⁶³ Moreover, it can be argued that Delekat and Müller-Armack argue along similar lines when they propose that any alienation from the

157 Guardini (1998) p.57, 79-81, 90-109.

158 Müller-Armack (1948) p.54.

159 Bultmann (1957) p.154. Cf. Gogarten (1966) pp.84-87.

160 Gogarten (1966) p.26, cf. pp.103-148; *ibid.* (1954).

161 Gogarten (1966) p.225. Cf. Schmitt (2009); Bultmann (1957) pp.136-141, 148-154; Stallmann (1960) p.32.

162 Groh (1998) p.118; Gogarten (1966) pp.127, 140-156, 178-181; Schmitt (2009) pp.167-168.

163 Gogarten (1966) p.225. Cf. *ibid.* (1954) p.350.

Christian tradition will either result in nihilism or totalitarianism; they thus suggest that faith, a balancing act in-between transcendence and immanence, is a necessary precondition for liberty in the political-historical sphere.¹⁶⁴

Overview and Evaluation

The Positions of Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt in Comparison to the Theological Contributions

After having discussed these various theological perspectives on secularization, modernity and history, we now arrive at a stage at which it has become possible to reflect on how these accounts relate to the philosophical positions of our primary authors, Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt. The purpose of this reflection is to zoom in on the significant analogies that exist between the ideas and themes that are discussed in the overtly theological and theistic perspectives explored in this chapter on the one hand, and on the other those that figure in the agnostic or atheistic philosophies of Löwith and Blumenberg as well as in the idiosyncratic political theology of Schmitt. Furthermore, we will find that this comparative analysis allows for a greater understanding of the complex interplay between these positions: that is, it elucidates the efficacy of Löwith's formula in the broader secularization debate, the effectiveness of Blumenberg's critique of the 'secularization theorem', and the 'hidden influence' of Schmitt. This analysis subsequently sheds new light on how a 'camp-formation' (alluded to in the previous chapter) occurs in these theological discussions that reflects divisions in the broader secularization debate.

In order to arrive at a structural comparison between the positions of Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt on the one hand and of the theological authors on the other, I will use a conceptual framework that partly draws on our analysis of Voegelin's 'metaxical' philosophy. Thus I highlight the structural interconnectedness of different conceptual differentiations (e.g., 'works/faith', 'history/eschatology', 'modernity/Christianity') in as far as they relate to the more abstract 'immanence/transcendence' distinction.¹⁶⁵ This framework is combined with the '*ideenpolitische*' insights that can be derived from the work of Lübbe, namely that the *meaning* of a concept (e.g. 'secularization') is to a significant degree dependent on the *function* that it fulfills in a narrative and subsequently on the 'ideological-political' purpose that the narrative serves.¹⁶⁶ This model of interpretation will be refined further by paying attention to how different authors can use similar themes and templates while still ending up with very dissimilar messages, and moreover to how the particular definition of one concept in a narrative will in turn determine how other, related concepts in the same account will be defined.¹⁶⁷

The casus that best illuminates the differences and similarities of the various accounts, and which follows from the exposition of Bultmann's and Gogarten's theologies, is how the relationship between 'history' and 'Christianity' is conceptualized in the various accounts under

164 Cf. Delekat (1958) pp.7-14, 37-43, 47, 59-73; Müller-Armack (1948) pp.33-35, 54, 139-144, 152-190.

165 For example: Gogarten's theological justification of 'works' directly results in a positive appraisal of history, secularization, modernity and the world (or 'immanence'), all of which stems from his affirmative, reconciliatory conception of Christianity. On the other hand, Voegelin's view of Christianity is more negativistic; thus he rather emphasizes the unsurmountable distance between faith and works, eschatology and history – hence his negative appraisal of modernity and secularization.

166 Cf. Lübbe (1965) pp.7-22, 86-87, 112; *ibid.* (1964) pp.231-232.

167 In Chapter 8 I will expound on the conceptual-methodological background of such an approach.

discussion. We have seen that Gogarten, Bultmann, Müller-Armack and Delekat are in agreement that ‘Christianity’ should not be confused with a stance of pure otherworldliness or with a completely negativistic attitude towards politics or human affairs. It is on the basis of this accommodative reading of Christianity that they can advocate a Christian revitalization of modernity.¹⁶⁸ This perspective relates to how ‘history’ is perceived, as especially the theologies of Bultmann and Gogarten exemplify. They assert that a position of faith does not render history meaningless, or an inherently inferior and evil domain, but that it can serve as an affirmation of it. This is because they associate ‘faith’ with a Kierkegaardian ‘leap of faith’ (i.e., a decision) rather than with a secure ‘knowledge of things unseen’.¹⁶⁹ History then becomes *the* sphere where decisions must be made, which means that it obtains a soteriological significance, be it one that cannot be expressed in teleological-providential terms. Significantly, both Bultmann and Gogarten thereby approximate Schmitt’s conception of history, articulated in his ‘Three Possibilities’. These three authors all adopt an eschatological framework that affirms historical action and eschews the “eschatological paralysis” which, according to Schmitt, inheres a passivist conception of eschatology.¹⁷⁰ In this respect they also share a preoccupation with the unique singularity of the historical ‘event’ and hence endow the singular historical decision with an eschatological significance.¹⁷¹ And indeed, while Bultmann is mainly known for his theologizing reception of Heidegger’s existentialism, the proximity between Gogarten’s theological decisionism and Schmitt’s political decisionism has been commented upon by several scholars, including Löwith.¹⁷²

It can be surmised at this stage that this conception of Christianity’s relation to history is not only contradicted by Löwith’s theory but also by those of Voegelin and Blumenberg. They perceive Christianity and eschatological faith (or religious ‘hope’) purely in terms of a quietist, negativistic and passivist stance of pure expectation. Eschatology and history are fully disconnected in the theories of both Löwith and Blumenberg, barring any meaningful interaction or, for that matter, a substantive continuity between them. This entails that, in light of a transcendent eschaton, history can only appear as meaningless and/or as a sphere of evil and suffering.¹⁷³ Gogarten, on the other hand, rejects this rigid separation of eschatology and history in *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit* as essentially *gnostic*:

Ebenso grundfalsch verstünde man das Verhältnis zwischen der göttlichen und der irdischen Geschichte, wenn aus der Unterscheidung eine Scheidung würde. Das geschieht, wenn ... der Glaube mit dieser Unterscheidung die Sündigkeit der irdischen Geschichte feststellt. Das würde aber bedeuten daß das irdische Weltgeschehen überhaupt den Charakter als Geschichte verlöre. Die Welt und ihre Ordnungen waren durch den Sündenfall ein für allemal verderbt; was in ihnen geschähe, hätte gar keine oder nur eine negative Beziehung zum Heil. Es ist leicht zu sehen, daß das die *gnostische* Auffassung von der Welt ist.¹⁷⁴

Gogarten confirms this in his ‘Das abendländische Geschichtsdenken’ (1954). While he admits that the correctness of Löwith’s thesis on the Christian origins of modern futurism is

168 Cf. Delekat (1958) pp.64-65; Müller-Armack (1948) pp.148, 181-182; Gogarten (1966) p.113; Lübke (1965) pp.117-126.

169 Gogarten (1954); Bultmann (1957) pp.138-155. Cf. Moltmann (2004) pp.19-22; Löwith (1995) pp.168-169.

170 Schmitt (2009) pp.168-170; *ibid.* (2005b) pp.849-852.

171 Schmitt (2009) pp.169-170; Moltmann (2004) pp.19-22, 30; Mehring (1996); Lievens (2016).

172 Löwith (1995) pp.159-169, 214; Falk (2014); Motschenbacher (2000) pp.240-249.

173 Cf. Ruh (1980) pp.98-107, 247-266.

174 Gogarten (1966) p.140 (emphasis added), cf. *ibid.* (1954) pp.338-339.

'beyond doubt', he adds: "Zweifelhaft scheint mir indessen, ob sein [Löwith's] Verständnis des christlichen Zukunftsglaubens richtig ist", concluding that Löwith's depiction of eschatological faith's disinterest in history applies more to a "gnostischen Glauben und sein Verhältnis zur Welt".¹⁷⁵

It is significant that Gogarten terms this passivist and negativist eschatology as 'gnostic' considering that Voegelin might instead be more inclined to interpret the former's decisionism as a 'gnostic' attitude, that is, as an inability to deal with the suspense of faithful passive expectation.¹⁷⁶ Indeed, Voegelin approaches Löwith's view, according to which 'faith' is mainly defined as passive expectation of an unintelligible eschaton rather than in terms of an active *Sohnschaft*. Voegelin suggests in *The New Science of Politics* that a disproportionate emphasis on actions and decisions – especially when an eschatological significance is attributed to them, as in the work of Bultmann and Gogarten – can quickly amount to the gnostic endeavor of immanentizing the eschaton.¹⁷⁷ As we have seen, Voegelin agrees with Löwith that genuine faith in a transcendent eschaton essentially renders history meaningless. Similar to Löwith's account, it is primarily Augustine who represents the orthodox Christian vision, dictating that "[o]nly transcendental history has direction toward its eschatological fulfilment".¹⁷⁸

Blumenberg maintains a conception of Christianity and eschatology that in some respects is more similar to Löwith's and Voegelin's views on this matter than, for example, to Bultmann's. In 1959, Blumenberg wrote a review of Bultmann's *History and Eschatology* that illustrates this connection further.¹⁷⁹ The gist of Blumenberg's critique pertains to Bultmann's definition of Christianity and eschatology. Whereas Bultmann – who is famous for his theological project of the *Entmythologisierung* and *Historisierung* of the New Testament – acknowledges that Christian eschatology is a historically determined phenomenon, he nonetheless seeks to exempt a theological kernel of eschatological faith from this historicization, recognized by Blumenberg as the notion of "kerygma" ('proclamation').¹⁸⁰ In response to this attempt, Blumenberg questions whether something such as kerygma or pure eschatological faith, that is assumedly without substance, can be secularized in the substantialist sense that Bultmann implies.¹⁸¹ After noting that the eschatology of the New Testament itself is not consistent, Blumenberg argues that the *Naherwartung* with which early-Christian eschatology is commonly associated is essentially inimical to historical thought in the way Bultmann envisions it: "Die lebendige Naherwartung zersprengt den überindividuellen Geschichtsstrom, sie vereinzelt und drängt jedem seine je eigene Heilssorge auf, aber keine 'Verantwortung' für irgend etwas anderes und irgendeine Zukunft."¹⁸²

175 Gogarten (1954) p.338. Cf. Ruh (1980) pp.260-666.

176 Voegelin (1952) pp.124-132; Ruh (1980) pp.261-262.

177 Cf. Syse (2000). Voegelin does place greater value on political endeavors than Löwith does, hence his plea for the establishment of a modest civil theology that can compensate for Christianity's de-divinization of the political sphere (1952, pp.157-163). This civil theology should however be strictly separated from any kind of eschatology or soteriology.

178 Voegelin (1952) p.118, cf. p.113. Both authors identify this perspective with the position of Augustine, but Zabel and Ruh also point out that this view is determined by more contemporary theological views, namely those of Franz Overbeck and Oscar Cullmann. Zabel (1968) pp.208-213, 260; Ruh (1980) pp.257-258.

179 Blumenberg (1959) pp.163-166. This review in fact already contains several key elements that would later constitute the argumentative core of the *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. For example, he proposes a conception of history that centers on functional reoccupation rather than substantive discontinuity, he mentions the self-secularization of eschatology and the latent Gnosticism of Christianity, and he identifies the secularization theorem with Löwith's thesis (pp.165-166).

180 Blumenberg (1983) p.40; *ibid.* (1959) p.164. Cf. Ruh (1980) pp.98-107.

181 Blumenberg (1959) p.165; *ibid.* (1983) p.40; Ruh (1980) p.264.

182 Blumenberg (1959) p.165. Cf. *ibid.* (1983) p.42; Blumenberg-Schmitt (2007) p.132.

Blumenberg argues that as a historical entity Christianity is nothing more than an amalgamate of heterogeneous, sometimes contradictory elements that are borrowed from other world-views and belief systems.¹⁸³ The only thing that is truly original to Christianity is the ‘immediate expectation’ or *Nabernwartung* of its earliest phase. However, Blumenberg holds that this *Nabernwartung* was so immediate and radical that could not be transformed without necessarily implying a functional reoccupation, or, in other words, a substantive break. In *Legitimacy*, Blumenberg continues his critique of Bultmann in this vein:

If one takes this [i.e., *Nabernwartung*] to be essential to the original core of Christian teaching, then it has nothing to do with the concept of history, or it has only one thing to do with it: It makes an absolute lack of interest in the conceptualization and explanation of history a characteristic of the acute situation of its end. Self-assertion then becomes the epitome of senselessness.¹⁸⁴

Both authors conceptualize this original eschatological stance in terms of the notion of kerygma, but to Bultmann this stance amounts to an essential affirmation of historicity that does not seem to be historically determined itself, whereas to Blumenberg it entails that authentic Christianity – in as far as it ever existed – precludes a meaningful relation to society, history or the world. The untenability of early-Christian *Nabernwartung* implies that it was short-lived and that later Christian thought was forced to accommodate a vast amount of “heterogenous ideas and conceptual means” from non-Christian sources.¹⁸⁵ Gogarten would consider this interpretation to be false, because it equates the original core of Christianity with gnostic world-negation. Blumenberg’s response – as his critique of Voegelin demonstrates – to this objection is that ‘original’ Christianity has more in common with Gnosticism than theologians would like to admit. Indeed, he repeatedly asserts – already in his 1959 review – that Marcion’s gnostic dualism is the only consistent solution to Christianity’s problem of the theodicy, which implies that logically speaking Christianity is merely an inconsistent form of Gnosticism.¹⁸⁶ Different evaluations notwithstanding, it can be surmised that Blumenberg concurs with Löwith and Voegelin that ‘authentic’ Christianity necessarily obstructs the idea of ‘meaning in history’, whether it is in the form of ‘progress’ or of the theologically informed decisionism that Bultmann, Gogarten and Schmitt prescribe.

Thus far they are in agreement; however, the point of *contention* between Blumenberg on the one hand and Löwith and Voegelin on the other lies not only in their normative appraisal of the world-negating character of authentic faith but also in their different answers to the question whether modernity can be disconnected from its religious past. The latter question separates Blumenberg from Löwith and Voegelin as well as from Schmitt, Bultmann and Gogarten. In this respect Blumenberg has an ally in Jaeschke, in that both agree that the ‘secularization theorem’ wrongfully delegitimizes modernity by denying it an origin independent from Christianity.¹⁸⁷ Jaeschke argues, in line with Blumenberg, that the ‘secularization theorem’ attempts to stake a Christian claim on something that is actually essentially modern, as for instance Gogarten and Bultmann attempt with historicity and Voegelin and Löwith with the modest idea of progress.¹⁸⁸ Jaeschke and Blumenberg both thematize such endeav-

183 Blumenberg (1983) pp.3-124; *ibid.* (1959) pp.164-165.

184 Blumenberg (1983) pp.42-43.

185 Blumenberg (1983) p.43.

186 Blumenberg (1959) p.165. Cf. *ibid.* (1983) pp.126-130.

187 Jaeschke (1976) pp.329-331; Blumenberg (1983) pp.13-25, 64-75, 113-120.

188 Jaeschke (1976) pp.26-27, 330.

ors in terms of the assumed rancor of ‘theology’, which supposedly stems from a fear of its obsolescence in an a-theological modernity. Jaeschke writes for instance that Bultmann’s and Gogarten’s monopolization of historicity is an “illegitime theologische Anspruch auf Bewahrung der Erfahrung der Wirklichkeit als Geschichte” that actually constitutes an “Argument zur Bewahrung der Theologie vor der Geschichte und zur Restituierung ihres bedrohten Anspruchs, die allein normbegründende Wissenschaft zu sein.”¹⁸⁹ Jaeschke suggests that theological attempts to stake a claim on essentially modern accomplishments, such as historical consciousness (Bultmann) or political liberality (Troeltsch and Gogarten), conceal an irreducible anti-modern conservatism. These attempts are nothing more than a “Aufforderung zur Rückkehr in den Ursprung”, namely a return to an original Christianity.¹⁹⁰

This last remark can help shed further light on a significant underlying division that constitutes the secularization debate. Jaeschke implicitly distinguishes between authors who argue for a “Rückkehr” and those – supposedly Blumenberg, Kamlah and Jaeschke himself – who do not. As a tool for understanding the secularization debate it should be noted that this differentiation is only valuable if it is situated in a broader framework, one that also addresses the question of historical continuity or discontinuity. Gogarten, Müller-Armack and Delekat, for example, do not simply advocate a return to an original past state but rather propose a re-rooting of the present state in its past, in a way that – in their minds – legitimizes both the present *and* the past. This ties in with a more fundamental difference between Jaeschke and Blumenberg on the one hand and Schmitt, Löwith and the theological authors discussed in this chapter on the other, that relates to Voegelin’s idea of metaxy. Jaeschke, Blumenberg and Kamlah are correct in suggesting that Löwith, Schmitt and the theologians in a sense deny modernity’s claim to constituting a genuinely new beginning. This is however not to say that these accounts can be simply be reduced to attempts at uncovering the ‘false self-consciousness’ of modernity by simply showing its historical indebtedness, as Blumenberg suggest. To put it abstractly, they rather seek to relate modernity, history or the sphere of immanence to something other, either something that transcends it – such as the divine – or something that underlies it – such as nature, in Löwith’s case – in a way that can either affirm *or* negate modernity, history or immanence. What these accounts, including Löwith’s and Schmitt’s, have in common is that they do not aim to return to a moment in time, but that they rather express the wish to break through history in a vertical sense, to reopen an orientation towards ‘transcendence’ or ‘nature’.¹⁹¹ Blumenberg interprets the reference to “a dimension of hidden meaning” as the assertion of a relation of dependency between *present and past*, whereas the theologians as well as Schmitt and Löwith would rather conceive of this relation as one between the historical sphere *in toto* and another sphere that somehow transcends or underlies it. The implication is that this orientation towards ‘otherness’ (nature or the divine) forms an important safeguard against the loss of measure, proportion and, ultimately, of freedom, that is assumedly concomitant with the absolutization/divinization of the immanent sphere.¹⁹² The question whether this stance nonetheless simply amounts to *conservatism* over against the supposed progressivism of Blumenberg will be addressed in the conclusion of this chapter.

In this instance it is important to emphasize once again, however, that a significant analogy or common structure between accounts should not be confused with an essential identity of positions. The fact that Löwith, Schmitt and the theological authors treated in this chapter

189 Jaeschke (1976) p.330. Cf. Blumenberg (1983) p.119; *ibid.* (1964) p.265; Flasch (2017) pp.481-482, 489.

190 Jaeschke (1976) p.330.

191 Cf. Timm (1967); Schmitt (1963) pp.121-123; Löwith (1966b).

192 Cf. Syse (2000); Barash (1998); Walther (2001) pp.131-132.

would take issue with what is perceived as Blumenberg's ideal of modernity's autonomous self-sufficiency and the concomitant defense of the immanent sphere from 'otherness' does not entail that they are essentially of one mind. The previous chapters, which subject the positions of our principal authors to comparative analysis, have already shown that Löwith and Schmitt disagree to a great extent on the value that is placed in Christian faith on historical and political action and on the interconnection of transcendence and immanence. At this stage it should be added that there are also significant differences to be discerned between the political theology of Schmitt and the theological decisionism that one encounters in, e.g., Gogarten, Bultmann and Guardini.¹⁹³ That is, whereas Gogarten, Bultmann and Guardini place more emphasis on the need for inner-historical action and decisions than Löwith's (and Voegelin's) conception of Christianity would allow for, they can still be seen to operate in a traditional 'Augustinian' framework. Although they would disagree with Voegelin and Löwith that the Augustinian differentiation between the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena* is simply self-evident to a true believer, which would take away the need for a real *decision* in the first place, they also eschew Schmitt's suggestion that this differentiation fully coincides with the historical decision of the political sovereign.¹⁹⁴ Instead, as especially Gogarten's theology exemplifies, they endorse an "eschatological reservation" that is reminiscent of Erik Peterson's theology, the primary aim of which is to relativize the promises of secular politics in light of a transcendent eschatological promise of fulfillment.¹⁹⁵ Gogarten's notion of *Sohnschaft*, for instance, suggests that while the individual operates under a divine mandate as the first heir of creation he/she remains under the auspices of the creator, whereas Schmitt's political theology implies that the sovereign effectively *replaces* God as the sole agent in the world.

Schematic Overview and further Reflection on the 'Secularization Theorem'

This analysis yields a complex image of various points of overlap and analogies but also of significant differences between the accounts under discussion. A more schematic overview will help better understand the interplay of similarities and divergences between these narratives, as it can elucidate how their contents are determined by the variety of definitions of the central concepts that are at play. These definitions in turn can be seen to correspond with the '*ideenpolitische*' points that the authors seek to get across. Hermann Lübbe already demonstrated how the position of an author in a discourse codetermines the definition and usage of a particular concept, e.g., 'secularization'.¹⁹⁶ However, rather than only focusing on the various usages of *one* concept by different authors, we must also take into account how the definition of this concept determines the function and meaning of the other central concepts (e.g., 'modernity' or 'Christianity') that occur in these narratives. In other words, the definition of a concept cannot be separated from the function that it fulfills in a narrative, and, as such, from the way it interconnects with the other concepts that appear within it. Moreover, it is worth

193 For instance, Falk (2014, pp.219-229) emphasizes the differences between Schmitt and Gogarten that Löwith (1995, pp.166-169) had glossed over.

194 Schmitt (2014) p.115; *ibid.* (2008) pp.10-11, 14-15 fn.12; Motschenbacher (2000) pp.212-224, 286-288.

195 Motschenbacher (2000) pp.178-180, 212-224. Cf. Gogarten (1966) pp.139-144; Delekat (1958) pp.16, 31; Müller-Armack (1948) pp.183-190; Guardini (1998) pp.108-109.

196 Lübbe (1965) e.g. pp.86-89. This issue, of the contested nature of concepts such as 'modernity', 'secularization' or 'Christianity' and the different ways in which they appear in historical narratives, will be addressed more extensively in the final, methodological chapter of this book.

noting that, despite their different interpretations and evaluations of these concepts, different authors nonetheless employ *similar sets* of concepts in their narratives. That is, if ‘secularization’ is involved in this discursive context, then ‘modernity’ and ‘Christianity’ are never far away. Moreover, it can be shown that these authors operate in a shared conceptual field where most of the central concepts that are used relate to the more abstract background distinction between ‘transcendence’ and ‘immanence’.

If ‘Christianity’ is primarily identified in terms of its transcendent ‘otherworldliness’, as it is in the theories of Voegelin, Löwith and Guardini, then this implies that a phenomenon such as ‘modernity’ – in as far as it is conceived of in terms of a *continuity* with Christianity – can only entail a dilution or a corruption of its assumed Christian origin. If, however, Christianity is defined more in terms of its purported ‘affirmative’ stance towards immanence, as it is in the theories of Gogarten, Delekat, and Müller-Armack (as well as Von Weizsäcker and Pannenberg), then this implies that modernity can be conceived of in terms of a legitimate continuity with its Christian past, as long as it does not transgress the boundaries that are set by Christianity. Finally, the concept of ‘Gnosticism’ also plays a significant role here, namely as a negative mirror image of Christianity. Most authors discussed here value Gnosticism negatively.¹⁹⁷ Hence, if they evaluate Christianity positively, then it is their definitions of Gnosticism that reveals what they value most about Christianity. Voegelin values a stance of ‘pure’ faith that is essentially passivist, whereas Gogarten values the more activist, affirmative stance of ‘Christian liberty’. In other words, if modernity is valued negatively – which is contingent on an otherworldly definition of Christianity – then it will most likely be associated with the heretic counterpart of Christianity, as Voegelin aptly demonstrates, whereas if Christianity is defined in terms of its affirmative stance then it is rather an inclination to *otherworldliness* that will be chastised as gnostic escapism, as for instance Gogarten illustrates.¹⁹⁸

The relative freedom with which authors can reconfigure similar sets of concepts within comparable narrative structures is mirrored in a more concrete sense by the reception in theological circles of Löwith’s thesis ‘progress is secularized eschatology’. Zabel and Ruh have observed that it is especially in these circles where Löwith’s formula gained the status of a powerful rhetorical tool with which to combat ‘secularist’ attempts to claim the heritage of modernity.¹⁹⁹ Here we can also recognize, simultaneously, what Blumenberg termed the “dogmatizing effect” of this formula as well as the way in which it became disconnected from Löwith’s own philosophy.²⁰⁰ It had a dogmatizing effect in that authors such as Voegelin, Von Weizsäcker and Bultmann explicitly adopt Löwith’s thesis as a self-evident theorem on the theological presuppositions of the modern conception of history without extensively reflecting on the precise theoretical claims (e.g., in terms of substance versus function, continuity versus discontinuity, normative versus descriptive) that can be made with it.²⁰¹ That being said, we also encounter

197 E.g., Voegelin (1952) and Gogarten (1966; 1954). In the next chapter we will find that Jacob Taubes (2006; 2009) forms an important exception to this rule. Cf. Schmitt (2014) p.125.

198 Gogarten (1966) pp.14-26, 140-141, 179; *ibid.* (1954) p.338. Cf. Bultmann (1957) pp.5-6. To be sure, in the case of Gogarten (and Bultmann) this identification of Gnosticism with ‘otherworldliness’ is contingent on a positive, accommodative interpretation of ‘Christianity’ and the assumption of a positive (or ‘substantive’) continuity between Christianity and modernity – given that ‘modernity’ is commonly associated with this-worldliness and historicity.

199 Zabel (1968) pp.194-196, 231-243; Ruh (1980) pp.236-238, 260-265; Cf. Timm (1967).

200 Blumenberg (1983) p.27. Ruh (1980, pp.160-161) states that “Gogartens Aufnahme von Löwiths These zeigt, wie wenig diese, wenn sie nur als allgemeiner Rahmen übergenommen wird, über die Konkreten Zusammenhänge und Abhängigkeiten aussagt, die sie implizieren soll.”

201 Voegelin (1952) pp.111-125; Von Weizsäcker (1964) pp.162-176; Bultmann (1957) e.g. pp.56-77. Cf. Stallmann (1960) p.19.

similar theses in the works of authors who do not reference Löwith's *Meaning in History* as a source: e.g., Delekat, Müller-Armack, Guardini and Gogarten.²⁰² It should be noted that the hypothesis that a key element of modernity – e.g., progress – derives from Christianity fulfills a different function in these theological narratives than it does in the accounts of Löwith, Koselleck, Kesting and Schmitt. We have seen in previous chapters that Löwith, Kesting and Koselleck employ the thesis without endowing it with a specific, delineated normative claim. (Schmitt's secularization concept is a special case, as it actually fulfills multiple different functions.) In the case of the theological accounts discussed in this chapter, however, 'secularization' does function as a category that is more clearly normative in nature. Contrary to what critics such as Blumenberg and Jaeschke suggest, this however does not mean that it *only* operates as a category of illegitimacy. It can also be used – for example by Gogarten and Delekat – to depict a legitimate continuity between modernity and its Christian past. Evidently, this implies that such authors maintain a Troeltschian definition of 'modernity', namely as a phenomenon that arises out of 'Christian liberty'. This of course contradicts the atheistic conception of modernity that we can find in the narratives of Kamlah and Blumenberg.²⁰³

It can moreover be contended that these theological accounts are more clearly *substantialist* in comparison to the narratives of Löwith, Schmitt, Kesting and Koselleck, which incline instead towards a functionalist conception of secularization. Especially Delekat and Müller-Armack assume that modernity harbors Christian substances in secular disguise, as is for instance the case with liberty, progress, planning or utopianism.²⁰⁴ The fact that substantialism is more clearly present in these accounts seems to be linked to the more delineated normative role that the concept of secularization fulfills in these instances. 'Substantive continuity' represents, as Blumenberg observed, some sort of indebtedness of the current state, i.e., modernity, to something 'other', whether it is the past or towards a transcendent source. In short, there is reason to agree with Zabel's observation that most of Blumenberg's criticisms of Löwith are actually better directed at the *theological reception* of the latter's formula.²⁰⁵ That being said, it should also be added that the 'substance/form' distinction is not extensively reflected upon outside of Blumenberg's and Jaeschke's critiques, and that the idea of a 'substantive continuity' does not carry the argumentative weight in these theological narratives that is ascribed to it by these critics. It is arguably more fruitful to focus on what substantialism stands for in Blumenberg's critique: that is, it is perceived as an assertion of heteronomy, a contradiction of his own idea of the relative self-sufficiency of the modern individual. And indeed, we have seen that the various authors under discussion – including Schmitt and Löwith – do seek to relate history, immanence or modernity to something 'other'; however, they do not *necessarily* need to take recourse to the rhetoric of substantialism in order to make this claim.

'Metaphorics' of Secularization

This further reflection on Blumenberg's critique of the 'secularization theorem' can be concluded with some observations about what he termed the "background metaphorics" of

202 Delekat (1958) pp.37-48, 54; Müller-Armack (1948) pp.107-109; Guardini (1998) pp.50, 76, 100; Gogarten (1966) pp.126-148. Although Gogarten does not mention Löwith in *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit*, he is addressed in his 'Das abendländische Geschichtsdenken' (1954, pp.336-357).

203 In short, these theological secularization narratives do not necessarily proclaim modernity's illegitimacy, they rather attempt to delegitimize the atheistic interpretation of modernity represented by Blumenberg.

204 Delekat (1958) pp.39-42, 50, 58; Müller-Armack (1948) pp.107-108, 119, 140-150.

205 Zabel (1968) pp.242-243. Cf. Blumenberg (1983) pp.72-75, 113-120, 466

secularization. It has become apparent that the metaphor of ‘expropriation’ is not the most pervasive one among theological accounts on secularization. Blumenberg reduces secularization to ‘expropriation’, and when confronted with Zabel’s critique that there are no historical grounds for this reduction he claims that historical evidence is not required since the “background metaphors” of secularization shows a clear predilection for the “expropriation model”.²⁰⁶ I submit that this hermeneutical approach is not illegitimate, and that it is indeed possible to reconstruct the background metaphors of a particular usage of a concept. This would imply looking beyond the explicit claims and statements of the authors in question and focusing instead on their tacitly held assumptions and the underlying ‘images’ that pre-determine surface-level argumentations. However, I contend that such an approach yields different results than Blumenberg suggests. Blumenberg undercuts this critique by asserting that apparent deviations from the expropriation model stem from an inconsistent and imprecise use of ‘secularization’.²⁰⁷ I propose a more benevolent reading of these accounts instead, which gives rise to the possibility that there are actually different “background metaphors” at play than the one Blumenberg puts forward. We have encountered two different templates, both of which can be distilled from the metaphoric language that pervades the discourse on secularization. Although they become manifest with varying degrees of clarity, and are often intertwined in their use, they should nonetheless be seen as two separate templates, as I will argue. The first template that I place under scrutiny has already been addressed as the so-called ‘organic metaphor’, which portrays Christianity as the sole life-giving source, or ‘fertile soil’, of modernity. This metaphor, which was already adopted by Troeltsch, emerges most clearly from the works of Delekat and Müller-Armack, but a variety of it also appears in Guardini’s *End of the Modern World*.²⁰⁸

When the organic metaphor operates in the background of a secularization narrative it will give rise to the clearest instances of what Blumenberg calls ‘substantialism’. We have seen that the organic metaphor presupposes that any positive cultural phenomenon is determined by a substance that supposedly gives it life and meaning, and that Christianity is the only possible source of this substance. If the life-line of modernity is cut through, this means that the substance will remain present for a limited time but that it will gradually wither away. To explain this connection between substance and its origin, I propose that, especially in the case of Delekat and Müller-Armack, this template serves as an analogy of Augustine’s principle of evil as ‘privation of the good’. This principle presupposes an identity between ‘being’ and the ‘good’: because everything has its source in God, this means that all of being participates in the good. From this it follows first of all that *evil* has no substance of its own, it simply means the corruption or privation an already existing substance, and secondly that this corruption can never be final, since as long as *something* exists, there is still good in it.²⁰⁹ This metaphor explains how a substance remains determined by its origin and why disconnection from a perceived cultural

206 Blumenberg (1983) pp.23, 25.

207 Blumenberg (1983) pp.18-25. There are of course more exceptional cases in which authors do employ the expropriation model (e.g. Delekat, 1958, pp.5, 50). One is the account of Von Weizsäcker (1964, pp.166-169, 180), where it is argued that the concept of ‘infinity’ – originally an associated with God – becomes appropriated by modern science and projected onto the universe. Blumenberg calls it “an exemplary text for the whole syndrome of the theme of secularization” (1983, p.79), and consequently interprets it in terms of the expropriation model. However, I believe that it can also be interpreted in terms of the second ‘template’ I will introduce, namely of drawing transcendence into the immanent sphere by divinizing immanent phenomena.

208 Lübke (1965) pp.84, 96, 120; Delekat (1958) pp.12, 22, 37-43, 64-65; Müller-Armack (1948) pp.35-36, 59-62, 110, 148-150, 178-182; Guardini (1998) pp.97, 100, 106.

209 Augustine states in his *Enchiridion* (2000, p.240): “If, however, the corruption comes to be total and entire, there is no good left either, because it is no longer an entity at all.”

source – or ‘deracination’ – will eventually result in a decline towards nihilism, until, that is, an effort towards the ‘re-rooting’ of modernity in its Christian soil is attempted. Although Delekat and Müller-Armack do not adopt an identical Neoplatonic-Christian ontology, their diagnoses of culture do exhibit something analogous to it when they admit that they genuinely cannot conceive of societal or cultural growth outside of Christianity.²¹⁰

The second template that can be distinguished from our analysis of the secularization debate is the ‘idolatry’ metaphor. This template also occurs in the accounts of Müller-Armack and Delekat, where it is intertwined with the organic metaphor, but it appears in a more abstract and systematic form in the works of especially Gogarten and Voegelin. Müller-Armack’s *Jahrhundert ohne Gott* however does thematize the topos of idolatry most explicitly. He holds that humankind is faced with a fundamental choice of worshipping either the divine or the world, and that, if the latter is chosen, this would lead to a divinization of the world.²¹¹ We have seen that in the accounts of Bultmann, Gogarten and Voegelin either a Paulinian notion of freedom, faith or a “truth of the soul” provides a vision of transcendence. Within the confounds of human existence, however, transcendence will necessarily remain perpetually à *venir*, beyond our reach. The unappropriated vision of transcendence subsequently functions as a vantage point from which to obtain a clear or ‘sober’ view of the sphere of immanence, be it ‘the world’ or ‘history’. This allows for a relatively positive appreciation of this realm but it also helps to acknowledge its essential limitations. This “existence-in-tension” (Voegelin) or “*fragendes Nichtwissen*” (Gogarten) – i.e., an existence of openness towards a transcendence that remains completely unintelligible – can become too straining for an individual, at which point the connection becomes lost. This loss of connection can result in two different scenarios, according to Gogarten: either transcendence is ignored altogether, which results in an all-encompassing nihilism or relativism, or, and this is more significant option, the “*Nichtwissen*” is surrendered in favor of an appropriation of this transcendent point, which signifies the detrimental absolutization of the world.²¹² The latter option is the most recurring one in the various accounts, and I would argue that this model forms the conceptual background for the popular topos of modern ideologies as *Ersatzreligionen*, which one encounters not only in the theories of Voegelin and Gogarten, but also in many others.²¹³ Moreover, when this model is temporalized, i.e., when the function of ‘transcendence’ is fulfilled by ‘the eschaton’, it also explains how modern histories of philosophy can be regarded as ‘immanentized’ eschatology. And indeed, there are reasons to also read Löwith’s own theory in this vein, as will become clear.

For now, it is expedient to briefly look at the distinguishing features of these templates and the commonalities between them. First of all, it should be noted that the ‘substantialism’ that Blumenberg and Jaeschke consider to be central to the ‘secularization theorem’ is only clearly recognizable in the organic template. If this substantialism is interpreted in terms of the organic metaphor it can explain certain things that are more difficult to clarify in terms of the expropriation model, namely: how and why the substance remains bound to its origin and why the alienation from Christianity is detrimental for modernity in the first place. The organic metaphor can answer both questions, namely: Christianity is the only source of ‘substance’ and the substance becomes depleted once it is disconnected from its source. Seen in this light it becomes apparent that secularization narratives are perhaps not merely expressions of the

210 As mentioned in an earlier footnote, I do not recognize a similar tendency in Guardini’s work. He sees ‘modernity’ as parasitic upon ‘Christianity’ (another use of the organic metaphor), but he does consider the existence of a durable, *purely secular* culture a real possibility (1998, pp.101-106).

211 Müller-Armack (1948) pp.59-69, 141-142.

212 Gogarten (1966) pp.142-143; *ibid.* (1954) pp.350-351.

213 Von Weizsäcker (1964) pp.12-13, 23; Delekat (1958) p.48; Müller-Armack (1948) pp.56-62, 148.

rancor of ‘theology’, as Blumenberg suggests. Now they can also be regarded as expressions of concern by conservative authors who genuinely cannot conceive of cultural growth beyond the horizon of Christianity. However, although this model arguably provides a better explanation of substantialism than the expropriation model, it must be noted that it appears to be less prolific than the ‘idolatry’ template, which is not strictly substantialistic.²¹⁴ Finally, I contend that narratives that use the organic metaphor (save for Guardini’s) display a clear penchant for a traditionalist cultural-conservative outlook, as it typically calls for a re-grounding of contemporary culture in Christianity as a *historical* cultural tradition, rather than relying on the more existentialist claim that individuals must maintain an attitude of openness towards a transcendence that remains beyond reach.²¹⁵

The ‘idolatry’ argument seems to depend less on a conservative substantialism and more on the formal concept of metaxy, that is, the need to sustain the delicate balance between transcendence and immanence. This lack of a distinct substantialism implies that this template cannot account for a possible *end* to the secularization process – that is, the point at which the substance is depleted – and thus offers no guarantees with respect to the reorientation about which Delekat and Müller-Armack seem more confident. It does not explain ‘secularization’ in terms of the exhaustion of a substance but more along the lines of the gradual divinization of immanence. The idolatry argument can lend itself to both a transitive and an intransitive use of the secularization concept – one can usually encounter both instances in the texts – in that it can denote the immanentization of a single phenomenon (resulting in a singular ‘idol’) and a generalized immantization process.

The distinguishing feature of the idolatry template is that it elucidates the perceived relation between the process of secularization and the phenomenon of political totalitarianism. This template indicates that ‘transcendence’ constitutes an existential *exit* from humanity’s surroundings, be it the world, history, or the political sphere. The suggestion is that the eclipse of this existential exit leads to a totalization of these surroundings, or in a political sense, to totalitarianism. This implication is of course evident in the works of Voegelin, Gogarten and Schmitt, but it also appears in a more areligious form in the accounts of Kesting, Koselleck and Löwith.²¹⁶

The similarity between the two templates now comes clearly into view: both paradigms proclaim the existence of another dimension – and this has been correctly observed by Blumenberg – such as nature, transcendence or a privileged tradition, which has priority over one that is falsely conceived of as an autonomous realm, e.g., the historical sphere, society or modernity. What Blumenberg and Jaeschke tend to underappreciate, however, is that this dimension is not only conceptualized in a ‘horizontal’ relation, between past and present, but also in a ‘vertical’ sense. It harbors a metaphysical *systematic* claim rather than only a historical *genetic* one.²¹⁷ The genetic claim seems to be most at home in an organic template whereas the

214 Although loosely scattered references to ‘roots’ and ‘soil’ can be found throughout the literature on secularization. Cf. e.g. Lübke (1965) p.84; Ruh (1980) p.43.

215 To clarify: Guardini is evidently not a progressive thinker either. I emphasize that he does not appear to endorse a stance of *cultural*-conservatism, according to which society, civilization, politics or culture should remain rooted in a Christian *tradition*; instead, he opts for a Catholic version of Kierkegaardian decisionism that disconnects ‘faith’ from the world.

216 Cf. Walther (2001) pp.130-133; Schmitt (1963) pp.121-123; *ibid.* (2014) pp.127-130; Löwith (1960) pp.228-255; Timm (1967). Koselleck and Kesting do not employ a similar concept of ‘transcendence’ but in their appropriation of Schmitt’s political theology they can be seen to use ‘the political’ in a similar vein, i.e., vis-à-vis ‘society’. Whereas to Schmitt ‘the political’ functions as a placeholder for ‘transcendence’, Kesting and Koselleck have effectively de-theologized Schmitt’s theory, without, however, modifying the *function* of ‘the political’ to a great extent.

217 Cf. Kroll (2010) p.210.

systematic claim is more appropriately situated in the template of idolatry. Another implication of this reconstruction, one that Blumenberg fails to take seriously, is that the relation between the two dimensions can be conceptualized in two different ways. That is, the supposed reality of the superior dimension – e.g., the original historical form of Christianity, or the metaphysical concept of transcendence – can either *affirm* or *negate* the reality of the secondary dimension.²¹⁸ This feature explains why these secularization narratives can serve different purposes, as Lübke already recognized. On the one hand they can affirm the essential link between for instance modernity or historicity with Christian faith (as in Gogarten or Bultmann), or on the other hand they can negate these phenomena as illusionary distractions vis-à-vis the reality that is considered essential (as in Guardini).

Conclusion

To briefly summarize this chapter: we have seen, first of all, that ‘secularization’ can be interpreted in a variety of ways, also within a shared theological framework. Delekat and Müller-Armack show that it can be valued negatively, namely as a process of privation or apostasy. Guardini regards ‘secularization’ as a more ambivalent phenomenon, because while he also conceives of it in terms of apostasy he also suggests that the disconnection of Christianity from ‘the world’ enables the existential choice with which each believer is faced to come clearer into view. Gogarten introduces the two-tiered conception of secularization – already implicit in Delekat’s account and present as an option in Schmitt’s political theology – that denotes both a legitimate continuity and an illegitimate break (as in ‘secularism’). The analysis of the contributions of Voegelin and Bultmann subsequently provided an occasion to reflect on how these secularization narratives conceptualize the relationship between Christianity on the one hand and modernity and history on the other. The theories of Gogarten and Voegelin have moreover proved valuable because they can be seen to provide a theoretical (respectively theological and philosophical) background to the cultural-historical accounts of Delekat and Müller-Armack. Our analysis of Bultmann’s theory of ‘historicity’ paved the way for a case study on the similarities and differences between the various accounts and on how they relate to the positions of Blumenberg, Löwith and Schmitt. This led to a reflection on the factors that constitute these differences, namely on the variety in interpretations of the key concepts – Christianity, modernity and secularization – and the narrative functions that they serve.

In conclusion I will briefly reflect on the general image of the secularization debate that emerges from this reconstruction and on how the variety of accounts we have encountered can be related to the contributions of Löwith, Schmitt and Blumenberg. First of all, one takeaway from the previous chapter was that it is possible to speak of heterogeneous, loosely organized camps in the German secularization debate, but that the idea of there being a single, monolithic crypto-theological ‘secularization theorem’ should be rejected. The current chapter demonstrates that although some of Blumenberg’s criticisms are better targeted at authors like Delekat and Müller-Armack rather than at Löwith (or Koselleck, Kesting and Schmitt for that matter) this does not imply, as Blumenberg, Jaeschke and Kamlah suggest, that ‘theology’ forms a single polemical position of anti-modern conservatism. Instead, even

218 Blumenberg (1983, p.24) and Jaeschke (1976, p.34) are aware of this option, but they reject it as disingenuous. This has to do with the fact that, in their view, any attempt to bind modernity to its ‘roots’ in Christianity will essentially amount to its denial, because it runs counter to their conception of modernity in terms of its substantive self-sufficiency.

the theistic, theologically informed accounts discussed in this chapter are not generally in agreement on ‘secularization’, partly because they differ on how ‘Christianity’ should be understood. The divergence in how Löwith’s formula was adapted by some authors (Bultmann, Von Weizsäcker and Voegelin) and how theses that are similar to Löwith’s function in the works of others (Delekat, Müller-Armack and Gogarten) indicate that the existence of a shared set of concepts or narrative templates does not entail what Marquard calls a “grundsätzlichen Positionsidentität”. One question that arises is whether, despite the heterogeneity in the theological perspective, it is nonetheless possible to concede to Blumenberg, Jaeschke and Zabel that theologically informed secularization narratives are naturally inclined to cultural conservatism in one way or another²¹⁹ I would argue that, although this impression is not outright incorrect, the overall picture is more ambivalent.

In this chapter we have encountered clear instances of cultural conservatism. Delekat and Müller-Armack clearly condemn modernity for its loss of traditional Christian values, and reduce most if not all of modernity’s problems to its disconnection from its roots. However, we have also seen that theological accounts on secularization can lend themselves to a (more or less modest) progressivism. Von Weizsäcker for instance argues that modernity should reconnect with the progressive currents of Christian history. This suggests that Christianity can also operate as a reservoir for emancipatory thought, on which the Modern Age can draw. This argument is however met with the skepticism of Jaeschke and Blumenberg, who suggest that this ‘progressivism’ is actually conservative anti-modernism in disguise. Jaeschke for instance takes issue with the argument – found in the work of Troeltsch, Guardini, Gogarten and Bultmann – that only Christianity (more specifically, Christian freedom) can guarantee true individual liberty. Jaeschke states that the Paulinian ‘freedom’ which Gogarten seeks to restore cannot be counted as a genuine freedom from a secular viewpoint: “Die befreiende Wirkung von Gogartens Lösung ist bloßer Schein. Der Mensch, der seine Freiheit verstanden zu haben glaubt und sich anschickt, aufzubrechen, wohin er will, erhält eiserne Fußangeln angelegt.”²²⁰ The freedom that the individual believer receives is only a freedom to choose for a traditional conception of Christianity; if he/she decides differently, this necessarily leads to self-enslavement, Gogarten suggests.²²¹ In the eyes of Blumenberg and Jaeschke this ‘permissive’ stance of secularization theology towards a modestly liberal modernity is merely a renewed attempt to bind the Modern Age to its Christian roots. This ignores the presumed essentially a-religious (if not atheistic) nature of modernity. It is in this sense that Jaeschke, Kamlah and Blumenberg can depict any theological account of secularization as being, at heart, anti-modern in nature despite explicit claims to the contrary.

The issue of substantialism illustrates this further. To Jaeschke and Blumenberg, substantialism represents an assertion of heteronomy that denies modernity its own substance and hence rejects its claim to relative autonomy. Once it is suggested that modernity should be ‘grounded’ in something ‘other’, e.g., in a historical-cultural soil or in revelation, this automatically subjugates the present to the past. However, at this stage we can also observe that this argument contains its own presuppositions that are not necessarily universally accepted. Blumenberg equates the liberty of modern individualism with autonomy as self-sufficiency. The self-creation of modern ‘substance’ (instrumental rationality, progress and self-assertion) is perceived in terms of a liberation from the burden of meta-human standards. Any postulation of a non-human Absolute can only result in human subjugation, or in other words, as

219 Zabel (1968) pp.265-266.

220 Jaeschke (1976) p.26.

221 Cf. Blumenberg (1983) pp.133-136; Walther (2001) pp.130-133.

Schmitt's theory illustrates, in political absolutism. This conception of liberty can be juxtaposed with another one, espoused in a more or less overt manner by several authors discussed in this chapter, which is that an absolute, transcendent orientation point can supposedly function as an existential escape hatch, one that precludes the absolutization of immanence. In short, we are not only dealing with incompatible conceptions of 'modernity', but there is reason to believe that they in turn relate to incompatible ideas on what 'human freedom' implies.

This ties in with my final remark, which is that it is possible to translate what I have termed the 'idolatry template' into more secular terms. Indeed, the very notion of 'absolutization' illustrates this. The question that separates Blumenberg not only from Löwith and Schmitt but also from most theological authors is whether it is necessary to postulate an absolutized 'other' outside of the realm of immanence (e.g. history or modernity) in order to prevent the absolutization of the latter. Walther argues in this respect that a 'metaxical' view along the lines of Voegelin and Gogarten offers no actual guarantees that totalitarianism will be resisted, and that a strict immanentism or anti-absolutism – that we have encountered in Blumenberg and which is expressly endorsed by Marquard – can fulfill the same function.²²² Incidentally, Richard Rorty provides an example of how the 'idolatry template' can also be used to make a Blumenbergian point. In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989), Rorty states that rather than 'worshipping' modern (crypto-religious) 'idols' such as Reason or History, we must "try to get to the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi divinity, where we treat *everything* ... as a product of time and change."²²³ The fact that the 'idolatry argument' can just as well be used to advocate an end to all worship shows its range beyond a religious context. Moreover, the notion that immanence, history, society or modernity should be kept open towards something outside of it or something that escapes it – transcendence, nature or 'the political' – can also take on a non-religious form, as not only Löwith but also Koselleck and Kesting (arguing in line with Schmitt) demonstrate.²²⁴ Koselleck and Kesting claim that totalitarianism emerges once the true nature of the political is ignored and a faith in human planning becomes absolutized. In Löwith's philosophy something similar occurs once the place of the human lifeworld within nature is obfuscated and the historical world becomes confused with 'the world' as such. I would suggest that this does not entail that these accounts are indebted to theology in a substantive sense. Rather, to use Blumenbergian terminology, it can be acknowledged that the functional position of 'transcendence' becomes *reoccupied*, by 'the political' or 'nature', respectively. They subsequently form the basis of a critique of that which reoccupies the function of 'immanence', namely 'society' or 'history'. In the next chapter we will find that the question whether an absolute 'other' should be postulated as a guarantor of human freedom or whether this freedom rather requires an 'unburdening' of human life from *all* absolutisms, transcendent or not, is not only an existential or metaphysical issue; it has important consequences for political thought as well.

222 Walther (2001) pp.130-133.

223 Rorty (1989) p.22.

224 It is worth noting that the Benjamin-Adorno-Derrida school of 'negative Messianism', or what Derrida (1994, p.74) calls "the messianic without messianism", arguably fulfills the same function. Taubes can certainly be placed in this line of thought. Cf. Bielik-Robson (2014) p.92. On the recurrence of the 'idolatry' topos in Benjamin's work, cf.: Deuber-Mankowsky (2002) pp.12-17.

Chapter 7

Politics: Between Heresy and Paganism, The Struggle over Political Theology between Jacob Taubes and Odo Marquard

Introduction

From previous chapters – on the Löwith-Blumenberg-Schmitt debate and on historiographical and theological perspectives on ‘secularization’ – it has already become apparent that the secularization debate contains a notable *political* dimension, one that is important to take into account for a thorough understanding of this wide-ranging and multifaceted discourse. To conclude this three-part series of different perspectives on the broader secularization debate we will therefore turn to politics. In reflecting on this dimension it is worth considering, as a point of departure, the upshot of Hermann Lübbe’s study on the history of ‘secularization’, *Säkularisierung: Geschichte eines ideenpolitischen Begriffs* (1965). This work stipulates that particular secularization narratives are informed by the ideological-political positions of the authors and that each iteration of the secularization debate tends to reflect its immediate historical-political context.¹ Looking back on examples from prior chapters we can indeed see how this is the case. Lübbe for instance points out that in the 19th century *Kulturkampf*, ‘secularization’ served as a shibboleth that signified cultural emancipation from ecclesiastical control.² We have also observed that the concept appeared during the interbellum in Carl Schmitt’s *Politische Theologie* (1922), where it was used to justify authoritarian decisionism against the liberal-parliamentarian indecisiveness that assumedly pervaded the Weimar Republic. Karl Löwith and Hans Blumenberg later rejected this notion of ‘structural’ secularization, not in the last place because they identified it with the political absolutism – in the form of 20th century totalitarianism – that Schmitt was held to represent. This rejection is tied in with Löwith’s critique of modern hubris and with Blumenberg’s repudiation of all (political or theological) absolutisms. Speaking more generally we can also see how the function of ‘secularization’ changed after the Second World War. In the conservative theology of Friedrich Delekat, Alfred Müller-Armack and Friedrich Gogarten, for instance, ‘secularization’ could explain the alienation of modernity from its Christian ‘roots’ (resulting in the recent catastrophe) but it could also

1 Lübbe (1965) pp.7-22, 86-87. Cf. Zabel (1968, pp.35-37) for a criticism of Lübbe’s *ideenpolitische* framework.

2 Lübbe (1965) pp.23-54.

be used to identify the way towards a “*Neuerverwurzelung*” of modernity in Christian soil. Lübke claims that the concept thus served the purpose of legitimizing a post-war conservative *Ordo-Liberalismus*.³

However, Kurt Flasch – in his study *Hans Blumenberg. Philosoph in Deutschland* (2017) – suggests that this is the end of the line. He states that by the time Lübke’s *Säkularisierung* (1965) was published, ‘secularization’ had already lost its potency. “Als Blumenberg sein Buch vorbereitete, *blickte* Hermann Lübke 1965 schon historistisch auf die Säkularisierungsdebatte *zurück*”. Flasch, like Blumenberg, views the discourse on secularization mainly as a conservative-theological affair, and notes that as such it had already more or less petered out when Blumenberg intervened in 1966.⁴ What Flasch perceives as the end of the secularization debate should however rather be seen as its transformation. This too can be understood within a political context. The contributions of Blumenberg, Wilhelm Kamlah, Walter Jaeschke and also of Odo Marquard (who will be discussed in this chapter) illustrate that by the mid-1960’s various intellectuals considered the time ripe to conceptualize a future for modernity beyond the historical-cultural horizon of its Christian past. Several commentators suggest that this image of modernity as a legitimate new beginning, perceived as an emancipation from past absolutisms, parallels the concrete-political legitimacy of the young liberal-democratic Federal Republic of West-Germany.⁵ This vindication of enlightened modernity as a breaking away from religious traditions however also does not mark the final stage of the secularization debate. In fact, we have reason to believe that the cautious optimism that Blumenberg expressed in the 1966 edition of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* was short-lived, because a *Tendenzwende* – a shift in tone in political and academic discourse characterized by polarization and politicization – that announced itself in the student revolt of 1968 would soon problematize this image of a “liberal modernity”.⁶

Christian Keller explains that Blumenberg’s retreat from academic publicity from the early 1970’s onwards should in part be understood as a response to the “Schock” of “1968”.⁷ Blumenberg however not only retreated from public academic affairs, he also attempted to withdraw from the intensifying polemic on secularization and modernity by increasingly turning his focus to ‘myth’ instead.⁸ Meanwhile, the publication of *Politische Theologie II* in 1970 gave a new, more overtly political direction to the secularization debate. This direction converged with a development that predated Schmitt’s book by a few years, namely the ‘discovery’ of political theology by theologians of the Left, such as Johann B. Metz and Dorothee Sölle. They initially drew inspiration not from Schmitt, but from the Jewish political Messianism of Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin.⁹ The arrival of the New Left entailed a polarization of

3 Müller-Armack (1948) pp.148-151, 178; Lübke (1965) pp.84, 109-133.

4 Flasch (2017) p.472 (emphasis added), cf. pp.472-478. My analysis of the theological perspective in Chapter 6 suggests that it is not as homogenous as Blumenberg and Flasch imply.

5 Keller (2015) pp.88-103; Flasch (2017) p.489; Martin (2017) pp.131-152; Marquard (1989) pp.4-12; Nicholls (2014) pp.184-188, 195-196. Cf. Blumenberg (1968/1969) pp.121-145.

6 On Blumenberg’s provisional ‘progressivism’, cf.: Wallace (1981) pp.63-79. On “liberal modernity”, cf: Müller (2003) pp.1-2, 251 fn.2; Taubes (2013) p.4.

7 Keller (2015) pp.93-95. Cf. Fellmann (2008); Nicholls (2014) pp.188-194; Marquard (2016) p.26.

8 The Blumenberg-Taubes *Briefwechsel* (2013, pp.130-204) shows that Taubes was eager to draw *Legitimacy* into extensive philosophical discussions, e.g., by organizing conferences centered on this work and specifically on Blumenberg’s polemic with Schmitt. Blumenberg however was hesitant and eventually declined Taubes’ later invitations. Blumenberg did not want to revisit the issue of secularization (pp.196-197) and on his polemic with Schmitt he mentioned to Taubes that his *Work on Myth* “alles enthält, was ich je noch zu einem Kolloquium zu sagen gehabt hätte” (p.203).

9 Metz (1968) pp.75-146; Feil (1970) pp.110-132; Sölle (1982); Faber (1983); Moltmann (2004) pp.29-46.

the political landscape, or to be more precise: it meant that the political poles *shifted* in comparison to the 1950's and early 1960's. Erstwhile defenders of 'progress' and 'secularity' such as Blumenberg, whose opponents had been cultural-conservatives, were now met with new antagonists, namely leftist thinkers drawn to ideas of revolution and radical 'critique'. The latter claimed to promote 'real progress' – as *radical* change. This had implications for the secularization debate. Now that leftist 'critique' could be mounted on the basis of a revolutionary political theology this implied that the perceived link between 'progress' and 'profanization' (as the overcoming of religion) was no longer self-evident.¹⁰ Blumenberg's defense of a modest, secular modernity was rebuked by New Left critics such as Richard Faber as a hopelessly conservative justification of an unjust status quo.¹¹

This development – the shift of political polarities and the subsequent renegotiation of the 'secular-religion binary' – forms the background against which Jacob Taubes and Odo Marquard should be placed. The polemic that ensued between them constitutes the focal point of the current chapter. We will find that focusing on the contributions of Taubes and Marquard and the respective philosophical traditions they can be situated in will not only help better understand the political dimension of the secularization debate, it also sheds light on a different stage in the development of this discourse, from the late 1960's to the early 1980's, when the latent political ramifications of 'secularization' came more closely to the surface. A first impression of how Marquard and Taubes related to each other is provided by Marquard himself, in his article 'Aufgeklärter Polytheismus – auch eine politische Theologie?' (1983), presented at a conference on Carl Schmitt that was organized by Taubes. Here he states that *in principle* Taubes is generally correct when it comes to "geschichtsphilosophiebetreffenden Dingen" but that one must always invert his "Bewertungsakzent": what seems desirable to Taubes is actually detrimental or even potentially catastrophic.¹² In other words, Marquard shows himself to be diametrically opposed to Taubes on an evaluative level. This witticism encapsulates the new stage in the development of the secularization debate: one of overt political polarization and changing roles. Taubes defended a religious heritage but was decidedly anti-conservative; Marquard defended Enlightenment-values against religious infringements, but was skeptical of 'progress' and instead wholeheartedly embraced the title of the cultural conservative.¹³

Taubes represents the brand of 'new' or 'revolutionary' political theology that was in part the product of the rediscovery of the leftist-Jewish thought of the Weimar-era. However, while someone like Johann B. Metz did not conceive of his 'new' political theology as an appropriation of Schmitt's 'old' political theology, Taubes did explicate the conceptual link between them.¹⁴ He used Benjamin as an exemplar of how Schmitt's political authoritarianism could be inverted and revolutionized.¹⁵ Taubes was also a close colleague of Blumenberg's; their extensive *Briefwechsel* (published with additional material in 2013) shows that, even though their views on progress and Enlightenment were initially not incompatible, they gradually drifted apart due to the latter's increased weariness with the theme of 'secularization' and with

10 I use Kamlah's (1969) term 'profanization' here to denote 'secularization' in an intransitive/quantitative sense.

11 Faber (1983) pp.86-99. For a criticism of this attack on Blumenberg, cf.: Kroll (2010) pp.292-295.

12 Marquard (1983) p.78. Cf. *ibid.* (1982) p.15.

13 Müller (2003) pp.120-124; Keller (2015) pp.89-93; Martin (2017) pp.131-153.

14 Metz (1968) pp.105-106. Schmitt refers to Metz in his *Political Theology II* (2014, pp.49-54, 143 fn.8) but Metz does not mention Schmitt, as Lübke (1983, p.48) notes. On Taubes and Schmitt, see their *Briefwechsel* (2012), Taubes' collection of letters and reflections, *To Carl Schmitt* (2013) and *The Political Theology of Paul* (2004, pp.62-70, 97-113). Cf. Bredekamp (2016) pp.680-683; Terpstra (2009) pp.185-206.

15 Bredekamp (2016) pp.680; De Wilde (2008) pp.12-13, 256, 265; Taubes (2013) pp.15-18; *ibid.* (2004) pp.7, 70-76, 98; Taubes-Schmitt (2012) pp.27-30.

the new political atmosphere of radical critique that Taubes was assumed to represent.¹⁶ Marquard – who identified himself with the conservative tenets of Blumenberg’s philosophy – stepped into the vacuum left behind by Blumenberg. He traded the latter’s cautious and indirect philosophical style in for a more straightforwardly polemical attitude. He directed this attitude against the revolutionary Left, which he regarded as essentially ‘anti-modern.’ Both Taubes and Marquard played an important role in the transformation of the secularization debate into a discourse on political theology. This meant that the debate moved away from a discussion of what the concept of secularization precisely signifies – as a juridical or descriptive, substantive or formal category – towards an increased preoccupation with the political functions of religion in modernity. The original initiators – Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt – disappeared from the debate after the early 1970’s: Löwith died in 1973, Schmitt submitted his “testament”, *Political Theology II*, in 1970, and Blumenberg felt that nothing more needed to be said on this subject after his revision of *Legitimacy* in 1974.¹⁷ I propose that Marquard and Taubes can be regarded as the heirs of this secularization debate, who advanced it in a new political context. This impression is confirmed by the fact that they partially positioned themselves as *proxies* of the aforementioned initiators: Marquard claims to represent not only Blumenberg’s liberal conservatism but also Löwith’s skepticism, whereas Taubes identified with Schmitt’s political theology – taken, that is, through the filter of Benjamin’s messianic Marxism.

In this chapter I will analyze how the secularization debate transformed, partly under the influence of Marquard and Taubes, into a discourse on political theology. Because the ‘new’ political theology that Taubes represents in this context is not only rooted in Schmitt’s work but since it also draws inspiration from leftist-Jewish messianic thought I will first expound on Benjamin’s Marxist Messianism. I then proceed to a general overview of Taubes’ thought, before focusing on his critique of the latent political implications of Blumenberg’s ‘work on myth’, formulated during several *Poetik und Hermeneutik* conferences. This leads us to a discussion of the nature of Taubes’ political theology and of his intellectual relationship with Schmitt. I introduce Marquard by situating him in the context of the liberal-conservative Ritter School. After sketching the general characteristics of his philosophy and reflecting on his polemic style, I discuss Marquard’s views on the Löwith-Blumenberg debate, expressed in his *Schwierigkeiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie*. We then turn to his contribution to a series of conferences on Schmitt and political theology, organized by Taubes under the working title ‘Politische Theologie III’. On these occasions Marquard attempted to explicate the latent political undertone of Blumenberg’s ‘work on myth’ by defending a liberal-conservative political poly-theology. I will conclude the chapter by offering an evaluation of their discussion and by reflecting on the ‘uses and abuses of political theology’ as such.

Walter Benjamin and the Rediscovery of Messianism

In order to obtain a proper understanding of the political-theological stance that Taubes represents in this chapter it is necessary to trace its roots beyond the ‘new political theology’ of the 1960’s back to the Weimar-era. This forms the context where Jewish intellectuals such

16 Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.120, 145-203, 282-292. Cf. Blumenberg-Schmitt (2007) pp.152, 167-171; Kopp-Oberstebrink (2013) pp.295-336.

17 Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.134-146, 196-203. Blumenberg’s *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung* (1974) is the revised version of the first part of 1966’s *Legitimacy*. Revisions of the other parts of the book would follow in later years, but Blumenberg did not revisit this first part polemical part again.

as Ernst Bloch, Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, Franz Rosenzweig and Walter Benjamin, attempted – in various ways – to salvage or revitalize Jewish Messianism.¹⁸ In his study of eschatology Jürgen Moltmann describes this endeavor as follows:

After the catastrophe of 1914-1918 they [i.e., these Jewish thinkers] forsook the cultural faith in progress, with its unattainable idea of ‘eternal peace’, and criticized its premise, which was the idea of time as a linear, homogeneous continuum, free of surprises. In its place they sought for a new, religiously defined and theologically reflected relationship to historical time – to the present, the Now. In place of the chiliastic ‘self-realization of absolute Mind’ in history ..., they put the messianism which in Jewish thought had always been bound up with experiences of catastrophe. The Christian theodicy of Hegel’s already ‘reconciled world’ had for them been shot to pieces at Verdun.¹⁹

These authors assumed that the original idea of ‘redemption’, derived from Jewish Messianism, was betrayed by the Christian-secular philosophy of history. This Hegelian perspective had promised secular salvation at the end of a homogeneous teleological process, but it had now become clear that this process has led to the catastrophe of the First World War instead of to the self-identification of the Absolute Spirit.²⁰ In order to counter this conception of history they reasserted what they believed to be the explosive, disrupting core of the original messianic perspective. The messianic event was regarded as something that essentially *breaks through* the homogeneity of the historical process rather than forming its necessary teleological conclusion.²¹

In the following exploration I will focus Benjamin, not only because of his considerable influence on leftist political thought from the 1960’s onwards, but also because his writings were crucial for the development of Taubes’ political theology.²² We will moreover find that Benjamin’s work on ‘political theology’ – I will address his ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ (1921), ‘Theologisch-politisches Fragment’ (1921) and especially his famous ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’ (1940) – further illuminates certain key themes already discussed in previous chapters.²³ First of all, Benjamin’s rejection of a homogeneous conception of history as teleological progress results in a heterogeneous concept of time that focusses on the redemptive potential of the *present* rather than the unforeseeable future. Benjamin writes in his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (as ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’ is known) that “the present” should be seen as “the ‘time of the now’ [*Jetztzeit*] which is shot through with chips of Messianic time”.²⁴ This means that redemption is not to be expected at the endpoint of a progressive history but rather in an instant that interrupts a homogeneous conception of progress. Benjamin suggests that this notion is analogous to the Jewish belief that the Messiah could appear unexpectedly at every moment. Benjamin reminds his readers that:

18 Cf. Mosès, *The Angel of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (2008); Rabinbach (1985) pp.78-124; Bielik-Robson (2014).

19 Moltmann (2004) p.30. Cf. Lijster (2010) pp.23-24; Benjamin (2007) p.84.

20 Mosès (2008) pp.1-14, 35-48.

21 Mosès (2008) pp.101-126; Moltmann (2004) pp.29-49; De Wilde (2008) pp.160-165; Lijster (2010) pp.22-27.

22 Cf. Bredekamp (2016) pp.680-683; Terpstra and de Wit (2000) pp.325-342; Taubes-Schmitt (2012) pp.27-30.

23 I use the following English translations: ‘Critique of Violence’, and ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’ in: *Reflections* (1978) and ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ in: *Illuminations* (2007).

24 Benjamin (2007) p.263. The German version reads (1980, p.704): “... Gegenwart als der ‘Jetztzeit’, in welcher Splitter der messianischen eingesprenzt sind.” This is comparable to Schmitt’s remarks on “the infinite singularity of historical reality” in ‘Three Possibilities’ (2009, pp.169-170). Cf. Lijster (2010) pp.24-27.

the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance [*Eingedenken*], however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn into soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.²⁵

Hence, eschatology is not conceived of in deterministic, teleological terms (e.g., as providence), or instead as a transcendent dimension that leaves world history untouched (as it is in Löwith's *Meaning in History*), but as something that ensures an essential heterogeneity *within* history. 'History', in this sense, is not taken as a homogenous sphere that is negated by eschatology; it is rather interpreted as a heterogeneous sphere of action, focused on "the time of the now", that is contingent upon the potentially imminent interruption by the eschatological-messianic *event*.²⁶ The idea that eschatology forms a precondition for historicity, engendering a heterogeneous or qualitative conception of history, became very influential. We have encountered it in Schmitt's 'Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History' (1950), Rudolf Bultmann's *History and Eschatology* (1957), and we will discover that Taubes also relies heavily on it, especially in his *Abendländische Eschatologie* (1947).²⁷

'Theses on the Philosophy of History' situates the distinction between the homogeneity of 'progress' and the heterogeneity of 'redemption' in a political framework that distinguishes Benjamin from, e.g., Rosenzweig. Significantly, Benjamin combined elements from Jewish Messianism with tenets from secular Marxist political philosophy. Hence, whereas Rosenzweig interpreted this distinction in religious terms as the division between the Christian and the Jewish concept of salvation, Benjamin translated this notion to the political division between the homogenous rule of the oppressor and the revolutionary action of the oppressed.²⁸ This mixture of Messianism and Marxism comes clearly to the fore in the first of his theses, which describes "a little hunchback" hidden in a robotic chess player. Benjamin paints an image of an "automaton ... that could play a winning game of chess" with "a little hunchback who was an expert chess player [that] sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings". Benjamin concludes:

One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called 'historical materialism' is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.²⁹

25 Benjamin (2007) p.264. The German version reads (1980, p.704): "Bekanntlich war es den Juden untersagt, der Zukunft nachzuforschen. Die Thora und das Gebet unterweisen sie dagegen im Eingedenken. Dieses entzauberte ihnen die Zukunft, der die verfallen sind, die sich bei den Wahrsagern Auskunft holen. Den Juden wurde die Zukunft aber darum doch nicht zur homogenen und leeren Zeit. Denn in ihr war jede Sekunde die kleine Pforte, durch die der Messias treten konnte."

26 Benjamin (2007) pp.210-211, 257-263; *ibid.* (1978) pp.312-313.

27 Schmitt (2009) pp.169-170; Bultmann (1957) pp.91-155; Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology* (2009) pp.4-40, 191-194. Cf. Gogarten (1954) pp.338-354; Moltmann (2004) pp.27-45; Taylor (2007) pp.54-61. This is not to imply that thinkers such as Bultmann or Benjamin were directly influenced by Benjamin or that he was the first to conceive of this idea, but his expression of the heterogeneity of time has been very influential, both directly and indirectly. Considering the fact that Schmitt was familiar with Benjamin's writings it is for instance not implausible that his 'Three Possibilities' was partly written with an eye on the latter's 'Theses'. On the relation between Schmitt and Benjamin, cf.: De Wilde (2008); Bredekamp (2016).

28 Mosès (2008) pp.17-126; Rabinbach (1985) pp.78-124; Benjamin (2007) pp.254-262.

29 Benjamin (2007) p.253.

This notion that Marxist historical materialism actually contains a hidden *theological core*, namely the messianic promise of redemption (that takes on a more timely secular guise in order for it to be deemed acceptable) arguably foreshadows the debate between Löwith and Blumenberg on the eschatological origins of modern philosophies of history. Moreover, the idea of an essential continuity between religious promises of salvation and secular philosophies of emancipation is something that would constitute the core of Taubes' thought.³⁰ In the theses that follow the one on the "little hunchback", Benjamin directed his Marxist-messianic notion of redemption against the homogeneous order of capitalism and against the hermetic totalitarian system that fascism had meanwhile put in its place. In this particular text, Benjamin tends to conceive of 'redemption' in terms of a political *act* rather than an occurrence. 'Redemption' has to be achieved in order to liberate a politically defined 'oppressed class'. A first step towards liberation is the destruction of the false conception of history that this oppressive system espouses, i.e., 'progress'.³¹

To Benjamin, 'progress', together with its underlying conception of homogenous time, does not simply form a theoretical misconception but more importantly a political legitimization of the status quo. It disguises the contingent and unjust political system of the present as a 'natural' outcome of history. In other words, Benjamin takes the idea that history is written by the victors very seriously.³² His idea of political action against oppression is paralleled by what he conceives as the task for the Marxist historian: just like the oppressed should emancipate themselves by breaking through the order of oppression, so should the historian "blast open the continuum of history". This entails an active negation of the idea of homogenous progress. The historian does this in order to recollect and remember the forgotten and unredeemed hopes for salvation that belonged to the generations of vanquished and oppressed, i.e., hopes that have ended up forgotten by the history of the victors.³³ 'Politics of remembrance' possesses a *messianic* function because it redeems the generations of the vanquished from obscurity and, through political action in the present, also fulfills their hopes for salvation.³⁴ In short, it seems apparent that Benjamin promotes a stance of revolutionary action in his "Theses". The revolutionary act comes to the fore as a redemptive decision that interrupts the flow of time by bringing it to a halt, so that the "Messianic" can shine through. To Benjamin, this evokes a 'monadic' conception of time, in which past, present and redemption are compressed into one instance:

A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.³⁵

30 Taubes and Rötzer (1987) p.316; Taubes (2009); Bielik-Robson (2014) pp.166-200.

31 Benjamin (2007) pp.214, 253-264. Benjamin still leaves some room for messianic *expectation* in this text, however. Lijster (2010, pp.27-28) and Mosès (2008, p.118) point to Benjamin's interpretation of Proust's "*mémoire involontaire*" in this respect: assumedly, the historical event first announces *itself* as the right time for political action, as a time when past occurrences reinsert themselves into the present and past promises can be redeemed through 'messianic action'.

32 Benjamin (2007) pp.254-257; Mosès (2008) p.110-117. The complaint that 'progress' is primarily a history of victors – leaving the vanquished forgotten – can also be heard in the post-war writings of Kesting and Schmitt, but they direct this critique against the discourse of restoration, the establishment of a liberal-democratic order after "Stunde Null" and denazification.

33 Benjamin (2007) pp.256-257, 262; Mosès (2008) p.121; De Wilde (2008) pp.164-177.

34 Benjamin (2007) pp.254-261. Cf. De Wilde (2008) pp.122-135, 158-159; Lijster (2010) pp.26-32.

35 Benjamin (2007) p.263. Cf. Taubes (2009) p.13.

The implication of ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ is that the messianic work has to be conducted in the here and now, namely by “the struggling, oppressed class” itself.³⁶ An earlier text, ‘Critique of Violence’ (1921), seems to confirm this impression at first reading. Here Benjamin appears to call for a “proletarian general strike” that “sets itself the sole task of destroying state power” as a manifestation of a liberating “*law-destroying*” “*divine violence*”. He opposes the law-destroying power of revolution to the “*lawmaking*” “*mythic violence*” of the state.³⁷ This text reveals an *antinomian* or anarchistic conception of freedom that Taubes would also adopt. This antinomianism implies that whereas ‘law’ or the legal order is equated with the natural or mythic violence of the state, emancipation or genuine freedom can only be realized by breaking through the legal order – as a divine interruption – and by executing *real* “justice”.³⁸ Although ‘Critique of Violence’ indicates that this interruption is a political act, there are also significant signs suggesting that the messianic “event” *cannot* fully coincide with concrete political action by historical agents. The text reveals what I will refer to as a paradox or an ‘antinomy of Messianism’, i.e., it displays an unresolved tension between two different ramifications of messianic hope.

To clarify: apart from the apparent call for decisive political action – indicating that the messianic task has to be performed by historical agents – Benjamin’s Messianism also maintains a certain element of expectation that makes it less straightforwardly activist. Benjamin occasionally signals that messianic action is preceded by a moment that announces itself from the outside. ‘Theses’ and ‘Critique of Violence’ appear to leave both options, action and expectation, open. The emphasis in ‘Theses’ lies on the call for political action, but Benjamin indicates that the agent does not necessarily decide when the “moment” for action, the instance where the homogeneous order is interrupted and a suppressed past reinserts itself in the present, has arrived: “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.”³⁹ Arguably, this tension between expectation and action leads to three optional scenarios: first, individuals or classes must perform the entire messianic task in the historical-political realm (and thus bear full responsibility for it), or, second, these political actions are mere prefigurations of an ultimate messianic event that fulfills these prior attempts, or, third, every political action is ultimately meaningless in light of the final messianic event that completely annuls history. There remains an indissoluble tension in Benjamin’s work between an affirmation of revolutionary politics on the one hand and on the other a negation of any such attempt in the light of ‘*the Revolution*’; the one that is yet to come, and which will bring absolute redemption.⁴⁰

‘Critique of Violence’ paints *the* ultimate Revolution in such apocalyptic terms, as a “non-violent” expression of divine wrath, which is “lethal without spilling blood”, that any historical act of rebellion can only pale in comparison.⁴¹ Benjamin claims that violent rebellions will inevitably result in new establishments that in turn will be toppled over, whereas a true

36 Benjamin (2007) p.260.

37 Benjamin (1978) pp.291, 297, 300 (emphasis added). Full quote (p.297): “If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood.” The dichotomy of divine versus mythical power is further thematized by Taubes in his *From Cult to Culture* (2010, e.g. pp.248-267).

38 Benjamin (1978) p.259. “Justice is the principle of all divine end making, power the principle of all mythical lawmaking”. Cf. Bielik-Robson (2014) pp.84-97, 110, 214-215; Gold (2006) pp.143-144.

39 Benjamin (2007) p.255. Cf. Lijster (2010) pp.27-32; De Wilde (2008) pp.142-147.

40 Cf. Benjamin (1978) pp.312-313; *ibid.* (2007) p.264; Deuber-Mankowsky (2002) pp.12-19.

41 Benjamin (1978) pp.291, 300.

Revolution will break through the circle of violence and herald a totally new epoch.⁴² Here, we see that Benjamin's Messianism fulfills a negative function, which is to devalue false promises of salvation in the light of a final redemption that however remains *à venir*.⁴³ This 'negative' aspect is exemplified in his cryptic 'Theologico-Political Fragment', written in response (and partly in opposition) to Bloch's *Geist der Utopie* (1918). Benjamin writes:

Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, creates its relation to the Messianic. For this reason nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic. Therefore the Kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set as a goal. From the standpoint of history it is not the goal, but the end.⁴⁴

In the 'Fragment', Benjamin describes the world in terms of a never-ending natural quest for "happiness", while the "immediate Messianic intensity of the heart, of the inner man in isolation, passes through misfortune, as suffering."⁴⁵ Commentators such as Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky and Thijs Lijster suggest that this should not be taken as an expression of gnostic world-negation, which would devalue this quest for happiness as a vain and illusionary. Benjamin might not negate the world in a gnostic sense, but according to Deuber-Mankowsky he does distinguish "the realm of God and worldly history so thoroughly that he excludes anything that would directly anticipate redemption." Hence, "to guarantee the possibility of critique through the preservation of transcendence, he pulls apart the difference between the realm of God and history until it tears, though without entirely dissolving the connection between them."⁴⁶ In other words, Benjamin can be said to espouse what Erik Peterson refers to (in a very different theological context) as "eschatological reservation".⁴⁷ Benjamin's Messianism rejects false messiahs or "*idols*" – i.e., false promises of salvation – that usurp the place of *the* Messiah.⁴⁸ Still, we can concur with Deuber-Mankowsky on the basis of Benjamin's 'Theses' that this does not mean that political revolutionary action is fully disconnected from "the Messianic" either. I would suggest that it is the point of Benjamin's Messianism to leave both options open; he suspends the antithesis between the eschatological affirmation and negation of concrete political action. This enables the possibility, however tenuous and precarious, of perceiving revolutionary action as a prefiguration of a final redemption that is (and remains) 'yet to come'. In the next section I will argue that Taubes

42 Benjamin (1978) p.300.

43 Deuber-Mankowsky (2002) pp.14-19. The expression "*à venir*", in this context, is popularized by Derrida. Bielik-Robson (2014, p.92) points out Derrida's affinity for Benjamin, and indeed, his *Specters of Marx* (1994, e.g. pp.68-92) and other writings thematize a Benjaminian concept of "the messianic without messianism".

44 Benjamin (1978) p.312.

45 Benjamin (1978) p.313. Cf. Taubes (2004) p.72; *ibid.* (2010) p.110.

46 Deuber-Mankowsky (2002) p.14. Cf. Lijster (2010) pp.30-32. However, Taubes (2004, pp.70-75; *ibid.* 2006, pp.54-65) *does* interpret the 'Fragment' as an expression of Benjamin's Gnosticism. See also: Bielik-Robson (2014) pp.84-112.

47 Schmitt (2014) p.50; Peterson (1951) pp.104-105. Cf. Metz (1968) p.106 fn.6; Benjamin (1978) pp.312-13; Taubes (2006) pp.54-65; Deuber-Mankowsky (2002) pp.13-19.

48 Deuber-Mankowsky (2002, pp.12-19) frames this in terms of a "proscription on idols" or a "proscription on graven images", i.e., the monotheistic prohibition of idolatry. Cf. Bielik-Robson (2014) p.95: "Christianity constitutes a false *kairos*". Evidently, this recalls the idolatry-template I have discussed in the previous chapter.

can also be interpreted in this manner.⁴⁹ It can be contended, in short, that both Benjamin and Taubes have thereby sought to avoid the “eschatological paralysis” that Schmitt warned against in 1950, while maintaining the “eschatological reservation” that Peterson prescribed.⁵⁰

It has been noted by several commentators that Benjamin’s Marxist Messianism amounts to a ‘political theology’ that is both diametrically opposed as well as similar in structure to Schmitt’s. Taubes was one of the first to notice that Benjamin had an intellectual affinity for Schmitt’s work, ignored by Benjamin’s heirs in the Frankfurt School. According to Taubes this link “turns out to be a ticking bomb that comprehensively shatters our preconceptions regarding the intellectual history of the Weimar period.”⁵¹ Marc de Wilde’s analysis of the Schmitt-Benjamin debate, *Vervantschap in extremen* (2008), confirms the impression that despite their profound differences Schmitt and Benjamin indeed shared a framework of anti-liberalism, decisionism and eschatology.⁵² Texts such as ‘Theses’ and ‘Critique of Violence’ articulate a conception of ‘law’ or ‘the political order’ that is also expressed in Schmitt’s *Political Theology* (1922). In fact, Benjamin had consulted this book for his work *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928), as he admitted in a personal letter to Schmitt.⁵³ Benjamin and Schmitt agree that the political order of the state or the rule of law is not grounded in ‘truth’ or ‘nature’, but that it rests on a political act that is inherently violent. This also applies to liberal parliamentarianism, despite its efforts to deny this. Whereas Schmitt simply prescribes an acceptance of the violent nature of the political (hence his endorsement of fascism), Benjamin, at least in ‘Critique of Violence’, appears to embrace a nonviolent anarchism that advocates the absolute negation of the power of the state.⁵⁴

What is more, both authors perceive the *act* or *decision* – its juridical equivalent being the “state of exception” – as a quasi-divine occurrence, perpetrated either by the sovereign or by the oppressed class. This decision occurs ‘in the heat of the moment’, be it a moment that first has to announce itself, according to Benjamin. The decision has to forgo preexisting laws or norms, because the aim of the decision is either to establish (Schmitt) or to break through (Benjamin) a lawful order. Schmitt believes that the “lawmaking” power of the sovereign manifests the divine power of God, whereas to Benjamin – who considers the power of the state to be “mythic” rather than “divine” – it is rather the “law-destroying” power of the revolutionary act that manifests a divine justice and an indictment of this very order.⁵⁵ The rise of Nazism would confirm the separation between the two authors. Schmitt bolstered his authoritarianism by endorsing a power that asserted itself in 1933 through the state of exception, and which would suspend the *Ausnahmezustand* indefinitely, while in 1940 Benjamin advocated bringing about a “*real* state of emergency” that would herald the end of this oppressive system. Benjamin writes in his eighth thesis:

49 Benjamin-scholarship is evidently divided as to how his Messianism must be interpreted. Note for instance the difference between Bielik-Robson’s (2014, pp.84-112) gnostic reading and Deuber-Mankowsky’s (2002, pp.3-19) anti-gnostic reading of Benjamin. A criticism of my interpretation might be that the option I present here is too ‘Hegelian’, i.e., it appears to function as a *synthesis* of the antithetical contradiction between eschatological affirmation and negation. In light of Taubes’ theory I would rather suggest that it should be regarded as an option that emerges from the tenuous *suspension* of an antithesis rather than as a stable synthesis.

50 Cf. Schmitt (2009) p.169; *ibid.* (2014) p.50; Peterson (1951) pp.102-105; Metz (1968) pp.105-106, fn.5-6.

51 Taubes (2013) p.16. Cf. *ibid.* (2004) p.98; Bredekamp (2016); Deuber-Mankowsky (2002) p.3; De Wilde (2008) p.12; Terpstra and de Wit (2000) pp.329-331.

52 De Wilde (2008); *ibid.* (2005) pp.121-149.

53 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1998) cf. pp.65, 239 fn.14; Taubes (2013) p.16; Bredekamp (2016) pp.680-688; De Wilde (2008) pp.41-90.

54 Benjamin (1978) pp.277-300. Cf. *ibid.* (2007) pp.253-264; De Wilde (2008) pp.86-124; *ibid.* (2005) pp.122-149; Schmitt (2005) pp.5-52.

55 Benjamin (1978) pp.277-300; De Wilde (2008) pp.91-98, 110-124; *ibid.* (2005) pp.122-149.

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ [*‘Ausnahmestand’*] in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a *real* state of emergency, and this will improve our struggle against Fascism.⁵⁶

In the upcoming section we will find that Benjamin paved the way for Taubes in several respects. Benjamin delineated the task of the ‘historian’ that Taubes would take to heart: the critical historian “regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.”⁵⁷ This involves preforming a ‘politics of remembrance’ by breaking through the homogeneity of a reified history, analogous to the political act of seeking (antinomian) freedom from an oppressive system. Taubes’ thought – which was preoccupied not only with Messianism but also with varieties of *Gnosticism* – moreover sheds a compelling light on this difference between Schmitt and Benjamin. Seen through the lens of his writings, this distinction between a divine lawmaking power (Schmitt) and a divine law-destroying power (Benjamin) comes to the fore as an iteration of the gnostic distinction between the evil God of law and creation and the good God of freedom and redemption.⁵⁸

The Political Theology of Jacob Taubes

General Characteristics, Style and Polemical Occasionalism

We have seen that Benjamin’s work is characterized by certain antinomies, the most important of which concerns the question whether the messianic task has to be performed by historical agents or whether one should nihilistically negate the old world and await the next. This ties in with another question that inheres apocalyptic-messianic thought, which is whether the old world has to be destroyed in order to make way for the next or if there is more of a continuity between the two. In short: Benjamin’s Messianism is suspended, in more than one way, between affirmation and negation. Taubes can be seen to follow in Benjamin’s footsteps, not only because he lets these antitheses persist, but by actively expanding on them. That is, Taubes broadened the substantive heterogeneity of Benjamin’s thought – a mixture of Jewish Messianism and secularist Marxism with a possible proclivity towards Gnosticism – by involving a plethora of other historical, philosophical and theological elements.⁵⁹ Taken together, these elements make for a combustible amalgamate rather than a coherent system. This is suggested by Agata Bielik-Robson, who characterizes Taubes’ thought in the following manner:

Coming late to the apocalyptic scene of the Weimar German Jewry, Taubes lets himself be influenced by Karl Löwith and Hans Jonas, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem and Hans Urs von Balthasar, producing an uncanny concoction of messianic motifs, images and ideas, *which remains interesting precisely because of its explosive inconsistency*.⁶⁰

56 Benjamin (2007) p.257 (emphasis added)/ibid. (1980) p.697. Cf. Schmitt (2005) p.5.

57 Benjamin (2007) p.257. Cf. Kopp-Oberstebrink (2013) p.330; Gold (2006) p.146; Terpstra and de Wit (2000) pp.329-331; Taubes (2006) p.64.

58 Taubes (2013) pp.1-18; ibid. (2004) pp.62-76, 103; (2006) pp.53-65; Schmitt (2014) pp.124-126; Faber (1983) pp.85-99.

59 Cf. Bielik-Robson (2014) pp.166-200; Mehring (1996) pp.239-248.

60 Bielik-Robson (2014) p.168 (emphasis added).

This “uncanny concoction” consists of an affinity or identification with religious motifs such as Messianism, kabbalah, chiliasm, Gnosticism and apocalypticism on the one hand, and intellectual traditions such as negative and dialectical theology, historicism, Hegelianism, Marxism, and Kierkegaardian decisionism on the other. Especially in his later writings Taubes would expressly frame his ideas on these subjects within a Schmittian framework, within which he identified with Benjamin *over against* Schmitt.⁶¹ It would be difficult – if not impossible – to incorporate these elements into a coherent philosophical system, but the impression that Taubes’ body of work evokes is that, save for his dissertation *Occidental Eschatology* (1947), he never really intended to do so.⁶² Blumenberg describes Taubes as a born polemicist, as “gemacht zur Intersubjektivität” rather than for the solitude of the writing desk. It is suggested that Taubes performed best when polemicizing against others and that he lacks the disposition for formulating his own intellectual system in isolation. Incidentally, this would be one of the reasons for Blumenberg’s increased dissatisfaction with Taubes’ polemicism, as their published *Briefwechsel* testifies. Blumenberg thought it hypocritical that Taubes had such a penchant for incessant ‘*critique*’ while he himself “nichts verfertigte, was hätte kritisiert werden können.”⁶³ Notwithstanding this complaint, I propose that it is precisely in this critical and combative attitude that the key to understanding Taubes’ work lies, that is, in his self-professed polemical ‘*occasionalism*’.⁶⁴

Taubes’ occasionalism signifies that he was not motivated by a substantive allegiance to certain religious or philosophical systems but rather by an constant formal propensity to break with reified norms or patterns, to “brush history against the grain”. In short, his works prioritize function over content. The primary aim of his writings is not substantive coherence or consistency but rather the emancipatory effect that they might have. Hence, since each different ‘occasion’ calls for a different response, a different way to achieve the emancipatory objective, this makes that Taubes’ body of work is more of a heterogeneous complex than a consistent philosophical monolith.⁶⁵ In other words, Taubes, not unlike his ‘teacher’, Schmitt, should be regarded as a dynamic, polemical thinker rather than as a (failed) systematic philosopher.⁶⁶ Bielik-Robson perceives Taubes’ work along similar lines, but she adds that this heterogeneity serves a certain dialectic inherent to his philosophy:

In Taubes’ unstable apocalyptic narrative two worlds clash all the time: the Kierkegaardian-Barthian universe of the antithesis so strong that it can only be called a *diathesis*, a static alternative of either/or between the worldly and the divine, and the Hegelian universe of dialectics that turns the antithetical separation of

61 Taubes’ *From Cult to Culture* (2010), a collection of papers from 1949 to 1984, exemplifies the breath of his interests. On Taubes and Schmitt, see his *To Carl Schmitt* (2013), *Political Theology of Paul* (2004, pp.62-70, 98-113), the Taubes-Schmitt *Briefwechsel* (2012) and, e.g., ‘Statt einer Einleitung: Leviathan als Sterblicher Gott’ (1983). I should add at this stage that Taubes does not offer clear-cut distinctions between concepts such as apocalypticism, Messianism and Gnosticism. Although I believe that such distinctions can be made I will, for the sake of this investigation, follow Taubes’ lead and assume that the borders between these concepts are fluid, which is precisely Taubes’ point.

62 Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology* (2009). Cf. Mehring (1996) p.242. Kopp-Oberstebrink (2013, pp.304-311) notes that this also what separates Taubes from Blumenberg: it is a distinction between “Kommentar” and “Werk” respectively.

63 Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.284, 292 cf. pp.136, 172-173, 291-292; Kopp-Oberstebrink (2013).

64 Taubes (2004) p.80; *ibid.* (2013) p.46. Cf. Deuber Mankowsky (2002) pp.3-4.

65 Taubes’ *Cult to Culture* (2010) is perhaps the best example of this.

66 Cf. Kopp-Oberstebrink (2012) p.125; *ibid.* (2013) pp.299-311; Grimshaw (2013) p.xi. On political theology as a polemical method or strategy in Schmitt, cf.: Meier (1995) pp.75-83.

revelation and reality into a stage of the holy-historical process, ultimately 'aiming at union with God'.⁶⁷

She concedes that Taubes is "[t]emperamentally more inclined towards" the antithetical side.⁶⁸ The antithesis-synthesis dialectic (i.e., the oscillation between separation and reconciliation) is moreover observable in his work as a polemical *strategy*. Brushing history against the grain implies that Taubes has a tendency to bridge gaps between traditions that are deemed naturally incompatible on the one hand, by for instance resituating Paul (as a new Moses) in Jewish thought. On the other hand he also has a predilection for uncovering 'explosive' elements *within* a single tradition, thus destroying its veneer of reified homogeneity and unveiling the hidden heterogeneity he believes to reside underneath.⁶⁹ Which direction Taubes takes is, I would suggest, context-dependent; it depends on what the 'occasion' calls for. By portraying Taubes as an occasionalist I do not suggest that his position is vacuous; on the contrary, it will become apparent that his thought is characterized more by a flexible albeit constant gnostic-apocalyptic *attitude* than by a static commitment to certain ideas or a single school of thought.

Apocalyptic Decisionism: Occidental Eschatology (1947)

Taubes' academic career began with the publication of his dissertation *Occidental Eschatology* in 1947; a critically acclaimed but rather impenetrable work that, as the only monograph he ever published, can be seen as the sole proof of his proficiency as a 'systematic' thinker in his own right.⁷⁰ It has recently been pointed out by commentators such as Michael Jaeger, Willem Styfhals and Peter E. Gordon that *Occidental Eschatology* evinces a significant intellectual connection between Taubes and Löwith.⁷¹ Taubes writes in *Ad Carl Schmitt: Gegenstrebbige Fügung* (1987) that reading Löwith's well-known *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (1941) as a young student caused an intellectual awakening that "was like scales falling from my eyes as I grasped the line that Löwith traced from Hegel via Marx and Kierkegaard to Nietzsche."⁷² Taubes subsequently adopted Löwith's account of the development from Hegel to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in the second part of *Occidental Eschatology*. Hans Jonas recounts in his memoirs how Löwith responded to this dissertation: when asked of his opinion on it, Löwith apparently said to Jonas: "Oh, it's a very good book. And that's no accident – half of it's by me, the other half's by you."⁷³ However, Taubes did not uncritically copy Löwith's narrative; he approached the issue from a very different evaluative angle. Instead of interpreting the Kierkegaard/Marx antithesis in light of the "nihilistic revolution" of 1933, Taubes perceived both Marx' historical materialism and Kierkegaard's spiritualism as positive realizations of the emancipatory potential

67 Bielik-Robson (2014) p.170. Cf. Taubes (2009) p.15.

68 Bielik-Robson (2014) p.170.

69 On Paul, Moses and Marcion, cf.: Taubes (2004) pp.7-54; *ibid.* (2006) pp.53-65. In *Occidental Eschatology* (2009, pp.77-124), Taubes for instance berates Augustinian 'orthodoxy' for neutralizing and therefore betraying the explosive eschatological core of 'true' Judaism and Christianity. Cf. Grimshaw (2013) p.xi; Assmann et.al. (2010) pp.xvii-xix. I believe that Taubes' Benjaminian conception of historiography is comparable to Foucault's Nietzschean conception of genealogy in this respect, see e.g.: Foucault (1984) pp.76-97.

70 Mehring (1996) p.242; Jonas (2008) p.168.

71 Jaeger (2001) pp.485-508; Styfhals (2015) pp.191-213; Gordon (2012) pp.349-370. These papers also deal with the intellectual relationship between Löwith and Taubes in a broader sense.

72 Taubes (2013) p.2. Cf. *ibid.* (2009) pp.149-194.

73 Jonas (2008) p.168; Gordon (2012) p.363.

that was still dormant in Hegel's philosophy.⁷⁴ Löwith's *Meaning in History* (1949) in turn partly draws on Taubes' dissertation, which is referred to as a "penetrating study"; it echoes *Occidental Eschatology* in asserting a significant continuity between the "theological historicism" of Joachim of Fiore and the modern philosophies of Hegel and Marx.⁷⁵ Once again, however, Löwith and Taubes disagree on the valuation of this connection: where Löwith saw Joachim's third epoch, the 'age of the spirit', as a foreshadowing of the Third Reich, Taubes emphasized the liberating potential of this school of thought, which he especially recognized in Left-Hegelianism and Marx.⁷⁶ Taubes would summarize his relation with Löwith in an interview years later:

Löwith hat den Nachweis führen wollen, daß die Geschichtsphilosophie mit der Geschichtstheologie zusammenhängt, was von Löwith bis Marquard als negative Einwand gilt. Ich selbst halte gerade diesen Nexus für das Positivste an der Geschichtsphilosophie. Man kann sich nicht gut als Verteidiger des christlichen Abendlandes aufspielen und zugleich dessen Geschichtsphilosophie als Illusion darstellen. Denn es ist das Spezifikum, das Proprium abendländischen Bewußtseins.⁷⁷

Taubes places great value on the link between "Geschichtsphilosophie" and "Geschichtstheologie" because they assumedly share an *eschatological* core. This positive appraisal of eschatology constitutes a strict separation between him and Löwith, as Reinhard Mehring observes, placing Taubes more in line with Benjamin and Schmitt.⁷⁸ Already in the introductory chapter of *Occidental Eschatology* Taubes states that it is impossible to disconnect history from eschatology, because it is only with an eye on the eschaton, functioning as an absolute "yardstick" that demarcates the end of history, that one can speak of history as a totality in the first place: "It is in the Eschaton that history surpasses its limitations and is seen for what it is."⁷⁹ In his (admittedly rather difficult) contemplation on "the essence of history" he argues that history is more than just time, happening or development. He affirms the Hegelian principle that "[t]he essence of history is freedom."⁸⁰ History is a sphere in which metaphysical principles such as God and world, life and death, eternity and time intersect and oppose one another. This intersection (or struggle) takes place in the free decisions of the individual: "As the midpoint between God and the world, mankind thus becomes the agent of history."⁸¹ The end of history does not only amount to humankind's freedom in its reconciliation with God, but—in Hegelian fashion—it also entails *God's self-realization*, as Taubes explains:

The difference between the thesis of the omnipotence of God, *deus sive natura*, and the synthesis, that God may be *all in all*, is the principle of freedom. The gap between the thesis and antithesis reveals the principle of freedom as history. The thesis is the totality [*das All*], when God and the world are not yet differentiated. The antithesis is the separation of God and the world: synthesis is the union of God and the world through mankind, so that in *freedom* God may be all in all.⁸²

74 Taubes (2009) pp.149-191. Cf. Löwith, *Hegel to Nietzsche* (1967); *ibid.*, *Heidegger and European Nihilism* (1995).

75 Löwith (1949) resp. p.248 fn.19, 156, cf. pp.167, 209, 248-249 fn.19, 255-256 fn.4. Cf. Gordon (2012) p.363.

76 Löwith (1949) p.159; Taubes (2009) pp.164-194.

77 Taubes and Rötzer (1987) p.316.

78 Mehring (1996) pp.231-247. Cf. Taubes (2013); *ibid.* (2004) p.103; (2006) pp.53-65; Terpstra (2009) pp.185-206; Gold (2006) pp.140-156.

79 Taubes (2009) p.3. Cf. Mehring (1996) pp.238-239.

80 Taubes (2009) p.5.

81 Taubes (2009) p.15.

82 Taubes (2009) p.15. Cf. Bielik-Robson (2014) p.170.

Taubes believes that the existence of the eschaton does not threaten the concept of freedom, as Schmitt feared.⁸³ On the contrary, freedom is perceived as the very essence of the movement from creation to redemption: this movement forms a trans-historical telos that is realized in the free individual decisions of historical agents.⁸⁴ This Hegelian teleological conception of freedom is overshadowed in Taubes' later writings. Here, he inclines more to an 'antinomian' idea of freedom that is reminiscent of Benjamin's, according to which liberty entails a non-teleological interruption, a *breaking out* of any system. Nonetheless he leaves the possibility of a synthesis between these two concepts open, as Bielik-Robson suggests.⁸⁵

To Taubes, human actions would be meaningless without the eschatological frame in which history occurs.⁸⁶ In this respect Taubes subscribes to a brand of political *decisionism* that is informed by eschatology, comparable to Benjamin and Schmitt. However, whereas Schmitt believes that decisions must be made in order to ward off the coming eschaton, Taubes and Benjamin – in as far as they affirm messianic action – rather advocate decisions that have a redemptive, i.e., an eschatological quality.⁸⁷ All three authors are in agreement that the eschaton gives life and the decisions made therein an essential seriousness. Because the eschaton is ever-nearing it calls for resolute decisions to be made in this finite time that is left. Time is essentially a “respite” (“*Frist*”), according to Taubes, always running out. This pressures individuals to assert their freedom in making the decisions that, taken together, constitute history.⁸⁸ Hence Taubes shares an aversion with Benjamin and Schmitt to the typically ‘liberal’, neutralizing tendency to ignore the need for real decisions in favor of endless discussion. In *To Carl Schmitt*, Taubes states:

All things come to an end, at the latest on the Final Day. You just cannot go on discussing and discussing without end; at some point you have to act. That means the problem of time is a moral problem, and decisionism means saying the time available is not infinite. And whoever denies this is amoral, simply does not understand the human situation, a situation that is finite and, because it is finite, has to make a separation, that is, has to decide.⁸⁹

Like Schmitt, it is easier for Taubes to stress *that* decisions have to be made than it is to determine in advance *which* are ‘good’ decisions. However, it can be inferred from his various texts that desirable decisions require an emancipatory or “law-destroying” objective, or that they must generally further the struggle for liberation against oppression. This creates a preference for decisions that are essentially disruptive. Taubes’ predilection for disruption explains his incessant praise, already in *Occidental Eschatology*, of heterodox, antinomian thought and ‘heresy’ in general. They form manifestations of will or “spirit” against reification.⁹⁰

In sum, by affirming both the ethical necessity of individual decisions *and* by placing this decisionism in all-encompassing ‘history of salvation’, Taubes can be seen to oscillate between a teleological Hegelian conception of history on the one hand, and on the other a more

83 Schmitt (2009) p.169: “eschatological paralysis”.

84 Taubes (2009) pp.3-40; *ibid.* (2010) pp.302-313.

85 Bielik-Robson (2014) pp.166-200. Cf. Taubes (2010) pp.71-75, 98-104, 137-146; *ibid.* (2006).

86 Taubes (2009) pp.3-40; *ibid.* (2010) pp.302-313; Taubes and Rötzer (1987) pp.305-318.

87 De Wilde (2005) pp.121-149; Terpstra and de Wit (2000) pp.320-353; Gold (2006) pp.140-156.

88 Taubes (2009) pp.3-40; *ibid.* (2013) pp.13, 45-46; (2004) p.72; Taubes and Rötzer (1987) pp.316-319; Mehring (1996) pp.238-248; Gold (2006) pp.140-146.

89 Taubes (2013) p.45. Cf. Gold (2006) pp.146-147.

90 Taubes (2009). *ibid.* (2004) pp.55-95; (2010) e.g. pp.137-146, 302-314.

decisionistic view (focusing on the “event” or “*Jetztzeit*”) that is reminiscent of Kierkegaard, Benjamin and Schmitt on the other. Being a true dialectician, this is not regarded as an insurmountable contradiction by Taubes; rather, he argues that the entire teleological course of history is reflected, or compressed, in the single monadic decision or “event” that itself is a manifestation of the eschaton.

The individual event serves the passage from creation to redemption. It ... reveals a glimpse of the order of creation, pointing forward to the order of redemption. An event is always related to the Eschaton. The Eschaton is the once [*das Einst*] in a double temporal sense: the that-which-once-was of the creation, axiology, and the that-which-one-day-will-be of redemption, teleology.⁹¹

Gnosticism, Interiorization: The Political Theology of Paul (1987/1993)

Taubes second major work, *Die politische Theologie des Paulus* (1993), is a posthumously published collection of lectures delivered in 1987, weeks before his death. This work requires attention if we want to obtain a more or less comprehensive understanding of Taubes’ philosophy. It shares a similar eschatological framework with *Occidental Eschatology*, but it also indicates that by the end of his life Taubes appears to have moved away from the optimism of *Occidental Eschatology*. In his dissertation he still expected the imminent arrival of a new historical aeon, but by the end of his life he had adopted a more disenchanting, gnostic-negativist attitude towards the world.⁹² Reflecting on his relation to Schmitt, he writes:

The jurist has to legitimate the world as it is. ... Schmitt’s interest was in only one thing: that the party, that the chaos not rise to the top, that the state remain. No matter what the price. ... This is what he later calls the *katechon*: The retainer [*der Aufhalter*] that holds down the chaos that pushes up from below. That isn’t my world-view, that isn’t my experience. I can imagine as an apocalyptic: let it go down. I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is.⁹³

His apparent (gnostic) indifference to the fate of the world is combined in *Political Theology of Paul* with an increased interest in a ‘Paulinian’ *interiorization* of eschatology. We have seen in our discussion of Bultmann that according to some interpretations, Paulinian eschatology implies a significant shift in eschatological thought. It means that the eschaton is no longer principally regarded as a world-shattering event that occurs *in* history (albeit from without). Believers now assume that the redemptive event has already occurred – and moreover that it only concerns the individual soul.⁹⁴ In Taubes’ case, this implies a more negative attitude towards political action in the world. For example, whereas in the 1960’s Taubes could still endorse the ‘the Enlightenment’ as a collective, positive project of political emancipation, this optimism appears largely absent by the time he gave his final lecture series.⁹⁵ Joshua Robert Gold suggests that Taubes had grown more aware of the “demonic powers of the apocalypse”, which

91 Taubes (2009) p.13, cf.pp.191-194; Benjamin (2007) p.263; Bielik-Robson (2014) pp.167-174.

92 English edition: Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (2004). Cf. *ibid.* (2009) pp.191-194.

93 Taubes (2004) p.103. Cf. Terpstra and de Wit (2000); Bielik-Robson (2014) p.213.

94 Bultmann (1957) pp.38-55; Taubes (2004) pp.13-54; *ibid.* (2006) pp.54, 61-65; (2010) pp.4-5, 53-58.

95 Bielik-Robson (2014) pp.198-200. Examples of his ‘progressive’ texts: ‘Culture and Ideology’ (pp.248-267), ‘Four Ages of Reason’ (pp.268-281) and ‘Intellectuals and the University’ (pp.282-301) in: *Cult to Culture* (2010).

implies that he recognized that an apocalyptic willingness to destroy the old world can be dangerous, especially if it lacks a conception of what the new world should look like.⁹⁶ Taubes hence places more emphasis on ‘interiorization’ in his later writings, on the turning inward of the messianic or eschatological idea. This requirement is presented as an important precondition that separates desirable varieties of Messianism from dangerous ones. In his famous essay ‘The Price of Messianism’ (1981) he directs his plea for interiorization against modern secular Zionism (and more indirectly, against his old teacher Gershom Scholem):

If the messianic idea in Judaism is not interiorized, it can turn the ‘landscape of redemption’ ... into a blazing apocalypse. If one is to enter irrevocably into history, it is imperative to beware of the illusion that redemption ... happens on the stage of history. For every attempt to bring about redemption on the level of history without a transfiguration of the messianic idea leads straight to the abyss.⁹⁷

This insistence on interiorization corresponds with Taubes’ increased interest in Paul. Taubes assumes that Paul transformed Jesus’ original message, that the Kingdom of God was at hand, into the claim that the redemptive event *had already occurred* in the crucifixion. This meant that those who are saved by Christ’s sacrifice already partake in the new dispensation, that they in a sense already inhabit the new world while the old world “is passing away”.⁹⁸ Taubes found in Paul’s writings, especially the Epistle to the Romans, a model for a new type of community or “union-covenant”: namely one that has surpassed ‘the law’ of the old world and already partakes in the freedom of the next.⁹⁹ Marin Terpstra and Theo de Wit point out that his self-identification as a “Paulinist” does not indicate a conversion to Christianity and a move away from Judaism.¹⁰⁰ Paul is instead regarded as a *Jewish heretic*, who functioned as a “new Moses” and is therefore assumedly more Jewish than either Jews or Christians care to admit. Taubes says that he is “in the business of gathering the heretic [i.e., Paul] back into the fold, because I regard him ... as more Jewish than any Reform Rabbi, or any Liberal rabbi, I ever heard ... anywhere.”¹⁰¹ *Political Theology of Paul* is thus a final exercise in brushing history against the grain. Taubes seeks to undo the boundary between Judaism and Christianity by asserting that the antinomianism that supposedly characterizes Christianity – i.e., principally through Paul – is already present in Jewish thought, and that Paul should thus be seen as a “new Moses” or as a Jewish Zealot rather than as the founder of something totally alien to Judaism.¹⁰² He subsequently draws a line of (progressive) development from Moses via Paul to Marcion of Sinope, who Taubes regards as the principal proponent of Gnosticism. This Paulinian-Marcionist mode of thought is believed to reappear in the work of 20th century authors such as Benjamin and Karl Barth: it is assumed that in both

96 Gold (2006) p.149. Cf. Taubes (2010) p.9. However, already in *Occidental Eschatology* (2009, p.11) Taubes writes: “If the revolution points to nothing beyond itself, it will end in a movement, dynamic in nature but leading into the abyss. A ‘nihilistic revolution’ does not pursue any goal [telos], but takes its aim from the ‘movement’ itself and, in so doing, comes close to satanic practice.”

97 Taubes (2010) p.9. Cf. Gold (2006) 151-152.

98 1 Cor 7:31, NIV. Cf. Gordon (2012) pp.364-365; Taubes (2009) p.68.

99 Hartwich et. al. (2004) p.130; Taubes (2004) pp.13-54; *ibid.* (2006) pp.60-64; (1955) pp.70-71. Note that the Paulinian identification of ‘the law’ with the old world and ‘freedom’ with the new forms an important inspiration for Taubes’ antinomian conception of liberty.

100 Terpstra and De Wit (2000) p.339; Taubes (2004) p.88.

101 Taubes (2004) p.11.

102 Taubes (2004) pp.40-62; *ibid.* (2006); (2010) pp.3-9, 45-58. Cf. Gold (2006) pp.154-156.

cases, the divine (i.e., the principle of salvation) is fully disconnected from the world (i.e., the principle of creation).¹⁰³

Taubes proposes a gnostic reading of Paul that corresponds with his own outlook on the world. Paul's internalization of eschatology entails that 'the other world' is no longer expected to arrive as a historical (or apocalyptic) event, it is instead transposed to the spiritual realm, which is already accessible to the believer by turning away from the world. This introduces a metaphysical dualism that was still foreign to 'original' Messianism.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, this dualism implies a radical ontological devaluation of the existing world; it means that the "thread that links creation and redemption" becomes very thin. It is in the Gnosticism of Marcion that "the thread has snapped." Marcion assumedly drew the necessary conclusion from Paul's distinction between the inner world of salvation and the outer world of creation by postulating an antagonistic dualism between the good God of salvation and the evil demiurge of the world.¹⁰⁵ In 'The Price of Messianism' (1981) and in 'Das stählerne Gehäuse und der Exodus daraus' (1984) Taubes suggests that this attitude, the gnostic rejection of the world in favor of other-worldly salvation, is a necessary and legitimate response to a disillusionment with the original messianic promise of salvation. In other words, once the apocalypse fails to occur it is legitimate to believe that one already belongs to the next or other world. Hence, a "spiritual investment" in the *current* "world as it is" is no longer required.¹⁰⁶

From his various writings on Gnosticism it can be surmised that Taubes himself was close to abandoning the belief in a collective or historical redemptive event and instead favored gnostic world-negation. However, this gnostic-Paulinian stance also contains its own bifurcation: that is, this attitude could either allow for a total "nihilistic" negation of this world – precluding any meaningful action within it – or instead engender an anticipatory or "*proleptic*" participation in the new dispensation while the old world disappears. In other words, this option too evokes the aforementioned tension between negation and affirmation that we have already observed in Benjamin; it signifies the tension between either an unrelenting nihilistic negation of the old world or an anticipatory participation in the new world. Rather than deciding in favor of one, Taubes appears to oscillate between both options.¹⁰⁷

Critique of Blumenberg's Liberal-Conservative Polytheism

After this overview of Taubes' intellectual development from *Occidental Eschatology* to *Political Theology of Paul* it is appropriate – because he was above all a *polemical* thinker – to resituate Taubes in the intellectual polemics in which he was engaged throughout his life, more specifically, in the context of the secularization debate. One of his most important interlocutors, apart from Schmitt, was his close colleague Blumenberg. Indeed, Taubes' position in

103 Taubes (2004) pp.55-95. It is not clear whether this is indeed a 'progressive' development for Taubes. Either there is indeed such a progression towards a greater truth or the apocalyptic-gnostic form simply remains universally valid regardless of its historical substantiation. Mehring (1996, p.241) suggests that, at least in *Occidental Eschatology*, one should assume such a progressive development.

104 Taubes (2004) pp.38-62; *ibid.* (2009) pp.68-77; cf. Bultmann (1957) pp.38-55.

105 Taubes (2004) p.60. Cf. *ibid.* (2010) pp.61-176; (2006) pp.54-64.

106 Taubes (2010) pp.4, 73-74, 146. English title: 'The Iron Cage and the Exodus from It, or The Dispute over Marcion Then and Now' in: *Cult to Culture* (2010) pp.137-146. Cf. *ibid.* (2009) pp.36-37, 68, 72.

107 Note the difference between the remark in *Political Theology of Paul*, "let it go down. I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is", and his penchant for a proleptic chiliasm on the other, e.g., in his 'On the Symbolic Order of Modern Democracy' (1955, pp.56-71, esp. pp.70-71). I derive the term "proleptic" from: Gold (2006) p.148.

the secularization debate should to a significant extent be understood in terms of his critical opposition to Blumenberg (and later, to Marquard).¹⁰⁸ Their extensive *Briefwechsel*, which spans the years 1961 to 1981, indicates that in the 1960's Taubes initially regarded Blumenberg as a philosophical ally. At that time both promoted the cause of 'progress', 'reason' and 'Enlightenment' as the antidote to authoritarian modes of thought. Their exchange for example shows that Blumenberg had read, "mit Interesse und Gewinn", 'Intellektuellen und die Universität' (1963), a paper by Taubes that advocated a leftist interpretation of scientific progress and the Enlightenment, namely as tools for political emancipation.¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile Taubes, who generally sympathized with the Frankfurt School, wrote to Siegfried Unseld (the head of Suhrkamp) in 1966 that Blumenberg's *Legitimacy* and Adorno's *Negative Dialektik* (1966) had more in common than both would dare to admit, adding that "Adornos Opus" is admittedly superior because Blumenberg lacked a dialectical method.¹¹⁰ However, as the years progressed it gradually became apparent that their different grounds for endorsing enlightened modernity – respectively, a penchant for total emancipation-as-redemption (Taubes) versus cautious self-preservation (Blumenberg) – outweighed their temporary points of agreement. Their letter exchange testifies to a gradual alienation between Taubes and Blumenberg, caused by personal and professional annoyances but also by profound philosophical and political differences.¹¹¹ On a philosophical level, their differences came clearly to the fore after 1968, when Blumenberg turned his attention to myth and polytheism, first in 'Wirklichkeitsbegriffs und Wirkungspotential des Mythos' and later in *Arbeit am Mythos* (1979).¹¹²

Taubes was suspicious of Blumenberg's turn towards polytheism. It is apparent from his philosophy why this would cause concern. All concepts that Taubes considers essential are intrinsically connected in his theory: history, freedom, morality and eschatology. A depreciation or outright denial of one of these concepts can be dangerous since it would impede a proper understanding of the others. In Taubes's view this was what was at stake in the attempt at revitalizing polytheism or myth; it supposedly meant a fatal denial of history and hence also of human agency.¹¹³ Similarly, Taubes considered modern affinities with ancient concepts such as the 'cosmos' or 'fate' to be detrimental because they are typically used to *reify* the social-political status quo as 'natural'. In various articles that are collected in his *Vom Kult zur Kultur* (1996) Taubes combines a gnostic aversion to 'nature' or 'the cosmos' with a form of ideology criticism that is inspired by Marx and Benjamin. He thus takes aim against what he perceives as a tendency towards the false naturalization (reification or 're-enchantment') of society that

108 Taubes (2010) pp.61-123, 137-146, 302-314; *ibid.* (2004) pp.66-70; cf. Nicholls (2014) pp.215-217; Kopp-Oberstebrink (2013) pp.293-336.

109 Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) p.31. Much later, in 1967, Blumenberg (p.136) would complain that their exchange was too one-sided in this respect, since he always sent Taubes his publications and received nothing in return: "Das Ergebnis meiner unermüdlichen Zusendungen an Sie war jedoch, daß bis zum heutigen Tage nur der Vortrag 'Die Intellektuellen und die Universität' von Jacob Taubes in meinem Thesaurus sich befindet." Cf. Taubes, 'Intellectuals and the University' (2010) pp.282-301; Kopp-Oberstebrink (2013) pp.315-319.

110 Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) p.113, cf. p.148. Taubes acted as a literary agent for Suhrkamp and he was the one who recruited Blumenberg for this publishing house (p.56). Nicholls (2014) p.221 fn.60.

111 Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.145-150, 161-181, 282-292. Cf. Styfhals (2019) p.125.

112 Blumenberg (1971) pp.11-66; *ibid.* Work on Myth (1985). For a more elaborate account of their relationship, cf.: Kopp-Oberstebrink (2013). A few details: Taubes organized a colloquium in 1967 solely devoted to Blumenberg's *Legitimacy*. However, Blumenberg was apparently dissatisfied with how the conference went (cf. *Briefwechsel*, pp.145-152, 171-172) and refused a publication of its proceedings. It is around this conference and its aftermath that one can discern the beginnings of a break between Taubes and Blumenberg (p.310). In 1979 Taubes intended to organize a public debate between Schmitt and Blumenberg, under the working title of 'Political Theology III', but both declined. Cf. Blumenberg-Schmitt (2007) pp.167-174.

113 Taubes (2010) pp.61-75, 98-146, 248-314; *ibid.* (2004) p.84; Taubes and Rötzer (1987) pp.315-319.

in fact only serves to legitimize an unjust and oppressive system.¹¹⁴ He not only recognized this tendency in, for instance, Nietzsche's *amor fati*, Arnold Gehlen's institutionalism or in Max Weber's *Vocation Lectures*, the latter of which describes the process of modernization in terms of a tragic 'fate', but also amongst his contemporaries, e.g., in the work of Blumenberg and Marquard. On the other hand, it is not unlikely that Blumenberg's turn to 'political polytheism' – that Marquard would later explicate and develop further – was in part a sublimated response to the political radicalism that Taubes was held to represent.¹¹⁵

Taubes' longstanding professional relationship with Blumenberg involved many collaborations on – and polemical encounters in – conferences and seminars. Significantly, both were members of the famous interdisciplinary research group *Poetik und Hermeneutik* (which was cofounded by Blumenberg).¹¹⁶ The *Poetik und Hermeneutik* conferences that were held in the 1960's, in which Taubes was deeply involved, provide us an illuminating insight in the polemic between him and Blumenberg. Two conferences especially stand out for our purposes because they aptly elucidate the primary points of contention between the two authors: first, it is worth focusing on the 1964 conference on *Immanente Ästhetik – Ästhetische Reflexion*. At this conference Taubes presented his 'Noten zum Surrealismus' and engaged in a discussion with Blumenberg on certain key themes that would reappear in the latter's *Legitimacy* (1966). The second focal point of this analysis is the 1968 *Terror und Spiel* conference, which centered on Blumenberg's 'Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos', a paper that would serve as a precursor to his later tome, *Work on Myth* (1979).¹¹⁷ At this conference Taubes submitted his 'Der dogmatische Mythos der Gnosis', which criticized a distinction, put forward by Blumenberg, between 'myth' and 'dogma'.¹¹⁸

In 'Notes on Surrealism' Taubes establishes a parallel between the cosmos of late Antiquity and the modern scientific worldview. He maintains that the modern "iron cage" – an image borrowed from Weber – forms an analogous world picture to the hermetic and 'reified' cosmos of Antiquity. One might say that both worldviews suffer from an 'eclipse of transcendence'.¹¹⁹ Based on this analogy Taubes asserts a "structural comparison" between the gnostic "revolt" against this cosmos and what he perceives as the modern surrealist revolt, in art and especially poetry, against the iron cage of industrial society and the modern scientific worldview.¹²⁰ The modern eclipse of transcendence and closure of the immanent sphere entailed that the passage of *escape* was now sought within the self, in a way that is comparable to gnostic interiorization, albeit expressed in this instance in the language of fantastic, surrealist imagination. This meant that the "symbolic", a placeholder for the divine, disappeared from the world: "The triumph of the natural-scientific interpretation of reality ... pushed the 'symbolic' interpretation of the world into poetry and exposed it as a product of fantasy that remains without worldly correlate".¹²¹

114 Taubes (2010) pp.98-123, 137-146, 248-314; cf. Gold (2006) p.145; Kopp-Oberstebrink (2013) p.317.

115 Cf. Blumenberg-Schmitt (2007) pp.167-174; Kopp-Oberstebrink (2013); Martin (2017) pp.131-152.

116 Kopp-Oberstebrink (2013) p.303.

117 *Immanente Ästhetik – Ästhetische Reflexion* (1966); *Terror und Spiel* (1971). Blumenberg himself was not present at the latter conference due to illness, but he had submitted his paper in advance. Another Poetik conference of interest is *Die nicht mehr Schönen Künste* (1998), which took place in 1966. (Note: in the references I refer to the dates of publication and not the dates of the conferences themselves.) The papers by Taubes (and the plenary debate on 'Notes on Surrealism') are published in his *Cult to Culture* (2010) pp.61-123.

118 Taubes (2010) pp.61-75. Cf. Nicholls (2014) pp.215-217; Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014) pp.103-123.

119 Taubes (2010) p.101. The image of the "iron cage" appears elsewhere: pp.138-146; cf. *ibid.* (2004) p.84; Bielik-Robson (2014) pp.84-111, 198; Gold (2006) p.144 fn.12.

120 Taubes (2010) p.104, cf. pp.98-109.

121 Taubes (2010) p.100, cf. pp.74, 99, 137-146; Nicholls (2014) p.188; Blumenberg (1985) pp.161-162.

The realm of interiority formed a passage to a “new world” that was not only foreign but hostile towards the outside one. Finally, with the poetry of Baudelaire, there occurred a “Manichean split between world and man.” Taubes claims that the “act of artistic creation here no longer copies an exemplary creation, the order of the world”. Instead, “it disassembles and destroys this order, in order to create out of the depths of the soul a new world ... to attest to the *sensation du neuf*.”¹²² Surrealism’s hostility to the universe (and modern, industrial society) in favor of a “new world” evidently has political implications. Taubes notes that surrealism initially favored “revolutionary communism, but in the course of the routinization of the revolutionary impulse it disengages itself from the program of world revolution” in favor of a “nihilistic worldlessness [which] ... ‘repeats’ in modernity the nihilistic worldlessness of Gnosticism in late antiquity.”¹²³ What unites modern surrealist nihilism and gnostic nihilism is their shared conception of the world as a “mythic” order, governed by fate or laws, that is essentially opposed to true human freedom or redemption:

The Gnostic doctrine of redemption is a protest against a world ruled by *fatum* or by *nomos*. This *fatum* presents itself in the mythological style of Gnosticism as personified powers: astrological determinism. The world as it is presented by the interpretation of modern science and technology against which modern poetry turned in varying phases since romanticism, regains a mythical coherence as a unified whole: natural-scientific determinism. The poetic protest turns against the enslavement to nature of science and technology, the consequence of knowledge as power that can be wielded only in the form of domination and coercion of a demystified nature.¹²⁴

Taubes’ assertion of a “structural comparison” between modern surrealism and ancient Gnosticism echoes Schmitt’s claim, central to his political theology, that metaphysics and politics relate to each other through a “systematic analogy”.¹²⁵ In both cases this assertion steers clear of the “substantialism” that Blumenberg would later attribute to the secularization theorem. Indeed, Taubes does not presume the existence of a perennial religious-gnostic ‘substance’ that somehow survived throughout the ages. Instead, he offers a justification of a gnostic revolt in modernity as a purely *formal* option that retains its vital importance as a possible way out of the immanent order, regardless of whether it carries a religious motivation or not. Indeed, since the “modern uniform universe ... has no beyond”, this means, according to Taubes, that the modern revolt against immanence “cannot invoke the guarantee of a god beyond the world”. Therefore it remains strictly atheistic.¹²⁶ However, the fact that this option has become secularized has no bearing on its enduring viability, Taubes suggests.¹²⁷

This touches on Taubes’ conception of history. In ‘Notes on Surrealism’ as well as in his lecture for the *Terror und Spiel* conference, ‘The Dogmatic Myth of Gnosticism’, it is suggested that the gnostic-apocalyptic attitude of revolt forms a kind of a transcendental, trans-historical position that is always available regardless of different historical circumstances. However, these circumstances *do* determine what the *outcome* of this attitude will be – i.e., whether it allows the individual to apocalyptically expect the arrival of a new world or to gnostically negate

122 Taubes (2010) p.100.

123 Taubes (2010) p.101. Taubes suggests (pp.73-74, 146) that a disappointment with apocalyptic promises of a new world automatically engenders a gnostic negation of the current world.

124 Taubes (2010) p.103.

125 Schmitt (2005) p.42, cf. pp.36-37; Taubes (2010) pp.222-232.

126 Taubes (2010) p.103, cf. pp.104-107.

127 Taubes (2010) pp.109, 119-123.

the current one.¹²⁸ That being said, Taubes indicates that the need for escape remains ineradicable regardless of these differences in outcome. Ancient Gnosticism is presented as the result of a disappointment in apocalyptic or messianic hope. This means that the other world that apocalypticism expected to arrive as a collective historical event is transposed to the spiritual realm, which is only accessible via the individual soul.¹²⁹ Taubes argues in the plenary discussion of ‘Notes on Surrealism’, quoting Benjamin, that the historical context determines when and how the gnostic “structure” becomes “citable.”¹³⁰ This implies that there is no need for a gnostic internalization of the ‘better world’ if its arrival can still be conceived of as a foreseeable world-historical event. However, once historical circumstances exterminate this hope it will turn inward and result in a nihilistic hostility towards the outside world.¹³¹ Consequently, it can be surmised that historical circumstances also determine the *political* implications of the gnostic-apocalyptic attitude. This attitude can thus harbor both a positive will to improve *or* destroy the existing world, and both a passive anticipation of *or* a proleptic participation in the next one, depending on the circumstances. Rather than structurally differentiating between beneficial and possibly harmful outcomes of the apocalyptic-gnostic attitude, Taubes emphasizes the enduring viability and legitimacy of this mode of thought.¹³²

Blumenberg responded to ‘Notes on Surrealism’ in the plenary discussion that followed. It is worth reflecting on this rebuttal, which foreshadows some central themes of *Legitimacy and Work on Myth*, because this pinpoints the key differences between the two colleagues.¹³³ Blumenberg first questions the historical soundness of Taubes’ portrayal of Gnosticism. According to Blumenberg, Gnosticism could never be regarded ‘revolutionary’ – as Taubes suggests – because it does not alter the state of affairs in the cosmos but only inverts its valuation. While Stoics could feel at home in the cosmos, the Gnostics regarded it as a prison cell; in neither case was agency in the sense of revolutionary action an option. Blumenberg then takes aim at Taubes’ negative portrayal of the modern worldview and his positive appraisal of the ‘theological absolutism’ that Gnosticism represents. This critique highlights the *antinomian* conception of freedom that Taubes presupposes.¹³⁴ Blumenberg suggests that Taubes’ dichotomy of “[f]antasy against legality” – conceived of in terms of ‘freedom against oppression’ – is dubious once projected on the modern condition. “It would be difficult to verify that the legal valuation of nature, stabilized by modernity *against the God of salvation* and of arbitrariness in nominalism, would have been consciously experienced as oppressive, constricting, or otherwise negatively.”¹³⁵ This is inconceivable to Blumenberg: in his view, the orderly law-abiding structure of the modern universe was posited expressly to the benefit of human freedom, i.e., self-assertion, *against* the absolutism of the “God of salvation”: “The laws of nature are thus precisely not the quality of reality that constrains the self in its freedom ... Rather, they are the medium [*Organon*] allied with freedom”. These laws guarantee the predictability of a depotentized nature that is now entirely at our disposal. “Modern law of nature cannot be compared with the Gnostic heimarmene because it was designed *against*

128 Taubes (2010) pp.98-123, 137-146.

129 Taubes (2010) p.74: “The historical schema of apocalypticism implodes with the disillusion about any predictions of the end of times and retreats inward.”

130 Taubes (2010) p.109. Cf. Lijster (2010) p.27; Benjamin (2007) p.255.

131 Taubes (2010) p.99-110, 259-267, 223.

132 Bielik-Robson (2014) pp.166-200; Martin (2017) pp.149-152.

133 Blumenberg in: Taubes (2010) pp.115-118. Cf. Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.60-74, 120.

134 Blumenberg in: Taubes (2010) pp.115-118, cf. Taubes’ response: pp.119-123.

135 Blumenberg in: Taubes (2010) p.116 (emphasis added). Cf. Nicholls (2014) pp.188, 215-217; Martin (2017) pp.144-148.

the arbitrariness of the miracle and the abyssal uncertainty of the *creatio continua*. From this origin stems its solid, positive quality of consciousness.”¹³⁶

Legitimacy of the Modern Age appeared two years after this discussion. Of this work Blumenberg would write to Taubes “daß es in diesem Buch viele Seiten gibt, bei deren Niederschrift mir der Partner Jakob [sic] Taubes präsent war”.¹³⁷ Indeed, we can now see that *Legitimacy* further elaborates on the theme of this discussion, where two conceptions of freedom are pitted against each other. Whereas Taubes advocates freedom from the restrictions of an immanent order, Blumenberg rather seeks freedom from the infringement by a transcendent, alien force (e.g., the gnostic God of salvation) through the very establishment of such an order. Schmitt’s political theology exemplifies in Blumenberg’s view that “the arbitrariness of the miracle” is not a vehicle for salvation, as Taubes suggests, but rather for oppression.¹³⁸ *Legitimacy*, as we have seen, depicts the modern conception of reality as an answer to the problem of Gnosticism. Where Gnosticism and late-medieval nominalism had made the world a fearful, inhospitable realm, modern science (as an instrument of human self-assertion) introduced a new image of reality – either as a mechanistic universe that obeys natural laws or as a blank screen on which ‘pure reason’ can impose a lawful order – in which the individual could feel safe once again. This supposedly constitutes “the second [and final] overcoming of Gnosticism”.¹³⁹ This disagreement between Taubes and Blumenberg points out a significant difference in their conceptions of freedom; that is, whereas for Taubes freedom is necessarily opposed to law, to Blumenberg law forms its necessary precondition.

Blumenberg elaborates on his philosophical anti-absolutism at the *Terror und Spiel* conference in 1968 by involving the world of myth. His paper ‘Wirklichkeitsbergiff und Wirkungspotential des Mythos’ marks the thematic shift in Blumenberg’s oeuvre from the subject matter of *Legitimacy* to that of *Work on Myth*. The *theological* absolutism of Gnosticism and late-medieval nominalism is now transposed to (what he would call in *Work on Myth*) the primordial “absolutism of reality”, conceived of in anthropological terms. In this paper and in *Work on Myth* Blumenberg suggests that the mythic consciousness forms a protective shield against this absolutism of reality.¹⁴⁰ Marquard would later explicate the notion, latent in Blumenberg’s work, that myth’s function is paradigmatic for that of culture in general, namely to form a bulwark against absolutism. This establishes a continuity between modern self-assertion (the theme of *Legitimacy*) and mythic consciousness (the theme of *Work on Myth*).¹⁴¹ The political implication of this anti-absolutism is not difficult to discern: Blumenberg indicates that unmediated or undivided (absolute) power has to be kept at bay and that the lifeworld must be protected through a “separation of powers”. Moreover, these powers in turn have to be subjugated to an encompassing law or ‘fate’.¹⁴² The mythic consciousness creates a condition of “mythische Liberalität” that, as Marquard would later argue, can perhaps be replicated in modern society.¹⁴³ Blumenberg states:

136 Blumenberg in: Taubes (2010) p.118 (first emphasis added). Cf. Blumenberg (1983) pp.125-226. It is worth remembering that the miracle functions as an analogue of the sovereign decision in Schmitt’s political theology.

137 Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) p.120.

138 Blumenberg (1983) pp.90-101; Martin (2017) p.146.

139 Blumenberg (1983) pp.125-226; cf. Marquard (1984) pp.31-36.

140 Blumenberg (1971) pp.11-66; *ibid.* (1985); Savage (2010) p.223; Marquard (2016) pp.20-22.

141 Campbell (1991) p.63. Cf. Blumenberg (1985) pp.30-31.

142 Blumenberg (1971) pp.14-27; *idem* (1985) pp.253, 523-555; Blumenberg-Schmitt (2007) p.133; Wetters (2012) pp.100-118.

143 Blumenberg (1971) p.21. Cf. Marquard (1983) pp.77-84; *ibid.* (1989) pp.87-109. Keller (2015) p.94.

Diese Mythologie ist daher nicht nur anthropomorph, wie andere auch, sondern in einem genaueren Sinne 'human', jeder Überforderung fern, so daß es sich leben ließ mit Göttern, welche dem Schicksal nicht weniger untertan waren und nicht sittlicher zu sein begehrt als die Menschen, und diese nicht zum Ungehorsam reizten durch jene Heiligkeit, welche dem Gott der monotheistischen Religionen angehört.¹⁴⁴

In the plenary discussion that followed, Taubes rebuked Blumenberg for having misunderstood how the concept of divine omnipotence is actually presented in the traditions of Gnosticism, Judaism and Christianity. Blumenberg, Taubes notes, confuses the personal God of the scriptures with the blind, abstract principle that he distills from nominalist metaphysics. Blumenberg "steigert die Allmacht Gottes zu einem absoluten Prinzip, so daß der Mensch sich nur in der Negation dieses allmächtigen Gottes behaupten kann. Aus der Negation eines molochitischen Gottes gewinnt Blumenberg ... die Legitimität einer atheistischen Neuzeit."¹⁴⁵ From Taubes' own contribution to this conference, 'The Dogmatic Myth of Gnosticism', it becomes clear what he was implying with this remark. Here, Gnosticism is portrayed as a mode of thought that establishes a mystic unity between the individual and the divine. This implies that true human freedom does not compete with the divine power of salvation but that it is guaranteed by it, not in the last place because Gnosticism asserts an *identity* between the human soul (*pneuma*) and the God of salvation.¹⁴⁶ Blumenberg equates the 'dogmatic' worldview of Christianity and Judaism with blind submission and the abandonment of mythic plurivocity, whereas Taubes asserts that these traditions – especially in as far as they display gnostic tendencies – rather convey a wide variety of different stories ('myths'), which all revolve, in various ways, around the single theme of redemption through the reconciliation of the individual soul with the divine principle.¹⁴⁷ Although Taubes' affinity with Gnosticism becomes more overt in his later years, he already displays a predilection for the gnostic attitude at this stage. However, far from advocating the submission to an extra-worldly God he rather wants to defend the extra-worldly destiny of the individual by elevating the soul to the level of the divine.¹⁴⁸

Not long after the *Terror und Spiel* conference Taubes published an article, 'Kultur und Ideologie' (1969), that sheds more light on the concerns that underlie his criticism of Blumenberg's anti-absolutist defense of a self-enclosed immanent order. In this paper, he writes in the same *Ideologiekritische* tone of most of his writings from the 1960's, leaving the gnostic-nihilistic attitude (that would render such a social-political 'critique' impotent) dormant for the moment.¹⁴⁹ Rather than addressing Blumenberg directly, Taubes makes it clear whose influence he suspects behind this contemporary return to the world of polytheism and fate, namely Weber and Gehlen. The implication of this text is that the 'terror' that Blumenberg believes to reside outside of the confines of human culture can also make its appearance within the cultural world itself, precisely when true human freedom – as emancipation – is eclipsed in favor of a counterfeit version, a "fiction of freedom".¹⁵⁰ Taubes argues here (and in similar

144 Blumenberg (1971) p.18 (original emphasis). For early critiques of this view, cf.: Lämmert in: Blumenberg (1971) pp.542-543; Faber (1983) pp.85-99.

145 Taubes in: Blumenberg (1971) p.539, cf. p.545. Cf. Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.252-254.

146 Taubes (2010) pp.61-75.

147 Note that in this particular instance Taubes understands 'myths' simply as 'stories' and not as vehicles of a detrimental mythic worldview. Taubes in: Blumenberg (1971) pp.538-540. Cf. Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014) pp.107-123; Nicholls (2014) p.216; Blumenberg (1985) pp.179-187.

148 Taubes (2010) pp.61-75, 137-146, 218-221.

149 Taubes, 'Culture and Ideology' (2010) pp.248-267, cf. pp.137-139, 313; Martin (2017) pp.140-152.

150 Taubes (2010) p.262.

articles) that Weber's recourse to the image of "fate" to describe the process of modernization results in the false impression that the "iron cage" of modern industrial-capitalist society is a *necessary* outcome of history. This naturalizing or 're-enchanting' rhetoric serves to reify a contingent and unjust social-political condition.¹⁵¹ By presenting the modern situation as one of "disenchanted polytheism", Weber suggests that modern societal powers lay beyond the scope of human control, whereby "the rule of humans over one another is concealed. Weber excuses this as fate."¹⁵² Although in Weber's theory this 'fate' still has a tragic ring to it, in the work of Arnold Gehlen – often named as an important source of influence for Blumenberg – one can rather find an enthusiastic affirmation of it. Taubes writes: "The relapse of consciousness to Greek polytheism is ... only the first step of regress. To render an apology for industrial culture, Gehlen has to return to the primitive Molochian sacrificial ritual itself."¹⁵³

Gehlen assumedly follows the Nietzschean-Weberian trail of 're-mythization' back to its origin, nature itself, by vindicating the industrial, rationalized society in naturalistic terms. It is suggested that in Gehlen's theory the need for order and stability outweighs the need for liberty, which means – as Taubes implies with an eye on Gehlen's former support of Nazism – that he is not only willing to sacrifice human freedom but also human lives to uphold this order. All the while, "the *fiction* of freedom and self-determination" is maintained to keep people compliant.¹⁵⁴ This paper can be interpreted as a veiled critique of Blumenberg's rejection of an antinomian conception of freedom-as-salvation in favor of an immanent and lawful freedom-from-fear. Taubes suggests that once this contrarian, transcendent freedom is completely excluded and once the fear of chaos and interruption by something 'other' ensures that the preservation of order takes precedence, it can possibly turn into the hellish totalitarian system with which Gehlen is associated. In Taubes' view, fascist totalitarianism always appears as a "heidnische Reaktionsform", a dangerous attempt to reverse history by going back to paganism (either in Germanic or Greek form), that denies the human freedom that is the essence of history.¹⁵⁵

The Political Theology of Taubes: Thinking with and Against Schmitt

At this stage in our analysis it will come as no surprise that Taubes reserves a vital role for *political theology* in furthering the struggle for emancipation against the consolidation of power in a reified industrial-capitalist iron cage. In order to expound on the precise nature, implications and inherent tensions of Taubes' political theology, it is necessary to first of all zoom in on his relationship with Carl Schmitt.¹⁵⁶ After the 1960's Taubes writings indicate not only a partial shift away from his former (positive) pro-Enlightenment stance – evinced for example by his 1963 paper 'Intellectuals and the University' – toward a more (negative) gnostic outlook, they also show that he increasingly identified his own position in light of Schmitt's political theology. This is evident from his *Political Theology of Paul* (1993) and his *To Carl Schmitt: Letters*

151 Taubes (2010) pp.258-259, cf. pp.137-146, 276-281, 299-301. "Weber ..., under the sign of Nietzsche, *enchants* both rationalization and intellectualization, and even the disenchantment of the world – to the fate [*Schicksal*] that remains inescapable and that establishes new forms of bondage." (p.258, translation modified).

152 Taubes (2010) p.259.

153 Taubes (2010) p.260. Cf. Nicholls (2014) pp.188-196, 215-217; Tabas (2012) pp.139-153.

154 Taubes (2010) p.262 (emphasis added).

155 Taubes and Rötzer (1987) p.319. Cf. Taubes (2010) pp.231-232, 276-281; Bielik-Robson (2014) pp.196-200; Martin (2017) pp.141-143; Faber (1983). Nicholls (2014, pp.188-217) notes that there are significant differences between Gehlen and Blumenberg that this type of critique tends to ignore, emphasizing especially Blumenberg's *liberalism* over against Gehlen's illiberalism.

156 On the relation between Schmitt and Taubes, cf.: Mehring (1996); Terpstra (2009); Reipen (2001).

and *Reflections* (1987).¹⁵⁷ Taubes' preoccupation with Schmitt is further illustrated by the fact that he organized a three-part conference series on political theology – titled *Religionstheorie und politische Theologie* – in the early 1980's, which initially carried the working title *Politische Theologie III*. His plan was to facilitate a debate between Schmitt and Blumenberg on secularization and political theology, but both had declined his invitation.¹⁵⁸ The conference series was realized in their absence, although the presence of Schmitt and Blumenberg was nonetheless felt due to the fact that many participants explicitly referenced their polemic, especially in the first edition: *Der Fürst dieser Welt: Carl Schmitt und die Folgen*, held in 1980.¹⁵⁹ What these conferences moreover indicate is that 'political theology' had become increasingly popular by the early 1980's as a staple of New Left critical thought. Taubes' leftist reading of Schmitt hence represents a broader intellectual movement.¹⁶⁰

Taubes recounts in *Political Theology of Paul* and *To Carl Schmitt* how his relation with Schmitt developed. He writes that although he was already influenced by Schmitt as a student, he never dared to embrace this indebtedness until finally Blumenberg, in a letter, urged him to (in Taubes' own words) "finally drop this ... tribunalistic attitude" and initiate contact.¹⁶¹ From this contact followed a correspondence that was concluded by a "stormy conversation at Plettenberg in 1980", described by Taubes as "one of the most violent that I have ever had in the German language".¹⁶² Jamie Martin rightly notices in this respect that Taubes tends to inflate his relation to Schmitt and is all too eager to present himself as the 'Schmittian anti-Schmitt'.¹⁶³ However, it is certainly true that there are significant parallels between him and Schmitt that have to be taken into account in order to understand the particular nature of Taubes' political theology.

In *To Carl Schmitt*, Taubes writes that he had met a kindred spirit in Plettenberg because he and Schmitt converged on a similar apocalyptic outlook. "Carl Schmitt can be read and understood both as a jurist and as an apocalyptic prophet of the counterrevolution. He addressed me in terms of the latter." He continues: "As an apocalyptic spirit I felt and still feel close to him. And we follow common paths, even as we draw contrary conclusions."¹⁶⁴ Indeed, both employ an eschatological scheme that determines the essential finitude of history; historical time becomes a mere respite (*Frist*) that awaits the end. This notion of time as respite is significant because it necessitates a decisionism that invalidates the (supposedly) typically liberal urge to suspend decision-making in favor of deliberation, discussion and compromise.¹⁶⁵ The suspension of the decision amounts to a denial of the essential seriousness of life-in-respite, which corresponds with the Blumenbergian penchant for aestheticization and *Spiel* that both Schmitt and Taubes abhorred.¹⁶⁶ However, and this brings us to the differences between the two, whereas Schmitt criticizes liberal parliamentarianism for denying the true nature of the

157 Taubes, 'Intellectuals' (2010) pp.282-301; *ibid.*, *Political Theology of Paul* (2004); *To Carl Schmitt* (2013).

158 Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.195-204; Taubes-Schmitt (2012) pp.95-96, 211-216. Cf. Lübbe (1983) pp.55-56; Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014) p.108.

159 E.g.: Lübbe (1983) pp.45-56; Faber (1983) pp.85-99; Hübener (1983) pp.57-76. Cf. Nicholls (2014) p.214.

160 Cf. Müller (2003) pp.169-180; Lübbe (1983) pp.45-56; Bredekamp (2016) pp.680-688; Feil (1970).

161 Taubes (2004) p.101. Cf. *ibid.* (2013) p.7; Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.173-174.

162 Taubes (2013) pp.7, 15. Cf. Mehring (2009) pp.571-573.

163 Martin (2017) pp.131-134.

164 Taubes (2013) p.8. Cf. Bielik-Robson (2014) pp.212-213.

165 Taubes (2013) pp.45-46. In 'Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie' Blumenberg (1968/1969, pp.121-145) in fact adopts a 'weak' decisionism in which the violent political act becomes reoccupied by a 'language act' (p.138).

166 Taubes and Rötzer (1987) pp.316-318; Taubes (2013) pp.33-47; *ibid.* (2010) pp.302-314; Blumenberg (1985) pp.545-546; *ibid.* (1971) pp.13-57.

political – i.e., for not being authoritarian enough –, Taubes rather follows Benjamin’s anarchic train of thought. The latter two both denounce liberalism for providing a counterfeit freedom that only veils a ‘softer’ form of oppression. In as far as they affirm political action, Taubes and Benjamin assume that the objective of political decisions is to emancipate the oppressed from all forms of domination. Taubes’ eventual embrace of Gnosticism does not imply that he abandons this emancipatory framework: the gnostic turn inwards and the negation of the existing world also constitutes a form of (political) “revolt” against the cosmos or the iron cage.¹⁶⁷ Hence, whereas Schmitt and Taubes share an apocalyptic framework they occupy opposed positions within it: Schmitt, in wanting to restrain the coming of the end, embraces an imperfect order in fear of what might come after, whereas Taubes believes the current order to be oppressive and longs for a final liberation from it.¹⁶⁸

In the first of Taubes’ conferences on political theology – *Der Fürst dieser Welt: Carl Schmitt und die Folgen* (1983) – Richard Faber presented a paper, ‘Von der ‘Erledigung jeder politischen Theologie’ zur Konstitution Politischer Polytheologie’, that further exemplifies how the positions of Taubes, Schmitt and Blumenberg can be situated over against each other. Faber suggests that the difference between these positions is best illuminated by the Postscript of *Political Theology II* (1970): he argues that whereas Benjamin – and by extension Taubes – is best identified with the gnostic-apocalyptic principle of salvation, expecting the arrival of a new world, Schmitt rather opts for the alternative, i.e., preserving the existing world at all costs. Faber claims that Blumenberg and Marquard also belong to Schmitt’s preservationist camp, notwithstanding their efforts to divide the single creator God (i.e., the Schmittian sovereign) into a plurality of smaller gods (i.e., a multitude of societal institutions). He concludes that Marquard and Blumenberg have thus merely replaced Schmitt’s political monotheism with a political “Oligotheismus”.¹⁶⁹

We will return to this appraisal of Blumenberg and Marquard in following sections, but for now it can indeed be surmised that Schmitt’s ‘stasiology’ deeply resonates with Taubes’ thought. Both Taubes and Schmitt resist any attempt at closing the immanent frame off from transcendence. Taubes could hence concur with Schmitt’s critique of Blumenberg’s ‘autistic’ or ‘legalistic’ defense of modernity.¹⁷⁰ Already in the plenary debate on ‘Notes on Surrealism’ (1966) Taubes suggested that Blumenberg’s idea of “the legality of nature ultimately makes the new appear as something predetermined, thereby in truth reiterating the old.”¹⁷¹ However, whereas Schmitt affirms ‘novelty’ (“the new”) as an occasion for sovereign intervention that is meant to establish and consolidate order against chaos, Taubes rather follows Benjamin in regarding it as a possibility to interrupt the homogenous order and ultimately abolish it.¹⁷² The gnostic antagonism between the creator and savior that Schmitt

167 Taubes (2006) pp.53-65; *ibid.* (2010) pp.98-104, 137-146; Martin (2017) pp.135-143.

168 Taubes (2004) p.103. Cf. Gold (2006) pp.140-153; Terpstra (2009) pp.185-206.

169 Faber (1983) p.97, cf. pp.85-99. Faber does explicitly mention Taubes himself, but it is highly likely that he would have placed the latter in the camp of Benjamin. Cf. Schmitt (2014) pp.116-130; Terpstra (2009) pp.201-204; Kroll (2010) pp.292-294.

170 Schmitt (2014) p.120; Taubes (2010) pp.123, 252-253. In *Occidental Eschatology* (2009, p.193) he objects to the closure of the immanent frame: “Forgetting the divine measure, man becomes more and more presumptuous and takes himself as the measure ... of all things. ... [Thus, he] conceals the true correspondence of things and constructs fabrications; he fills the world with purposes and safeguards, fashions it into a protective shell, and walls himself in. These fabrications conceal the correspondence of things with and in God, and push God out into the realm of ‘mystery.’”

171 Taubes (2010) p.123. Cf. *ibid.* (2004) p.69, 84-85, 112. This remark predates Schmitt’s similar critique of Blumenberg – that the latter could not conceive of true novelty – in *Political Theology II* by four years.

172 Cf. De Wilde (2005) pp.121-149; Taubes (2010) p.252.

situates within the divine ('the One is always in uproar against itself') indeed delineates, as Faber suggests, Taubes' and Benjamin's positions over against Schmitt. The latter writes in the Postscript:

The main structural problem with Gnostic dualism, that is, with the problem of the God of creation and the God of salvation, dominates not only every religion of salvation and redemption. *It exists inescapably in every world in need of change and renewal*, and it is both immanent and ineradicable.¹⁷³

Schmitt and Taubes agree that the condition of the world as *res mixtae* necessitates an inescapable either/or distinction – between full-blown revolution or a rigid preservation of the existing order that represses the incessant need for revolt – and position themselves over against each other accordingly. They subsequently deride anyone, e.g., Blumenberg, who refuses to accept this either/or choice.¹⁷⁴

It has become clear that Taubes' political theology is best understood as a critical counterpart of Schmitt's. However, this juxtaposition does not suffice in obtaining a full understanding of its precise nature and ramifications. Several commentators appear to suggest that Taubes' thought is encapsulated by a direct inversion of Schmitt's, resulting in a theological de-legitimization of all political power.¹⁷⁵ Terpstra and De Wit argue along these lines in their article on Taubes' "negative political theology": "A positive (or 'right-leaning') political theology [i.e., Schmitt's] would provide a spiritual justification for secular power, while a negative (revolutionary, critical, or 'left-leaning') political theology [i.e., Taubes' and Benjamin's] would undermine a spiritual justification of political power".¹⁷⁶ This leads them to conclude that while "messianic expectations remove legitimacy from political powers, they can never *justify* revolutionary activities".¹⁷⁷ However, the problem with this interpretation is that it tacitly relegates Taubes' position to one of a quietist, passive expectation of divine intervention.¹⁷⁸ Arguably, this would make it structurally indiscernible from Löwith's Augustinian, anti-decisionistic depiction of 'pure faith'.¹⁷⁹ This characterization does not do full justice to the ambivalence of his political theology, not in the last place because it ignores the numerous occasions in which Taubes does indeed appear to advocate positive emancipatory action in the world.¹⁸⁰ Indeed, even in his more 'gnostic' writings it seems that Taubes *never completely* abandons the possibility

173 Schmitt (2014) p.125. Cf. Faber (1983) pp.88-99.

174 Schmitt (2014) p.115; Taubes (2013) pp.29-30; Terpstra (2009) pp.196-200.

175 Terpstra (2009) p.192; Terpstra and De Wit (2000) pp.320-353; Martin (2017) p.132.

176 Terpstra and De Wit (2000) p.341.

177 Terpstra and De Wit (2000) p.342.

178 I believe that this misunderstanding of Taubes' position – a denial of his 'positive' attitude towards revolutionary action – ties in with Terpstra's and De Wit's (2000, pp.343-344) assertion that Taubes *rejects Gnosticism*, a claim for which I can find no decisive proof in Taubes' writings. In supposedly opting against 'gnosis' (knowledge) in favor of 'pistis' (faith), Terpstra and De Wit assume that Taubes had no other option than to faithfully await the end of the old world. Thus he could neither advocate actively realizing this end or proleptically partaking in the new world. This is an understandable inference from Taubes' 1954 article 'The Realm of Paradox', on which they base their interpretation, but based on his other writings I am led to believe that Taubes himself did not maintain this "pisticism"; indeed, most of the figures that are placed in the 'pistic' tradition in this article – e.g. Luther, Kierkegaard and Barth – are presented in later writings as implicit Gnostics (Taubes 2004; idem 2010, p.143). See Robson-Bielik (2014, p.188) against this 'pistic' interpretation.

179 Taubes and Schmitt agree that the Augustinian distinction is not simply pre-given, as Löwith suggests. It requires a political decision. Cf. Taubes (2013) pp.29-30; *ibid.* (2004) p.103.

180 E.g., Taubes' writings from the late 1950's and 1960's: (2010) pp.235-301.

of a collective and historical redemptive event, however improbable it may seem given the destitute state of the world.¹⁸¹

In response to this conundrum I propose a different characterization of the political theology of Taubes. Admittedly, this political theology can indeed be signified as ‘negative’ because it negates the existing order; however, this does not preclude, as Terpstra and De Wit suggest, a positive affirmation of revolutionary action. Taubes can indeed affirm a form of political action, but in doing so it is essential that his political theology does not become *exhausted* by such an affirmation. For example, in his ‘Intellectuals and the University’ (1963) Taubes laments that the “critical substance that first renders scientific progress possible is consumed in the progress of the industrial society”, and expresses the hope that this “critical substance” can be exhumed once again, so that “the postulate of the Enlightenment, to coax people out of their self-inflicted immaturity, can become a reality.”¹⁸² Hence it follows that this “critical substance” may not be completely identified with any particular revolutionary movement, because that would assumedly result in its usurpation once a revolution fails or simply installs a new oppressive system. In short, Taubes can never go ‘all in’ and put all of his eggs in one revolutionary basket; it is necessary that there remains a critical, negative instance in place so that critique is still possible once the revolution falters.¹⁸³ It can be argued that Taubes, like Benjamin before him, seeks to preserve an “eschatological reservation” while not succumbing to an “eschatological paralysis”. They deny that any actual historical struggle can ever be identified with *the* ultimate redemptive event – because doing so would be ‘idolatrous’ (we might surmise with an eye on the previous chapter) – but they do not thereby simply negate all historical-political action as meaningless.¹⁸⁴

This oscillation between affirmation and negation can be understood in light of the strategic function of Taubes’ political theology. The antinomies that reside in Taubes’ political theology (e.g., between apocalypticism and Gnosticism, activism and passivism, *pistis* and *gnosis*) are not necessarily meant to be either sublated *or* eliminated by a resolute, a priori decision. Arguably, Taubes, who is not concerned with building a substantively coherent philosophical system, benefits from maintaining these antinomies in suspension so that when he engages in polemics he can choose to deploy one option and not another in his defense of liberty-as-escape, depending on what the *occasion* demands. This deployment depends on an a posteriori, occasionalist decision. Again, this occasionalism does not imply that his own position is entirely vacuous. I assume that for example texts such as ‘The Price of Messianism’ and ‘Benjamin: ein moderner Marcionit?’ indicate that *beyond* his polemic occasionalism still lies a hope for an ultimate synthesis of the gnostic interiorization and the apocalyptic externalization of redemption.¹⁸⁵ Far from systematically elaborating on what this synthesis might look

181 Taubes (2010) pp.3-9, 61-123, 137-146; *ibid.* (2006) pp.53-65. Cf. Bielik-Robson (2014) pp.198-200.

182 Taubes (2010) pp.297, 300.

183 Taubes (2010) pp.252-267, 275-301.

184 Taubes (2010) p.300. Cf. Metz (1968) pp.105-107, fn.6; Schmitt (2014) pp.49-50; Benjamin (1978) pp.277-300, 312-313; Deuber-Mankowsky (2002) pp.12-18; Lijster (2010) p.32.

185 Taubes remains rather silent on this matter, but there are indications that this is his ultimate desideratum. Cf. Taubes (2010) p.9: “If the messianic idea in Judaism is not interiorized, it can turn ... into a blazing apocalypse”, and: “every attempt to bring about redemption on the level of history *without a transfiguration of the messianic idea* leads straight to the abyss” (emphasis added). This suggests that he envisions a synthesis between interior/ exterior, that he asserts the viability of an externalist Messianism or apocalypticism via its gnostic interiorization. Likewise, in ‘Benjamin: ein moderner Marcionit?’ (2006, p.62), Taubes writes that Paul’s purely spiritual negation of the Roman empire ultimately had very real, political consequences. Paul continues the nationalist-political struggle of the Zealots against Rome, be it “mit spirituellen Mitteln, *durch die er Rom am Ende in die Knie zwingt*” (emphasis added).

like, Taubes only provides hints that it would be a synthesis that radically changes the outside world *via* a flight inwards. This will most likely consist of an anticipatory participation in a new world while “the world in its present form is passing away”.¹⁸⁶

Taubes on Secularization

At this stage of our exposition of Taubes’ political theology it has become possible to zoom in on his conception of ‘secularization’. This term reappears often in his texts, but usually lacks theoretical reflection. However, the fact that a clear concept of secularization does not lie at the forefront of his writings is telling in and of itself. For instance, in *Political Theology of Paul*, Taubes quickly glosses over the debate between Schmitt and Blumenberg on secularization, saying that “Blumenberg discovers in the word ‘secularization’ an illegitimate title; he rejects the concept, he says it doesn’t hold up. (I still believe it holds up.)”¹⁸⁷ By mentioning this debate only in passing, without for instance explaining why the concept still “holds up”, it becomes clear that Taubes is not concerned with the technicalities that surround Blumenberg’s rejection of the concept of secularization in *Legitimacy*. This can be explained by the fact that – as *Occidental Eschatology* already testifies – Taubes is not interested in preserving a religious substance or in reconnecting modern phenomena with their purported religious origins. Unlike for instance Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, Taubes does not believe that leftist emancipatory thought should remain ‘rooted’ in the Christian or Jewish traditions.¹⁸⁸ By assuming a Schmittian ‘structural analogy’ between politics and theology, he rather asserts the perennial viability of modes of thought that might have originated in a religious context but which remain available even when they have been emptied out of all religious substance.¹⁸⁹ The most recurring example of such a perennially valid theological template is the gnostic-apocalyptic distinction between ‘this world’ and ‘the next world’. This is a template that can be modified – i.e., spiritualized and secularized, internalized or externalized – indefinitely throughout its history of application without losing its significance, Taubes suggests.¹⁹⁰ Elsewhere, in ‘Notes on an Ontological Interpretation of Theology’ (1949), Taubes offers a different example of how a ‘theological’ form can become de-theologized without losing its significance. Here, he follows the principle of negative theology to such a degree that theology becomes identical with atheism, resulting in “[t]heological atheism”, “the latest, most incontestable, and most radical consequence of contradictory positions; of theology and atheism, of Enlightenment and orthodoxy.”¹⁹¹

In *Political Theology of Paul* Taubes states: “I ask after the political potentials in the theological metaphors, just as Schmitt asks after the theological potentials of legal concepts.”¹⁹² Taubes does not suggest that theological principles only reflect political ideas in a unidirectional fashion. He rather implies that he is primarily concerned with how theological principles

186 1 Cor 7: 31. NIV. Taubes (1955) pp.70-71; *ibid.* (2004) pp.53-54. In a similar vein, *Occidental Eschatology* (2009, pp.164-194) hints at a possible reconciliation of Kierkegaard’s spiritualist negation and Marx’ materialist critique. Cf. Bielik-Robson (2014) pp.166-200.

187 Taubes (2004) p.68, cf. pp.64-70.

188 Taubes (2009) pp.86-191; *ibid.* (2010) pp.222-232, 267-281; (1955) pp.70-71. Cf. Von Weizsäcker (1964) pp.161-180.

189 Taubes (2010) pp.99-123, 130-136, 214-232; Bielik-Robson (2014) pp.196-200.

190 Taubes (2004) pp.55-96; *ibid.* (2010) pp.99-107, 137-146.

191 Taubes (2010) p.221, cf. pp.214-221.

192 Taubes (2004) p.69.

can be used in order to continue the struggle for emancipation, whether via an individualistic retreat from the world or through a collective redemption of it. Hence, ‘secularization’ can be regarded as a desideratum by Taubes if it signifies a process that releases new emancipatory potential from religious modes of thought. However, this does not necessarily entail that something is legitimate simply because it is ‘secularized’, as an inversion of how Blumenberg views this concept. Marquard already corrected Blumenberg in this respect, noting that for Taubes (and Löwith) ‘secularization’ does not function as a “Diskriminierungskategorie”.¹⁹³ That is to say, it does not necessarily matter to Taubes *if* a particular historical manifestation of a transcendental form of thought appears in secularized guise or not; what matters is whether this manifestation can live up to the emancipatory potential that resides in its form.¹⁹⁴ Taubes seems to be indifferent as to whether others recognize the formal continuity he asserts between the theological and the secular expression of a political mode of thought. In his view the transcendental viability of this formal template endures regardless of this recognition.¹⁹⁵ Hence, Taubes distances himself from what Blumenberg calls ‘the secularization theorem’ because, unlike for instance Friedrich Delekat, he does not want to assert a relation of *indebtedness* between secular modernity and the religious past; his aim is not necessarily to uncover “a dimension of hidden meaning” beneath the surface of secular modernity in order to deny its self-conception *as secular*. His aim is to revitalize the universal emancipatory potential in originally religious templates rather than to ‘re-root’ Western thought in Judeo-Christian soil.¹⁹⁶

However, it can also be admitted that Taubes’ confidence in the universality of the emancipatory mode of thought is only possible because he stretches these originally theological concepts so thin that only very general and abstract residues remain. Arguably, these concepts become too general and imprecise to have any analytical value. For instance, Taubes identifies ‘Gnosticism’ as *any* sense of ‘alienation’, and ‘negative theology’ is identified as the belief that ‘nothingness’ is the origin and end of history and being. Meanwhile, ‘apocalypticism’ becomes relegated to mere ‘finitude’ of history, “die Bedeutung von Sein und von Zeit als Frist.”¹⁹⁷ Indeed, this raises the question what added value the ‘negative’ political theology of Taubes possesses if it seemingly does everything and nothing at the same time. This question can best be addressed after first situating it in a polemical context, that is, over against the skeptical ‘political poly-theology’ of Odo Marquard.

Liberal Conservatism Against the New Left: the Ritter School

Schmitt’s apodictum “der Feind ist unsere eigene Frage als Gestalt” is at least partially correct in that it explains how intellectual and political opponents can recognize themselves *ex negativo* in the other. This explains Schmitt’s willingness to engage with Blumenberg, but it can

193 Marquard (1982) p.15. It can be added that Taubes follows Schmitt in affirming ‘secularization’ as a manifestation of the structural analogy between theology and politics and consequently rejects ‘neutralization’ as a process that denies this essential analogy.

194 One problem that emerges in this respect is that – aside from his interiorization-requirement – Taubes cannot stipulate how one can systematically distinguish ‘good’ instances of secularization from ‘bad’ ones. Whereas he recognizes (2010, pp.293-294) that there are some ‘bad’ examples, e.g., the secularization of Joachimism in the Soviet Union, he cannot explain beforehand which preconditions must be met to avoid this; he can only determine *after* the fact that it falls short of its emancipatory promise. Cf. Martin (2017) p.152.

195 Taubes and Rötzer (1987) p.317.

196 Taubes and Rötzer (1987) pp.316-319.

197 Taubes and Rötzer (1987) pp.316-317. Cf. Taubes (2010) pp.144, 214-221.

also be applied, we will discover in this section, to the relationship between the leftist-heretic student of Schmitt, Taubes, and the pronounced skeptic-conservative Marquard, who has been named Blumenberg's "jüngerer Bruder im Geiste".¹⁹⁸ However, before we investigate Marquard's considerable contribution to the secularization debate it is necessary to also situate his liberal-conservative skepticism in an intellectual-political context, that is, in the philosophical tradition of the Ritter School. I will proceed by first expounding on the background and general characteristics of this liberal-conservative school of thought, after which two other proponents of this school will be briefly highlighted, namely Hermann Lübke and Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde. Lübke's and Böckenförde's contributions to the secularization debate will moreover prove valuable in light of the final section of this chapter, where I will reflect on 'political theology' as such.

The origins of the Ritter school lie in the 'Collegium Philosophicum', an informal study group that the conservative philosopher Joachim Ritter had shaped out of a selection of his most promising students and doctorandi. This study group developed into a broader network of academics and intellectuals that eventually formed the liberal-conservative counterpart of the Frankfurt School. Various commentators, including Marquard, have noticed that this originally heterogeneous group of people eventually converged on a similar political position, i.e., that of liberal conservatism.¹⁹⁹ This has two reasons: first of all, it is suggested that the members of this school were already predisposed towards conservatism by their shared memories of totalitarianism. Christian Keller for instance emphasizes (in line with Marquard) that the political positioning of the intellectuals of the Ritter School should be understood in terms of Helmut Schelsky's notion of the "skeptische Generation". The youthful experiences with Nazism that this generation (c. 1910-1930) went through supposedly engendered a profound skepticism vis-à-vis absolutized, utopian political promises of both the Left and Right. This however did not create an unwillingness to engage in politics, on the contrary: members of this generation placed high value on the peace and stability that the Federal Republic of West-Germany provided. They were moreover especially sensitive to its inherent vulnerability.²⁰⁰ It is argued that the memory of totalitarianism created a general penchant for pragmatism, moderation and an appreciation of 'normalcy' as opposed to utopianism or a Schmittian politics that focuses on the 'exception'.²⁰¹

A second reason why the members of the Ritter School converged on conservatism lies, according to Marquard and Keller, not in their youth but their adult experiences with the events of 1968 and the general prominence of the New Left during the 1960's and early 1970's. The radicalism of the New Left was diametrically opposed to the anti-utopian pragmatism of the members of the skeptical generation, which meant that as it gained ground they began to rally under the common banner of conservatism.²⁰² Ferdinand Fellmann and Keller note that a similar development can also be recognized in the thought of Blumenberg, whose moderate 'progressivism' in *Legitimacy* became replaced by a more defensive stance in *Work on Myth*. This shift is paralleled by Blumenberg's gradual retreat from academic publicity and by an increased

198 Quoted in Keller (2015) p.89. Cf. Marquard (1983) p.78; Taubes and Rötzer (1987) p.316.

199 Keller (2015) pp.88-103; Van Laak (1993) pp.192-200; Müller (2003) pp.116-132; Marquard (1989) pp.3-20.

200 Keller (2015) pp.88-93; Schelsky (1960) cf. pp.84-95; Marquard (1989) pp.4-8; *ibid.* (1982) pp.31, 151 fn.44; Nicholls (2014) pp.189-191. Van Laak (1993, p.195) also notices a large degree of political engagement in the Ritter circle, and he notes that most of them tended towards the "reformerischen Flügel der post-Godesberger SPD."

201 Lübke (1965b) pp.138-140; Keller (2015) p.97; Müller (2003) pp.116-132.

202 Keller (2015); Marquard (1989) pp.3-21.

indirectness in his philosophical style.²⁰³ We will discover that the tacit link of intellectual affinity between Blumenberg and the Ritter School is explicated and thematized by Marquard, who consciously draws Blumenberg's seemingly 'apolitical' philosophy into the political program of liberal conservatism.²⁰⁴ Indeed, both Blumenberg and the Ritter School regarded the emergence of the New Left as a threat to the tenuous order that the Federal Republic had established as a bulwark against totalitarianism and other kinds of absolutist politics. Moreover, both Marquard and Blumenberg regarded Taubes' gnostic-apocalypticism as a sure sign of the potentially destructive tendency of the New Left.²⁰⁵ In the letter to Taubes where Blumenberg suggested that the former should overcome his "tribunalistic attitude" in relation to Schmitt, he moreover scolded him for invoking a (we might say Benjaminian) extra-legal sense of "justice" that would render the tenuous legal and institutional order powerless:

Wir machen unendliche Anstrengungen, den Geist des moralischen Gerichts und der Rache aus unseren Institutionen zu verbannen, was auch entgegengesetzt in unseren Kämmerchen gedacht und gewünscht werden mag. Das ist eine der Großen Leistungen, in welchen der Staat sich sogar der Mehrheit des Willens seiner Bürger entgegenstellt.²⁰⁶

The political anti-utopian pragmatism of the Ritter School is mirrored by a philosophical emphasis on the irreducible contingency of life and the essential deficiency of the human being. In the phrasing of Arnold Gehlen, the human being is perceived as a *Mängelwesen*, a creature of deficiency.²⁰⁷ Philosophy and politics should therefore be devoted to the therapeutic task of helping the individual to cope with his/her inescapable fate, namely the contingency of life and his/her own deficiency. The worth of cultural phenomena is primarily measured by how they help the individual to *compensate* for or succeed in *unburdening* the effects of this deficiency. This creates an appreciation for societal institutions, traditions and customs as cultural forms that achieve *Kontingenzbewältigung*; institutions and other durable cultural phenomena are regarded as necessary constructs that provide a sense of stability and belonging, not in the last place because they guide human actions and compensate for the individual's limited power and knowledge.²⁰⁸ This philosophical view is commonly supported by a 'weak' decisionism, which we have already encountered in Blumenberg's 'Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie' (1968/1969). This decisionism is framed as an interpretation of Descartes' *morale par provision*, stipulating not only the need for a provisional morality in absence of absolute certainties, but also the need for (cautious) decisions (*Handlungszwang*) in absence of complete knowledge (*Evidenzmangel*).²⁰⁹

203 Keller (2015) pp.93-96; Fellmann (2008). Cf. Marquard (2016) p.26; Kroll (2010) p.294; Nicholls (2014) pp.184-196. It should be added however that it is curious but perhaps also significant that Blumenberg's most explicitly political text, 'Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie' (1968/1969), which is ignored in most commentary on his political philosophy (apart from Nicholls and Heidenreich, 2014), was written around 1968. Perhaps this paper should be regarded as Blumenberg's sole explicit response to the provocation of 1968, before he retreated into his "ganz private ... Schreibhöhle". (Marquard, 2016, p.26)

204 Marquard (1983) pp.77-84; *ibid.* (1984) pp.31-36; (1989) pp.87-109; (1991) pp.11-25; Nicholls (2014) pp.189-190, 214; Keller (2015) pp.88-103.

205 Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.174, 282, 291; Marquard (1983) pp.77-84; *ibid.* (1984) pp.31-36.

206 Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) p.174. Cf. Taubes (2013) p.101; Marquard (1989) pp.8-13, 46-57.

207 Müller (2003) pp.116-132; Blumenberg (1987) pp.429-458; Tabas (2012) pp.139, 150.

208 Marquard (1991) pp.8-28; Blumenberg (1985) p.166; Müller (2003) pp.116-132; Nicholls (2014) pp.190-192; Lübke (1986) pp.160-177.

209 Blumenberg (1981) p.117. Cf. *ibid.* (1968/1969) pp.123-145; Müller (2003) pp.125-127; Van Laak (1993) p.200; Keller (2015) pp.96-103; Marquard (1991) p.115; Lübke (1965b) pp.138-140.

Apart from Marquard there are two other prominent members of the Ritter School who were involved with the issue of secularization and political theology: Lübke and Böckenförde. Lübke's input in the earlier phase of the secularization debate, his 1965 study on secularization as an *"ideenpolitischen Begriff"*, is discussed in Chapter 5. In this instance, I briefly focus on his commentary on the debate's later turn towards political theology, which he provided at Taubes' 1980 conference on Carl Schmitt in a paper titled 'Politische Theologie als repolitisiert Religion' (1983). Significantly, this paper contains a concise reflection on a particular theory of the origin of the modern state. It recalls Schmitt's reception of Hobbes, but it also appears in Blumenberg's *Legitimacy* and it found an especially well-known expression in Böckenförde's paper 'Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation' (1967).²¹⁰ Böckenförde and Lübke both concur with Blumenberg in that they view the 'neutralization' of religion as a positive accomplishment of the modern state.²¹¹ Whereas in the Middle Ages religion and politics were intertwined, the argument goes, this caused a violent eruption of competing absolutist (political-theological) claims to salvation once the unity of the church disintegrated. Hobbes finds the solution to this problem by relegating the plurality of absolute truth-claims to the private sphere in favor of the unity of the political sphere, which is founded on authority rather than truth. In this solution, Lübke states, "triumphiert der politische Willen zum Frieden über den Willen zum politischen Triumph der Wahrheit."²¹² While the Hobbesian phrase "auctoritas non veritas facit legem" appears as an authoritarian formula in Schmitt's work, for Lübke this dictum becomes a guarantee for liberty.²¹³ Far from regarding Hobbes' theory as a paradigm for political absolutism, as Schmitt does, Böckenförde and Lübke instead see it as the start of the development of the modern liberal state. Hence, it is precisely the "politische Neutralisierung der Religion" that constitutes the principal achievement of this process of "religionspolitischer Aufklärung".²¹⁴

Böckenförde and Lübke differ, however, in how they precisely evaluate the process of the neutralization (or depoliticization) of religion. Lübke appreciates the state's freedom *from* religion more than the individual's freedom *of* religion, but he concedes that a residual, inoffensive civil religion can be beneficial as a form of *Kontingenzbewältigung*. As Jan-Werner Müller puts it, it can be "part of the general programme of modern compensations" put in place to cope with humanity's essential deficiencies.²¹⁵ Böckenförde on the other hand values the process of the de-theologization of modern politics more positively, placing him in line with the secularization theology of Friedrich Gogarten. Böckenförde regards the individual's freedom of religion, provided by the secular state, as an essential expression of Christian liberty. This entails that "die Christen diesen Staat in seiner Weltlichkeit nicht länger als etwas Fremdes, ihrem Glauben Feindliches erkennen, sondern als die Chance der Freiheit, die zu erhalten und zu realisieren auch ihre Aufgabe ist."²¹⁶ He asserts an irreducible connection between secular liberty and Christian freedom that is encapsulated in the famous 'Böckenförde-dictum': "Der freiheitliche, säkularisierte Staat lebt von Voraussetzungen, die er selbst nicht garantieren kann." The

210 Lübke (1983) pp.50-55; Schmitt, 'Die Vollendete Reformation?' (1965) pp.51-69; *ibid.*, *Leviathan in the State Theory of Hobbes* (2008); Blumenberg (1966) pp.59-61; Böckenförde (1967) pp.75-94. Cf. Koselleck (1988) pp.15-50.

211 Lübke (1983) pp.49-52; Böckenförde (1967) pp.80-94; Blumenberg (1966) pp.59-61.

212 Lübke (1983) p.51. Cf. Böckenförde (1967) pp.87-90.

213 Lübke (1983) p.50. Cf. Schmitt (2005) p.33; *ibid.* (1963) p.122.

214 Lübke (1983) p.52. Cf. Böckenförde (1967) pp.86-90.

215 Müller (2003) p.166; Lübke (1983) pp.52-55; *ibid.* (1986) pp.160-177.

216 Böckenförde (1967) p.94. Cf. Gogarten (1966); Lübke (1965) pp.117-123.

implication is that the secular state is upheld by a moral substance in society that it cannot attempt to control if it wants to remain 'liberal'.²¹⁷

There is also a difference in how Lübbe and Böckenförde evaluate Schmitt's project of 'political theology'. Lübbe, whose self-confessed liberal appropriation of Schmitt's theory sometimes becomes indistinguishable from his take on the latter's actual intentions, curtails the meaning of Schmitt's own 'political theology' to a mere descriptive research program.²¹⁸ This purely neutral research program supposedly traces "analytisch erhebbare und dann historisch erklärbare *strukturelle Analogien* zwischen zentralen theologischen Begriffen einerseits und zentralen juristischen Begriffen andererseits".²¹⁹ Schmitt's political theology is subsequently juxtaposed to another mode of thought that calls itself the '*new* political theology' of the leftist variety, represented by Taubes (and Bloch and Metz). Lübbe suggests that it attempts to undo the process of Enlightenment by 're-politicizing' religion. He concludes that this new approach has nothing in common with the venerable research program invented by Schmitt, except its name.²²⁰ In earlier chapters I have already demonstrated – based on, e.g., Ruth Groh's analysis – that Schmitt's political theology is more multifaceted than Lübbe lets on and that it does contain a prescriptive dimension, but what is significant at this point is that Lübbe resolutely rejects (with an appeal to Schmitt) all varieties of 'appellative' political theology.²²¹ Lübbe maintains that the process of the de-politicization of religion is irrevocable, which means that *new* political theology is a self-delusional exercise. He suggests that it can only apply a thin theological veneer to conceal its secular-Marxist political ideas. This means that new political theology risks making the Gospel redundant:

In Wahrheit fügt es [i.e. the Gospel] der politischen Realität nichts hinzu, und im Endeffekt macht diese Theologie das Evangelium nichtssagend, indem es das Evangelium sagen läßt, was auch ohne Berufung auf es in den politischen Auseinandersetzungen ohnehin ständig gesagt wird.²²²

Lübbe assumes that the de-politicization of religion has indeed rendered it completely 'neutralized' and hence privatized in an unproblematic way (thus failing to explain why there is an apparent need for *new* political theology in the first place). Böckenförde was also present at the 1980 Schmitt-conference, and in the paper he delivered on this occasion – 'Politische Theorie und politische Theologie' (1983) – he draws different conclusions from Schmitt's political theology. First of all, Böckenförde appears to be more sympathetic towards the recent revival of appellative political theology, which he also identifies with the leftist theology of, e.g., Metz.²²³ Böckenförde distinguishes political theology as a descriptive research program from institutional political theology, which is concerned with conceptualizing the relation between the church and the secular realm, and from appellative political theology, an attempt to revitalize the ethical potential of Christian faith in modern society. He suggests that due

217 Böckenförde (1967) p.93 (emphasis original), cf. pp.91-94. Indeed, this raises the question whether Böckenförde's dictum would also fall under Blumenberg's category of the 'secularization theorem'. For a recent critique of Böckenförde, cf.: Habermas (2006) pp.21-52.

218 Van Laak (1993) pp.192-200; Müller (2003) pp.116-132; Groh (1998) p.23; Lübbe (1983) pp.45-48.

219 Lübbe (1983) p.47 (emphasis added). Cf. Schmitt (2014) p.148 fn.2; *ibid.* (2005) p.37.

220 Lübbe (1983) pp.48-56.

221 Groh (1998) cf. pp.9-24; Lübbe (1983) pp.45-49, 54-56. The phrase 'appellative political theology' stems from: Böckenförde (1983) pp.20-21.

222 Lübbe (1983) p.55.

223 Böckenförde (1983) pp.20-25.

to a “weitgehenden Abbau vermittelnder Institutionen” the emphasis has come to lie more on “Aktion und Bewegung”, which befits the ‘appellative’ variety of political theology more than the ‘institutional’ variety.²²⁴ That being said, however, Böckenförde does warn against the tendency of appellative political theology to turn into a “bloß engagierter, (oftmals marxistisch inspirierter) theologisierender Politik”.²²⁵ It is argued that the emergence of a new political theology is but a recent illustration of a central issue that the secular state and the church are perpetually faced with, and which is the primary concern of political theology. This is that the dividing line between church and state (or spiritual and worldly, public and private) is not set in stone but requires constant deliberation and ultimately a political *decision*. This decision in turn will become problematized over time when the need for a redrawing of the boundary rises again.²²⁶ Hence, any claim that religion should remain apolitical is also a political decision. If religion adheres to this decision then it ineluctably takes part in politics by attempting to stay clear of it. In other words, Böckenförde suggests – in line with Schmitt – that religion necessarily contains a political dimension, and consequently that any theological claim is reflected by a parallel political claim, whether this is explicated or not.²²⁷ We will see in the following section that Marquard was well aware of this premise of political theology, which is why – contrary to his fellow members of the Collegium, Böckenförde and Lübke – he could not concede a place for monotheistic religion within modernity, however modest, because he believes that the very theological structure of monotheism has political implications that properly speaking do not belong to the Modern Age.

The ‘Political Poly-Theology’ of Odo Marquard

General Characteristics of Marquard’s Philosophy

Before we delve into Marquard’s debate with Taubes it is necessary to briefly sketch the outlines of his thought. Above all, Marquard identified his own philosophical position with skepticism.²²⁸ Keller suggests that if the Ritter School embodies the ‘skeptical generation’ then Marquard in turn serves as a prime representative of the Ritter School. Marquard, Keller notes, stylized himself in his autobiographical essays, e.g., ‘Abschied vom Prinzipiellen’ (1981) and ‘Schwierigkeiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie’ (1973), as “ein auf Erden wandelnder Idealtypus” of the skeptical generation; i.e., as ironic, pragmatic and anti-utopian.²²⁹ To Marquard, this skepticism entails a “farewell to matters of principle”, namely a rejection of the need for absolute justifications, whether by reason or faith, and of all absolute promises of redemption. It is, in short, a philosophical anti-absolutism. However, rather than regarding this “farewell” to Grand Narratives as an occasion to embrace *postmodernism*, as his French and American colleagues proposed, Marquard instead interprets ‘modernity’ itself in essentially skeptic and anti-absolutist terms. This means that the Grand Narratives that someone like Lyotard saw as symptomatic to modernity are perceived by Marquard as a product of the

224 Böckenförde (1983) p.22, cf. pp.19-23; Groh (1998) pp.15-21; Metz (1968) pp.99-116; Schmitt (2014) p.50.

225 Böckenförde (1983) p.21

226 Böckenförde (1983) pp.21-25.

227 Böckenförde (1983) pp.21-25; Schmitt (2005) p.2: “We have come to recognize that the political is the total, and as a result we know that any decision about whether something is *unpolitical* is always a *political* decision”.

228 Cf. Marquard (1991) pp.3-7; *ibid.* (1989) pp.3-21; (1982) 28-33; Geulen (2012) pp.10-13.

229 Keller (2015) p.93. The first paper can be found in Marquard’s *Farewell to Matters of Principle* (1989, pp.3-21), the second in the eponymous *Schwierigkeiten* (1982, pp.13-33).

Gegenneuzeit, or *anti-modernity*.²³⁰ Modernity is defined as the condition in which humans have finally denounced absolutist promises of ‘heaven on earth’ and instead accept the essential *deficiency* of humanity. This implies that the goal of cultural endeavors shifts to a more modest task of making life bearable and compensating for this deficiency. When surveying Marquard’s texts it becomes clear that his conception of modernity is to a large extent informed by a political aversion to all forms of revolutionary thought, whether it appears in religious or secular form. Writing after 1968, Marquard suggests that the greatest threat in this respect is to be expected from the Left. Hence, his position was in many ways diametrically opposed to Taubes’.²³¹

Although Marquard is regarded as Blumenberg’s “jüngerer Bruder im Geiste”, his philosophical style is markedly different. Compared to Blumenberg’s extensive and intricate narratives, in which the central (polemical) argument is often buried under elaborate historical or philological research, Marquard’s texts are more straightforward. They display a transparent argumentative structure and contain formulaic expressions of a normative standpoint. Part of Marquard’s strategy is establishing simple identifications – e.g., modernity *is* conservative and anti-absolutist – on the basis of which he can make clear (and often oversimplified) inferences, such as: because a progressivist philosophy of history lends itself to the support of absolutist claims, it is essentially anti-modern.²³² Marquard thus overtly engages in what Lübke calls “Ideenpolitik” – the struggle over the definitions of polemical concepts – in a manner that betrays the therapeutic and pragmatic function of his philosophy. His objective is a defense of modernity as the “bewahrenswerteste der für uns historisch-lebensmäßig erreichbaren Welten” against revolutionary attempts to destroy this provisionally ‘best of all obtainable worlds’ in favor of an unobtainable absolute good.²³³ The ‘skepticism’ of Marquard should be understood less as a metaphysical or epistemological position on truth, and more as a normative or ethical position that arises out of the Gehlenian concept of the *Mängelwesen*.²³⁴ Humans require compensations or “unburdenings” (*Entlastungen*) to make life bearable. Taken together, these unburdenings constitute the human lifeworld, an ‘artificial’ realm that humans ‘naturally’ create because they are “by nature creatures of deficiency, who are forced to become cultural creatures in order to compensate for their natural deficiencies”.²³⁵ This concept explains the therapeutic aim of his philosophy: rather than being concerned with a truth that either unfolds in history or appears in nature, Marquard is more interested in humanity’s needs or means for survival.²³⁶ A central task of Marquard’s philosophy is to distinguish between cultural phenomena or modes of thought that succeed in helping humanity cope with its inescapable fate and those that only exacerbate it.

It is not a coincidence that Marquard refers to the ancient notion of ‘fate’. In ‘Apologie des Zufälligen’ (1986) and ‘Ende des Schicksals?’ (1976) Marquard expounds on what he believes to be the essential task of the acceptance and alleviation of fate.²³⁷ ‘Defense of the Accidental’ elaborates on the notion of ‘deficiency’ by emphasizing that we have only limited control over our lives and are largely determined by “fateful accidents” over which

230 Marquard (1989) pp.3-21; *ibid.* (1991) p.88; (1984) pp.31-36. Cf. Monod (2016) p.11.

231 Marquard (1991) pp.71-90; *ibid.* (1982) pp.18-19; (1983) p.78. Cf. Müller (2003) pp.120-124; Kroll (2010) pp.286-294.

232 Marquard (1984) pp.31-36; *ibid.* (1983) pp.77-84; (1982) pp.16-33.

233 Marquard (1983) p.82.

234 Marquard (1991) pp.8-25; *ibid.* (1982) pp.135-144; Müller (2003) pp.120-124; Geulen (2012) pp.10-13.

235 Marquard (1991) p.84, cf. p.23; *ibid.* (1982) pp.122-144; (1989) pp.38-57; Nicholls (2014) p.190.

236 Geulen (2012) p.11-12; Müller (2003) pp.120-123; Marquard (1982) pp.28-33, 122-143.

237 Marquard, ‘Defense of the Accidental’ (1991) pp.109-129; *ibid.*, ‘The End of Fate?’ (1989) pp.64-86.

we have no power, e.g., the fact that we are born in a certain time and place.²³⁸ The extent and ways in which we are determined by ‘fate’ is formulated in ‘The End of Fate?’.²³⁹ Here Marquard argues that ‘fate’ can be valued positively, namely as our *Geworfenheit* in a historical lifeworld. This lifeworld contains continuities, customs, traditions and institutions that supersede the individual’s existence, all of which unburden individuals of the task of having to ‘reinvent the wheel’ in every single aspect of life. The lifespan of humans is short and occurs in a pre-given context: “life is an interim: where it ceases, it is at an end, but where it begins is never the beginning. For reality ... is always already there, and they have to link up with it.”²⁴⁰

This notion of ‘linking up’ (*anknüpfen*) with what is already there illustrates Marquard’s conservatism, which is conceived of in line with Ritter, Niklas Luhmann and Blumenberg. Blumenberg argues that the limitedness of our lifespan makes it necessary to prioritize the *given over change*, which means that that which already exists receives the benefit of the doubt and that advocates of change receive the “burden of proof”; this is a reoccurring credo in Marquard’s texts.²⁴¹ The observation that it is better to conserve a large part of social reality in order to successfully improve on small parts of it is meant to serve as an antidote to the revolutionary tendency to completely abolish the old world in favor of a new one. This ties in with another credo, borrowed from Ritter, which states that it is only possible to conceive of a viable future on the basis of the preservation of elements from the past: “Zukunft braucht Herkunft.”²⁴² Hence Marquard’s position amounts to a moderate conservatism. It involves an appreciation of historicity as a precondition for understanding and meaningful action. Thus it prioritizes continuity over discontinuity but refrains from advocating an unadulterated solidification of the past. Marquard concludes that ‘fate’ (i.e., our historical *Geworfenheit*) provides the “condition of the possibility of action” because it supplies pre-given forms and patterns within which humans can enjoy a relative freedom.²⁴³

Now we arrive at an ambivalence in Marquard’s theory. Marquard suggests on the one hand that although individual humans are above all creatures of deficiency this lack is compensated by the fact that they already live in a benevolent order, constituted by traditions, customs and institutions: i.e., we already live in the ‘best of all obtainable worlds’. However, on the other hand Marquard’s texts also give rise to a less optimistic impression of contemporary society. In ‘The End of Fate?’ and ‘Zeitalter der Weltfremdheit?’ (1984), Marquard argues that a denial of our ‘fate’ or historicity can have fatal consequences.²⁴⁴ This denial stems from a philosophical “program of making man absolute” that is rooted, according to Marquard, in theology.²⁴⁵ Marquard sees this program behind the largescale ‘utopian’ projects of the engineered society. These projects are driven by a belief in planning – the total calculability of reality and the insurmountable power of human reason – but necessarily result in the disappointment of unforeseen consequences, and hence in a return of the ‘fate’ that was thought conquered.²⁴⁶

238 Marquard (1991) pp.119-122;

239 Marquard (1989) pp.64-86.

240 Marquard (1989) p.73. Cf. Müller (2003) pp.122-124.

241 Marquard (1989) p.74, cf. pp.14-16, 117; *ibid.* (1991) p.116; Blumenberg (1970) p.39; *ibid.* (1987) p.447; (1985) p.166.

242 Marquard (1989) p.75; *ibid.* (2003) p.152. Cf. Nicholls (2014) pp.189-196.

243 Marquard (1989) p.75 cf. p.85 fn.33; *ibid.* (1991) pp.113-126. In the final sections of this chapter I will argue, however, that this moderate conservatism turns more rigid once it is contrasted with Taubes’ thought.

244 The latter paper can be found as: Marquard, ‘The Age of Unworldliness?’ (1991) pp.71-90. For a critique of such modern interpretations of ‘fate’, cf.: Löwith (1949) pp.10-12.

245 Marquard (1991) pp.110-113. Cf. *ibid.* (1989) pp.76-82; (1982) pp.66-82.

246 Marquard (1991) pp.71-90.

This hubristic propensity towards ‘planning’ is motivated by the idea of *progress*. Marquard values this concept negatively, similar to Schmitt, Reinhart Koselleck and Löwith, but he rejects it as an element of *anti-modernity*.²⁴⁷

In ‘The Age of Unworldliness?’ Marquard writes that ‘progress’ was realized in the 20th century but only in a perverted form. It is realized as an increased ‘acceleration’ and differentiation of societal processes that make it exceedingly difficult to obtain a grasp on reality.²⁴⁸ The sense of ‘wordlessness’ that this evokes disconnects the tie between an experienced *Herkunft* and an expectable *Zukunft*. This makes that people, driven by the “program of making man absolute”, can no longer conceive of a feasible image of the future but only of unrealizable utopia’s. The utopianism this engenders prescribes the complete replacement of an under-appreciated ‘old world’ by an unobtainable ‘new world’. Once these people are inevitably disillusioned in their utopian dreams, they will exchange this disproportionate optimism with a disproportionate pessimism. In other words, when they realize that heaven on earth is unattainable they wrongly conclude that it must be hell.²⁴⁹ Marquard suggests that the hubristic praxis of planning and utopian fantasies mutually reinforce each other, and that although the latter are illusionary they have very real consequences, namely a real sense of ‘unworldliness’ that is caused by an unbridled acceleration of the societal processes that these illusions have set in motion.²⁵⁰ This pessimistic image stands in stark contrast to his aforementioned optimism. Moreover, it raises the question how such a dire situation could ever occur in the first place, given humanity’s near-impotence and essential determinedness by a seemingly benevolent fate. Indeed, we will discover in the final section that this creates a problem for Marquard that ties in with his notion of ‘theodicy’.

Marquard holds that a healthy way of coping with fate and of alleviating deficiencies requires that one eschews adopting a single mono-narrative of either progress or decline. Instead, he emphasizes that we must appreciate the heterogeneous nature of the human life-world and cultivate this heterogeneity into a condition of *pluralism*. A key term that Marquard employs in this respect, which echoes Blumenberg’s polytheism, is the “separation of powers”.²⁵¹ Marquard for instance argues that “skepticism is an appreciation of the separation of powers”, because the skeptic can refrain from accepting any belief and instead play existing convictions off against each other, so that they “collide”. This “collision” creates space for dissent and hence freedom: it “causes both convictions to decline so much in power that the individual – *divide et fuge!* [divide and escape!] – as the laughing or crying third party, gets free of them, gaining distance and his or her own distinct individuality.”²⁵² Marquard elaborates on this notion of liberty in ‘Defense of the Accidental’, where the cognitive freedom of skepticism is paralleled with political freedom:

Accidental reality is ... multiform, motley [*bunt*]. This very motleyness [*Buntheit*] is the human opportunity for freedom. It is the possibility of freedom that is put in the foreground by the doctrine of the separation of powers; for the effect of the political separation of powers, in terms of political freedom, is only a special case of the effect of the general motleyness of reality, in terms of freedom in general – a

247 Marquard (1983) pp.79-80; *ibid.* (1982) pp.15, 66-70. Cf. Löwith (1964); Koselleck (1988); Schmitt (2009).

248 Marquard (1991) pp.71-90. Blumenberg (1987, pp.429-456) for instance regards ‘rhetoric’ as a tool that helps compensate for an increasing societal “acceleration”.

249 Marquard (1991) pp.82, 118. Cf. *ibid.* (1984) pp.31-36.

250 Marquard (1991) pp.86-88.

251 Marquard (1991) pp.67-68, 112, 122-126; *ibid.* (1989) pp.98-105. Cf. Blumenberg (1985) pp.29-144.

252 Marquard (1991) p.4.

special case of the effect of the fact that the accidents that befall man, as fates, are not uniform and monolithic, but instead – accidentally – intersect and interfere with one another and thus, to a degree, neutralize one another.²⁵³

This notion of freedom from any single power, which is made possible by a constellation in which a plurality of powers cancel each other out, reoccurs in Marquard's texts in multiple applications; he for instance defends a plurality of histories, philosophies, traditions, sciences, and generally of 'narratives', i.e., stories (or "myths") that give meaning to our lives. To Marquard, this concept of freedom however does not signify a freedom *to* identify with any of these options – and perhaps obtain a *modus vivendi* with the others – but rather a skeptical freedom *from* identification with any of them. He wants to avoid the "unfreedom of identity" that comes with being "entirely possessed" by a single mono-narrative.²⁵⁴ The paradigm of all mono-narratives, according to Marquard, is monotheism. Monotheism does not tolerate other mono-narratives besides its own and is hence antithetical to the pluralism Marquard promotes. This is the reason Marquard eventually involved himself in the debate on political theology: he seeks to defend what he considers to be the political-theological paradigm for pluralism, namely *polytheism*.

Secularization and the Recurrence of the Theodicy-Motif

Marquard explicated his political polytheism in various writings from the 1980's, the most significant being the papers he submitted to Taubes' colloquia on political theology. Before we can assess Marquard's political polytheism we must first turn to his earlier contribution to the secularization debate. We will find that these earlier texts on secularization elucidate how he conceived of his own position in relation to not only Blumenberg but also to Löwith. That is to say, Marquard attempts to conflate the positions of Löwith and Blumenberg in order to bolster his own skeptic-conservative defense of modernity against any political mono-theology.

Marquard's early contributions to the secularization debate – which are collected in his *Schwierigkeiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie* (1973) – concern the theological problem of the 'theodicy' and its persistence in the modern 'speculative philosophies of history' of for example Hegel and Marx.²⁵⁵ One of his earlier papers, 'Idealismus und Theodizee' (first published in 1965), asserts a continuity between eschatology and the modern philosophy of history. However, Marquard argues that this relation is different in nature than has been suggested by Löwith in *Meaning in History*.²⁵⁶ This continuity does not consist of a general 'future-orientedness', as Löwith suggests, it rather pertains to the more specific occurrence of the transferal of the problem of theodicy from Christian theology to modern philosophy of history via German Idealism. Marquard contends that when the modern idea of progress was developed in the idealist philosophy of e.g., Kant, Fichte and Schelling, it replaced God by humanity

253 Marquard (1991) p.123. Cf. Nicholls (2014) pp.190, 210-215.

254 Marquard (1989) pp.93-94. Full quote: "Persons ... who, monomythically, can and must participate ... in only one myth, do not have this freedom: On account of their compulsion to identify completely with this single story, they fall prey to narrative atrophy, and end up in what one can call the unfreedom of identity that results from a lack of nonidentity. On the other hand, the latitude of freedom that goes with nonidentities, which is lacking in the case of the monomyth, is granted by the polymythical plurality of myths. It is a 'separation of powers'."

255 I use the 1982 republished version of *Schwierigkeiten*.

256 Marquard (1982) cf. pp.62, 176-177 fn.38.

as the leading agent in history. The notion of humanity's *autonomy* thereby reoccupied the position that was held by God's omnipotence.²⁵⁷ This entailed an unparalleled elevation of humanity's dignity and station in the grand scheme of things. It also implied a solution to the theological problem of the theodicy according to Marquard, because in attributing sole responsibility for everything to humanity this meant that God was relieved (or unburdened) from it. Hence, God became 'exonerated' of guilt because his existence was denied:

Dabei gelingt ein Freispruch Gottes wegen erwiesener Unschuld – also eine Theodizee – offenbar genau dann, wenn sich nachweisen läßt: nicht Gott ist verantwortlich für diese schlimme Welt, den nicht er macht und lenkt sie – sondern ein anderer: nämlich der Mensch oder (wie Kant, Fichte, Schelling statt dessen sagen) das Ich. Dieser Nachweis ... ist der Idealismus: also eine Theodizee durch die Autonomiethese; ... nicht Gott ist schuld, denn nicht Gott macht und lenkt die Welt, sondern der Mensch.²⁵⁸

In 'Theodizee und Idealismus' Marquard assumes that the proponents of German Idealism actually intended to exonerate God by relieving him of his position; as an 'honorary discharge' that he calls "Atheismus ad maiorem Dei gloriam."²⁵⁹ In other instances he suggests that the template of theodicy – as an unexpected historical irony – simply automatically and unintentionally appears once humanity occupies God's place as the Absolute.²⁶⁰ In these earlier writings Marquard holds the view that the theodicy-motif has no place in modernity, because it engenders a denial of humanity's essential limitedness. Speculative philosophy of history casts humanity in God's role and thereby burdens it with the responsibility for all evil in the world. This responsibility would only be bearable in the highly optimistic worldview of Idealism, but as soon as this optimism disappears it becomes apparent that it is too much of a burden to place on the shoulders of humanity.²⁶¹

In 'Wie irrational kann Geschichtsphilosophie sein?' (1972), also published in *Schwierigkeiten*, Marquard sharpens his thesis and envisions what he believes to be the disastrous consequences of the continuation of the theodicy-motif in modern philosophy of history. When God is abolished in his own favor and humanity takes the burden of guilt for evil it quickly becomes clear that it cannot carry this burden. This problem is subsequently mitigated by what Marquard calls "die Kunst, es nicht gewesen zu sein", namely the art of avoiding guilt by blaming someone else.²⁶² Marquard hereby elaborates on a claim that can also be found in the work of Hanno Kesting, Koselleck, Löwith and Schmitt, which is that 'speculative philosophy of history' tends to create a division between the protagonists of its historical narrative and its antagonists (e.g., between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie).²⁶³ Philosophy of history, Marquard argues, divides humanity into two parts, the people who fall

257 Marquard (1982) pp.52-65, cf. pp.66-81; *ibid.* (1971) pp.259-260.

258 Marquard (1982) p.59.

259 Marquard (1982) pp.21, 65, 70. Cf. Blumenberg (1983) p.57.

260 Initial formulation: Marquard (1982) pp.57-59, later formulation: pp.18, 70-71. Blumenberg (1983, pp.56-61) takes issue with the suggestion that the proponents of Idealism *intended* to fulfill theodicy's function to "exonerate God". Marquard's main point is however that the 'logic' of the absolutization of humanity necessarily causes the reappearance of the theodicy-problem, with the problem of evil now falling on the shoulders of humans rather than on God's.

261 Marquard (1982) pp.52-81; *ibid.* (1984) pp.34-36; (1991) pp.11-13.

262 Marquard (1982) pp.73-80.

263 Kesting (1959) pp.232-233; Koselleck (1988) pp.127-153; Löwith (1949) p.44; Schmitt (2009) p.167; Marquard (1982) pp.15, 67; *ibid.* (1989) pp.94-98.

on the right side of history – and hence occupy the position of the good God of salvation – and those that fall on the wrong side of history, and who are made responsible for the fact that history has not yet achieved its ideal end. In other words, “[w]o der außerweltliche Sündenbock verlorengelt, muss ersatzweise ein innerweltlicher [i.e.] ... ein menschlicher Sündenbock gefunden werden”.²⁶⁴ Marquard argues that this harmful dynamic is inherent to the absolutization of humanity: where humanity takes the place of God it requires an *alibi* for the sorrowful state of the world, and it finds this in the postulation of a human enemy.²⁶⁵ Hence, he concludes that while philosophy of history promises autonomy it actually delivers heteronomy. By absolutizing humanity it creates the necessity of construing an enemy who must be scapegoated for the fact that there is still evil in the world.²⁶⁶ The divinization of one half of humanity and the demonization of the other furthermore destroys the essential unity originally contained in the concept of ‘humanity’. Marquard phrases this sarcastically: “Just so, wie die Theodizee ... mit der Eliminierung Gottes perfekt wurde, gerade so wird die im Namen des Menschen absolut gewordene Geschichtsphilosophie perfekt mit der Eliminierung des Menschen.”²⁶⁷

Significantly, Marquard used his account of the continuation of the theodicy-motif in modern philosophies of history to criticize a common understanding of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate. Already at the 1968 *Terror und Spiel* conference, Marquard suggested that Löwith’s and Blumenberg’s positions are actually compatible on an evaluative level:

In der Tat lassen sich ... Positionsähnlichkeiten zwischen Löwith und Blumenberg bemerken: ihre Säkularisierungskontroverse scheint eigens inszeniert, um zu verdecken, wie einig sie sich sind in ihrer Frontstellung gegen die dogmatische Tradition biblischer Provenienz und in ihrem Verdacht gegen die Geschichtsphilosophie.²⁶⁸

In *Schwierigkeiten* Marquard argues that Blumenberg’s and Löwith’s accounts are also reconcilable on a descriptive level.²⁶⁹ This claim not only allows Marquard to portray his own theory as a specification (or perhaps as a *synthesis*) of the accounts in *Meaning in History* and *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, it also enables him to conceive of Blumenberg’s anti-absolutist defense of modernity in terms of Löwith’s skepticism. In the eponymous introductory paper of *Schwierigkeiten* and in ‘Wie irrational kann Geschichtsphilosophie sein?’, Marquard claims to adopt the gist of *Löwith’s* thesis in terms that take Blumenberg’s criticism of the ‘secularization theorem’ into account. Marquard thus asserts a ‘functional continuity’ between theodicy and philosophy of history rather than a substantive continuity; this implies that the philosophy of history *occupies* the *schema* that theodicy had put in place. He concludes that Blumenberg’s functional model of historical continuity can be applied to Löwith’s theory in a way that satisfies both the former’s criteria and the latter’s intention,

264 Marquard (1982) p.77.

265 Marquard (1982) p.79: “Autonomieanspruch erzeugt Alibibedarf”.

266 Marquard (1982) p.80: “Die Geschichtsphilosophie: sie hat die Pflicht zum Gottesbeweis durch die Pflicht zum Feindesbeweis ersetzt ... die Theodizee durch die Revolution ... Sie begann als Kritik der Religion; sie endet als Religion der Kritik: der Gott dieser neuen Religion ist das Alibi; sein Gottesdienst ist die Polemik”. Heteronomy returns in the “Gestalt eines Zwangsbedarfs an Alibis, an Gegnerfurcht und Kampfpflicht”.

267 Marquard (1982) p.18.

268 Marquard in: Blumenberg (1971) p.530. In Chapter 1 I have argued that Löwith’s and Blumenberg’s positions may be reconcilable on a descriptive, but not on an evaluative level.

269 Marquard (1982) pp.14-18, 68-72, 135-143, 179 fn.4. Cf. *ibid.* (1991) p.72; (1983) p.79. In Chapter 1 we have found that this view, that the Löwith-Blumenberg is ‘staged’, concealing a fundamental agreement between the two, reappears throughout contemporary commentary.

which is to establish a general link between the two phenomena rather than a specific substantive continuity.²⁷⁰

Blumenberg responded, in the 1974 revised first part of *Legitimacy*, to Marquard's attempt at reconciling his views with Löwith's.²⁷¹ He admits "discomfort" with Marquard's claim that his theory of functional continuity provides the only defensible form in which Löwith's "secularization theorem" can be upheld, presumably because Blumenberg still identifies "secularization" solely with an assertion of modernity's illegitimacy.²⁷² Blumenberg rejects Marquard's claim that "theology" somehow survives – as *theodicy* – in modern philosophies of history, and he even goes as far as stating that "[w]ithout keeping its name, Marquard has reduced the secularization thesis to its most extreme and most effective form". Marquard does this, according to Blumenberg, by asserting the continuation of theology without relying on a notion of substantive continuity: "What remains is no continuity of contents, of substance, of material, but only the naked identity of a subject, whose survival through changes in clothing and in complete anonymity ... is assured."²⁷³ Significantly, Blumenberg argues that "modern theodicy" – e.g., in the form in which it was coined by Leibniz – cannot be the continuation of theology by different means, because "[m]odern theodicy is an 'indirect' advocacy of human interests" rather than of God's. It constitutes the "protest of the Enlightenment against the God of will and His *potentia absoluta*" because it asserts the logical "reliability" of the world, which is a necessary precondition for "the principle of sufficient reason".²⁷⁴

We will discover that the latter objection – that "modern theodicy" can be an instrument of human self-assertion – would be taken to heart by Marquard, but with regard to the other points of critique it can be contended that Blumenberg tends to gloss over the overt similarities between his and the former's defense of modernity. Marquard did not want to defend the illegitimacy-claim that Blumenberg associated with "the secularization theorem", he rather used this theory of functional continuity (between theological problems and *geschichtsphilosophische* solutions) in order to argue that certain "carry-over questions" – e.g., those that concern ultimate salvation and the totality of history – properly speaking do not belong in the Modern Age. This is in keeping with Blumenberg's own suggestion that speculative philosophy of history is the result of the "overextension" of the modern idea of progress. Blumenberg himself notes in *Legitimacy* that the "philosophy of history is an attempt to answer a medieval question with the means available to a postmedieval age." This means that "the idea of progress is driven to a level of generality that overextends its original, regionally circumscribed and objectively limited range ... [I]t is drawn into the function for consciousness that had been performed by the framework of the salvation story".²⁷⁵ Marquard's purpose was not in the first place to assert the secret survival of "theology" but rather – similar to Walter Jaeschke – to explicate

270 Marquard (1982) pp.14-18, 68, 179 fn.4. Cf. Blumenberg (1983) pp.48-49; Styfhals (2019) pp.121-122.

271 Blumenberg (1983) pp.56-61. Blumenberg had already addressed Marquard's 'Idealismus und Theodizee' in the 1966 edition of *Legitimacy* (pp.38-40).

272 Blumenberg (1983) p.61. This despite the fact that Marquard (1982, p.15) correctly pointed out that 'secularization' is not a "Diskriminierungskategorie" for Löwith and Taubes.

273 Blumenberg (1983) p.59 He moreover objects to what he perceives as Marquard's suggestion that modern ideas of progress were actually formulated with the *intention* of 'exonerating God', noting that the modern conception of history rather proved "the demonstrated – and bearable – possibility of doing without God" (p.59).

274 Blumenberg (1983) resp. pp.59, 58, 55. Cf. *ibid.* (1966) pp.39-40; Marquard (1982) p.171 fn.20; Styfhals (2019) pp.122-130; Flasch (2017) p.478. It should be noted that *Legitimacy* differentiates between an Augustinian theodicy, which does aim to exonerate God at the expense of humans (1983, pp.53, 134-136), and the modern theodicy of Leibniz, which establishes the reliability of the world for the benefit of human reason.

275 Blumenberg (1983) pp.48-49.

a latent implication in Blumenberg's theory, which is that some "carry-over questions" cannot be answered by modern secular rationality and should hence be rejected, because if they are not rejected these questions will reintroduce the religious radicalism of the context in which they originated.²⁷⁶

Marquard's thesis is straightforward: it is possible to make a clear-cut distinction between questions that do and those that do not belong to modernity, because anti-modern questions somehow invoke 'the Absolute' whereas modern rationality has banished *all* absolutisms (political and theological) to beyond the "epochal threshold".²⁷⁷ It is on this basis that Marquard argues in *Schwierigkeiten* that the philosophy of history, in its anti-modern immodesty, does not only adopt the theological function of theodicy but eventually also of eschatology and of Gnosticism. "Geschichtsphilosophie" constitutes the "Rache der Neutralisierten Eschatologie an dieser Neutralisierung" by modernity, and if modernity is "the second overcoming of Gnosticism", as Blumenberg argues, then the philosophy of history constitutes the "Rache der zweimal überwundenen Gnosis and ihrer zweiten Überwindung."²⁷⁸ Hence, the philosophy of history is not a product of modernity but an instance of the "Gegennezeit". This anti-modern mode of thought appears in Marquard's works as a symptom of the constantly reoccurring inability of people to reconcile themselves with the anti-absolutist preconditions of modernity.²⁷⁹

Marquard drives this point home by diffusing Blumenberg's problematic concept of 'secularization'. Philosophy of history should be rejected by modern reason, Marquard argues in *Schwierigkeiten*, not because it is a secularized form of Christianity but because it is not secularized (i.e., secular, areligious) enough. Implicitly, Marquard trades the transitive concept of secularization (e.g., 'progress is secularized eschatology') in for an intransitive concept of secularization, according to which 'secularity' simply means the absence of religion rather than its secret survival.²⁸⁰ This means that the concept is emptied out of its connotations of illegitimacy, expropriation and substantialism that were attributed to it by some 'secularization theorists' (e.g., Delekat) and by Blumenberg. Instead, Marquard reinstates 'secularization' as "neutralization", or in other words as the dismantlement and disappearance of religious substances and forms; it is understood as 'profanization', to use Wilhelm Kamlah's term.²⁸¹ While Marquard's definition of 'secularization' might appear more straightforward, it is not simply derived from common sense nor is it altogether unpolemical. This becomes clear from a later article, 'Aufgeklärter Polytheismus – auch eine politische Theologie?' (1983), where Marquard explains that secularization should be interpreted as "neutralization" in the sense that Schmitt puts forward, namely as a process of immanentization and the elimination of absolute political or theological claims. However, Marquard evidently reverts the Schmitt's evaluation of this process: neutralization, if it indeed implies an end to the violent politics associated with Schmitt's and Taubes' political theologies, can only be welcomed as a genuine accomplishment of modernity. Marquard unambiguously advocates 'secularization' as

276 Marquard (1982) pp.14-20, 66-82; Jaeschke (1976) pp.41-42. Cf. Dickey (1987) p.160. See Chapter 1 for a discussion of this question in relation to Blumenberg's (1983, p.65) notion of "residual needs". In the first edition of *Legitimacy* (1966, pp.60-61) does hint at a Marquard-esque differentiation between modern and anti-modern elements that have somehow survived.

277 Marquard (1982) pp.18-19; *ibid.* (1984) pp.31-36; (1991) pp.11-13. "Epochal threshold" is a concept from *Legitimacy*: (1983) pp.457-596. Cf. Flasch (2017) pp.482-486.

278 Marquard (1982) p.16. Cf. Blumenberg (1983) p.126.

279 Marquard (1982) p.16; *ibid.* (1984) pp.31-36; (1983) p.82; (1989) p.33. Incidentally, Blumenberg (1983, p.60) objects to this formulation because it overemphasizes the discontinuity between modernity and its 'other'.

280 Marquard (1982) p.16; *ibid.* (1983) pp.79-80. Cf. Zabel (1968) pp.15-39.

281 Kamlah (1969) pp.53-70; Marquard (1983) pp.79-80.

the beneficial neutralization (i.e., elimination) of harmful anti-modern elements such as the political mono-theologies of Taubes and Schmitt.²⁸²

Marquard's aversion to philosophy of history and to eschatology not only allows him to tie in with Blumenberg's anti-absolutist defense of modernity, it also opens a path towards Löwith's skepticism. We have seen that Marquard consciously writes himself in line with Blumenberg – thereby explicating the political implications of the latter's philosophy – while also trying to reconcile Blumenberg's position with Löwith's. In *Schwierigkeiten* Marquard primarily emphasizes that Blumenberg's and Löwith's theories are compatible on a descriptive level, whereas in his 'Aufgeklärter Polytheismus' – presented at the 1980 colloquium on Carl Schmitt – he repeats the statement he made at the 1968 *Terror und Spiel* conference, i.e., that their normative-philosophical positions are similar if not *identical*.²⁸³ In this instance it becomes clear that Marquard's appreciation of Löwith's skepticism leads him to underemphasize the differences between the latter and Blumenberg, especially with regard to Löwith's critique of modernity and of its de-naturalized anthropocentrism. Because Marquard essentially identifies the concept of 'modernity' with skepticism and anti-eschatology, it is less difficult to recruit Löwith as an advocate of (this definition of) modernity and to brush over the differences that exist between him and Blumenberg.

Blumenberg, der Löwith ausdrücklich kritisiert, will im Grunde genau dasselbe wie Löwith, nämlich Abwehr des Anspruchs der Eschatologie und Rückgang vor deren Anspruch in philosophische Positionen des Hellenismus; Löwith: Rekurs auf die Stoa und Skepsis; Blumenberg: Rekurs auch auf Epikur. Beide geben dem Kosmos starke Stellung. Die Säkularisierungskontroverse zwischen Blumenberg und Löwith ist möglicherweise inszeniert zur bloßen Tarnung dieser grundsätzlichen Positionsidentität.²⁸⁴

Blumenberg, contrary to Löwith, of course does not affirm the cosmos *an sich* but rather the sense of safety that the *cultural image* of the cosmos had provided in Antiquity.²⁸⁵ This is also the gist of Marquard's attempt at uniting Blumenberg and Löwith: he believes it necessary to borrow concepts from Antiquity to bolster the defense of modernity against absolutism. In *Schwierigkeiten*, Marquard thus interprets Löwith's skepticism as a *pro-modern* rejection of the grandiose salvation-narratives of the philosophy of history, and in his later writings – e.g., 'Aufgeklärter Polytheismus', 'The End of Fate' and 'Lob des Polytheismus' (1979) – he expands his conceptual repertoire by involving the cosmos, myth, fate and polytheism.²⁸⁶ Because Marquard portrays skepticism as the antipode of the anti-modern philosophy of history it not only becomes easier to identify Löwith – a 'modernist' despite himself – with Blumenberg, but also to regard Antiquity as a kind of a *proto-modernity* or as a paradigm for keeping the Absolute at bay. That this defense of modernity via Antiquity against all revolutionary thought indeed falls in line with Blumenberg's philosophy of myth will become more

282 Marquard (1983) pp.82-83; idid. (1984) pp.33-34. Cf. Schmitt (1993) pp.130-142; Styfahls (2019) p.126. As I argued in Chapter 4, this conception of modernity as "an age of neutralizations" can be seen to correspond with Blumenberg's account of modern politics in 'Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie' (1968/1969, pp.121-146).

283 Marquard (1983) pp.78-79; *ibid.* (1982) p.135; Marquard in: Blumenberg (1971) p.530.

284 Marquard (1983) p.79. Cf. Kroll (2010) p.131.

285 Blumenberg (1971) pp.11-66; *ibid.* (1985) pp.29-144, 528-545.

286 Marquard (1982) pp.134-135; *ibid.* (1983) pp.77-84. The latter article is translated as 'In Praise of Polytheism' in: *Farewell to Matters of Principle* (1989) pp.87-110.

apparent in what follows. In the final section of this chapter I return to the question whether Marquard's appropriation of Löwith's skepticism is justified.

Political Poly-Theology: 'Aufgeklärter Polytheismus' (1983)

We turn again to the later, politicized phase of the secularization debate in the early 1980's, because at this stage of our investigation it is possible to assess the way in which Marquard operated in this polemic as a placeholder for Blumenberg, explicating the political implications of the latter's philosophy.²⁸⁷ We will moreover find that Marquard, influenced by Blumenberg's objections in *Legitimacy*, revises his conception of 'theodicy' in order to better defend modernity against the 'eschatological' thought of Taubes and Benjamin. I will especially focus on the two papers that Marquard submitted to Taubes' colloquia, 'Aufgeklärter Polytheismus' (1983) and 'Das gnostische Rezidiv als Gegenneuzeit' (1984). In these contributions Marquard self-consciously represents a 'Blumenbergian' position in the secularization debate.²⁸⁸

Marquard was able to promote a Blumenbergian standpoint because he recognized what he believed to be the core task of philosophy and of the human-cultural endeavor at the heart of Blumenberg's philosophy: this is the task of the "Entlastung vom Absoluten". Blumenberg agreed that this was indeed the "Grundgedanke" of his philosophy. When Marquard asked "Sind sie sehr unzufrieden mit dieser Interpretation?", he replied: "Unzufrieden bin ich nur damit, daß man so schnell merken kann, daß alles ungefähr auf diesen Gedanken hinausläuft."²⁸⁹ Blumenberg and Marquard were to a significant extent in accord with each other, not only when it comes to the task of philosophy but also with regard to the political implications of this task. Commentators note that Blumenberg's 'retreat' – which in part was a response to the events of 1968 – coincides with a slight shift in his political position, which now inclined more towards the liberal conservatism that Marquard advocated.²⁹⁰ This entails, in sum, that Marquard functions as a bridge figure between Blumenberg's – only *latently* political – 'work on myth' and the secularization debate that had, partly under Taubes' influence, meanwhile become politicized. By fulfilling this function, Marquard's theory acquired the peculiar characteristics of a synthesis between two different approaches: his 'political poly-theology' forms a Blumenberg-inspired, secularist-polytheistic appropriation of political theology, which was not only directed against Schmitt, but also explicitly against Taubes.²⁹¹

The paper 'Aufgeklärter Polytheismus' was presented at the first colloquium: *Der Fürst dieser Welt. Carl Schmitt und die Folgen*. The title of the conference indicates an growing interest in exploring the ramifications of Schmitt's political theology. Several participants (including Böckenförde and Lübke) agreed that the most potentially volatile ramification lies in the fact

287 Faber (1983) pp.96-99; Nicholls (2014) p.214; Styfhsals (2019) pp.113-131. It is necessary to be mindful of the differences between Blumenberg and Marquard and to eschew the assumption that the latter was a mere political mouthpiece of the former. Kroll (2010, p.293) and Geulen (2012, pp.8-20) emphasize that Marquard is not simply the "exoteric voice" of Blumenberg but that there exist subtle but significant differences between the two (which I will address in a later section). However, it is true that Marquard *presented himself* on this occasion as an advocate of a Blumenbergian standpoint.

288 This is significant because at this stage Blumenberg had grown increasingly frustrated with the subject and unwilling to engage further in this discussion, cf.: Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.171-172, 266-277.

289 Marquard (2016) p.20. Cf. *ibid.* (1991) pp.25-26; Wetters (2012) p.107.

290 Marquard (2016) pp.17-27; *ibid.* (1989) p.17; Fellmann (2008); Keller (2015) pp.88-103; Kroll (2010) p.294; Nicholls (2014) pp.188-196.

291 Cf. Marquard (1983) pp.77-84; *ibid.* (1984) pp.31-36. Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014, pp.103-117) refer to *Work on Myth* as "ein *latent* politisches Buch" (emphasis added).

that political theology had been co-opted since the 1960's by leftist revolutionary thought.²⁹² The short text from Blumenberg's *Nachlaß*, 'Politische Theologie III' (also the working title of Taubes' conference), shows that he fundamentally distrusted *any* re-theologization of politics. It is not unlikely that Blumenberg therefore avoided giving the impression that his own defense of *polytheism* forms a liberal-conservative counterpart to the political mono-theology of both the extreme Left and Right.²⁹³ Marquard did not share Blumenberg's hesitation in this respect: he employed the conceptual framework of political theology to formulate a liberal "politischer Polytheismus" that he positioned against the authoritarian political theology of Schmitt and the revolutionary political theology of Taubes. As mentioned, Marquard defines the nature of modernity in essentially anti-Schmittian terms, namely as an "age of neutralizations". Marquard states: "die Neutralisierungen sind – meine ich – ein Positivphänomen: sie sind unverzichtbar. Die neutralisierenden Potenzen sind Errungenschaften und haben nicht abgewirtschaftet: ihre Neutralisierungskraft ist noch unausgeschöpft."²⁹⁴ From this vantage point Marquard views Schmitt and Taubes as enemies of modernity: both seek to reverse the process of neutralization by reintroducing past absolutisms, either via authoritarian decisionism or revolutionary interruption.²⁹⁵ But once again, Marquard expects more danger from the Left than from the Right: he portrays – in this article as well as in other texts – the *revolutionary* (e.g., Marxist) philosophy of history as the sole successor of Christian eschatology, and hence, because modernity is essentially defined as "Gegen-Eschatologie", as the Modern Age's mortal enemy.²⁹⁶

Marquard argues in 'Aufgeklärter Polytheismus' – and in the similar 'Praise of Polytheism' – that the harmful nature of eschatology and the revolutionary philosophy of history is explained by their connection with monotheism. Monotheism, Marquard states, introduces an intolerant "Monomythos" that centers on a single, exclusivist truth and eradicates other 'myths' or narratives. "[T]his myth commands: I am your only story, you shall have no other stories besides me."²⁹⁷ The intolerant nature of monomythic thinking also becomes manifest in revolutionary philosophy of history, as it engenders a single grand historical narrative that only contains a happy ending for those who belong to 'the right side of history'. Marquard asserts: "die revolutionäre Geschichtsphilosophie ist – monomythisch – der heutige politische Monotheismus".²⁹⁸ Over against this political monotheism he therefore promotes a political polytheism, or "Polymythic":

Polymythie – aus dem Polytheismus kommend – bedeutet für alle Menschen in jeden einzelnen: jeder darf viele verschiedene Geschichten haben und ist – divide et impera bzw. divide et fuge – ihnen gegenüber frei und ein einzelner durch Gewaltenteilung als Geschichtenteilung. Polymythie ist bekömmlich, Monomythie ist schlimm.²⁹⁹

Marquard does not only advocate a revitalization of ancient polytheism in modernized form, he also recognizes an already existing 'polytheistic' scheme in the organization of contemporary

292 Cf. Böckenförde (1983) pp.16-15; Lübke (1983) pp.45-56; Faber (1983) pp.85-99.

293 Blumenberg-Schmitt (2007) pp.167-171. Cf. Nicholls (2014) pp.214-215.

294 Marquard (1983) p.82. Cf. *ibid.* (1984) pp.33-34; Schmitt (1993) pp.130-142.

295 Marquard (1983) pp.78-82; *ibid.* (1984) pp.31-36. Cf. Faber (1983) pp.96-99. Taubes responded to Marquard's attack in his 'On the Current State of Polytheism' (2010, pp.302-314) and in an interview with Florian Rötzer (1987, pp.315-318).

296 Marquard (1983) p.80, cf. p.82; *ibid.* (1984) pp.33-36; (1982) pp.18-19, 80; (1989) p.94.

297 Marquard (1989) p.94, cf. pp.87-110; *ibid.* (1983) pp.77-84.

298 Marquard (1983) p.82.

299 Marquard (1983) p.82. Cf. *ibid.* (1989) pp.17-18, 92-105; (1982) p.138-143; Nicholls (2014) p.214.

society. He concurs with Max Weber that the process of *differentiation* – where the societal unity disintegrates into a plurality of different “value spheres” – constitutes a recurrence of polytheism, but while Weber saw only the “schrecklichen Implikationen” Marquard emphasizes its positive effect, i.e., that pluralism provides individual freedom through the “separation of powers”.³⁰⁰ The sociological concept of societal differentiation thus becomes a concrete-political mirror image of Blumenberg’s philosophical notion of the “Gewaltenteilung im Absoluten”.³⁰¹

Weber’s and Blumenberg’s concepts both signify a condition in which multiple powers cancel each other out, locked in a perennial stalemate, leaving the individual free from being overpowered by a single one. This leads Marquard – in line with Blumenberg – to a recognition of the beneficial function of societal *institutions* in a way that is reminiscent of Arnold Gehlen. However, Angus Nicholls hastens to add that Marquard and Blumenberg eschew the latter’s authoritarianism and instead commend the individual liberty that is made possible by a condition of institutional pluralism.³⁰² Marquard (with his usual ironic tone) suggest that societal institutions *really are* the old gods in new, worldly guise: monotheism had banished the ‘many gods’ from heaven, and once cast down to earth they took on the disenchanting form of the “zu Institutionen entgöttlichten Götter Legislative, Exekutive, Jurisdiktion; als institutionalisierter Streit der Organisationen zur politischen Willensbildung; als Föderalismus; als Vielfalt der Interessenvertretungen; als Konkurrenz der wirtschaftlichen Mächte am Markt ...” et cetera. He concludes: “Von dieser Gewaltenteilung lebt das Individuum.”³⁰³ Marquard in effect recognizes this liberating polytheism in *any* situation that has a built-in inclination towards pluralism; e.g., in historiography, literature, academia, and the economy. Marquard adds in ‘Praise of Polytheism’ that whereas the *individual* first came into view at the beginning of modernity as a result of human self-assertion against an overpowering God, it is only because of the more recent “secularized polytheism of the separation of powers” that “one could really have the *freedom to be an individual*.”³⁰⁴

In ‘Aufgeklärter Polytheismus’ Marquard furthermore alludes to the gnostic dualism that Schmitt placed in the core of monotheism in his Postscript of *Political Theology II*, i.e., to the notion that ‘the One is always in uproar against itself’.³⁰⁵ Marquard admits that this gnostic antagonism indeed lies at the heart of monotheism – which also follows from his earlier analysis in *Schwierigkeiten* – and concludes that if we want to avoid it we should rather resort to a polytheistic pluralism of the ‘polymyth’. It is important, Marquard argues, “gegen die eschatologischen Monomythos das Bündnis mit einem politischen Polytheismus zu suchen nach dem Motto: nemo contra Deum nisi plures Dei.”³⁰⁶ If the one is in uproar against itself then this one (the Absolute) has to be divided up into several smaller powers. The idea that the absolutization of humanity results in disastrous antagonism is developed further, and thematized

300 Marquard (1983) p.77. Cf. *ibid.* (1989) pp.93-103; (1991) pp.123-126; Weber (2004) p.24. It is interesting to note the circuitous *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Weber’s notion of disenchanting polytheism in this study alone, e.g., to compare this positive liberal conception of Weber’s idea with Müller-Armack’s (1948) interpretation of ‘polytheism’ in terms of ‘idolatry’.

301 Marquard (1983) p.84. Cf. Blumenberg (1971) pp.11-66; Blumenberg-Schmitt (2007) pp.133, 168-170.

302 Nicholls (2014) pp.188-215. Cf. Blumenberg (1971) pp.14-27; Wetters (2012) pp.100-118.

303 Marquard (1983) p.84. Cf. *ibid.* (1989) pp.101-105; Nicholls (2014) pp.190-215.

304 Marquard (1989) p.103 (emphasis added). Cf. *ibid.* (1982) pp.80-82, 139-142; (1991) pp.50-68.

305 Schmitt (2014) p.122; Marquard (1983) p.83. Cf. Faber (1983) pp.85-99.

306 Marquard (1983) p.83; cf. *ibid.* (1982) pp.68-80. This is a polytheistic inversion of Schmitt’s (2014, p.126) interpretation of the Goethe-phrase “nemo contra deum nisi deus ipse”, which was central to his debate with Blumenberg. Cf. Blumenberg-Schmitt (2007) pp.132-133; Blumenberg (1985) pp.523-556; Nicholls and Heidenreich (2014) pp.103-117.

in relation to Gnosticism, in Marquard's contribution to Taubes' second *Religionstheorie* colloquium: 'Das gnostische Rezidiv als Gegenneuzeit: Ultrakurztheorem in lockerem Anschluß an Blumenberg' (1984). It will come as no surprise that this text constitutes another critique of Taubes' revolutionary political theology, and especially of its gnostic implications.

Return to 'Theodicy' and Anti-Gnosticism: 'Das gnostische Rezidiv als Gegenneuzeit' (1984)

The subtitle of this paper, 'Ultrakurztheorem in lockerem Anschluß an Blumenberg', suggests that it expands on a theme that is prepared in *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Indeed, the premise of this argument is Blumenberg's notion that the Modern Age constitutes the final over-coming of Gnosticism. Supposedly, Christianity has not succeeded in overcoming its heretic 'other' because it could never compete with Gnosticism's clear-cut solution to the problem of the existence of evil, which is to postulate a dualism between the creator and the redeemer God. When Christianity tried to exonerate God in the late Middle Ages, the argument goes, this only resulted in his further removal from the world and thus in an unintended reiteration of gnostic dualism.³⁰⁷ Marquard agrees with this thesis and infers that 'Gnosticism' (which becomes indistinguishable in this text from 'eschatology') forms the epitome of 'anti-modernity'. To further his argument, Marquard provides a simple definition of Gnosticism: it is "die Positivierung der Weltfremdheit durch Negativierung der Welt."³⁰⁸ He subsequently expands on Blumenberg's theory by arguing that the same penchant for world-negation, i.e., the core principle of Gnosticism, reappears in the philosophy of history. Any grand eschatological narrative of redemption reiterates the gnostic opposition between the two principles, good and evil or redemption and creation, because – as we have already discussed – it is forced by its own logic to differentiate between the "bösen Schöpfermenschen" (those responsible for the evil state of the present world) and the "guten Erlösermenschen" (those responsible for its future salvation).³⁰⁹ Marquard argues that this absolutized gnostic duality resides, at least latently, in *any* monomyth that adopts an eschatological form. This dualism explains why such monomyths tend to qualify the current world as evil and generate hope for its destruction in favor of the next.³¹⁰

What is especially significant about 'Das gnostische Rezidiv' is that it provided Marquard with an occasion to rethink his earlier rejection of 'theodicy'. Willem Styfhals suggests that Marquard was convinced by Blumenberg's remark that "modern theodicy" is an "advocacy of human interests" that serves rational self-assertion by establishing the reliability of the world. In this sense, 'theodicy' is taken as a protest of the Enlightenment against the *Willkürgott* of late-medieval theological absolutism.³¹¹ In 'Das gnostische Rezidiv' and in a paper that was written shortly after this conference, 'Entlastungen: Theodizeemotive in der neuzeitlichen Philosophie' (1984), Marquard shows himself fully on board with this reinterpretation of the theodicy-motif.³¹² Marquard's reasoning is, again, straightforward: modernity is an instance of 'anti-Gnosticism'. This means that its core principle consists of the validation and

307 Blumenberg (1983) pp.125-226; Marquard (1984) pp.31-36. Cf. Flasch (2017) pp.488-525.

308 Marquard (1984) p.32. Cf. Blumenberg (1983) p.60; Styfhals (2019) pp.113-131.

309 Marquard (1984) p.35. Cf. *ibid.* (1982) pp.18-19, 59-64, 73-80; (1991) pp.8-17.

310 Marquard (1984) pp.34-36. Cf. *ibid.* (1991) pp.72-74, 82, 118.

311 Styfhals (2019) pp.115-130; Blumenberg (1983) pp.58-61; Blumenberg in: Jauß (1968) p.536.

312 The latter is translated as 'Unburdenings: Theodicy Motives in Modern Philosophy' in: *Defense of the Accidental* (1991) pp.8-28.

justification of the world (the principle of creation) against an external principle (the principle of extra-worldly redemption). In other words, it is defined by a “Positivierung der Welt durch Negativierung der Weltfremtheit.”³¹³ Modernity is hence essentially a ‘conservative epoch’ because it conserves the world against the external principle that Gnosticism identifies with the God of salvation. At this instance Marquard conceives of the modern principle, the “Positivierung der Welt durch Negativierung der Weltfremdheit”, in terms of the theodicy-motif. It is suggested that there are two possible solutions to the theodicy, the one good (modern) and the other harmful (gnostic). Both solutions agree that the one God of monotheism has to be divided up into two principles, an immanent and a transcendent one. Gnosticism chooses to defend the transcendent principle – and projects the notion of an absolute *good* on it – whereas modernity instead opts for a defense of the immanent principle and *rejects* the notion of an *absolute*, extra-worldly good.³¹⁴ This argumentation evokes a peculiar mirror image between the Modern Age and the Middle Ages, because the medieval system supposedly also tried to ‘conserve’ and justify the goodness of creation. However, it was ultimately unable to do so, because it did not want to abandon the idea of a transcendent absolute good.

Die Neuzeit ... verteidigt die Welt und ihren Schöpfergott gegen ihr Ende, und zwar durch Nachweis ihrer grundsätzlichen Bonität: das gilt für die erste – mißlungene – Neuzeit [i.e., the Middle Ages], und es gilt erst recht für das zweite ... Mittelalter, die Neuzeit: beide sind – gegen den eschatologischen Enthusiasmus des Schlußmachen mit der Welt – konservative Zeitalter.³¹⁵

Taubes’ predilection for Gnosticism is regarded by Marquard as symptomatic for *all* revolutionary thought. He essentially agrees with Taubes that an eschatologically informed progressivism is likely to revert to full-blown gnostic world-negation once the hopes for the betterment of *this* world are disappointed.³¹⁶ Marquard suggests that (gnostic-eschatological) revolutionary thought adheres to a “Bestmöglichkeitsgedanken” – the idea that an absolute good can be realized in this world – and hence resorts to a “Alles-oder-Nichts-Prinzip”: if the old world cannot be made absolutely good it must be destroyed in favor of a new world.³¹⁷ Modernity, according to Marquard’s definition, has abandoned this notion of the absolute good and instead adopts the principle that one must ‘make do’ or ‘make the best of’ a given world that is imperfect but at least bearable. Properly modern politics is a sober, pragmatic affair that Bismarck called the “Kunst des Möglichen”.³¹⁸ If the gnostic, anti-worldly duality of the absolute good and absolute evil is rejected then the world changes its appearance: it is no longer perceived as absolutely evil but as a fairly ‘good’ order that is inhabited by a plurality of non-absolute minor goods; i.e., a recurrence of a ‘polytheistic’ condition.³¹⁹

313 Marquard (1984) p.33.

314 Marquard (1984) pp.32-36; *ibid.* (1991) pp.8-28; (2016) p.22.

315 Marquard (1984) p.32.

316 Taubes (2010) pp.74-75, 98-123, 137-146; Marquard (1991) pp.12-24, 46, 72-74, 118.

317 Marquard (1984) p.36. Cf. *ibid.* (1991) pp.72-74.

318 Marquard (1984) p.34.

319 This characterization is a synthesis of Marquard’s polytheism (1983) and his modern theodicy (1984): he defends a monistic – fairly good – order that is bearable because it is comprised of an inherent pluralism. Hence it becomes clear that, as Faber (1983, pp.85-99) suspected, this pluralism presupposes a monistic framework. Blumenberg (1971, p.18) for instance takes comfort in the fact that the many gods of polytheism are themselves subjugated to an encompassing *fate* (comparable to how societal institutions operate within the rule of law). Against this, Faber (pp.98-99) suggests that because this monistic order remains ‘erlösungsbedürftig’ it does not solve the problem of Schmitt’s gnostic antagonism.

In ‘Unburdenings: Theodicy Motives in Modern Philosophy’, Marquard presents the theodicy as a universal problem that also applies to modernity.³²⁰ In this instance he expressly interprets ‘theodicy’ as the justification of creation and not of the creator. Creation – i.e., the world – can only be justified by unburdening it of absolutes, which necessitates the rejection of the idea of an extra-worldly creator.³²¹ Marquard furthers his case by introducing an antithesis between eschatology and theodicy. He argues that eschatology (the negation of the existing world) only appears as an option whenever theodicy (interpreted as the justification of the *world* instead of its creator) fails. The modern answer to theodicy is successful in comparison to the medieval attempt simply because modernity rejects the principle of an outer-worldly absolute good and thereby neutralizes the “eschatology of redemption”.³²² Marquard however admits that the goodness of the existing order is not a given. The justification of the world also means improving on it – via compensations – in order to make it more justifiable. He distinguishes several “theodicy motives” that occur in modern thought, of which all but one inevitably fall back into its opposite, namely eschatology. The single motive that *is* feasible is, of course, “the theodicy motive of *compensation*”, or in other words the previously discussed Ritterian program of acceptance and alleviation of fate.³²³ In short, the only viable solution to the problem of the theodicy – the justification of the world – is to unburden the world of absolutes and offer the necessary compensations for this lack; concretely, Marquard hereby articulates a liberal-conservative endorsement of minor improvements within a stable societal-institutional status quo, the latter of which is justified by tradition, ‘common sense’ and now by a modern re-reading of the theodicy-pattern.³²⁴

Marquard thus reinterprets his own work – and Blumenberg’s – as a form of theodicy: the justification of the world and its principle.³²⁵ Marquard’s vindication of ‘creation’ (without a ‘creator’) borrows from Christianity the idea that the world is created as a good order, placing it in line with the ancient Greek veneration of the cosmos. If we synthesize Marquard’s reflections on the theodicy with his polytheism we can conclude that this ‘good cosmos’ can be conceived of as good because it does not recognize an *extra*-cosmic principle, i.e., it is monistic, and because it is constituted by a heterogeneous plurality of minor goods.³²⁶ Evidently, Marquard does not make any *theoretical* propositions about the ontic nature of the cosmos itself. He freely borrows from the Christian and the ancient Greek traditions in the service of the *therapeutic* aim of unburdening and compensation. This sheds light on the exact nature of Marquard’s ‘political theology’. That is to say, if the “theodicy motive” that Marquard advocates consists of “compensation”, then it can be assumed that his own recourse to polytheism and theodicy is driven by a perceived deficiency that has to be functionally compensated. Sensing that both the illiberal Left (Taubes) and Right (Schmitt) already possess their own political theologies, which form powerful sources of motivation and justification for their respective political programs, Marquard might have observed a deficiency in his own political camp and therefore thought it expedient to construct his political poly-theology in support of a ‘liberal-conservative modernity’.

That Marquard goes beyond Blumenberg’s theory is beyond doubt. Although they both shared a similar Gehlenian concern with ‘compensations’, Marquard is evidently more

320 Marquard (1991) pp.12, 24; *ibid.* (2003) p.154; (2016) p.22.

321 Marquard (1991) pp.21-25; *ibid.* (2016) pp.21-22.

322 Marquard (1991) p.13, cf. pp.12-17. Cf. *ibid.* (1984) pp.33-34; Styfthals (2019) pp.127-131.

323 Marquard (1991) pp.17-25.

324 Cf. Nicholls (2014); Keller (2015) pp.88-103; Martin (2017) pp.150-152; Müller (2003) pp.120-124.

325 Marquard (1991) pp.8-28; *ibid.* (2016) pp.21-22; (2003) pp.153-154.

326 Cf. Blumenberg (1971) p.18; *ibid.* (1985) pp.225-226, 525-538; Taubes (2004) p.84.

pragmatic and utilitarian than Blumenberg in seeking them. In this sense he appears less restricted by the methodological and theoretical caution that we can still find in Blumenberg. Not only does Marquard for instance offer a wholly ahistorical ideal-type of modernity that identifies it with world-preservation *per se*, surpassing the limits of Blumenberg's historicist approach, he also ignores the latter's evident aversion to *any* re-theologization of politics by 'political theology'.³²⁷ This means that Marquard, contrary to Blumenberg, does not hesitate to use the tools of his 'enemies' or to forgo the latter's much more judicious historical approach. In other words, Marquard transgresses Blumenberg's restrictions in order to better defend Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology.

Evaluation and Reflection

The 'Negation' of Taubes and Löwith against the 'Affirmation' of Blumenberg and Marquard

At this stage of our analysis of the political dimension of the secularization debate it has become expedient to provide an evaluation of the two main positions in this chapter, i.e., the skeptical conservatism of Marquard and the gnostic-apocalyptic stance of Taubes. I will reflect on how their positions should be interpreted over against each other and on what the merits and possible shortcomings of their arguments are. This subsequently leads us to a discussion of the different functions and limitations of 'political theology' itself. In the conclusion of this chapter I will finally consider whether Taubes' and Marquard's standpoints are simply incompatible or whether a reflective comparison of their positions can yield something constructive after all. The question I shall discuss currently is whether Marquard's recruitment of Löwith's skepticism for the purpose of his own conservative modernism is justified. I argue that it is not, but that a common objection to this type of skepticism also helps illuminate a problem in *Taubes'* position of gnostic negation. Highlighting this will in turn enable a better understanding of Blumenberg's and Marquard's opposition to this type of gnostic negation.

Marquard presents his political conservatism as a necessary consequence of his skepticism. In *Schwierigkeiten* he argues that as a proponent of the skeptical generation he essentially distrusts all grand political claims and thus feels obliged to skeptically negate the grand negation of the Frankfurt School and the New Left. He automatically ends up on the other side of the political spectrum, i.e., by negating the monomyth of negation arrives at a *pluralistic affirmation*: "skepticism is ... the 'no' to the great 'no' for the sake of the little 'yesses'."³²⁸ Marquard hereby responds to a common *leftist* critique of skepticism, expressed by Max Horkheimer and later by Habermas and Faber, which is that skepticism cultivates passivity, leaving the status quo unaltered, and that it fetishizes the individual.³²⁹ Rather than defending skepticism against this critique Marquard simply embraces the inference that skepticism leads to conservatism and an affirmation of the status quo. After all, he argues, a skeptical

327 Blumenberg (1983) pp.60, 89-101; Blumenberg-Schmitt (2007) pp.167-171. Geulen (2012, pp.8-120) indicates that Blumenberg is a better "skeptic" than Marquard. For Marquard, "skepticism" is (ironically) an article of faith that leads him to an unreserved embrace of conservatism and an affirmation of the status quo. In the case of Blumenberg, the political conclusions that are clear to Marquard from the outset are only drawn hesitantly and tentatively, emerging out of "Evidenzmangel" and "Handlungszwang".

328 Quoted in: Geulen (2012) p.12. Cf. Marquard (1982) pp.13-32; *ibid.* (1989) pp.3-18; (1991) pp.3-7.

329 Marquard (1982) pp.30-32; Habermas (1983) pp.81-99; Faber (1983) p.99; Horkheimer (1971) pp.96-144.

affirmation of the status quo is better than the destructive negation that the Frankfurt School envisions.³³⁰

Marquard suggests in *Schwierigkeiten* that Löwith's skepticism should equally be regarded as a historically determined political response to the threat of (leftist) philosophies of history, and we have seen that at least on two other occasions he argues that Löwith's position is in this sense identical to Blumenberg's.³³¹ The implication is that, given their shared aversion to (anti-modernist) eschatology and philosophy of history, Marquard, Löwith and Blumenberg belong to the same (modernist) liberal-conservative camp. I would argue that if the equation of skepticism with political conservatism only pertains to the unintended political ramifications of an apolitical philosophical stance then this depiction of Löwith's thought might be valid, but that it fails to do justice to the actual intention or the content of the latter's skepticism. Indeed, in various writings Löwith only affirms the 'status quo' – or the social lifeworld – in as far as it can be understood in continuity with the natural world. However, the primary function of his skepticism is to *critique* the human edifice for denying its place in nature.³³² In 'Karl Löwith's stoischer Rückzug vom historischen Bewußtsein' (1963) Habermas rebukes him for cultivating a stance of contemplative passivity that makes it difficult if not impossible for him to conceive of a way of actually improving the world, that is, to overcome humanity's alienation from nature.³³³ Habermas' criticism of the disengaged, contemplative-theoretical nature of Löwith's skepticism inadvertently highlights the difference with Marquard's skepticism: the sole point of Löwith's 'classical' or 'theoretical' skepticism is precisely to repudiate the anthropocentrism that forms the foundation of Marquard's therapeutic and pragmatic skepticism. Marquard and Blumenberg distance themselves from Löwith in that their recourse to classical notions of fate or the cosmos is not driven by a contemplative belief in their ahistorical universal validity, but rather by a contemporary, historically determined need to compensate for a certain deficiency. This is diametrically opposed to the concept of *theoria* that Löwith advocates, which entails abandoning the concern with the satisfaction of practical needs in favor of a disinterested contemplation of truth.³³⁴ The concepts of polytheism, fate or cosmos are regarded by Marquard as historical artifacts that can be wielded in the contemporary historical condition to support the human artificial edifice that protects humans from what lies outside of it: the absolute. Löwith on the other hand wants to break through the human edifice to contemplate that which lies beyond: the cosmos.

Habermas' critique of Löwith mainly centers on the fact that the latter refuses "to be practically engaged by what is needed" and instead advocates *theoria* as "the need for freedom from neediness".³³⁵ However, his critique can also be interpreted more generally as the argument that a stance of 'pure' negation without a positive alternative can never engender real change.³³⁶ Interpreted in this more general way this critique would also apply to Taubes in a sense, as it

330 Marquard (1982) pp.30-32. Cf. Geulen (2012) pp.8-13.

331 Marquard (1982) pp.30-32, 133-138; *ibid.* (1983) p.79; Marquard in: Blumenberg (1971) p.530. Cf. *ibid.* (1989) pp.4-18. The suggestion that Löwith's skepticism is itself a historically determined response to, e.g., the war, has also been raised by Gadamer (2013, pp.550-551).

332 Löwith (1960) pp.152-255; *ibid.* (1952) pp.296-329; (1966) pp.433-451.

333 Habermas, 'Löwith: Stoic Retreat from Historical Consciousness' (1983) pp.92-98.

334 Löwith (1960) pp.176, 246-255; Habermas (1983) pp.92-98.

335 Habermas (1983) pp.92-93. Cf. Löwith (1962) pp.7-38.

336 In 'Intellectuals and the University' (2010, p.300) Taubes himself phrases this as follows: "an intelligence that retreats from the process of production of the industrial society is not in the position to penetrate the dazzlement of the scientified society, but can only abide in absolute negation. This absolute and admittedly only verbal negation morphs into an apology for the respective ruling authorities and falls back into obscurantist mythology."

highlights the political implications of his Gnosticism. That is to say, Taubes' later attitude of pessimistic-gnostic negation eventually casts doubt on the possibility of bringing about real improvement in the world through political action. While Taubes attempts to maintain the 'antinomies of Messianism' (e.g., between messianic action and messianic expectation) rather than sublating them, he finally seems to move away from a 'progressive' activist standpoint towards a gnostic and passive attitude of total negation of this world *sans* immanent alternative.³³⁷ I suggest that Taubes' negation of the human world in favor of a 'wholly other' extra-worldly alternative is in this respect at least functionally analogous to the negative dimension of Löwith's philosophy.³³⁸

Blumenberg, in fact, pointed something similar out in his response (during the 1964 conference on aesthetics) to Taubes' 'Notes on Surrealism'. He argued that the gnostic attitude of pure negation "does not entail any alteration in the conditions of things, rather only its index, and thus [engenders] neither revolt nor protest."³³⁹ The suggestion is that the gnostic view cannot bring about change, but that it only performs a *Gestalt*-switch that makes the good cosmos of Greek Antiquity now appear as a prison cell created by an evil demiurge. In short, Taubes faces the criticism that pure negation can only beget passivity, which leaves the status quo untouched, and that it cannot create positive change. However, we have also seen that it is possible to conceive of a way out of this conundrum in Taubes' political theology, although he himself did not systematically elaborate on this option. Several of Taubes' writings hint at a 'Paulinian' notion (that one for instance encounters in Tolstoy's later anarchistic writings) that an outward revolution is only viable through an inner 'conversion', and that as soon as the *proleptic*, anticipatory participation in the new world – the dispensation of love and grace – gains ground, the old world of violence and the law with simply wash away. Taubes also suggests in this respect that even a purely 'negative' or 'passive' stance amounts to a political decision that could result in a more radical revolution than any 'positive' movement of political activism.³⁴⁰

The leftist line of critique against a stance of pure negation would be that if it cannot map out the route towards positive change it is therefore complicit in the continuation of an unjust status quo. The difference between such a critique on the one hand and Marquard's and Blumenberg's objection on the other is subtle but significant: Marquard and Blumenberg do not protest the fact that Taubes cannot envision positive change in the existing world but that, by introducing an extra-worldly absolute good, he makes the existing world seem (absolutely) evil. Taubes thus willfully ignores the positive qualities of the existing order in favor of an unobtainable ideal.³⁴¹ Marquard contends that we have to 'settle for less' in life and politics, and that we should thereby reject absolute goals that irrevocably place the existing world in a negative light. The generalizing (antinomian) depreciation of any 'system' feeds the counterproductive tendency to regard all authority, or any power or institution, as somehow intrinsically fascistic or totalitarian. Marquard resented this "technique of detecting a hair in every soup, alienation in every reality, repression in every institution, power and fascism in every relationship" because it equates the imperfections of a *bearable* condition – namely the liberal state of the Federal Republic – with the actual horrors of totalitarianism, in reaction to which this liberal order was

337 Cf. Taubes (2010) pp.137-146, *ibid.* (2006) pp.53-65; (2004) p.103; Bielik-Robson (2014) p.198.

338 Timm (1967, pp.573-594) for instance asserts a functional analogy between Löwith's skepticism and Barth's orientation towards the 'wholly other'. Taubes in turn, as Bielik-Robson argues (2014, pp.168-203), displays Barthian tendencies in a similar respect. For Taubes on Barth, cf.: (2004) pp.62-70; *ibid.* (2010) pp.177-194.

339 Blumenberg in: Taubes (2010) p.118, cf. pp.115-118.

340 Taubes (2010) p.223, cf. pp.7-9, 74-75; *ibid.* (1955) pp.70-71; (2006) pp.53-65.

341 Cf. Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.174; Marquard (1989) pp.10, 54-57.

constructed.³⁴² Blumenberg concurs that the existence of law or order does not equal oppression or incarceration, just like the natural laws of the scientific worldview do not form the bars of the gnostic “iron cage”. Rather, laws “are the medium [*Organon*] allied with freedom” that protects against the “arbitrariness of the miracle”.³⁴³ He thus suggests that a lawful order not only offers existential protection from the late-medieval *Deus absconditus* but also political protection from either a Schmittian sovereign or a Benjaminian revolutionary ‘Messiah’.

Reflecting on these opposing positions it can be contended that it is important to be able to criticize the status quo (or the *Normalzustand*) – something which Blumenberg and Marquard tend to disregard given their general aversion to ‘critique’ – without obfuscating the ability to distinguish between mere imperfection and full-blown terror, or between an order that does not meet its own ideals of justice and a totalitarian system. And indeed, this ability seems to elude Taubes at times. The Marquard-Blumenberg line of argumentation stipulates that the ability to make this essential distinction, i.e., between the Federal Republic and the Third Reich, is necessarily impeded once the only desirable alternative forms an unobtainable absolute ideal. However, on the basis of the analysis contained in this and the previous chapter I surmise that the latter inference is not justified. It has been remarked, e.g., against Friedrich Gogarten, that the postulation of a transcendent orientation point is not a necessary bulwark against totalitarianism. However, we can *also* concede that the postulation of a transcendent (or absolute) orientation point need not entail full-blown nihilism or political absolutism either, as Blumenberg and Marquard appear to suggest.³⁴⁴ My interpretation indicates that Benjamin and Taubes seek to maintain an “eschatological reservation” without succumbing to “eschatological paralysis”: that is, by upholding an image of *ultimate* redemption as something that is always yet to come they can both criticize *and* legitimize historical-political attempts at improving the world. Taubes’ ‘absolutized’ political ideals – of ‘true’ justice and democracy – could be regarded as “*à venir*” principles, reminiscent of Derrida’s “justice to come”: such ideals remain unobtainable but they could still motivate attempts at ‘approximating’ it.³⁴⁵ One might add that this in turn is not altogether incommensurable with Blumenberg’s own (more Kantian) idea of ‘infinite progress’, formulated in *Legitimacy*. Indeed, Taubes’ theory – in all its problematic indeterminacy – can *also* accommodate a stance that affirms the kind of political action which improves the existing world rather than intending to destroy it.³⁴⁶

342 Marquard (1989) p.10. Cf. Keller (2015) pp.88-103; Martin (2017) pp.131-152; Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) p.282. This is also Kroll’s (2010, pp.292-296) criticism of Faber’s (1983, pp.85-99) attack on Blumenberg and Marquard, a criticism that could also apply to Taubes’ (2010, pp.260-267) suggestion that a revitalized polytheism somehow automatically leads to a Gehlenian totalitarianism.

343 Blumenberg in: Taubes (2010) p.118.

344 Walther (2000) pp.131-133. Marquard suggests that the reintroduction of religious transcendence in modern politics either leads to totalitarianism (when attempts are made to realize eschatological promises in the historical sphere) or nihilism (once it becomes apparent that they are not realizable). Gogarten (1966, pp.140-144) makes a similar argument from the opposite perspective in claiming that the *denial* of transcendence either leads to nihilism or totalitarianism.

345 Cf. Derrida (1994) pp.68-92; Bielik-Robson (2014) pp.92, 176, 196-200; Lijster (2010) p.32; Deuber-Mankowsky (2002) pp.12-19.

346 Taubes (1955) pp.57-71; *ibid.* (2010) pp.235-302. On the problematic indeterminacy of Taubes’ thought, cf. Martin (2017) p.152.

Critique of Marquard's Theodicy and Disenchanted Polytheism

This brings me to a critical appraisal of Marquard's own "modern theodicy", i.e., of the defense of a conservative modernity that he mounted against the destructive negativism of Taubes and the New Left. We can now observe that Marquard's unambivalent embrace of conservatism leads him to espouse a black and white view in which 'anti-modernity' receives the blame for all evils in the contemporary world, while 'modernity' is completely exonerated. He thus fails to avoid the pitfall that he, as evinced in *Schwierigkeiten*, believes to reside in all speculative philosophies of history: humanity is divided up by his theodicy in two halves, the "children of light" who are the heirs of a good order (modernity) and the "children of darkness" who are responsible for the fatal disturbance of this peaceful and inherently good world. The image that Marquard sketches in various texts is – if one permits the irony – almost one of a *Manichean* struggle between the two meta-human 'forces' of modernity and anti-modernity. Arguably, this function of his 'theodicy' removes the need for *modern self-critique*; after all, anti-modernity can operate as a scapegoat for all of modernity's problems, e.g., what he calls an increased sense of "unworldliness".³⁴⁷

Marquard's modern theodicy becomes less convincing when he expounds on the darker side of the contemporary condition, for instance in 'The Age of Unworldliness?' or 'The End of Fate?'. His assumption that individuals are nearly powerless – and should therefore rely on the benevolent stability of pre-existing societal institutions – can only lead to a positive appraisal of the status quo if it is evident that the order that modernity provides is indeed good. Once it is suggested that there is something amiss, as these two articles in fact indicate, this can also inadvertently lend plausibility to a Taubesian gnostic inversion of the 'good order of modernity'. That is, if the presumed inherent goodness of this order becomes doubtful it can once again appear as an "iron cage" that calls for total negation or escape.³⁴⁸ I would suggest that this static, black and white dichotomy between Marquard's indiscriminate affirmation of the status quo and (the later) Taubes's full-blown negation of it is more a result of the political-philosophical polarization of the post-1968 secularization debate than that it is a necessary consequence of the types of ideas and principles they espouse. The conception of modernity that Blumenberg puts forward *Legitimacy* (1966) is in this sense less insulated than Marquard's. Arguably, *Legitimacy* reserves a place for self-critique in the form of infinite progress, which makes the tendency to create an anti-modern scapegoat less acute. 'Progress' as an instance of self-critique is however more or less rejected by Marquard because it is anti-conservative and therefore anti-modern.³⁴⁹

Another point of criticism concerns both Blumenberg and Marquard, and this requires that we recall the reasons underlying Taubes' aversion to the modern rehabilitation of the ancient notions of myth, polytheism and fate. Taubes denounces recent adaptations of concepts such as 'fate' and 'myth' because they tend to 'reify' or solidify contingent societal constellations or processes. This 're-enchantment' obscures the discourse of moral agency and responsibility that is required to *change* such a system if necessary.³⁵⁰ In light of Taubes' critique it might be surmised that when Marquard (explicitly) and Blumenberg (implicitly) portray the conservative-liberal order as an inherently good plurality of societal institutions under the sacred canopy of the law, they do not only 'reify' it but in effect 'deify' this order by

347 Marquard (1991) pp.71-89.

348 Marquard (1991) pp.71-89, *ibid.* (1989) pp.64-96; Taubes (2010) pp.98-110, 137-146.

349 Cf. Blumenberg (1983) pp.32-35, 85-87; Wallace (1993) pp.191-195; Nicholls (2014) pp.195-196, 212-215. It could even be argued that Blumenberg's more 'progressive' side is not altogether irreconcilable with Taubes' earlier (pre-gnostic) work, e.g., 'Intellectuals and the University' and 'Four Ages of Reason' (2010, pp.268-301), that affirm the emancipatory potential in the Enlightenment and scientific disenchantment.

350 Taubes (2010) pp.247-267, 276, 299-314; Taubes and Rötzer (1987) pp.314-318.

conceptualizing it in terms of polytheism within a monistic cosmos.³⁵¹ It is not unjustified to bolster and solidify what is regarded as a necessary bulwark against terror – e.g., rule of law, institutional pluralism and a general division of powers – but by making these powers appear as ‘gods’, as Marquard does, this arguably also implies that they are placed beyond the reach of democratic control (e.g., through collective action) over these societal phenomena.³⁵²

The fact that societal powers are portrayed as ‘gods’ by Marquard and Blumenberg is significant because it uncovers their shared underlying concepts of power and freedom. The division of powers is perceived a struggle between gods. In Blumenberg’s theory these gods form sublimated manifestations of the primordial, blind and violent forces of nature and the “absolutism of reality”.³⁵³ Marquard’s account stipulates that these ‘gods’ only leave the individual free from being overpowered by a single one by virtue of the fact that they are locked in a perennial stalemate. Marquard and Blumenberg thus give rise to the impression that the highest obtainable political aim is the freedom of the individual to be left alone by such forces. There is a biographical dimension to this conception of liberty, as Marquard notes in his text on Blumenberg, ‘Entlastung vom Absoluten’: he recounts that Blumenberg’s incarceration during the war and his overall perception of the limitedness of the human lifespan made that he placed high value on his time, and therefore retreated after 1970 “in seine ganz private Höhle” to work in blissful isolation.³⁵⁴ This retreat from publicity and societal forces into his ‘private cave’ can thus be seen as an act of self-emancipation. Marquard defines freedom in a similar vein. It is telling that for instance in ‘Praise of Polytheism’ Marquard advocates a poly-mythical condition in which various narratives coexist, not so that individuals are free to identify with any narrative they please, but rather so that the individual can be free *from* identification.³⁵⁵ In both cases freedom is solely defined as freedom *from* power instead of freedom *to* have a say over or collective control of power. It is not improbable that this stance is partly informed by their response to the new political radicalisms of the 1960’s, which Blumenberg and Marquard both associated with Taubes’ leftist political theology. That is, this upheaval might have given them the impression that the societal institutions that protect the individual in turn have to be protected from the masses. Marquard’s recourse to political poly-theology was meant to ‘reify’ these institutions, i.e., making them seem less contingent and precarious, in order to strengthen them against the antinomian sense of righteousness incorporated in the New Left.³⁵⁶

Reflection on ‘Political Theology’

This evaluation of the polemic between Taubes and Marquard and of how their positions relate to the outlooks of Blumenberg and Löwith has set the stage for a final reflection on

351 Marquard (1983) pp.77-84; *ibid.* (1989) pp.87-109; Blumenberg (1971) pp.13-27. Cf. Taubes (2004) pp.84-85; Faber (1983) pp.92-99.

352 Cf. Keller (2015) pp.88-103; Martin (2017) pp.131-152. Nicholls (2014, pp.183-217) places more emphasis on the ‘democratic’ element in Blumenberg’s ‘political philosophy’, and it can be conceded that Blumenberg (e.g., in his 1968/1969 paper on ‘Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie’) does reserve a place for democratic deliberation (although not necessarily for political *action*). I suggest that this democratic element is more subdued in Marquard’s theory, in that his priority lies with the affirmation of the societal status quo and the vindication of institutions.

353 Blumenberg (1985) pp.550; *ibid.* (1971) pp.42-43, 63.

354 Marquard (2016) p.26, cf. pp.24-27.

355 Marquard (1989) pp.93-94.

356 Marquard (1989) pp.46-57; *ibid.* (1983) pp.77-84.

‘political theology’ itself. The current and previous chapters have made it apparent that ‘political theology’ is not a defined philosophical doctrine or delineated theory. Indeed, in terms of its normative content ‘political theology’ can refer to the authoritarian decisionism of Schmitt, the leftist Messianism or Gnosticism of either Benjamin or Taubes, as well as to the ironic liberal poly-theology of Marquard. Furthermore, ‘political theology’ is also perceived either as a purely neutral-descriptive research program or as a polemic strategy.³⁵⁷ This final section will not only enumerate some of these different functions of political theology, I will also consider its possible advantages and disadvantages. In doing so I will have to restrict my scope to the prior discussion, while drawing especially from Lübke’s and Böckenförde’s commentary on this subject.

First of all, my investigation indicates that political theology can indeed provide a valuable vantage point from which to systematically discern the relation and interplay between religion and politics in society. Lübke and Böckenförde both concur with Schmitt that, as an “akademisches Forschungsprogramm”, political theology can highlight “systematic and methodical analogies” between the two domains, resulting in a “sociology of juristic concepts.”³⁵⁸ Rather than implying that every theological concept (e.g., atheism) has an exact political or juristic duplicate (e.g., anarchism), as Schmitt suggests, this emphasis on the interconnection of religion and politics can be taken to entail that political ideas tend to correlate with metaphysical assumptions and vice versa. This assertion seems acceptable, and indeed, both Marquard and Blumenberg in fact concur with this insight when they identify the political threat of absolutism that supposedly inheres in the theological absolutism of Christianity and Gnosticism. Marquard subsequently concludes that his own political position and concomitant worldview can also be translated into the language of political theology, which leads him to advocate disenchanting polytheism and to defend the world as a “creation without creator.”³⁵⁹

This emphasis on the political implications of religious or areligious views ties in with Böckenförde’s observations, in ‘Politische Theorie und politische Theologie’ (1983), on what he calls ‘institutional’ political theology. He argues that this type of political theology affirms the interconnectedness of ‘theological’ (or metaphysical) claims and their political implications, and that it thus highlights the essentially contentious nature of the relation between the two corresponding societal domains. Taken in this sense, ‘political theology’ demonstrates the need to continuously *renegotiate* where in society the line between church and state, and/or public and private should be drawn. Even an apolitical religious stance, he suggests, is preceded by a political ‘decision’ to withdraw from the political sphere, which in turn requires a decision on where to situate this threshold.³⁶⁰ Böckenförde suggests that this continuous renegotiation is necessary because otherwise one risks that the one collapses into the other; this could result either in an illiberal theocracy or an illiberal secularism.³⁶¹ Marquard for example engages in what Böckenförde calls ‘institutional’ political theology when he advocates institutional pluralism and the rejection of crypto-gnostic monomyths. He moreover tries to renegotiate the religious-secular binary by asserting that all religious monomyths secretly harbor absolutist political pretensions, which implies that they should therefore be drastically curtailed in their public influence.³⁶²

357 Lübke (1983) pp.45-48; Meier (1995) pp.75-76; Groh (1998) pp.15-21.

358 Lübke (1983) p.47; Schmitt (2005) p.37. Cf. *ibid.* (2014) p.148 fn.2; Böckenförde (1983) pp.18-19; Taubes (2010) pp.221-232.

359 Marquard (1983) pp.77-84; *ibid.* (1984) pp.31-36. Source quote: Löwith (1949) p.201.

360 Böckenförde (1983) pp.19-25. Cf. Schmitt (2005) p.2; *ibid.* (2014) pp.45-46.

361 Böckenförde (1967) pp.91-94.

362 Marquard (1989) pp.64-109; *ibid.* (1983) pp.77-84.

Not only can political theology provide insight in the intersection of religion and politics in society, it can also be of value as a form of hermeneutics, as Taubes indicates in *Political Theology of Paul*.³⁶³ For example, when Taubes posits a “structural comparison” between the gnostic image of the world as a prison cell and the “iron cage” of the modern industrialized society he does not make a claim of genetic derivation, that is, he does not argue in this instance that the modern world is substantively derived from a religious source. Rather, he invokes a theological template in order to better understand the political problems of contemporary society, one of which is that in a completely ‘reified’ world it becomes difficult to conceive of positive change.³⁶⁴ Political theology could thus be regarded as a method of understanding, one that illuminates political issues by structurally comparing them to theological analogues. Another example is Marquard’s modern theodicy: by modelling his own theory after the theodicy-motif it becomes clear that he defends a “creator without creation”, i.e., a world that is deemed inherently good by virtue of the non-existence of an extra-worldly *absolute* good. I would add that the theodicy-motif also highlights the shortcomings of his theory, namely that it pinpoints his tendency to shift the blame to anti-modernity so as to exonerate modernity. Lastly, I suggest that a political-theological framework can help better understand certain philosophical polemics. If the opposition between Blumenberg and Marquard on the one hand and Benjamin and Taubes on the other is framed in terms of a neoclassical affirmation versus a gnostic-apocalyptic negation of the cosmos then this allows one to identify, for instance, the essential difference in their conceptions of freedom, law and power. The nomos-gnosis antithesis illustrates that the central question in this debate is whether freedom necessitates an order to keep other powers at bay or if any such order is essentially oppressive and should be broken through via an identification with an extra-worldly idea of justice or ‘true’ freedom.

A final advantage of political theology that I would like to point out relates to what Böckenförde calls ‘appellative’ political theology.³⁶⁵ This ‘appellative’ function signifies that political theology can provide a channel through which religious ideas, motivations or substances can be taken up and introduced to the secular political sphere. In recent writings, Habermas suggests in a similar vein that that secular politics can use something like ‘political theology’ to draw motivation and inspiration from religious worldviews. Böckenförde went as far as asserting that Christianity provides the necessary moral foundation for secular society, something which Habermas would object to.³⁶⁶ In any case, Böckenförde describes appellative political theology as follows: “Sie ist keine Theologie der Politik oder politischen Ordnung, sondern gibt eine Begründung und Ausformung des glaubensmotivierten politisch-sozialen Engagements der Christen, zielt unmittelbar auf Handlung und Aktion.”³⁶⁷ Political theology can, as Habermas and Böckenförde suggest, form a type of discourse in which motives from comprehensive doctrines are ‘translated’ within a secular-democratic context into political action. I would add that this model applies not only to, e.g., the leftist Catholicism of Metz or to the Jewish-heterodox thought of Taubes and Benjamin but also to Marquard’s ironic neo-paganism. Marquard attempts to find ‘appellative’ or motivational sources in the *pre-Christian* concepts of fate, polytheism and the cosmos to motivate the preservation of societal institutions against leftist apocalypticism.

This brings us to the possible limitations or disadvantages of ‘political theology’. The first follows directly from the appellative function of political theology that Lübke and

363 Taubes (2004) pp.31, 40, 64-69.

364 Taubes (2010) pp.98-113, 137-148.

365 Böckenförde (1983) pp.20-25.

366 Böckenförde (1967) p.93. Cf. Habermas (2006) pp.21-52; *ibid.* (2011) pp.15-33.

367 Böckenförde (1983) p.21. He refers to the political theology of J.B. Metz.

Böckenförde identify. They suggests that the appellative political theology of, e.g., Bloch and Metz easily turns into a “theologisierender Politik” or a “repolitisierte Religion”. Their accounts imply that this would threaten the liberal order, which is premised on the neutralization or depoliticization of religion.³⁶⁸ My suggestion, which is slightly different, is that the theologization of a political argument can potentially obstruct constructive political debate if this means that a political opponent is denied a full understanding of the core or the driving force of one’s argument. This is illustrated by Taubes’ political Gnosticism. Although Taubes’ theory certainly contains accessible insights, the fact that he eventually resorts to ‘Gnosticism’ as a political paradigm does raise the impression that the knowledge he possesses is not accessible via profane rationality, but only to those who have recognized some kind of an eternal truth *beyond* the visible realm, or an inner spark that is hidden away in the depths of interiority.³⁶⁹ This strategy creates a chasm between himself and his opponents, one that ineluctably obstructs the kind of fruitful and open polemic that Taubes valued so greatly. This is not to say that the core of Taubes’ theory is inaccessible; I rather suggest – in line with his own political theology – that if one introduces metaphysical concepts (such as Gnosticism) to a debate they should be taken seriously and examined for their possible political ramifications. ‘Gnosticism’ as a political paradigm evokes an antagonistic distinction between the ‘initiated’ and the ‘uninitiated’ that, if applied to a political debate, a priori denies a political opponent access to the underlying grounds of one’s arguments.

This ties in with a final consideration, which is that appellative political theology can not only fuel but also essentialize political antagonisms. Lübke noted in ‘Politische Theologie als Theologie repolitisierte Religion’ (1983) that the ‘new’ political theology of the Left tries to import the essential “Ernstes der Religion” into politics “zur Evokation politischer Fronten”.³⁷⁰ Political theology, in this form, appears as a Schmittian polemical strategy that creates, legitimizes and cements political friend-enemy distinctions. Taubes’ own critique of ‘reification’ can also be applied the type of appellative political theology that he himself represents. That is to say, by solidifying societal or political antagonisms in theological terms, polemical political theology tends to overshadow nuances or opportunities for self-critique, offering pre-given reified moral categories instead. I have already demonstrated that even though Marquard criticizes this tendency in *Schwierigkeiten*, he himself does not remain free from blame in this respect. Both Taubes and Marquard tend to get bogged down in a ‘politics of suspicion’ according to which every political opponent becomes an unknowing representative of some frightful impersonal force, whether it is ‘crypto-fascism’ or ‘anti-modernity’ respectively. But perhaps this type of reasoning is simply symptomatic for political debates in an age of polarization.

Conclusion

In sum, we have seen that the politicization of the secularization debate during the 1970’s and 1980’s not only entailed a revival of Schmitt’s political theology but that this revival was infused with Weimar-era leftist Messianism. Focusing first on Benjamin as an important representative of this school I have noted that the inherent tensions in his thought – e.g., between messianic action and messianic expectation – were not ‘solved’ by his student, Taubes, but

368 Böckenförde (1983) p.21. Cf. Lübke (1983) pp.46-56.

369 Cf. Taubes (2004) p.80.

370 Lübke (1983) p.55.

that they were rather cultivated and expanded. I have also suggested that by maintaining this tension they attempt to avoid an “eschatological paralysis” while preserving an “eschatological reservation.” During the *Poetik und Hermeneutik* conferences Taubes employed a Benjaminian political theology in order to counteract the tendency towards neutralization or reification that he recognized in Blumenberg’s recent turn to myth. The conferences that Taubes organized during the early 1980’s, known under the working title ‘Politische Theologie III’, were marked by Blumenberg’s absence. Meanwhile, Taubes (taking his cue from Benjamin) had begun to thematize his intellectual relation to Schmitt and presented himself as the latter’s leftist-apocalyptic counterpart. The emergence of the New Left, with which Taubes was associated, signified a noticeable shift in the political landscape of post-war Germany. The intellectual development of the Ritter School reflects this. Erstwhile ‘progressives’ increasingly embraced a stance of liberal conservatism in order to withstand what they perceived as a deluge of radicalism. Marquard rose to the challenge of defending the liberal-conservative order by drawing explicitly political conclusions from Blumenberg’s later writings on myth and polytheism. He compensated for Blumenberg’s absence during Taubes’ ‘Politische Theologie III’ conferences by presenting his Blumenberg-inspired liberal-conservative political poly-theology. Seeking a middle ground between Löwith and Blumenberg, Marquard argued that his defense of a neo-pagan conservative modernity is a necessary consequence of skepticism. His recourse to the theodicy-motif subsequently helped him to differentiate between ‘modernity’ and its enemy, ‘anti-modernity’. In the final section I have reflected both on the Marquard-Taubes polemic as well as on ‘political theology’ as such. I surmised that although ‘political theology’ can be a valuable *method*, as a polemical instrument it can foster a tendency to reify political antagonisms.

In conclusion: I raised the question earlier whether the difference between Marquard and Taubes (and the positions they represent) is simply unbridgeable or if one can derive some constructive insights from a comparative reflection on their views after all. First of all, there is at least one thing that Taubes and Marquard – following Schmitt and Blumenberg – ultimately agree on, which is that the limitedness of life or time has serious philosophical and existential ramifications. This is a supposedly crucial insight that is in fact a theoretically underdetermined truism. Marquard and Taubes both argue that the recognition of this simple truism automatically leads to an acceptance of their own political-philosophical positions, i.e., either conservatism or apocalypticism.³⁷¹ One reason why their shared experience of ‘time-as-respite’ leads to such different outcomes is that they hold incompatible conceptions of freedom and order. ‘Vita brevis’ implies to Marquard that we do not have the time or the means to presently overturn the entire world in favor of some unobtainable absolute good in an unforeseeable future. He presupposes that the world in which we find ourselves is already quite bearable, which means that we should learn to appreciate and make the best of it. The crucial point is that Taubes cannot accept this; he cannot settle for less because to him less is not enough. In his apocalyptic mode he assumes that if there is a chance that change might work out for the better then one has to risk it; to him, the limitedness of time means that a decision must be made, namely one that breaks through the order of ‘normalcy’ and a false sense of safety in favor of something beyond. In other words, Marquard and Taubes are separated by their adherence to incompatible paradigms, ‘gnostic’ and ‘cosmic’, which determine how they evaluate concepts and experiences.

By invoking Thomas Kuhn’s notion of (incommensurable) ‘paradigms’ I do not mean to suggest that Marquard and Taubes had no way of understanding each other’s viewpoints,

371 Taubes and Rötzer (1987) pp.316-318; Taubes (2013) p.45; Marquard (2016) pp.24-27; *ibid.* (1989) pp.64-86. Cf. Müller (2003) pp.120-124; Taubes-Blumenberg (2013) p.196; De Wilde (2008) pp.180, 256.

on the contrary. In a sense they had agreed that they were each other's antipodes, and this allowed them to better understand their *own* standpoints in opposition to the other. In short, they engaged in polemical self-identification, recalling Schmitt's credo: "der Feind ist unsere eigene Frage als Gestalt".³⁷² The incommensurability of their conflicting 'paradigms' is hence not pre-given. It rather reflects a development in the secularization debate where opposing views grew further apart and became insulated to such a degree that it became increasingly difficult to arbitrate between them. As a result, Marquard's 'cosmic' stance implied an a priori affirmation of 'normalcy' whereas Taubes' 'gnostic' stance implied an a priori negation of it. What disappears in this condition of polarization is not only a common ground, but also a willingness – when this common ground is either problematic or absent – to perform a temporary *Gestalt*-switch, the momentary suspension of one's own beliefs and the adoption another viewpoint, as a means to critique and improve upon one's own 'paradigm'. In spite of Taubes' incessant emphasis on the need for critique and Marquard's aversion to political scapegoating they can both be seen to fall prey to this logic of polarization.

Polarization can become burdensome. This might explain why Blumenberg became increasingly aloof in his correspondence with Taubes, assumedly to hide his growing antipathy towards the latter.³⁷³ Marquard suggests that retreat is a legitimate strategy of "unburdening" that is justified by the finitude of the human lifespan. His portrait of Blumenberg, 'Entlastung vom Absoluten', indicates that the latter's retreat from public and academic life can be interpreted as a response to an increased politicization – and polarization – that had also permeated the debate on secularization.³⁷⁴ There is, however, a certain parallel between Blumenberg's 'epicurean' retreat into his private "Schreibhöhle" and Taubes own 'gnostic' retreat into interiority, in that neither found there the 'ataraxic bliss' that Löwith pursued. When Taubes died in 1987, Blumenberg was asked to write a necrology on behalf of *Poetik und Hermeneutik*. In his *Nachlaß* we can find preliminary notes for a necrology that Blumenberg would never submit, because, he writes: "Meine Würdigung ... würde ein harter Text; ich kann auf JT [Jacob Taubes] nicht der sanften Blick der Kameraderie werfen". These notes give the impression that despite Taubes' famed spiritedness his life was marked by a profound dissatisfaction. This leads Blumenberg to the conclusion: "Dennoch kann ich nicht froh auf ein vollendetes Leben zurückblicken."³⁷⁵ Marquard's 'Entlastung vom Absoluten' suggests that the latter also did not find full satisfaction in his retreat. Marquard writes: "Wir ..., und ich werfe mir das durchaus vor, haben so viel Respekt vor ihm gehabt, daß wir auch diese seine methodische Vereinsamung respektiert haben, die ihn – obwohl er sie wollte – doch wohl auch traurig gemacht hat." Marquard notes that even though Blumenberg chose solitude to devote his time to writing, he refrained from publishing his final works; "Für wen eigentlich? soll er gefragt haben."³⁷⁶

372 Taubes and Rötzer (1987) p.316; Taubes (2010) pp.302-314; Marquard (1983) p.78; *ibid.* (1982) p.15.

373 Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.145-207, 282-292.

374 Marquard (2016) p.26.

375 Blumenberg-Taubes (2013) pp.283-284.

376 Marquard (2016) p.27. The book in question is Blumenberg's *Beschreibung des Menschen* (2014).

PART IV

Methodological Reflection

Chapter 8

Understanding the Secularization Debate: Geistesgeschichte and Essentially Contested Concepts

Introduction

In previous chapters we have come across many different accounts of secularization, most of which are profoundly at odds with each other. If taken together, these accounts do not generate a single coherent and comprehensive story. Rather, they give an impression of a general and seemingly insurmountable disagreement on most issues involved. First, disagreement exists on what kind of a ‘plot structure’ would be most suitable with regard to the topic of secularization. Should the story be told as a pessimistic *Verfallsgeschichte* of modernity’s descent into nihilism (e.g. Carl Schmitt, Eric Voegelin and Alfred Müller-Armack) or rather as a more optimistic tale of progress and Enlightenment (e.g. Wilhelm Kamlah and Odo Marquard)?¹ Moreover, these narratives tend to contradict each other with regard to the question whether the relation between modernity and Christianity should be conceived primarily in terms of a discontinuity (e.g. Hans Blumenberg) or a continuity (e.g. Karl Löwith). Above all, the secularization debate is characterized by a pervasive disagreement on how the relevant concepts – ‘secularization’, ‘modernity’, and ‘Christianity’ – should be defined and evaluated. It is not the purpose of this book, and hence also not of this chapter, to settle this discussion by attempting to provide the *real* story of secularization or a comprehensive account of how ‘modernity’ and ‘Christianity’ should *actually* be understood. I am convinced that my attempt at doing so would not bring the secularization debate to an end but, rather, that it will simply mean the addition of one more secularization narrative to an already abundant repertoire of narratives. Instead, this final chapter is devoted to a methodological reflection on the contested nature of concepts such as ‘secularization’ and on the type of narratives in which they appear. The upshot of this reflection is that while it is unlikely that disputes on ‘secularization’ or ‘modernity’ will be decisively ‘solved’ through rational discussion, this does not mean that such debates are without value or that they are for that matter ‘irrational’.

This chapter tries to answer certain questions that have lingered in the background of my investigation. For instance, what kind of narratives are we dealing with: are they ‘historical’ or ‘philosophical’? I will argue that the secularization narratives encountered in previous chapters are a combination of both and that they are therefore akin to – although not identical with – the so-called ‘*speculative* philosophies of history’ of Hegel and Marx, for instance. This raises the question what these narratives actually convey vis-à-vis the historical reality they purport to represent. Moreover, how can one arbitrate between these narratives: is it possible to distinguish

1 On different “modes of emplotment”, cf.: White, *Metahistory* (1973) pp.7-11, 29-42.

certain criteria that allow for judgements on their quality or is ‘everything permitted’ while, at the same time, being equally conjectural and thus perhaps intellectually inconsequential once a ‘speculative’ element enters the writing of history? A positivist view of historiography dictates that professional historians should eradicate all speculative, presentist or normative elements from their historical narratives. We, however, are dealing precisely with normative and presentist histories that are written in order to get a certain philosophical (or in some cases theological) point across.² Rather than conceding to the positivist view of historiography that these accounts should not be regarded as proper representations of the past, I argue that these narratives belong to a distinct philosophical-historical genre, one that engages with history in a specific fashion.

There are two additional reasons for constructing a methodological frame that illuminates the issues mentioned above. First, the type of philosophical historiography I focus on is evidently not limited to the German secularization debate discussed in previous chapters. It signifies a brand of philosophy that is, broadly speaking, characteristic of the post-Hegelian continental tradition.³ What I have in mind is a philosophical historiography (or historical philosophy) that can in principle be distinguished from a Rankean ‘professional historiography’, but also from history of philosophy proper as well as from ‘analytical philosophy of history’.⁴ The genre of philosophical historiography is actually quite ubiquitous in continental philosophy: apart from the narratives discussed (e.g., Blumenberg’s and Löwith’s) one might think of the writings of Theodor W. Adorno, Ernst Bloch, Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Slavoj Žižek, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. They offer philosophies that take on the form of ‘grand historical narratives’. However, although the historical dimension is essential to these accounts it is perhaps more common to treat them as *philosophies* rather than *histories* of a certain type. One reason for this might be that, traditionally, those working on the ‘theory of history’ (also known as ‘analytical philosophy of history’) were mainly concerned with the epistemology of ‘professional historiography’ and dismissed any variety of philosophical historiography as mere speculation, at least in so far as the latter genre purports to provide historical representations. Hence, especially the older literature on the theory of history lacks a systematic methodological reflection on the historical dimension of such philosophies. This creates the erroneous impression that the historical elements in these philosophies are superfluous or that authors of philosophical historiography are exempted from the epistemic concerns that preoccupies ‘professional historiography’. Recent historical theory is more appreciative of ‘speculation’ in historiography and I wish to follow this relatively new direction – and help compensate for a previous neglect of the historical dimension of a certain type of continental philosophy – by regarding philosophical history-writing as a legitimate genre of historiography.⁵

2 I will refer to such histories as belonging to the genre of *Geistesgeschichte*; I do not differentiate between theological and philosophical *Geistesgeschichten* within the scope of this chapter.

3 Cf. Taylor (1984) pp.17-30.

4 For reasons that will become apparent, I will refer to ‘professional historiography’ as ‘historical reconstruction’ and ‘analytical philosophy of history’ as ‘theory of history’.

5 Cf. Skinner, *Return of Grand Theory* (1990) pp.1-20; Carr (2014); Paul (2015) pp.12-15 Historical theory gradually abandoned its disapproval of what was pejoratively called ‘speculative philosophy of history’ since the 1970s, see: Fain (1970), White (1973), Munz (1977). However, this hesitant rehabilitation of speculative philosophy of history remains – to this day, as evinced by Carr (2014) – focused on the usual suspects: Hegel, Marx and sometimes Spengler. While authors like Carr and Fain might have asserted that historians should, for instance, take Hegel more seriously and not instantly dismiss any whiff of ‘speculation’, it remains unclear how the works of 20th century historiographic philosophers (e.g. Adorno, Arendt and Foucault), who practice history philosophically but not as overtly metaphysically as Hegel does, should be related to the endeavor of professional historiography. This is a misbalance I wish to adjust by interpreting the secularization narratives discussed in previous chapters in terms of the methodological frame I construct here.

Secondly, it is worth reflecting on the questions raised earlier because the subject matter of ‘secularization’ continues to be relevant. This becomes clear when considering the current discourse on ‘postsecularism’. Postsecularism constitutes a wide-reaching interdisciplinary discourse on modernity and secularization that involves prominent thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Peter Berger, Jürgen Habermas, and Gianni Vattimo.⁶ In this discourse various issues that were central to the older German secularization debate are once again put up for discussion. I will argue below that there are not only significant parallels between the older German secularization debate and the contemporary postsecularist debate but also that we can find similar problems in both discourses. These problems center on the difficulty of rationally arbitrating between various incompatible grand historical-philosophical narratives, narratives that adherents of a positivist view of historiography might regard as equally ‘subjective’ or conjectural. Hence, we can assume that the undertaking of this final chapter is relevant and indeed timely.

In this chapter, I first expound on the parallels and the inherent problems that arise in both debates. I will then offer a methodological reflection on the debates with the help of two key concepts: Richard Rorty’s notion of ‘*Geistesgeschichte*’ and Walter B. Gallie’s theory of ‘essentially contested concepts’. After having identified the secularization narratives from the previous chapters as *Geistesgeschichten*, I will address the question how these narratives relate to the ‘speculative philosophies of history’ of, for instance, Hegel, by focusing in particular on Löwith’s and Blumenberg’s accounts. Moving beyond Rorty’s depiction of the genre, I focus also on the different functions and purposes of *Geistesgeschichte*, in particular the political dimension of the genre. In order to do so, I will refer to the recent work of David Carr on the ‘practical’ efficacy of grand narratives. I will then identify a number of epistemic criteria that help evaluate the quality of different *Geistesgeschichten*. In the final sections of this chapter, I will use examples from previous chapters to put forward an image of historiography as a pluralistic endeavor in which multiple modes of historical engagement ideally coexist and reinforce each other. In the concluding remarks, I return to the topic of postsecularism, addressing the question how our investigation into the older secularization debate benefits contemporary debates on the same set of essentially contested concepts.

Parallels between the Secularization Debate and Postsecularism

‘The Postsecular Turn’ and Postmodern Postsecularism (Rorty and Vattimo)

First, let us turn to a cursory exposition of the parallels between the German secularization debate, discussed in previous chapters, and the contemporary postsecularism discourse. One way of understanding the ‘postsecular turn’ is by highlighting a change in the use of the concept of ‘secularization’. In a recent article, Herbert De Vriese notes that academic scholarship on secularization has for a long time been divided into two separate discourses: on the one hand there is what he calls the philosophical debate on secularization – which coincides with the German debate that is the focus of my investigation – and on the other we find

6 Cf. Taylor, *Secular Age* (2007); Berger, *Desecularization of the World* (1999); Vattimo and Rorty, *The Future of Religion* (2005); Habermas and Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization* (2006).

the empiricist, sociological-scientific ‘secularization theory’.⁷ The latter also originated in the 1960’s but was initially more of an Anglo-American affair. One of the main differences between these debates lies in their initial definitions of the concept of secularization: whereas in the German-philosophical context ‘secularization’ tended to signify a *transitive* (or qualitative) process in which a modern phenomenon is regarded as a secularized (transformed or alienated) version of a religious equivalent (‘X is a secularized Y’), hereby describing a hidden presence of a religious element in secular-modern disguise, the sociological secularization theorists were more concerned with secularization as an *intransitive* (or quantitative) process that denotes a gradual and unambivalent disappearance of religion.⁸

Contemporary postsecularism lifted the barrier between the philosophical and sociological-scientific discourses in terms of the interpretation of the concept of secularization. The so-called ‘postsecular turn’, then, should not only be understood as the moment that sociological secularization theorists, such as Peter Berger in *The Desecularization of the World* (1999), realized that new data has ‘falsified’ their initial secularization hypothesis. It should also be interpreted as indicative of a growing recognition that the “religious-secular binary” itself, presupposed in the ‘intransitive’ concept of secularization, is not clear-cut or unproblematic.⁹ The arrival of postsecularism entailed, among other things, that the concept of secularization was broadened to accommodate the sense that secularization does not necessarily imply a decline of religion but could also describe its *transformation* – as explored in the earlier German debate. Indeed, we have already seen that ‘secularization’ can be defined either as a transformation of a religious substance, as a structural analogy between the secular and the religious spheres, or as a reoccupation of a religious function. Hence, it is not surprising that we can find various different analogues to the ‘German’ notion of secularization, i.e., as the ambivalent persistence of religious elements in secular guise, in contemporary discussions on religion and modernity, especially in the academic postsecularist discourse.¹⁰

The transitive conception of secularization can be found throughout the postsecularist discourse. Indeed, apart from the protean nature of postsecularism, it is possible to distinguish a distinct line of thought in postsecularism that is worth paying attention to because of the remarkable way in which it resonates with the Löwith-Blumenberg debate. Interestingly, this line of thought stems from postmodernism’s anti-metaphysical “incredulity towards metanarratives”, in Lyotard’s phrasing. The postmodern critique of metanarratives can also be

7 De Vriese (2016) pp.35-37. Cf. McLennan (2010). Berger’s *Sacred Canopy* (1967) is often cited as representative of the old ‘secularization theory’, e.g., by Gorski and Altinordu (2008, pp.56-61).

8 De Vriese (2016) pp.33-40; Lübke (1965) p.61; Blumenberg (1983) pp.9-11, 16; Ruh (1980) p.355. On the distinction between transitive/intransitive secularization, cf.: Zabel (1968, pp.27-39). Fincke (2009, pp.130-131) distinguishes between qualitative and a quantitative secularization.

9 Berger (1999) pp.1-18. Fincke (2009, p131) writes: “the ‘post-secularist’ who is surprised and, probably, disappointed by the lack of any ‘death of religion’, would presumably be the sort who had expected the success of this kind of quantitative secularization.”

10 Cf. De Vriese (2016); Hildebrandt, Brocker and Behr (2001); Cortois and Vanheeswijck (2016). This concept can also be found outside of postsecularism, see for instance: Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (2019). Andrew Sullivan (2018), a columnist for *New York Magazine* and prominent critic of Donald Trump, has for instance voiced his concern that Americans are enticed by ‘surrogate religions’, both Left and Right: “We have the cult of Trump on the right, a demigod who ... can do no wrong. And we have the cult of social justice on the left ... They are filling the void that Christianity once owned...” Another example: Thierry Baudet, leader of the Dutch Right-populist party *Forum voor Democratie* depicted belief in the reality of climate change as ‘secularized diluvialism’. In the same speech he also uses the same concept in a positive sense: “Als FvD’ers weten wij dat je de metafysische grondslagen van het christendom niet hoeft te aanvaarden om toch de wederopstandingsgedachte als leidend motief ... van de westerse beschaving te kunnen aanvaarden.” Cf. Tempelman (2019).

found in postsecularist discourse, in which case it is directed against the metanarrative of ‘Secularization’. Lyotard himself already noted, in vein with Löwith and Blumenberg, that there is a continuity between the modern metanarrative of progress and religious eschatology, even though the former tends to conceal these religious roots: “Although secularized, the Enlightenment narrative, Romanticist or speculative dialectics, and the Marxist narrative deploy the same historicity as Christianity, *because they preserve the eschatological principle*.”¹¹ The upshot of this postmodern critique is that all metanarratives are somehow metaphysical in nature, betraying a religious origin. Note, for instance, how Richard Rorty in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989) appropriates the ‘idolatry-topos’ in reference to Blumenberg, who he thereby cleverly enlists for the project of postmodernism:

I can crudely sum up the story which historians like Blumenberg tell by saying that once upon a time we felt a need to worship something which lay beyond the visible world. Beginning in the seventeenth century we tried to substitute a love of truth for a love of God, treating the world described by science as a quasi divinity. Beginning at the end of the eighteenth century we tried to substitute a love of ourselves for a love of scientific truth, a worship of our deep spiritual or poetic nature, treated as one more quasi divinity. ... Blumenberg ... suggests that we try to get to the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi divinity, where we treat *everything* – our language, our conscience, our community – as a product of time and chance.¹²

Indeed, there is a marked presence of postmodernist authors, such as Jacques Derrida, Vattimo, and Rorty, in the postsecularist discourse.¹³ Assumedly, postmodernists reached the conclusion that ‘Secularization’ operates as a quasi-metaphysical metanarrative, which means that a-religious postsecularists strive towards the “secularization of secularism”. This signifies the de(con)struction of secularism in favor a more thorough disenchantment instead of ‘a return of religion’.¹⁴ In this vein, Gregor McLennan has noted in his article ‘The Postsecular Turn’ (2010) that the postsecularism of Talal Asad and Judith Butler should be considered as “*intra*-secular rather than *anti*-secular” – that is, as a secularist self-critique.¹⁵ For our purposes we can state that the salient feature of the postmodern critique of Secularization is not only that it ‘secularizes Secularization’. There also exists a clear parallel if not a more or less direct line of influence, as Jean-Claude Monod has shown in a recent article, between the postmodern aversion to metanarratives (e.g., Foucault and Lyotard) and the ‘German’ aversion to speculative philosophies of history (present among nearly all the authors we have discussed in previous chapters except for Taubes). Both camps reject speculative metanarratives as ‘surrogate eschatologies’ that legitimate the *Ersatzreligionen* which either characterize modernity (Löwith) or constitute its ‘evil other’ (Marquard, Blumenberg).¹⁶ In both intellectual traditions it is claimed that religious elements such as eschatology do not necessarily disappear with the advent of modernity but that they can also be transformed into (seemingly) secular

11 Lyotard (1997) p.97 (emphasis added). Cf. Monod (2016) pp.10-12. In Blumenberg’s case (1983, pp.48-50), speculative philosophy ‘reoccupies’ the position left behind by providence.

12 Rorty (1989) p.22. For his views on Blumenberg, cf.: Rorty (1984, pp.56-57, 72) and (1983). A similar atheist iteration of the idolatry-topos is offered by Gray (2019, p.1).

13 Cf. Derrida and Vattimo, *Religion* (1998); Vattimo and Rorty (2005); Rorty, *An Ethics for Today* (2011).

14 McLennan (2010) p.4. Cf. Vattimo and Rorty (2005) pp.29-40.

15 McLennan (2010) pp.18-19.

16 Monod (2016) pp.8-15.

metanarratives. When placed in the service of the anti-metaphysical thought of, for instance Rorty, postsecularism adds to this picture the conclusion that the narrative of ‘Secularization’ can also contain traces of metaphysics, especially once it becomes analogous to the metanarrative of ‘Progress’.¹⁷

Gianni Vattimo is another prominent representative of the postmodern and post-metaphysical brand of postsecularism. Contrary to Rorty (and by extension to Blumenberg and Löwith), Vattimo sees any continuity between Christianity and its transitively ‘secularized’ derivations in a much more positive light. He echoes Taubes in affirming the emancipatory potential of Christianity and regards secularization as the necessary “historical unfolding of Christianity” – that is, as its realization.¹⁸ Vattimo’s “weak thought” supposes that the post-modern farewell to metanarratives, metaphysics and Truth in favor of free-floating interpretations and irony constitutes the end result of the process of the “weakening and dissolution of (metaphysical) Being”.¹⁹ This entails that the violence that supposedly underlies all metaphysical truth-regimes is gradually replaced by a spirit of friendship and cheerful nihilism. In the 1990’s, Vattimo experienced his own ‘postsecular turn’ and subsequently reinterpreted his theory of ‘weak thought’ as an iteration of the Christian story of *kenosis*: the immanentization of the divine. Building forth on René Girard’s work, Vattimo regards the Christian Incarnation as the moment in which the Father – the God of metaphysics, violence and authority – becomes replaced by the Son, the ‘weakened Christ’, who inaugurates a new dispensation of love and universal friendship.²⁰ The suggestion is that any critique of the violence of metaphysics, also of ‘Christianity’, is a realization of the Christian message. Self-proclaimed ‘enemies of Christ’ – Voltaire, Nietzsche and Heidegger – are thus heralded as proponents (*nolens volens*) of the project of the “Christianization of mankind”.²¹

While our civilization no longer explicitly professes itself Christian but rather considers itself by and large a dechristianized, post-Christian, lay civilization, it is nevertheless profoundly shaped by that heritage at its source. This is the reason why I speak of a ‘positive’ secularization as a characteristic trait of modernity.²²

While the quote above might be reminiscent of Löwith’s *Meaning in History*, it is also clear that Vattimo has a very different opinion on how ‘secularization’ must be evaluated. Like Rorty, Vattimo was also familiar with the Löwith-Blumenberg debate (having studied in Heidelberg under Löwith), but unlike Rorty, he decidedly rejects Blumenberg’s idea of the discontinuous, antagonistic relation between Christianity and modernity.²³ Vattimo argues that Löwith was correct by asserting an essential continuity between Christian faith and the modern era and that Blumenberg’s suggestions otherwise put him on a par not only with a naïve version of Enlightenment-thought but also, because he asserts the incompatibility of true Christianity and modernity, with Catholic conservatism.

17 Cf. Rorty’s ‘Anticlericalism and Atheism’, in: *ibid.* and Vattimo (2005) pp.29-41.

18 Michel (2016) p.67. Cf. Vattimo, *Belief* (1999); ‘The Age of Interpretation’ in: *ibid.* and Rorty (2005) pp.43-54; ‘Heidegger and Girard: *Kénosis* and the End of Metaphysics’ in: *ibid.* and Girard (2010) pp.78-87.

19 Vattimo (1999) p.41, cf. pp.10-55.

20 Cf. Vattimo and Girard (2010) pp.23-87; Michel (2016) pp.72-81; Harris (2015) pp.2-6. This theory is of course reminiscent of Joachim of Fiore (a pivotal figure in Taubes’ *Occidental Eschatology*), who Vattimo portrays as a postmodernist *avant la lettre* in *After Christianity* (2002, p.26).

21 Vattimo (1999) p.41. Cf. Nietzsche (2006) p.119.

22 Vattimo (1999) p.43.

23 Harris (2015) pp.6-13; Vattimo (2002) pp.65-70.

[T]he various processes of secularization occurring throughout modernity need not be seen as a leave-taking from the religious source – as is argued by Hans Blumenberg, for example, and by much historiography inspired by the Enlightenment, and also by Catholicism Rather, these can be seen as processes of secularization, application, enrichment, and specification of that source.²⁴

Against this notion of secularization as a radical break, Vattimo proposes that it must instead be seen as a process of “*Verwindung*”: a Heideggerian concept that denotes the “convalescence”, “alteration” and “distortion” of a metaphysical-religious past rather than its “overcoming” or “*Aufhebung*”.²⁵ However, despite Vattimo’s aversion to the Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung*, we might concede that he does position himself in a Hegelian tradition by regarding modernity as the positive realization of Christianity and that this brings him in proximity to a diverse range of authors varying from Jacob Taubes to Friedrich Gogarten. That is, Taubes equally asserted the emancipatory potential of messianic religion in its secular transformations, while Gogarten also regarded ‘secularization’ as the necessary and legitimate outcome of Christianity. One significant difference between both authors and Vattimo is, however, that the latter believes that Christianity’s positive realization in (post-)modernity entails that it becomes fully depleted or exhausted, without leaving a trace of an untranslatable religious residue or an untouched transcendent orientation point.

Liberal Postsecularism (Habermas)

Jürgen Habermas’ contribution to postsecularism has been formative for its development and its recognition as a reputable discourse. Like Vattimo, Habermas also addresses the question of whether ‘secularization’ as a positive transformation of religious elements should be regarded as being exhaustive or not. He offers a different answer, however, by distancing himself from the postmodern line of thought, occupying a liberal position instead, which places him closer to John Rawls and Taylor than to Vattimo.²⁶ Whereas Taylor’s *Secular Age* (2007) forms a complex and voluminous philosophical-historical narrative about the roots of modern secularity, most of Habermas’s contributions to postsecularism form concise papers that are more programmatic in nature and less historiographical in terms of scope.²⁷ The concept of secularization that is put forward by Habermas, already expressed in his 1963 article on Löwith, forms a variation on the ‘transitive-qualitative’ interpretation: it is presented as a dialectical process of the critical reappropriation of religious substance by secular rationality that leaves the religious source itself untouched.²⁸ Western modernity is thus regarded in light of a positive continuity with its religious heritage:

For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor ... Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the

24 Vattimo (2002) p.65 (emphasis added), cf. p.70. It should be noted however that Blumenberg does not explicitly use the term ‘secularization’ as concept in his positive account on the origin of modernity, because he interprets the term in the transitive-substantialist sense.

25 Vattimo (1987) pp.7-17; Harris (2015) pp.3, 10-12; Pecora (2006) pp.20-22.

26 Cf. Habermas and Taylor (2011) pp.60-69; Taylor (1998) pp.38-52; Gorski and Altinordu (2008) p.56.

27 The one exception being Habermas’ recent *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (2019). Cf. *ibid.*, ‘Glauben und Wissen’ (2001) pp.9-15; *Religion and Rationality* (2002); *Dialectics of Secularization* (2006); *Between Naturalism and Religion* (2016).

28 English translation: Habermas, ‘Karl Löwith: Stoic Retreat from Historical Consciousness’ (1983) pp.92-96.

ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, *substantially unchanged*, has been the object of a continual critical reappropriation and reinterpretation. Up to this very day there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a postnational constellation, we must draw sustenance now, as in the past, from this substance. Everything else is idle postmodern talk.²⁹

This is not an ‘identitarian’ claim that Western modernity is or should be *exclusively* Judeo-Christian in a religious sense.³⁰ Habermas, rather, suggests – contra Blumenberg – that the history of modernity should be understood in terms of the positive “learning processes” of the critical appropriation of religious ideas or substances. These substances are placed in the service of the public commonwealth after having been *translated* from a religious, exclusivist ‘dialect’ into the ‘lingua franca’ of a commonly accessible secular rationality.³¹ The concepts of secularity and secularization are not essentially antagonistic to religion in Habermas’ theory, they rather pertain to the transformation from a homogeneous worldview to a pluralistic condition in which multiple worldviews co-exist and ‘secular reason’ forms the language that makes communication between them possible. Habermas emphasizes – contra Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde – that rationally speaking the democratic order should not require justification outside of a quasi-universal Kantian practical reason. However, he also asserts that in terms of *ethical motivation* people need to be able to draw strength and inspiration from their various “comprehensive doctrines” – including religious ones – and to speak their religious dialects in the public sphere so as not to feel alienated from secular society. It is suggested that religion functions as a source that remains inaccessible to secular rationality, but from which on occasion new ideas come to the surface that can be used – after having been translated into secular language – in support of public, democratic aims.³²

Habermas’ postsecularism is essentially liberal in that it focusses on the (re)negotiation and the preservation of the boundary between religion and secularity. He rejects proposals to eliminate this boundary by either denying religion any rightful place of its own or by arguing that religion’s realization is in secularity, like Vattimo does. Habermas wants religion to stay ‘within the bounds of reason’ but he also insists that secular rationality should know its place and not overstretch itself by attempting to either eradicate or deplete the religious substance over which, by its nature, it can have no say.³³ Habermas admits that he endorses “an agnostic,

29 Habermas (2002) pp.148-149 (emphasis added).

30 The claim is rather that awareness of the religious roots of Western modernity is a precondition for a hermeneutical exchange with other, non-Western cultures. “This spur to reflection [on religious rootedness] doesn’t prevent intercultural understanding; indeed it is what makes it possible in the first place.” Habermas (2002) pp.155-156.

31 Habermas (2016) pp.130-140; *ibid.* (2013) pp.625-630; (2006b) pp.1-20; (2019) pp.67-71, 130-135; Gordon (2019) pp.166-167.

32 Habermas (2011) pp.23-28; *ibid.* (2006) pp.24-52. Cf. Böckenförde (1967) p.93. Taylor’s more programmatic writings on (post)secularity approximate Habermas’ theory, in that both philosophers offer a ‘post-secular correction’ to a Rawlsian liberalism. Taylor (1998, pp.38-53; *ibid.* 2011, pp.105-106, 311, 319) for instance adopts Rawls’ idea of the “overlapping consensus” in a similar approach to the question of how social cohesion can be fostered while doing justice to the “fact of pluralism”. The main difference between Taylor and Habermas, as is evinced by a recent discussion between them (2011, pp.60-70), is that the former rejects the latter’s supposed reliance on a Rawlsian-Kantian “reason alone”-argument.

33 Habermas (2001) pp.11-15; *ibid.* (2006) pp.40-52. The Kantian, Enlightenment-inspired faith-reason distinction has also attracted criticism, cf. e.g.: Milbank (2016) pp.81-93; Taylor (2011) pp.318-324.

but non-reductionist philosophical position” that “refrains ... from passing judgment on religious truths while insisting ... on drawing a strict line between faith and knowledge.”³⁴ The political-philosophical concern with drawing boundaries between religion and secularity places Habermas in the same conceptual field as Marquard, Lübke, Böckenförde, and, of course, Schmitt. Indeed, we might add that while Habermas rejects the anti-metaphysical tendency to deny religion any place outside of the private sphere, he also has to shield his theory from attempts at exclusively grounding politics in religion, attempts we have encountered in the theories of Gogarten, Müller-Armack, Böckenförde, and Schmitt. Habermas explicitly engages in a discussion with the liberal-conservatism of Böckenförde as well as with the more extreme position of Schmitt. His postsecularism should thus be seen both as an attempt to accommodate the concerns of those who wish to ‘reconnect’ modernity to its religious ‘soil’, while also avoiding the pitfall of an exclusivist, identitarian illiberalism. He is willing to concede to Schmitt and Böckenförde that the political sphere requires sustenance from the sphere of comprehensive worldviews, while also emphasizing that there needs to be a *plurality* of these worldviews, that secular translation-processes should be in place, and that public goods require a religion-independent rational justification that can do without exclusivist references to metaphysical beliefs.³⁵ Regardless of whether he succeeds in this tenuous balancing act of reserving a place for religion while denying some of its inclinations – e.g. a combination of exclusivism and universalism – it is significant for us that Habermas explicitly takes up issues of political theology (that concerned Schmittians both on the Right and the Left). By reflecting on the positive ‘transitive’ nature of secularization – in line with the reception of Löwith’s thesis (e.g. by Von Weizsäcker and Pannenberg) – he establishes a clear continuity between the older secularization debate and postsecularism.³⁶

Postsecularism and the German Secularization Debate: Similar Problems

This cursory overview of postsecularism demonstrates that the problematic relation between religion and secular modernity is still a hot-button issue and that there are both significant parallels between the older German secularization debate and contemporary postsecularism as well as direct lines of influence. At this stage, however, it has also become clear that similar methodological problems emerge. That is, many philosophical disagreements on this topic revolve around the different ways in which the central concepts in the debates are defined and evaluated, the most important of these concepts being ‘Christianity’ (or ‘religion’ in general), ‘modernity’ and of course ‘secularization’.³⁷ The problem is not merely that opinions strongly diverge on what the precise nature of these phenomena is but that there does not seem to be a way to arbitrate between the different interpretations, for lack of a widely agreed-upon, neutral ‘standard definition’ of any of these concepts. Even the seemingly neutral and scientific definition of secularization that was popular in the Anglo-American sociological paradigm of the 1960’s has assumedly been ‘unmasked’ by (postmodern) postsecularists as a ‘crypto-metaphysical metanarrative’, along with the presupposition that ‘raw data’ itself can tell us everything we

34 Habermas (2006b) p.16.

35 Contra Böckenförde: Habermas (2006) pp.21-52; contra Schmitt: *ibid.* (2011) pp.15-28.

36 Habermas (2013) pp.623-630; *ibid.* (2019) pp.40-74 Cf. Garver (1990) p.257.

37 Cf. Dallmayr (2012) p.964; Griffioen (2016) pp.189-191. Michel (2016, pp.67-81) provides a more specific example. He demonstrates how the divergence between the philosophies of Marcel Gauchet and Vattimo centers on their different interpretations of the Christian concept of the ‘Incarnation’.

need to know about this complex cultural process. The fact that many postsecularist authors have since then converged on a renewed appreciation of a qualitative-intransitive conception of secularization does not mean that they have reached a common ground of agreement. On the contrary. We have already seen in the older German secularization debate that regarding ‘secularization’ as an ambivalent transformation rather than an unambivalent disappearance raises a host of new questions. What is the exact nature of this transformation or continuity: functional or substantive (and does this matter)? If X is a secularized Y, then how should both X and Y be evaluated, both on its own and vis-à-vis the other central concepts that are at play? What are the ethical-‘juridical’ implications of this transferal in terms of legitimacy or illegitimacy and, additionally, what remains of the source of this transferal (Y) after it has occurred: is it depleted, hidden, or left untouched?

What appears to be lacking when it comes to a concept such as ‘secularization’ is a commonly accessible reference point that can be grasped in purely descriptive terms. Indeed, it is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid a normative element entering into any definition of such a concept. Furthermore, disagreements between different accounts never simply center on the definition and evaluation of an isolated single concept (e.g., secularization). They also necessarily involve the definition of other concepts that are intrinsically connected with the first. In other words, one’s definition and evaluation of ‘Christianity’ and of ‘modernity’ determine how one subsequently perceives ‘secularization’ (and vice versa).³⁸ Simply put, if one thinks that modernity is good and that religion is bad, then one will think positively about secularization, provided that secularization is taken in the *intransitive* sense, namely as the unambivalent disappearance of religion. If it is taken in the transitive sense, namely as the secret survival of religion, then secularization will be seen as something bad.³⁹ Evidently, the whole configuration changes if one of these variables is defined or evaluated differently. Authors have a reasonable amount of freedom in conceiving of these definitions, because if they are forced by the logic of their own accounts (i.e., by the definitions they attributed to other concepts) to accept a certain evaluation of a concept that does not correspond with their desired outcome, they can readjust their definitions in accordance with their aims.⁴⁰ The point, however, is that these concepts are usually inextricably connected to each other in an account and that their definitions cannot be changed without potentially damaging the structure of the account itself, since these concepts form parts of a coherent whole. One might say that they constitute elements of a consistent *narrative*.

Indeed, regardless of whether the account takes the form of a fully-fledged narrative, we can contend that authors such as Habermas and Vattimo, but evidently also Blumenberg, Löwith and Schmitt, present us with a certain story about how, for instance, modernity came into being *through*, *despite* or *in reaction to* its religious past. In other words, these accounts form normative and philosophical histories of modernity, and as such we are dealing with historical narratives of some sort, albeit not purely descriptive ones. These narratives form philosophical histories that are placed in the service of an evaluative diagnosis of the present condition that seeks to explain, for instance, the uneasy place that religion occupies in modern society. But what can these narratives actually teach us about history? After all, they appear to be far

38 Cf. Connolly (1993) pp.10-14.

39 An analogous issue, which separates Löwith from Marquard and Blumenberg, is whether ‘speculative philosophy of history’ is deemed intrinsically modern or essentially anti-modern. If the former is maintained, and if it is assumed that philosophy of history is detrimental, then this forms an indictment of modernity. If the latter is maintained instead then it indicts ‘anti-modernity’, as Marquard for instance asserts.

40 One strategy for instance is to divide one concept into two – by e.g. differentiating between ‘good secularization’ and ‘bad secularization’ (cf. Gogarten, 1966).

removed from the Rankean ideal of ‘professional historiography’, which prescribes a strictly descriptive reconstruction of the past that eschews normative, presentist or speculative biases. Furthermore, what role do problematic concepts such as ‘modernity’ and ‘secularization’ play in such narratives and how does this differ from the role they usually or ideally play in professional historiography? In order to arrive at answers to these questions, it is necessary to reflect on the historiographical dimension that co-constitutes the philosophical secularization narratives we are concerned with and to find a way of identifying the nature, scientific status, and function of the particular genre – as ideal-type – with which they can be identified.

Geistesgeschichte and Essentially Contested Concepts

Rehabilitation of the ‘Speculative’ Element in Historiography

We have at this point we entered the field of historical theory, otherwise known as the ‘philosophy of history’.⁴¹ First, the term ‘philosophy of history’ demands some clarification because in previous chapters we have already encountered this term as a signifier for a type of historical metaphysics that has received a bad reputation in the 20th century. This is the ‘speculative philosophy of history’ of, for instance, Hegel, Comte, and Marx. Its poor reputation is the result of a two-sided attack on this particular brand of philosophy. Scholars of the analytical tradition – most famously Karl Popper – criticized speculative philosophy of history from an epistemological perspective and discarded it as ‘apriorist’ and ‘metaphysical’, or simply as bad historiography *and* as bad philosophy – not in the last place because it is a combination of both.⁴² On the other hand, critics in the continental tradition tend to ignore epistemological issues and reject speculative philosophy of history exclusively for ethical reasons, namely because of its supposed complicity in the horrors of the early 20th century and/or a general ‘malaise of modernity’.⁴³ It is not surprising that the contribution of Löwith has been significant to the development of this particular line of critique, as David Carr and Arthur Danto attest, but we must remember that the aversion to *Geschichtsphilosophie* was widespread in the German secularization debate and can also be found in the work of Blumenberg and Schmitt, for instance.⁴⁴ Scholars in the Anglo-American (analytical) tradition had meanwhile devised a distinction between ‘critical philosophy of history’ and ‘speculative philosophy of history’. The first was considered to be a legitimate philosophical enterprise, functioning roughly speaking as the epistemology of professional *historiography*, whereas the latter was “relegated to the trashcan of history.”⁴⁵

In time, this clear-cut distinction between an illegitimate ‘speculative’ and a legitimate ‘critical’ philosophy of history lost the air of self-evidence with which it was asserted by analytically inclined historical theorists. A possible reason could be that the strictly empiricist

41 In line with Paul (2015, pp.9-15), I favor the term ‘historical theory’ over ‘(analytical) philosophy of history’, since it not only avoids confusion but also circumvents the problematic distinction between speculative- and analytical/critical philosophy of history.

42 Paul (2015) pp.9-12; Carr (2014) pp.74, 80-82, 99-104. Cf. Popper, *Open Society and its Enemies* (2008); *ibid.* *The Poverty of Historicism* (1961).

43 Evidently, there is an ethical dimension to Popper’s critique as well, as becomes clear in his *Open Society and its Enemies*, which is not dissimilar to criticisms we have already encountered in the German debate. For instance, his famous quote “[t]he attempt to make heaven on earth invariably produces hell” (2008, p.262) could just as well have appeared in Voegelin’s *New Science of Politics* or Löwith’s *Meaning in History*.

44 Danto (1968) pp.6, 9; Carr (2014) pp.99-104; Blumenberg (1983) pp.35, 48-450; Schmitt (2009) pp.167-168.

45 Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1968) pp.1-16. Cf. Paul (2015) pp.9-12. Quote: Taylor (1984) p.20.

presuppositions that underlie the differentiation have not weathered the ‘narrative turn’ and the advance of postmodernism in historical theory very well.⁴⁶ This relates to another shift, namely the appraisal of ‘speculation’ in history: since the early 1970’s, historical theorists such as Haskell Fain, Hayden White, Peter Munz and more recently David Carr, have not only questioned whether a rigid boundary between professional historiography and the ‘philosophical’ or ‘speculative’ engagement with history is tenable (put simply: because both ultimately rely on subjective interpretations and are equally removed from the past itself), they have also contributed to a tentative rehabilitation of ‘speculative’ grand historical narratives.⁴⁷ In his recent book *Experience and History* (2014) Carr encapsulates this movement towards the acceptance of philosophical historiography. He rejects the term ‘speculative’ because of its pejorative connotations and argues that these grand historical narratives fulfill genuine needs and legitimate functions that are not primarily epistemic but rather practical and ethical in nature. In short, he argues that these narratives help individuals to come to terms with their historicity and to assert their identities as historical beings who are part of larger collectives or “we-subjects”. Carr thus scolds those historians and historical theorists who remain perpetually surprised when discovering the popularity of ‘speculations’ on the nature of modernity or the purpose of history outside of professional/academic historicist accounts, such as *The End of History* (Fukuyama), *The Clash of Civilizations* (Huntington), or more recently *Homo Deus* (Harari) and *Enlightenment Now!* (Pinker). This popularity, Carr suggests, is not only natural but also justified.⁴⁸

In line with Carr, I will pursue the claim that the grand historical secularization narratives we encountered in previous chapters should be interpreted in a similar way. In their approach to history these accounts attempt to fulfill certain functions – of which a practical-ethical diagnosis of the present condition is perhaps most important – that traditionally fall outside of the jurisdiction of professional historiography but that correspond with legitimate needs.⁴⁹ A salient feature of this claim is that this entails that the narratives of, e.g., Löwith, Blumenberg and Marquard at least bear a family resemblance to the ‘speculative philosophies of history’ that they abhor. Rather than suggesting that they are identical to a type of metaphysical history usually associated with Hegel, I will argue that there exist significant similarities between them in terms of their function, as well as important differences in terms of the claims that they put forward. Firstly, however, we must identify the genre we are discussing.

Geistesgeschichte and Historical Reconstruction (Rorty)

In order to arrive at a satisfactory demarcation of the genre in question I will take my cue from a paper by Rorty, namely ‘The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres’ (1984). The article provides a useful categorization of different ideal-typical approaches to the history of philosophy, distinguished according to their different purposes and attitudes to the past.⁵⁰ As the title

46 Carr (2014) 81-104; Paul (2015) pp.9-15. Prominent examples of (postmodern) narrativism are Ankersmit’s *Narrative Logic* (1981) and White’s *Metahistory* (1973).

47 Fain, *Between Philosophy and History* (1970); Munz, *The Shapes of Time* (1977); Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (1986); *ibid.* (2014). Cf. Skinner (1990).

48 Carr (2014) pp.78-79. This rehabilitation of ‘grand narratives’ corresponds with pleas in historiography for a return to *longue-durée* perspectives in which representations of the past are related to a shared future, or for ‘synthesizing’ approaches to history that integrate the results of the differentiated and increasingly specialized discourse of professional historiography into ‘big pictures’. Cf., respectively: Guldi and Armitage (2014); Ankersmit (1990) pp.230-253.

49 Cf. Carr (2014) pp.105-140; Bernstein (1991) pp.102-122; Popper (2008) p.297.

50 I hereby further develop a methodological frame that I have devised earlier (Griffioen, 2016).

suggests, Rorty distinguishes four approaches to the history of philosophy, namely “doxography”, “rational reconstruction”, “historical reconstruction”, and finally “*Geistesgeschichte*.”⁵¹ Near the end of the article a fifth genre suddenly appears, “intellectual history” that functions as an ‘*aufgehoben*’ variety of historical reconstruction and that in turn engenders a new, self-conscious version of *Geistesgeschichte*.⁵² I will return to this fifth genre, intellectual history, at a later stage of the current exposition because I contend that it helps to explain the function of the analyses of Hermann Lübbe and Hermann Zabel (discussed in Chapter 5) in the secularization debate. For now, only two of these genres – *Geistesgeschichte* and historical reconstruction – are pertinent to our discussion. *Geistesgeschichte* provides the template for the type of philosophical historiography I am concerned with here, while historical reconstruction can function as a placeholder for the historicist, Rankeian brand of professional historiography. I will focus on both genres, not only because this will help illuminate the specificity of *Geistesgeschichte*, but also because I will eventually argue that it is primarily through a reciprocal, constructive cooperation between the two approaches that *Geistesgeschichte* can truly be fruitful.

First, historical reconstruction signifies the endeavor of modern, professional historians to understand the past “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*” – to use Ranke’s well-known dictum. This dictum represents a historicist research ethos that stipulates that the past should be understood as objectively and non-anachronistically as possible, i.e., strictly on its own terms.⁵³ Evidently, professional historicism has not remained blind to the ‘crisis of historicism’ or to the new hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, both of which indicate that this objectivism is an unobtainable goal. Quentin Skinner for instance states:

I am ... pleading for a history of philosophy which, instead of purveying rational reconstructions in the light of current prejudices, tries to avoid these as much as possible. Doubtless they cannot be avoided altogether. It is deservedly a commonplace of hermeneutic theories that, as Gadamer in particular has emphasized, we are likely to be constrained in our imaginative grasp of historical texts in ways that we cannot even be confident of bringing to consciousness. All I am proposing is that, instead of bowing to this limitation and erecting it into a principle, we should fight against it with all the weapons that historians have already begun to fashion in their efforts to reconstruct without anachronism the alien *mentalités* of earlier periods.⁵⁴

In other words, ‘objectivity’ – taken here as the ideal of doing full justice to the “otherness of the past” by avoiding harmful anachronism and by suspending evaluative judgements – might lie beyond reach, but it can and should function as a “regulative ideal” or a common goal for this genre of historiography.⁵⁵

It can be argued that in absence of the possibility of direct access to the past, the shared ideal of ‘objectivism’ takes the form of a professional reverence for historical evidence, out of which a broadly agreed upon body historical facts can be construed that is affirmed by a rational scholarly consensus. Hence, while these facts are not simply ‘given’, they are also more

51 Rorty (1984) pp.52-54, 61-65. Respectively, “doxography” and “rational reconstruction” denote the genre of “history of Western philosophy” and anachronistic-analytic reconstructions of great philosophers in accordance with contemporary standards. Evidently, Rorty did not coin the term ‘*Geistesgeschichte*’, which is commonly associated with Dilthey, but I will use the term in the former’s specific, delineated sense.

52 Rorty (1984) pp.67-74.

53 Rorty (1984) pp.49-56.

54 Skinner (1984) p.202. Cf. *ibid.* (1990) p.7.

55 Paul (2011) p.17.

than reified opinions or subjective fabrications, as Rorty might suggest, because they are constructed through rational discourse out of actual historical evidence. Herman Paul advocates in this respect a “dialectical objectivity” that is “the product of an *interaction* between historians and their source material.”⁵⁶ It is on the basis of this rational consensus among historians in relation to historical material that one can differentiate between a more or less ‘subjective’ – i.e., ‘prejudiced’ or idiosyncratic – interpretation of the facts.⁵⁷ Furthermore, multiple historical theorists concur that an adherence to the regulative ideal of objectivity need not lead to a full denial of all evaluative-presentist judgements. Rather, they suggest that the evaluative element must be more or less clearly distinguishable from the descriptive function of a historical representation and that the latter should be prioritized. Hence, emphasis is placed more on the extent to which the historical account is receptive to support by empirical evidence rather than on its ethical desirability.⁵⁸ In a ‘weak’ or non-positivist sense, this entails that it is possible to have a reasonable debate over the quality of historical-reconstructionist narratives or argumentations, namely in terms of whether they do justice to the historical material that is ‘emplotted’ or argumentatively arranged by them. In a next section we will discuss a number of criteria by which this can be determined. Reversely, the scope of the *selection* of facts can also be judged on the basis of whether it includes relevant material or, rather, ignores pertinent evidence solely because it does not ‘fit’ into the narrative. It is argued that this process of judging the epistemic veracity of a historical reconstruction takes place in a rational discourse that compares different representations of the past with each other, with the available evidence, and with the scholarly consensus on a certain subject.⁵⁹

Leaving these epistemological considerations aside, Rorty makes an important point by emphasizing the ethical function of historical reconstruction and its ideal of objectivity. He claims that because historical reconstruction ideally confronts us with the “otherness of the past” it allows for a “*self-awareness*” of the present. Because historical reconstruction shows the vast chasm that separates past life-forms, practices and ideas from our own, it can help us to become aware of the contingency or historicity of our own condition. In line with Rorty’s description of this genre, I add that that if we assume that future historians will in all likelihood regard our ‘truths’ with the same amused puzzlement with which we might view past truth claims, this realization leads to a certain humility. Historical reconstruction, in short, yields self-awareness by allowing us to consider the *contingency* of past and present beliefs and practices.⁶⁰

While historical reconstruction ideally provides self-awareness by understanding the past on its own terms, Rorty argues that *Geistesgeschichte*’s function consists in providing “*self-justification*” by attempting to understand the past in light of the present. This means that the aversion to anachronism and subjective prejudices that characterizes historical reconstruction is less constitutive of *Geistesgeschichte*. Instead of effacing an evaluative diagnosis of the present condition, as historical reconstruction traditionally attempts, in *Geistesgeschichte* this is taken as the point of departure. Such a diagnosis usually involves identifying a certain ‘problem’ in the present that requires explanation – in terms of how it came about – and an indication of a solution in the future. The historical narrative that is thus constructed serves as an ‘anamnesis’ that

56 Paul (2015) p.149. Cf. Lorenz (1998) pp.309-329; Kuukkanen (2015); Bevir (1999) pp.78-126; Polkinghorne (1988) pp.175-183.

57 Gadamer (2013, pp.280-296, 306-310) of course distinguishes between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ prejudices, those that enable and those that hinder understanding; I refer here to the latter category.

58 Tucker (2008) pp.7-8; Dray (1989) pp.54-72; Paul (2015) pp.139-153. Paul (p.79) quotes Howard Zinn: “Our [presentist-political] values should determine the questions we ask in scholarly enquiry, but not the answers.”

59 Kuukkanen (2015) pp.116-197; Lorenz (1998) 320-329; Bevir (1999) pp.96-124; Mahajan (1997) p.89.

60 Rorty (1984) pp.50-68. Cf. Griffioen (2013) p.424.

attributes persuasiveness to the normative diagnosis of the present. In short, *Geistesgeschichte* offers self-justification for the particular normative outlook of the author because it allows him/her to conceive of history as something that, if not necessarily then at least plausibly, leads to the conception of the present condition that the author starts out with.⁶¹ I add, using a term from Donald Polkinghorne, that whether a *Geistesgeschichte* is convincing depends on the “explanatory power” of the diagnosis and its corresponding historical anamnesis. In other words, the persuasiveness of a narrative correlates with the range of different phenomena that it can explain or the extent to which the initial problem is broadly recognizable.⁶²

As normative and diagnostic accounts of how a perceived problem in the present emerged out of history, *Geistesgeschichten* are destined to appear more ‘subjective’ than historical reconstructions because they are more overtly determined by the specific evaluative outlooks of their authors. This feature gives rise to a type of discourse in which the rational consensus that historical reconstruction strives for would be unobtainable. But this type of consensus would also not be an adequate goal to pursue, because a *Geistesgeschichte* is typically meant to *convince* an audience into adopting the specific moral standpoint of its author rather than that it tries to reach a neutral-‘objective’ level of agreement beyond such particular standpoints.⁶³ Unlike historical reconstruction, *Geistesgeschichte* as a genre is not naturally oriented towards a rational consensus ‘on what happened’ in history, in as far as that can be separated from more divisive normative questions on how this should be evaluated and what it means to us in the present. This also pertains to how the genre relates to the historical material on which it draws. Typically, a *Geistesgeschichte* would be less concerned with the historical-reconstructionist objective of ‘emplotting’ the historical material in such a way that the historical representation that ensues from it can be separated from the moral and presentist beliefs of its author. *Geistesgeschichten* usually do more than attempt to merely describe ‘what happened’. In other words, they do not try to eliminate our present evaluative judgements nor do they typically try to differentiate clearly between description and evaluation. Rather, such narratives seek to connect past and present in a comprehensive story that aims to convey a particular moral. This means that historical facts tend to function more as illustrations in *Geistesgeschichte* than as a principal epistemic priority.⁶⁴ That is not to say that facts are inessential to *Geistesgeschichte*. I will argue below that this genre also requires a commitment to historical truth but that the quality of these normative and ‘speculative’ accounts is less easily measured by a general accordance with a (consensually agreed upon) body of facts, as is ideally the case in historical reconstruction.

Colligatory Concepts and Essentially Contested Concepts

This relates to another difference between the two ideal-typical genres, namely in how they deal with those difficult concepts mentioned earlier: ‘modernity’, ‘Christianity’, and ‘secularization’. The analytical-epistemological branch of historical theory already concerned itself with the

61 Rorty (1984) pp.56-74.

62 Polkinghorne (1988) p.172.

63 Cf. Rorty (1984) pp.53-58. I refer to Tucker’s (2004, pp.29-34) contention that professional historiography (i.e., historical reconstruction) should strive towards a “heterogeneous consensus”, that can ideally be reached by people with a variety of different moral-political background beliefs.

64 Cf. White (1980) pp.20-21; *ibid.* (1973) pp.427-428. Historical reconstructions also do not simply reflect a ‘given’ body of facts – i.e., they are not photocopies of historical reality. Walsh (1967b, p.80) notes: “historical facts can never speak for themselves: no statement of fact, however simple, is entirely independent on the outlook of the historian and its readers.”

nature of concepts such as these. William H. Walsh, who wrote the canonical *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (1951), introduced the term “colligatory concepts” to signify interpretative forms that originate in the mind of the historian rather than in the historical material itself and that help to select and “illuminate” an initially disparate set of facts or “a largely unconnected mass of material”.⁶⁵ Thus, a heterogeneous range of phenomena such as, for instance, Petrarch’s ascent of Mont Ventoux, the art of Botticelli and the politics of the Medici dynasty can be brought together – placed in a meaningful perspective – under the ‘colligatory concept’ of ‘the Renaissance’, even when this concept cannot be directly ‘found’ in or distilled from the material itself. In historical theory the discussion about colligation focused on the question what the relation is between the colligatory concept – and by extension the historian’s narrative itself – and the facts or data it colligates. The question is whether the historical material is infinitely flexible and can fit in any interpretative form – as e.g. Frank Ankersmit asserts – or whether it can resist certain interpretations, as Walsh himself suggests.⁶⁶ What however appears to be absent from this particular debate is the acknowledgement that such concepts – e.g. ‘modernity’ – often possess an element of inherent *normativity* and that this normative dimension tends to give rise to controversy. This normative dimension can either be ignored or consciously suspended if a concept such as ‘modernity’ is used as a colligatory concept in historical reconstruction, but that evidently does not mean that the latent normative contestability of such concepts has thereby disappeared. Furthermore, we have already seen that the definition of one such concept has a bearing on how other concepts must be defined in a single narrative in order for it to be coherent.⁶⁷ This is certainly the case with the colligatory concepts we are concerned with: modernity, secularization, disenchantment and Christianity. Moreover, while the meaning of ‘the Renaissance’ might appear less controversial than the kindred concept of ‘modernity’, it is still hardly a purely neutral or descriptive term as it signifies a glorious ‘rebirth’ at the end of a dark period, ‘the Middle Ages’.⁶⁸

In order to do justice to the fact that many colligatory concepts to a lesser or greater extent lack universally acceptable definitions and are often normatively charged, I introduce another element to this methodological exposition, namely the theory of “essentially contested concepts”, first proposed by Walter B. Gallie and later adopted by scholars such as William E. Connolly.⁶⁹ Gallie introduced this term to denote normative, complex and open-ended concepts that are central and indispensable to academic or public debate, but on which no universal agreement can be reached since “it is ... impossible to find a *general principle* for deciding which of two contestant uses of an essentially contested concept really ‘uses it best’.”⁷⁰ These concepts will necessarily yield a wide range of contradictory interpretations, but they are nonetheless considered important enough by their users to refrain from dismissing them

65 I use the 1967 republished edition. Walsh (1967) pp.59-63; *ibid.* ‘Colligatory Concepts in History’ (1967b) pp.75-79; Kuukkanen (2015) p.123.

66 Walsh (1967b) pp.75-83; Ankersmit (1981) pp.100-147. Cf. Kuukkanen (2015) pp.97-115; Ricoeur (1980) pp.176-180; White (1978) pp.46-47, 64-65.

67 Cf. Connolly (1993) pp.14, 22-35.

68 Taubes (2009) argues that the Antiquity/Middle Ages/Modernity schema is itself a ‘secularization’ of Joachim’s tripartite theology of history, which would indicate that it still contains the evaluative charge of its theological origin. Cf. Davis (2008) pp.77-102.

69 Gallie (1956) pp.167-198; *ibid.* *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (1968) pp.157-191; Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse* (1993) pp.9-44, 139-173, 213-243. Cf. Garver (1990) pp.251-270; Collier et. al. (2006) pp.211-246; MacIntyre (1973) pp.1-9.

70 Gallie (1968) p.184.

altogether as “radically confused”.⁷¹ In short, Gallie regards these concepts as essential points of reference in public and academic discourse that can however never be comprehensively represented by single definitions. Significantly, this means that a *competition* between a plethora of different interpretations does better justice to the inexhaustible ‘original’ than any single attempt at grasping its meaning.⁷² Gallie’s own examples of essentially contested concepts are limited to art, democracy, social justice and Christianity, but this list can be extended to include modernity and secularization as well.⁷³ The conditions of essential contestability that Gallie lists and the analogy he employs to explain his theory – of rivalling sports teams that disagree on what sport they are competing in but agree that it is a sport worth pursuing – are determined by the fact that he was mainly concerned with the contestability of terms that are viewed *positively* by all its users, e.g. different artistic schools or Christian creeds.⁷⁴ We however also have to take into account that, as previous chapters have shown, a debate on ‘Christianity’, ‘modernity’ and ‘secularization’ (but the same applies to social justice and even to art and democracy) will not merely involve a broad divergence in positive evaluations of these concepts. It will in all likelihood engender a more fundamental disagreement on whether it is a good or bad thing in the first place.⁷⁵ In short, we have to pay attention to a deeper level of normative contestability that Gallie ignored.

Circling back to the two ideal-typical genres, *Geistesgeschichte* and historical reconstruction, we can begin to see how each genre would deal differently with such concepts. That is, it is conceivable that historical reconstruction needs concepts such as ‘modernity’ or ‘the Renaissance’ in order to colligate and present historical material, i.e., to shape the historical data and bestow a meaningful structure unto it. But a historical reconstruction will presumably fare better if it eschews contestation by either consciously *bracketing* the normative connotations of such a concept if this is an active point of contestation (e.g. ‘modernity’) or by leaving them unaddressed once the evaluative dimension appears less contested and more self-evident (e.g. ‘the Renaissance’).⁷⁶ *Geistesgeschichte*’s role is diametrically opposed to this. Rather than avoiding the contestable nature of such concepts it drives it to the forefront, because it is the aim of a *Geistesgeschichte* to get a certain moral or message across. As such, it is a primary objective of a *Geistesgeschichte* to propagate specific normative definitions of the concepts it uses, in accordance with the viewpoint that the author wants the audience to adopt.⁷⁷ This implies that while historical reconstruction would for instance bracket the Enlightenment-inspired positive appraisal of ‘modernity’ so that it does not distract from the historical material it colligates, *Geistesgeschichte* would

71 Gallie (1968) p.168. He suggests that the difference between a) a positive situation of essential contestedness and b) a negative situation of radical confusion is that in a) the various uses of a concept still purport to refer to one “exemplar”, and that the competition between different usages itself can be considered as a manifestation of the richness of the original exemplar, whereas in b) these two conditions are absent.

72 Gallie (1968) pp.168-191. Such concepts are ‘open-ended’; McIntyre (1973, p.2) calls this an “essential incompleteness.” Cf. Collier et. al. (2006) p.218.

73 Gallie (1968) p.168. Connolly (1993, pp.86-173) for instance focusses on the essentially contested concepts of ‘power’ and ‘freedom’. Garver (1990, pp.251-270) uses ‘religion’ and ‘Christianity’ as examples.

74 Gallie (1968) pp.158-168.

75 Cf. Collier et. al. (2006) p.216.

76 Taylor (1984) demonstrates how ideas – such as the “epistemological model” (pp.18-28) – can become embedded or ‘sedimented’ into (scholarly) practices so that the normative efficacy of these ideas is concealed. In this vein, we might say that the indispensable colligatory framework of historians – including concepts such as ‘the Renaissance’ (rebirth) or ‘the Middle Ages’ (dark ages) – can harbor a covert presentist-normativity that is partly neutralized in scholarly usage but which does not necessarily disappear in this neutralization.

77 Cf. Griffioen (2016) p.203.

either consciously reaffirm it (e.g. Blumenberg), renegotiate its secularist implications (e.g. Christian revisionists such as Von Weizsäcker and Gogarten), or reject it outright and replace it with a negative appraisal (e.g. Löwith and Schmitt).

'Modest' and 'Metaphysical' *Geistesgeschichte*

I will conclude this particular section by addressing the relation between the *Geistesgeschichten* of, for example, Löwith and Blumenberg and the dreaded specter of 'speculative philosophy of history' epitomized by the work of Hegel.⁷⁸ In order to see what the possible similarities are between both types of *Geistesgeschichte* – let us call them for the moment the 'modest' and the 'metaphysical' variety – we have to set them both apart from historical reconstruction in yet another way.⁷⁹ First, it needs to be acknowledged that both types of *Geistesgeschichten* seek to convey more about historical occurrences than 'the facts themselves' permit and it is for this reason that they place more emphasis on the emplotment of the facts rather than that they attempt to employ historical facts as a benchmark to test the veracity of interpretations. Evidently, this depends on the type of claims an author puts forward and on the purpose that a narrative serves.

Any historical narrative will implicitly differentiate between an immediate or 'factual' meaning of an event – e.g. Luther nailed his theses to a door in 1517 to initiate a discussion on indulgences – and its 'underlying significance'. This underlying significance remained unknown to the historical agents themselves or to their immediate successors: Luther unwittingly initiated the Reformation and/or the end of the Middle Ages. In practice, the precise answer to the question what this significance is and how it should be interpreted or evaluated relies on what story the narrator wants to tell. Although the latter type of meaning-attribution can also be found in historical reconstructions, I would argue that the difference between *Geistesgeschichte* – both 'modest' and 'metaphysical' – and historical reconstruction can be found in the extent to which an evaluative interpretation of the 'underlying significance' is emphasized and forms the actual focal point of the narrative.⁸⁰ As an example I will use Blumenberg's representation of Giordano Bruno, who plays a prominent role in *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* as a vanguard figure of modern self-assertion. A historical-reconstructionist account of Bruno will typically eschew the presentism inherent in the tendency to regard some past figures solely as forerunners of our own time. Hence, it might contain only a few suggestive remarks (usually in the introduction and the conclusion) on the epoch-transgressive nature of his work. By contrast, in Blumenberg's *Legitimacy* Bruno is *primarily* interpreted in light of how his work departed from the confines of medieval thought and how he should be seen as a forerunner of modern thought. Moreover, the concepts 'modernity' and 'the Middle Ages' do not merely function as hermeneutical-conceptual tools that only serve to colligate the historical material, they are presented by Blumenberg as actually existing historical phenomena that possess their own

78 This distinction can also be deduced from Popper (2008, p.297): "We want to know how our troubles are related to the past, and we want to see the line along which we may progress towards the solution of what we ... choose to be our main tasks. It is this need which, if not answered by *rational and fair means*, produces historicist interpretations." (Emphasis added.) Rather than arguing that 'metaphysical' *Geistesgeschichte* is 'irrational' I do suggest that it is more immodest in its claims than, e.g., Löwith's and Blumenberg's accounts. On the interpretation of Hegel in historical theory, cf.: Carr (2014) pp.83-97; White (1973) pp.81-131; Walsh (1967) pp.134-150. They mainly focus on his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.

79 Carr (2014, pp.76-96) calls a Hegelian historiography "metaphysics of history".

80 Cf. Bevir (1999) pp.121-122; Munz (1977) pp.62-112, 258; Mahajan (1997) pp.80-81.

normative content, and between which one can delineate a clear “epochal threshold”.⁸¹ In this vein, Blumenberg can assert that in comparison with Christopher Marlowe’s *Faust*, Bruno is “the real Faust figure of [his] century, in distance from the Middle Ages far in advance of his poetic colleague.”⁸² In short, a *Geistesgeschichte* such as Blumenberg’s is mainly concerned with what a historical phenomenon means to us in the present rather than with how contemporaries might have understood it.⁸³ Bruno is presented as someone who paved the way for modern thought, even though he would not have recognized the concepts ‘Middle Ages’ or ‘the Modern Age’ in the same way we understand these now.

The example indicates another similarity between both types of *Geistesgeschichte*, which separates them from historical reconstruction, namely that the evaluative judgement about the ‘underlying significance’ of historical events is intertwined with the author’s normative and contestable definition of the concepts that are at play. Hence, in *Legitimacy* Bruno is not simply portrayed as a forerunner of ‘the Modern Age’ in a general, widely acceptable sense, but as the forerunner of Blumenberg’s (particular definition of) ‘modernity’: the essentially anti-theistic epoch that constitutes a revolt against the dark ages of theological absolutism.⁸⁴ Once again, this shows that the definitions of concepts such as modernity and the Middle Ages are interconnected: Blumenberg’s portrayal of Bruno as a champion of an essentially anti-theistic Modern Age coincides in *Legitimacy* with the identification of the Christian Middle Ages as the repressive age of theological absolutism. Arguably, it is this tendency to focus on how a historical event or person represents a grand trans-historical development, the meaning of which relates to the main message of the story, that unites both types of *Geistesgeschichte*.

This does not entail that Löwith and Blumenberg offer a ‘metaphysical’ account of modernity, the type that Hegel is associated with. The main difference between a ‘modest’ and a ‘metaphysical’ *Geistesgeschichte* boils down to what kind of claims are made vis-à-vis the trans-historical developments that figure prominently in both.⁸⁵ For instance, a *Geistesgeschichte* like that of Löwith centers on what he perceives to be long-term unintended consequences of the intellectual endeavors of historical agents, such as Joachim of Fiore. These consequences eventually obtain a certain ‘logic’ that can, in retrospect, be discerned philosophically: this is the logic of the secularization of eschatology.⁸⁶ Or, in a similar vein: Blumenberg interprets ‘modernity’ as a long-term, historical project that unites us with forerunners such as Descartes or Bruno even though they had a different conception of what they were doing than we might have.⁸⁷ What Löwith and Blumenberg do *not* claim, however, is that the underlying ‘logic’ of the development in which they situate Joachim and Bruno somehow exists prior to its historical manifestations or that it possesses a certain *telos* that *necessarily* realizes itself in history. Contrary to (a standard reading of) Hegel, Löwith and Blumenberg do not assert the existence of metahistorical *telos* such as the ‘cunning of reason’ that operates largely of its own accord. They describe grand historical movements that can in retrospect

81 Blumenberg (1983) p.587, cf. pp.467, 543; Gordon (2019) p.165; Flasch (2017) pp.483-485, 494-496, 527-545; Ingram (1990) pp.13-14. For a historical-reconstructionist approach to Bruno, cf.: Gattí (2016) pp.xv, 414.

82 Blumenberg (1983) p.382.

83 Cf. Rorty (1984) p.50; Skinner (1984) pp.201-202; *ibid.* (1968) pp.28-29.

84 Blumenberg (1983) pp.457-596; Gordon (2019) p.165; Flasch (2017) pp.544-546. Cf. Rorty (1984, pp.56-61) on *Geistesgeschichte* as canon-formation and the “honorific use” of its central concept, in his case ‘philosophy’, in ours ‘modernity’.

85 This characterization of a Hegelian philosophy of history is loosely based on those provided by Carr (2014, pp.76-97), Walsh (1967, pp.117-165) and White (1973, pp.81-131).

86 Löwith (1949) pp.212-213. Gauchet (1997, e.g., p.104) also claims that historical developments possess an inherent ‘logic’ once they are initiated, but that this does not mean that they *necessarily* occur.

87 Rorty (1984) pp.56-57.

be recognized philosophically (i.e., not purely on the basis of historical facts) but that do not require a special philosophical-metaphysical initiation that would enable one to grasp the timeless truths behind the historical appearances. Nor do the concepts they use (secularization or modernization) obtain their own *agency* – such as ‘Reason’ or ‘Spirit’ in Hegelianism – that can in theory be completely disconnected from the agency of historical individuals. Indeed, Löwith steers clear of asserting that “modern faith in progress” is the necessary outcome of history, not in the last place because beyond his narrative of a tragedy of errors he believes that the wisdom of the Greeks is still within reach. Nor does Blumenberg consider modern “self-assertion” to be the only possible realization of human freedom at the end of history; instead, modern individualism is regarded as an outcome of a trans-epochal dialogue that is itself subject to historical contingency.⁸⁸ In short, Löwith’s and Blumenberg’s accounts comprise philosophical approaches to history that rely heavily on evaluative interpretations of grand trans-historical developments, interpretations that go beyond the purview of professional historians. However, neither Löwith nor Blumenberg – and by extension ‘modest’ *Geistesgeschichte* in general – claim to describe a *telos* that realizes itself in history by necessity and that in theory can be disconnected from the actual thoughts, intentions and actions of historical agents.

The Functions of *Geistesgeschichte*

The Diagnostic Function

Having delineated the genre with which the secularization-narratives of previous chapters can be identified, it has become appropriate to push the investigation further by determining the functions that *Geistesgeschichte* can – and historical reconstruction cannot – fulfill in academic and societal discourse. We will find that *Geistesgeschichte* serves a therapeutic and diagnostic purpose, but this also implies that the genre possesses a divisive, political force. In order to expound on this diagnostic function, I take recourse to Rorty’s notion of “self-justification”, while also borrowing insights from historical theorists such as David Carr. Not only will I indicate how this diagnostic function can be recognized in the secularization debate, we will also find that Lübke’s concept of “Ideenpolitik” and Marquard’s interpretation of the ‘theodicy-motif’ are useful in ascertaining how *Geistesgeschichte* works.

Rorty claims that *Geistesgeschichte*’s primary function consists in yielding positive “self-justification” as opposed to historical reconstruction’s negative sense of “self-awareness”.⁸⁹ In “The Historiography of Philosophy”, the notion of self-justification initially refers to the specific practice of philosophical “canon-formation”. A *Geistesgeschichtler* starts out with a contemporary and “honorific” definition of what ‘philosophy’ is, or rather ought to be, and subsequently constructs a historical narrative that links a succession of past philosophers to each other in accordance with their progressive insight in what we now believe to be true, namely that our current conception of philosophy is the best one. In this direct sense,

88 Hudson (1993, pp.112-114) notes a tension in this respect between Blumenberg’s universalist anthropology and his historicism. Blumenberg considers Christianity to be subject to historical contingency (cf. Gordon, 2019, pp.159-163), and he concedes that “the modern age is unthinkable without Christianity” (1983, p.30). Hence, while the anthropological need that underlies modern self-assertion is not contingent, the precise form it assumes in modernity is a product of historical circumstances, given that it constitutes a reaction to Christian theological absolutism and has to deal with the post-Christian de-divinization of the cosmos.

89 Rorty (1984) pp.49-61. Cf. White (1978) p.48.

Geistesgeschichte justifies the author's particular conception of philosophy by creating a philosophical canon in its image.⁹⁰ Rorty lists Blumenberg alongside Hegel, Heidegger, Foucault and MacIntyre as examples of *Geisteshistoriker*. Indeed, one can recognize the function of canon-formation in *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, for instance in how Blumenberg situates Nicolas of Cusa on the *medieval* (wrong) side and Giordano Bruno on the *modern* (right) side of "the epochal threshold".⁹¹ However, this already suggests that "self-justification" should be understood in a broader sense, because Blumenberg's narrative is not only a defense of modern philosophy but of modernity itself. Similarly, the narratives of the other *Geisteshistoriker* mentioned by Rorty are not only meant to formulate a philosophical canon, but they function as diagnoses of the present condition. Foucault summarized his own project as working toward a "critical ontology of ourselves", in other words, as a philosophical-historical self-interpretation, and it is in this broader sense that *Geistesgeschichte's* aim of self-justification should be understood.⁹² Rorty eventually admits that self-justification involves the author's more general perspective on the present condition and not only his/her conception of philosophy. This becomes clear when he suggests that *Geistesgeschichte* can also be a vehicle for critique of the present condition:

When I say that these are works of self-justification, I of course do not mean that they justify the present state of things, but rather that *they justify the author's attitude towards the present state of things*. Heidegger's, Foucault's, and MacIntyre's downbeat stories condemn present practices but justify the adoption of their author's views towards those practices ... – the same function as is performed by Hegel's, Reichenbach's, and Blumenberg's upbeat stories.⁹³

Geistesgeschichte justifies the author's particular outlook on the present condition by generating a convincing historical genealogy. It is important for a *Geistesgeschichte* that the author and the audience sense that this evaluative outlook is not universally accepted, because otherwise there would be no need to mount a convincing defense of this outlook in the first place. Hence, *Geistesgeschichte* implicitly presupposes a recognition of its own 'contestedness' that is similar in kind to the condition Gallie describes with regard to the use of essentially contested concepts. Gallie asserts that each user of a contested concept somehow realizes that his/her use is indeed contested by others, i.e., that there are other, often incompatible but seemingly reasonable definitions of the same concept at play that are deemed convincing by other people. For that reason, one user will try to convince the audience that her/his use of the concept is the best one among many others.⁹⁴ I add that it is in a similar sense that a *Geisteshistoriker(in)* will be aware of the fact that his/her audience must be *persuaded*

90 Rorty (1984) pp.57-59.

91 Rorty (1984) pp.56-57; Blumenberg (1983) pp.547-596. Similarly, one can recognize the function of "canon-formation" in Löwith's "downbeat" story in *Meaning in History* (1949) – and his *From Hegel to Nietzsche* (1967) – in that it differentiates between authors who stay true to (Löwith's honorific conception of) 'philosophy' (i.e., Burckhardt, Goethe), those who do not (i.e., Joachim, Bossuet, Hegel, Marx), and those fall in between (i.e., Vico and Nietzsche). We will return to Löwith in the next section. The importance to *Geistesgeschichte* of a *honorific* use of 'philosophy' shows the central role that evaluative definitions of essentially contested concepts occupy in this particular genre.

92 Foucault (1984) pp.47-50.

93 Rorty (1984) p.57 (emphasis added).

94 Gallie (1968) p.161: "each party recognises the fact that its own use of [a concept] is contested by those of other parties, and ... each party must have at least some appreciation of the different criteria in the light of which the other parties claim to be applying the concept in question."

to accept a viewpoint that lacks universal acceptability, not in the last place because this outlook will necessarily have a bearing on the essentially contested concepts relevant to it.⁹⁵

This self-justificatory function can be appreciated further by involving metaphors from the realm of medicine – e.g. those of illness, amnesia, therapy and cure – as they help explicate the essentially ‘diagnostic’ potency of *Geistesgeschichte*.⁹⁶ Rorty recognized that *Geistesgeschichte* can serve as a vehicle of critique if an author condemns “present practices” and seeks to reject the status quo. In the case of “downbeat stories” like those of Heidegger and Foucault as well as Löwith, Schmitt and Voegelin, this critical function is evident, but I argue that since *Geistesgeschichte* offers a diagnosis of the present condition it will necessarily contain a critical element, and that this also applies to “upbeat stories” such as Blumenberg’s. Pursuing the medical metaphor we might say that a *Geistesgeschichte* presupposes the existence of a certain ‘ailment’. It then diagnoses how this ailment affects the contemporary condition in which we find ourselves and after conducting anamnesis it prescribes the way towards betterment (if this is deemed viable).⁹⁷ Evidently, each diagnosis will be contestable, because it relies on a particular interpretation of what the problem is, how it pertains to the current condition, and who or what requires to be ‘cured’ in the first place.

To illustrate: if we simply equate the contemporary condition with ‘modernity’ then ‘anti-modern’ authors such as Schmitt, Löwith, and Voegelin would argue that the affliction – let us identify it broadly as ‘human hubris and its disastrous effects’ – is indistinguishable from this current condition. That is, they claim that modernity is an essentially hubristic era and that the only way towards betterment would be to step out of it. By contrast, ‘pro-modern’ and ‘anti-religious’ authors such as Blumenberg and Marquard identify the ailment as ‘absolutism’, an affliction that is the most severe when it takes on a religious form, and then argue that in as far as our current modern condition is essentially ‘post-’ or ‘anti-religious’ it can only remain healthy if we continue to keep ‘absolutism’ at bay. Hence it is clear that “upbeat stories” (as Rorty calls them) like those of Marquard and Blumenberg also contain a critical element, but that it serves a more defensive rather than an offensive purpose vis-à-vis the perceived status quo.⁹⁸ What is at stake in each diagnosis is the identification of a perceived problem, its origin, its relation to our current condition – i.e., whether it is healthy or not – and the presentation of a possible remedy.

This emphasis on the diagnostic function of *Geistesgeschichte* is congruent with Hermann Lübbe’s analysis of the secularization debate from the perspective of *Ideenpolitik* (see Chapter 5), as well as with Marquard’s reflections on the perseverance of the theodicy-template in modern thought. Not only does Lübbe’s approach to the concept of ‘secularization’ as a *Kampfbegriff* correspond with our current focus on its essential contestedness, he also asserted that the different secularization narratives he analyzed shared a similar objective, which is to diagnose a shared albeit undefined sense of cultural *crisis*.⁹⁹ His analysis of the German secularization debate suggests that it should be understood as a sublimated response to its immediate historical context, namely the aftermath of the Second World War. Post-war academic discourse supposedly elevated immediate questions about who or what was to blame for the war and whether the attribution of blame could exonerate the contemporary Federal Republic to a higher

95 Gallie (1968) p.160-168.

96 On the medical metaphor, cf.: Foucault (1984) pp.80, 90; Paul (2017) pp.53-69; Carr (2014) p.156.

97 Cf. Carr (2014) pp.116, 120, 156.

98 Cf. White (1973) pp.22-29. In *Legitimacy* (1983, pp.3-120) Blumenberg’s positive account of the genesis of modernity is preceded by an extensive polemic against attempts of ‘theology’ to undermine modernity’s core principle of self-assertion, that is, one might say, to reinstate the rule of theological absolutism.

99 Lübbe (1965) pp.109-133; *ibid.* (1981) p.52. Cf. Zabel (1968) p.167.

intellectual plane. This meant that these questions were drawn into more abstract reflections on the legitimacy of modernity vis-à-vis what was perceived as a fundamental civilizational crisis. In short, the secularization debate was a form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, according to Lübbe.¹⁰⁰ Hence, the ‘question of guilt’, which initially concerned concrete historical phenomena, was transformed into a more fundamental question of who or what was to blame for a general ‘malaise of modernity’. Beyond the historical context of post-war Germany we can contend that Lübbe’s argument helps us recognize, first of all, that *Geistesgeschichten* should be understood as responses to the perceived challenges of their time. The therapeutic function of ‘*Bewältigung*’ arguably reoccurs in any *Geistesgeschichte*. These narratives usually tend to appeal to a widely shared – albeit essentially undefined – sense of cultural malaise, one that will be interpreted differently in accordance with changing historical circumstances (as postsecularist *Geistesgeschichten* exemplify).¹⁰¹ The question that separates such attempts is whether the contemporary condition coincides with this perceived malaise, as Voegelin, Löwith and Schmitt might argue, for instance, or whether this ailment is essentially foreign to it and must be expunged, as Blumenberg and Marquard claim. Secondly, Lübbe’s analysis helps us recognize that what is often at stake in a *Geistesgeschichte* is not only the proper identification of the precise nature of this malaise but also the identification of the ‘guilty’ party that should be held responsible.

This calls to mind Marquard’s reflections on the function of *theodicy*. I propose that *Geistesgeschichten* will generally, although not necessarily, assume a function that is roughly analogous to Marquard’s interpretation of the theodicy-template, discussed in Chapter 7.¹⁰² This can be maintained because a *Geistesgeschichtliche* diagnosis of a perceived cultural or societal ailment will in all likelihood raise not only questions as to how this problem can be solved, but also about who or what is responsible and whether our present condition remains salvageable. We have discovered that Marquard initially emphasized the offensive function of ‘theodicy’. According to him, the theodicy-template is used in order to identify a perceived ‘evil’ and to differentiate between those who are to blame for this evil and those who are exonerated from blame. In other words, it attributes guilt to one party and designates another party as part of the solution. I have concluded upon reflection that this function can also be recognized in Marquard’s own writings, namely in how he identifies Leftist progressive-utopian thought with ‘anti-modernity’ (*Gegennezeit*) and blames it for all of modernity’s woes.¹⁰³ My point is that, given its diagnostic function, *Geistesgeschichte* can and often does operate in a fashion similar to Marquard’s interpretation of the theodicy-template. In as far as a *Geistesgeschichte* is centered on

100 Lübbe (1965) pp.109-117; *ibid.* (1981) p.62; (1964) pp.236-237. In this context generational differences are often deemed important. This could also be a fruitful way in which to understand the German secularization debate: from this vantage point, Löwith and Schmitt represent the older, fatalistic generation that was content with declaring the bankruptcy of modernity, whereas Blumenberg and Marquard appear as representatives of the cautiously optimistic generation of the post-war *Wiederaufbau*, while Taubes – even though he himself was older – can be seen to represent the radical, New-Leftist generation of 1968. Cf. Marquard (1989) pp.3-21; Flasch (2017) pp.474-489.

101 One example of postsecular *Geistesgeschichte* as *Kontingenzbewältigung*. Dreyfus and Kelly (2011) pp.1-21.

102 Not necessarily: *Geistesgeschichte* can also operate in a more dispersive rather than integrative mode, which means that would it tend to eschew mono-linear plotlines and straightforward ‘heroes versus villains’ role divisions. Cf. Foucault (1984) pp.76-100. On the dispersive/integrative distinction, see: White (1973) p.15; Ankersmit (1990) pp.45-52, 63-64. However, such *Geistesgeschichten* are arguably absent from the German secularization debate.

103 Marquard (1982) pp.52-82; *ibid.* (1984) pp.31-36; (1991) pp.8-25 Cf. Styfhsals (2019) pp.113-131. This is not to disqualify Marquard’s thesis. I rather contend that this theodicy-pattern is a common feature of ‘normal’, i.e., ‘non-dispersive’, *Geistesgeschichten* and that it occurs in varying degrees of intensity. Note for instance that notwithstanding Popper’s critique of ‘historicism’ his own defense of the *Open Society* (2008) functions as a type of ‘self-conscious’ *Geistesgeschichte* (p.307) that is directed, as the rest of the title states, against *its Enemies*.

a delineated, single problem – i.e., if it condenses a general and undefined sense of cultural malaise into *one* distinct issue – it must necessarily explain *how* this problem came about. I contend that this usually involves a more or less explicit attribution of guilt. Rorty already alludes to the fact that *Geistesgeschichte* as canon-formation tends to differentiate between historical figures who fall on the ‘right’ and those who fall on ‘wrong’ side of a particular benchmark. Based on our analysis of the philosophies of Taubes and Marquard it is clear that a *Geistesgeschichte* can indeed lend itself to a ‘political diagnosis’ in this sense. We have seen that Taubes never ceased to differentiate between proponents of retrogressive thought (for instance that of Gehlen and Heidegger) on the one hand and proponents of emancipatory thought (varying from Marcion to Marx) on the other, whereas Marquard displays an exact similar tendency, albeit invertedly.

Viewed in light of the theodicy-template, as Marquard describes it, Rorty’s offhand differentiation between “upbeat” and “downbeat” stories now comes to the fore as a distinction between a *Geistesgeschichte* that justifies the status quo *against* its perceived afflictions (Marquard) and a *Geistesgeschichte* that regards these afflictions as an indictment of the status quo itself (Taubes). This sheds new light on Rorty’s notion of *Geistesgeschichte* as canon-formation, because it shows that there can be more at stake than a mere justification of an author’s intellectual affinities. Especially in an overtly politicized form, *Geistesgeschichte* can easily lend itself to the construction of moralizing stories about a grand historical struggle between, to quote Löwith, “the children of darkness and the ... children of light”. They can either be the ‘oppressors’ and the ‘downtrodden’ in the case of Benjamin and Taubes, or ‘modest moderns’ and ‘violent radicals’ in the case of Marquard and Blumenberg.¹⁰⁴ This implies that *Geistesgeschichte* is not an innocuous pastime but a potentially volatile type of historical engagement: it contains a distinctly political dimension that is less overt in historical reconstruction and that requires further analysis.¹⁰⁵

The Political Function

The political dimension of historiography is discussed by historical theorists such as Mark Day, Herman Paul, J.M. Bernstein, and David Carr. They focus in varying ways on what is referred to as the “practical relation with the past”.¹⁰⁶ Carr’s recent work *Experience and History* (2014) is of particular interest because it is devoted to the – in his eyes legitimate – political and ethical function of grand philosophical-historical narratives, which I refer to as *Geistesgeschichten*.¹⁰⁷ In order to get a firmer grasp on the political efficacy of *Geistesgeschichte* it is therefore expedient to zoom in on his argument. First of all, Carr argues that critics of ‘philosophy of history’ such as Danto and Walsh have wrongly assumed that it is a purely ‘theoretical’ enterprise that simply intends to describe history as it happened. Instead, he claims that this genre of historiography does not primarily center on empirical questions about what took place in history but on moral questions about how history ought to be viewed from a certain evaluative

104 Löwith (1949) p.44. As noted in the previous chapter, this political dimension is less explicit in Blumenberg’s theory compared to Marquard’s. Cf. Nicholls (2014) pp.184-217.

105 Lübke (1965) pp.19-22; Adam (2001) p.147. We must take into account that historical reconstruction can also fulfill a political function, as e.g. White (1980, pp.14-23) suggests.

106 Day (2008) pp.422-426; Paul (2015) pp.30-41, 70-82, 123-153; Bernstein (1991) pp.102-122; Carr (2014).

107 Carr (2014) elaborates on his *Time, Narrative, and History* (1986) which focused on the notion of ‘narrative (collective) identity’ and devoted less attention to ‘metaphysical history’.

vantage point.¹⁰⁸ Using Kant's excursions into the philosophy of history as a paradigm case, Carr argues that this endeavor should primarily be regarded as a brand of "practical" philosophy.¹⁰⁹ Kant's purpose, according to Carr, was not to make "claims about the actual course of history; rather, he is outlining the ideal conditions under which alone ... history could exhibit any progress. Since these conditions are ... far from having been realized, Kant's claims are clearly prescriptive and moral in character" rather than purporting to be descriptive and empirical.¹¹⁰ For example, in Kant's 'Idea for a Universal History' he acknowledged that his endeavor should not be confused with the work of empirically oriented historians:

It would be a misinterpretation of my intention to contend that I meant this idea of a universal history, which to some extent follows an *a priori* rule, to supersede the task of history proper, that of *empirical* composition. My idea is only a notion of what a philosophical mind, well acquainted with history, might be able to attempt from a different angle.¹¹¹

In this Kantian vein, Carr argues that philosophy of history in general must be "understood less as a theoretical than as a practical enterprise, one which displays historical events along a temporal axis geared to a projected future, one not to be speculated but to be *realized*."¹¹² It makes sense to adopt Carr's insights and regard *Geistesgeschichte* as a type of practical philosophy. After all, it typically not does attempt to simply describe historical events as neutrally as possible, it rather prescribes how the underlying significance of historical events should be understood and evaluated.¹¹³ That this narrated history necessarily involves a diagnosis of the present condition has thus far become clear, but Carr insists that it also presupposes a certain ethical-political prognosis of the future.¹¹⁴

In line with recent theorizing on 'narrative identity' Carr claims that an important practical function of historiography, especially of grand philosophical histories, consists in the constitution and formulation of collective identities.¹¹⁵ Although it is suggested that all historiography has this effect in varying degrees, Carr, Day and Bernstein agree that grand narratives are particularly efficient in asserting, iterating and delineating a communal identity – in Carr's terms: a "collective subject" or "we-subject" – in a way that simultaneously (re)affirms this

108 Carr (2014, p.121) however eventually abandons the is/ought or concomitant descriptive/prescriptive distinction in favor of the notion of 'redescription'. For the sake of clarity I will more or less keep this distinction intact, while bearing in mind that the corresponding notion of 'objectivity' should be interpreted as a *regulative ideal* rather than as a genuine possibility.

109 Carr (2014) pp.90-91. Cf. Day (2008) pp.422-426.

110 Carr (2014) p.90.

111 Kant (1970) p.53.

112 Carr (2014) p.80 (emphasis added).

113 Historical narration is a proposal to "seeing as ..." according to Ankersmit (1981, pp.92-96).

114 Carr (2014) pp.110-121; Day (2008) pp.424-426; White (1978) pp.48-49; *ibid.* (1973) p.278.

115 Similar to Ricoeur (1980, pp.169-190), Carr's conception of 'narrative identity' does not boil down to a simple constructivism. Put briefly, Carr and Ricoeur assert that there is a necessary continuity between the iteration of a collective identity in a 'grand narrative' and the cultural material the author uses for this purpose, which already possesses a (proto-)narrative form. However, this also necessarily involves a creative and interpretative act on the part of the author, thus constituting a break with the aforementioned material, which makes that the resulting narrative is not a mere *reflection* of a body of proto-narrative material but a creative transfiguration (cf. Bernstein, 1991).

collective subject's moral-political aims and aspirations.¹¹⁶ While these historical theorists tend to focus on the narrative (re)constitution of collective identities that coincide with already existing political entities (e.g. nations), their claims can also be applied to the type of topics that are involved in the German secularization debate. In this respect, Blumenberg's and Marquard's narratives can for instance be viewed as attempts at delineating and justifying the identity of 'the modern individual', who can identify him/herself with contemporaries and predecessors through an ethically defined 'modern project'. Likewise, the *Geistesgeschichten* of Benjamin and Taubes constitute and justify the trans-historical identity of 'the revolutionary' who identifies him/herself with 'the downtrodden' as opposed to 'the oppressors', regardless of the historical form in which they might appear. The works of liberal-conservative Christian authors such as Gogarten, Böckenförde and Müller-Armack, on the other hand, assert the identity of its intended audience by declaring that 'we' moderns should regard ourselves as responsible heirs of a revered Christian heritage.

These *Geistesgeschichten* do not simply formulate new collective/narrative identities, they also lay certain claims on how existing 'identities' – modern, progressive or Christian – should be interpreted. Such narratives, therefore, participate in a *political* struggle, in *Ideenpolitik*, on the definition of the essentially contested concepts that form nexus points of identification, i.e., on what it means to *be* a modern, progressive or Christian individual.¹¹⁷ Carr and Day emphasize in this respect that this *Ideenpolitik* necessarily involves a historical horizon, as it pertains to questions about how a certain collective subject should be envisaged in the present as emerging from a particular past. Significantly, it also relates to how a collective subject orients itself vis-à-vis an anticipated but as of yet not fully realized *future*, which is defined by the moral and political goals that are inscribed in this identity.¹¹⁸ With Carr we might note that a *Geisteshistoriker(in)* is not simply theoretically foretelling the outcome of history but that he/she is "urging that it move in a certain direction. He is organizing the past in order to make the case for a particular future".¹¹⁹ This future is not theoretically predicted but practically advocated. Bearing in mind the theodicy-motif discussed above, I add that Carr appears to ignore the darker side of *Geistesgeschichten*, namely that a call to establish a bright future can often entail, in some way or another, a call to arms against a perceived enemy. He neglects Schmitt's central insight that the formation of a 'we' tends to create simultaneously a 'they', i.e., the practical potency of philosophical historiography is an eminently *political* one, in a Schmittian sense of the word. This implies that grand narratives are far more contentious and politically incendiary than Carr appears to allow for.

If we apply these insights of Carr, Bernstein, and Day to the authors discussed in previous chapters it requires little effort to see that this political function of *Geistesgeschichte* also operates in the work of, for example, Taubes, Blumenberg and Marquard. That we are dealing with philosophical historiography as a type of *Ideenpolitik* is perhaps most evident in the work of Marquard. In his use of colligatory concepts such as 'the Middle Ages' or 'the Modern Age' he appears to be less concerned with deference to historical evidence than with getting his message across, that is, with the intrinsic logic of his normative argument. This logic for instance dictates that if modernity is essentially conservative, as Marquard maintains, this means that progressivism is essentially anti-modern. Furthermore, because the medieval system also

116 Carr (2014) pp.49-52; (1986) pp.122-185; Bernstein (1991) p.111; Day (2008) pp.424-426. From a more critical perspective, White (1980, pp.13-24) claims that historiography tends to reiterate and reinforce the sociopolitical status quo.

117 Lübke (1965) pp.17-22.

118 Carr (2014) pp.119-120; Day (2008) pp.424-426. Cf. *ibid.* (2008b) pp.181-184.

119 Carr (2014) p.130.

contains conservative tendencies but refused to abandon its adherence to eschatology (which is anti-modern), Marquard concludes, paradoxically, that it constitutes a “mißlungene ... Neuzeit”. Modernity constitutes a second, successful “Mittelalter”, because it has abandoned eschatology altogether.¹²⁰ Marquard thus prescribes how the essence and the limits of the modern identity ought to be understood. He argues that if one wants to be truly modern this means that one must do away with any kind of eschatological hope for absolute fulfillment, whether within or without history, and instead be content with the modest Epicurean freedom and security that modernity provides. From his ironic tone it can be inferred that Marquard was well aware that he is not simply neutrally describing a historical state of affairs, but that he is advocating a particular and contested definition of ‘modernity’. He tries to convince the audience that, out of all possible futures, a future in which every kind of eschatological thought is eliminated is the most desirable one.

Verfallsgeschichten and Löwith's Approach to History

Before proceeding to the next section, it is necessary to address two issues first. How is the interpretation of the ethical and political efficacy of philosophical historiography that is put forward by Carr, and in a similar vein by Bernstein and Day, able to accommodate the so-called ‘histories of decline’ (*Verfallsgeschichten*) we have encountered in our investigation? After all, Carr’s approach appears to be premised on the assumption that *Geistesgeschichte* is mainly a vehicle for optimistic affirmation of existing identities. The answer to this question has already been alluded to, which is that as a self-justificatory endeavor *Geistesgeschichte* only legitimizes the perceived societal status quo if the values that are embedded in it are also endorsed by the author. In *Metahistory* (1973) White points out that different political perspectives entail different attitudes towards the present condition, centering on the question where “utopia” – i.e., the ideal society – can be found on an abstract timeline. He argues that whereas conservatives “imagine historical evolution as a progressive elaboration of the institutional structure that *currently* prevails”, liberals situate utopia in a “*remote* future, in such a way as to discourage any effort in the present to realize it precipitately”.¹²¹ Radicals, such as Benjamin and Taubes, on the other hand believe that the arrival of utopia can be *imminent* but only if it is brought about by revolutionary means, whereas what White calls ‘anarchists’ – which is a slight misnomer – “are inclined to idealize a *remote past* of natural-human innocence”.¹²² My point is not that every author we have encountered can be neatly fitted into these categories, but rather that this overview suggests that *Geistesgeschichten* can justify a variety of political ideals, each of which relates differently to the perceived societal status quo. The extent to which the ideal (‘utopia’) coincides with the perceived status quo will determine how affirmative or optimistic a *Geistesgeschichte* appears to be. Hence, it can be argued that most if not all genuine ‘histories of decline’ (e.g. Schmitt’s or Voegelin’s), which narrate the process of modernization as pessimistic tales of downfall and ‘paradise lost’, are nonetheless oriented towards such an ideal. As such they presuppose an often unspoken hope that ‘utopia’ will either be reached *after* having gone through the deepest point of crisis, or that, while remaining unobtainable, a meditation on “the remote past of ... innocence” in the present will at least bring a semblance of its bliss.¹²³

120 Marquard (1984) p.32. Cf. *ibid.* (1983) pp.31-36; (1991) pp.8-25.

121 White (1973) p.25. Blumenberg’s (1983, pp.34-35) defense of the concept of “infinite progress” can be identified as ‘liberal’, according to this categorization.

122 White (1973) p.25.

123 Cf. Carr (2014) pp.155-157; White (1973) pp.7-11.

The second issue is how Löwith – who is after all one of the three main figures of this investigation – compares to this description of the ideal-typical *Geisteshistoriker*. Evidently, given Löwith’s aversion to historicism and speculative philosophy of history, it has become clear that this is not necessarily a seamless fit. I will briefly address this problem by arguing that Löwith is a *Geisteshistoriker nolens volens* and that the narrative form in which he shapes his arguments creates a tension with the content of his philosophy.¹²⁴ So rather than indicating a deficiency in the ideal-type of *Geistesgeschichte* this discrepancy allows us to shed a new light on certain ineradicable tensions that inhere in Löwith’s philosophy. Incidentally, this will bring my appraisal closer to Habermas’s critique of Löwith, expressed in his 1963 paper ‘Löwiths stoischer Rückzug vom Historischer Bewußtsein’, than for instance to Blumenberg’s critique.¹²⁵ First we can note differences between Löwith and the ideal-typical *Geisteshistoriker*. For instance, Löwith’s philosophy hardly lends itself for the identification and justification of a “we-subject”, to use Carr’s term, unless one extends this notion so far as to include the essentially detached, skeptical and apolitical ‘group’ of intellectual individuals who are naturally inclined to resist group-thought in the first place.¹²⁶ Secondly, in as far as *Geistesgeschichte* forms a practical-political response to the perceived “needs” of a certain time, this forms a stark contrast to Löwith’s self-professed ideal of “theoria”. Habermas recognizes this as Löwith’s highest goal and that, to the latter, theoretical contemplation is “the freest human activity” that first requires the “need for freedom from neediness.”¹²⁷ In this respect many of the practical functions that I have attributed to *Geistesgeschichte* are explicitly rejected by Löwith as symptoms of the disorientated state of modern thought that is captured by historical consciousness: for instance, he rejects the post-Hegelian attempt at capturing the spirit of a time through historical-philosophical diagnosis, the tendency to divide humanity into “children of light” and “children of darkness”, or the inclination to situate “utopia” (to use White’s understanding of the term) on *any* point of the historical scale – whether it is the past, present or future. Evidently, this means that Löwith’s account cannot be identified as a simple ‘*Verfallsgeschichte*’, as has often been done.¹²⁸ Furthermore, Löwith’s critique of Nietzsche in *Meaning in History* aptly demonstrates that he is precluded by his own philosophy from expressing hope for a glorious return – through a historical movement of any kind – to a state of blissful innocence.¹²⁹

Put very simply, there is a tension between what Löwith *wants* to say on the one hand and on the other *how* he says it, if not what he *actually* says. Habermas already noticed this:

Just as Löwith mistrusts Nietzsche’s turn back to the natural world perspective of the eternal return of the same because it is mediated by the historically connected thought of the will to power, he mistrusts his own enterprise to the extent that it consists of breaking out of the enchanted realm of historical consciousness with incantations he learned from that consciousness.¹³⁰

We can conclude that this tension arises from the fact that whereas Löwith intends to model his philosophy after the ahistorical ideal of *theoria* – which involves a focus on the eternal

124 Löwith (1960) p.153: “‘Geistesgeschichte’ ist ein moderner Begriff, der aus Hegels Philosophie des geschichtlichen Geistes stammt.” Cf. *ibid.* (1967) pp.vi-vii; (1962) pp.8-9.

125 English translation: Habermas, ‘Karl Löwith: Stoic Retreat from Historical Consciousness’ (1983) pp.81-99.

126 Cf. Marquard (1982) pp.30-33.

127 Habermas (1983) p.93. Cf. Löwith (1960) pp.243-255.

128 Habermas (1983) p.84 *ibid.* (2019) pp.40-74; Rorty, ‘Against Belatedness’ (1983).

129 Löwith (1949) pp.214-222.

130 Habermas (1983) p.88.

rather than the transient and on what is true rather than what is needed – this proves to be ill-suited to the historiographical form in which he usually casts his philosophy, which is that of *Geistesgeschichte*, a distinctly modern and post-Hegelian genre of thought in which he was well-versed.¹³¹ While this narrative form might not fully predetermine the entire content of his philosophy it does create tensions within it, and it determines how Löwith's message comes across.¹³² It is in this sense that most of the functions of *Geistesgeschichte* can indeed also be recognized in Löwith's work, albeit often in milder form, especially in *Meaning in History*. He can be said to advocate a future in which we have overcome our alienation vis-à-vis nature, he can be said to divide history into 'heroes' (e.g. Goethe and Burckhardt) and 'villains' (e.g. Marx and Spengler), and he can be said to justify the collective historical identity of skeptical *Bildungsbürger* who do not want to identify with a historical collective. This is all inadvertently, however, so despite his own intentions.¹³³ The discrepancy perhaps does not fully disqualify Löwith's philosophy, but it does partially confirm Habermas's and Gadamer's criticism that Löwith fails to escape the confines of his own historicity. Moreover, it explains why he is so often misinterpreted as a *Verfallshistoriker*, for instance by Zabel and Rorty.¹³⁴

'Intellectual Virtues' and Criteria for Judgement

Synchronic Criteria

I have depicted *Geistesgeschichte* as a genre that produces contestable, normative, and presentist histories. This is contrasted with historical reconstruction, a genre I have portrayed as seeking rational consensus on what happened in the past and that attempts to bracket divisive evaluative questions about what this past means to us in the present. Evidently, this depiction of *Geistesgeschichte* – and the way in which it is juxtaposed with the attempted neutrality and objectivism of historical reconstruction – might raise the objection that this genre fosters subjectivism and an 'anything goes' mentality. Carr's contention that we are not dealing with 'speculation' properly speaking but rather with 'practical' accounts that advocate, via historical narration, the realization of political aims in the future, is not enough to counter this critique. Indeed, pointing out the political dimension of *Geistesgeschichte* might only confirm critics who believe that historiography is meant to be a purely descriptive, 'value-free' enterprise and who assume that *Geistesgeschichte* is not proper historiography but rather a vehicle for political opinion formation or even for propaganda.¹³⁵ Looking back on the polarized discourse around Taubes and Marquard, discussed in the previous chapter, it might be conceded that *Geistesgeschichte* can indeed lend itself to a detrimental kind of politicization, that is, the justification and consolidation of 'us versus them' narratives. However, this does not imply that *Geistesgeschichte* necessarily fosters unbridled subjectivism or that it is not 'real' historiography.

131 Löwith (1960) p.153; *ibid.* (1967) pp.vi, 61, 127, 229. Cf. Riesterer (1969) p.78.

132 White (1973, pp.1-42) for instance argues that discrepancies can arise between the "mode of emplotment" and the "mode of argument" (not to mention the "mode of ideological implication") that are employed in a historical narrative, and reversely that it is possible to trace "elective affinities" between them. In this sense I maintain that there is a tension between the purpose of Löwith's philosophy (to arrive at ahistorical, timeless truths) and the narrative mode of *Geistesgeschichte* he uses.

133 Cf. Gordon (2019) p.153.

134 Habermas (1983) p.84; Gadamer (2013) pp.550-551; Zabel (1968) pp.208, 230; Rorty (1983).

135 See for instance Tucker's (2004, pp.39-45) critique of White's narrativism and of the prioritization of 'therapeutic' over 'epistemic' values.

In this section I will argue that *Geistesgeschichten*, in order to be successful and persuasive, require a commitment to empirical truth and that they can therefore be subjected to empirical intellectual criteria that allow one to determine, albeit partially, which narrative renders a more *convincing* image of the past. In a later stage we will return again to the political dimension of *Geistesgeschichte*.

I believe that it is possible to differentiate, at least *analytically*, between a descriptive and a normative element in a *Geistesgeschichte*, even though the two are usually interwoven and difficult to distinguish in practice. Assuming that it is – in theory – possible to distinguish these two elements helps explain, for instance, the dynamic between Marquard and Taubes: both agree on a similar account of what happened, e.g. in the development between Joachim and Marx, but occupy opposite positions on how this should be evaluated.¹³⁶ The assumption that *Geistesgeschichten* possess a descriptive element, although it remains subordinate to its normative function, also indicates that such narratives perform better if they adhere to an epistemic commitment to truthful historical representation.¹³⁷ The purpose of a *Geistesgeschichte* is to convince an audience into accepting a single story with a moral that contains the author's diagnosis of the present, prognosis of the future and corresponding anamnesis of the past. Such a narrative will only prove to be convincing if it yields a high degree of verisimilitude; the normative point of a story is convincing if it appears to follow naturally from, or appears to be a logical conclusion of, a realistic-seeming historical representation.¹³⁸ Although a *Geistesgeschichte* will in all likelihood appear to be normatively contestable in a way that many descriptivist historical reconstructions attempt to avoid, it does need to deliver a historical representation that an audience can accept as believable. Hence, it evidently needs to refer to a widely shared conception of history – 'the philosophical canon' (in the broadest sense) or an agreed upon body of basic facts – otherwise it cannot fulfill its 'diagnostic' and 'therapeutic' function. It is safe to say that a completely 'fact-free' narrative would not be persuasive.¹³⁹

Given that *Geistesgeschichten* also have to relate themselves to empirical questions about 'what happened' in a descriptive sense, this implies that these narratives can be subjected to the same type of intellectual criteria with which it is possible to judge the quality of historical reconstructions. Historical theorists such as Mark Bevir, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, Aviezer Tucker, and Herman Paul agree that such criteria can already be found in the scientific community as quality-markers. Even though they comprise a heterogeneous array rather than one clear-cut yardstick, they are indispensable as "rules of thumb" to further rational discussion in the field of historiography.¹⁴⁰ These "cognitive values" or "epistemic virtues" pertain to the quality of historiographical narratives, especially in how they colligate the historical material on which they draw. Bevir lists accuracy, which prescribes that a narrative should have a "close fit with the facts", comprehensiveness, denoting "a wide range of facts", and consistency or logical soundness as important "intellectual virtues". Kuukkanen's similar list distinguishes between scope and comprehensiveness – scope implies in this case a broad range, whereas comprehensiveness involves thoroughness and detailedness – while adding originality as an important criterion.¹⁴¹ 'Consistency' is a criterion that applies to all scientific texts, philosophical or historiographical, and it can be taken to refer to both internal (logical) consistency as well as to a general conformity to scholarly common sense and/or indispensable axioms in

136 Taubes and Rötzer (1987) pp.315-316; Marquard (1983) p.78.

137 Cf. Paul (2015b) pp.453-455.

138 On the notion of 'verisimilitude', cf.: Polkinghorne (1988) pp.170-176.

139 Cf. Bevir (1999) pp.78-126.

140 Bevir (1999) pp.100-106; Kuukkanen (2015) pp.116-130; Tucker (2004) pp.36-39; Paul (2011) pp.1-19.

141 Bevir (1999) p.102; Kuukkanen (2015) pp.123-130. Both refer to Kuhn (1977, pp.321-322).

a scientific field. The criterion of ‘accuracy’ denotes that a *Geistesgeschichte* that falls short of empirical support or factual illustration – e.g. Marquard’s – is less convincing, whereas ‘comprehensiveness’ or ‘scope’ implies that a broader, more complex story – e.g. Taylor’s *Secular Age* or Blumenberg’s *Legitimacy* – that integrates a wide and heterogeneous range of material is preferable to a one-track story like Löwith’s *Meaning in History*.¹⁴² That being said, critics might note that the breadth of a scope does not necessarily coincide with a comprehensive attention to historical detail, on the contrary. However, and this relates to ‘originality’ as a criterion, we will discover in the next section that accuracy or factual comprehensiveness does not necessarily determine if a *Geistesgeschichte* is ‘successful’. This also depends on the efficacy that a *Geistesgeschichte* has in a discursive context, e.g. whether it is able to stimulate new research. We return to this criterion, which Bevir calls the “fruitfulness” of a historiographical account, at a later stage.

Kuukkanen indicates that virtues like width of scope and originality on the one hand and accuracy on the other often exist in tension with each other and that this usually implies a trade-off between them: “[w]hat is gained through a wide scope of applications may ... be lost in specificity”.¹⁴³ An increase in originality might mean a decrease in factual accuracy, which implies that one must strive for a certain balance between the two, depending on the author’s aims.¹⁴⁴ Roughly speaking, these intellectual virtues can typically be divided into two categories: one category, which contains virtues such as accuracy and scientific rigor, dictates that one should do justice to the historical material and not interpretatively overstretch it to suit one’s ends. The other category, containing virtues such as width of scope and originality, instead appeals to the author’s creativity, imagination and integrative powers. My contention is that although every type of historiography should ideally excel in virtues belonging to both categories, historical reconstruction will, in terms of their aims, more likely lean to the first and *Geistesgeschichte* to the second category.¹⁴⁵ The implication is, however, that *Geistesgeschichten* provide more than ‘morality tales’ that have no bearing on actual history, as a positivist critic might suggest. They too possess an epistemic dimension, the cognitive veracity of which can be judged by scholarly discourse, using criteria such as those listed above. It can even be suggested in addition that *Geistesgeschichten*, especially those of the more innovative variety, are more likely to excel in the virtues in which the consensus-reliant historical reconstructions can fall short.

However, because a *Geistesgeschichte* does more than attempt to give a realistic impression of what happened in the past, since its main function is to present a story with a moral, this means that a debate on the epistemic qualities of a *Geistesgeschichte* will not be exhaustive. This raises the question whether (what Carr would call) the ‘practical’ dimension of a *Geistesgeschichte* can be judged in an analogous manner. Tucker introduces a distinction between “cognitive values” and “therapeutic values”, the latter of which are congruent with my reflections on the

142 Nonetheless, Flasch (2017, p.495) claims that despite the vast amount of material that Blumenberg colligates he fails to make his argumentative core convincing: “Blumenberg verziert seine monokausale Erklärung – der Zorn des Willkürgottes provoziert die Menschheit zur Rebellion, so daß sie ihre Energie der Welt zuwendet – mit unendlichem gelehrtem Detail. Doch deren ‘Kern’ ist zu einfach, um auch nur wahrscheinlich zu sein.” I suggest in the conclusion of this chapter that this simplicity can also be regarded as an attractive quality.

143 Kuukkanen (2015) p.127, cf. pp.168-197; Walsh (1967b) pp.80-81.

144 Kuukkanen (2015) pp.168-197. Cf. Munz (1977) p.134.

145 Ankersmit (1981, pp.233-264) prefers the latter category as a goal for historiography. I contend that a balance – or maximized excellence – in both categories is ideal, but that *Geistesgeschichte* will most likely specialize in the latter and historical reconstruction in the former.

functions of *Geistesgeschichte*.¹⁴⁶ Can we identify such therapeutic or ‘practical’ values? Based on the overview of *Geistesgeschichte*’s functions it can be maintained that, as a diagnostic exercise, the value of a *Geistesgeschichte* can be determined by its “explanatory power” in identifying a widely shared but undefined cultural ‘problem’ and in diagnosing the extent to which this ailment indicts the social-cultural status quo. This would raise further questions as to whether such a genealogy offers a satisfying solution to this problem, and whether it succeeds in formulating and justifying the collective desires and goods of a “we-subject”. However, it is likely that these criteria will engender more controversy than the epistemic ones. After all, the *identification* of the ‘problem’, ‘solution’ or the ‘we-subject’ itself is already in a sense a political decision, or in other words, a matter of essential contestedness, as Gallie’s theory indicates. Hence it is impossible to say which one of multiple narratives is able to explain a single problem best, because they will each identify a *different* problem – e.g. human hubris (Löwith) or theological absolutism (Blumenberg). In short, while it might be possible to conceive of formal criteria with which to judge the practical efficacy of a *Geistesgeschichte*, since the application of these criteria requires identifications of the different essentially contested concepts that are at play, they can only operate as flexible rules of thumb to guide a rational debate rather than as steadfast ‘norms’.

Diachronic Criteria

So far we have established that, guided by the criteria listed above, it is possible to have a rational debate on the quality of different *Geistesgeschichten*. But the epistemic criteria I discussed tend to focus on the quality of a historical narrative taken in isolation, whereas a fuller appreciation of its added value must also take into account how it operates in a discursive context. Bevir distinguishes what he calls “synchronic” criteria (the aforementioned values of accuracy, comprehensiveness and consistency) from “diachronic” criteria, the latter of which indicate the quality of a historical account in terms of how it resonates with and can be seen to further the development of the academic discourse it is situated in. These diachronic criteria favor what Bevir refers to as “positive speculative theories”, which are “positive in so far as they inspire new avenues of research and suggest new predictions”. According to Bevir, such “speculative” narratives should ideally display the qualities of being “progressive, fruitful and open.”¹⁴⁷ Progressiveness can be identified with Kuukkanen’s criterion of originality, i.e., the extent to which a narrative introduces an innovative approach to history. Fruitfulness, in turn, denotes the extent to which other research can build on a ‘speculative theory’ by convincingly coming up with empirical support for this new approach. Openness subsequently refers to clarity and transparency in the formulation of an account’s presuppositions and the extent to which it can be meaningfully criticized. Arguably, these criteria signify that *Geistesgeschichten* are not incommensurable if they succeed in displaying these values.¹⁴⁸ Only truly idiosyncratic *Geistesgeschichten* that preclude meaningful substantive criticism because they do not seem to refer to anything outside themselves would be genuinely incommensurable.¹⁴⁹ In short, these ‘diachronic’ criteria suggest that the value of a *Geistesgeschichte* depends for an important part on the influence or efficacy it can have in its academic-discursive context.

146 Tucker (2008) pp.3-14. Tucker himself is dismissive of the latter category as a legitimate aim for professional historiography. Cf. Nauta (2008) pp.270-272.

147 Bevir (1999) pp.102-103. Ankersmit (1981, pp.235-238) uses the similar concept “fertility” in this respect.

148 Bevir (1999) pp.102-106; Kuukkanen (2015) pp.123-130. In this instance, I mean ‘incommensurable’ in the sense that different narratives would be *completely* incomparable, as if they constitute different ‘worlds’.

149 Cf. Bevir (1999) pp.96-116

In *De navel van de geschiedenis* (1990) Ankersmit revisits an interesting idea from Jan Romein. The latter claimed that professional historical scholarship is naturally inclined towards specialization, resulting in a ‘fractured image’ (*vergruisd beeld*) that makes it near impossible to obtain a synoptic overview of a historical topic such as the Dutch Revolt (1568-1648). Romein and Ankersmit argue that historiography is in need of grander, synthesizing narratives that are able to recollect and integrate the heterogeneous and complex body of existing historical research, an endeavor which Romein calls ‘theoretical history’.¹⁵⁰ Ankersmit writes: “Theoretical history does not seek the (foundationalist) *anchoring* of specialisms, but their (synthetical) *integration*.”¹⁵¹ While Ankersmit ultimately advocates the dissolution of boundaries between different modes of historical engagement, and thus eschews the pluralist option I espouse here, it is clear that his idea of ‘theoretical history’ is analogous to the notion of ‘*Geistesgeschichte*’.¹⁵² Bernstein depicts the function of ‘grand narratives’ in a similar manner. They do not originate solely in the mind of the philosopher-historian, but they draw on and thus synthesize the narrative material that already exists in the academic and cultural context of the author. “Grand narratives are second-order discourses that order, criticize, align, disperse, disrupt and gather the first-order discourses and practices that make up the woof of social life”.¹⁵³ This can be taken to mean that *Geistesgeschichten* necessarily employ material from the life-world broadly speaking – not only ‘facts’, but also perceived ‘cultural problems’, plot structures, *topoi* and other cultural templates – but more specifically also from the academic enterprise it is embedded in. Hence, it is possible and even advisable for a *Geistesgeschichte* to attempt to integrate results from more specialistic historical research, that is, from historical reconstructions.

Blumenberg’s *Legitimacy*, for instance, does not only contain a large amount of original historical research but he can also be seen to utilize existing historical research, e.g. on nominalism.¹⁵⁴ A more recent example of *Geistesgeschichte*’s integrative qualities is Taylor’s *Secular Age*, which also features many quotes from primary sources but predominantly references secondary literature, thus synthesizing a vast body of work, varying from specialist monographies to *Geistesgeschichtliche* accounts such as Louis Dupré’s *Passage to Modernity* or Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*.¹⁵⁵ My claim is not that because the scope of *Geistesgeschichte* tends to be broader it must utilize existing specialist research instead of conducting its own. It is rather that *Geistesgeschichte* can fulfill a positive discursive function vis-à-vis specialist discourses by offering synthesizing overviews to counterbalance the tendency towards ‘fracturing’. Evidently, historical reconstructions can also offer integrative overviews of a research field, but they will typically avoid getting pinned down too much with regard to the possible *contemporary relevance* of these investigations (save for a few introductory remarks). A *Geistesgeschichtliche* overview on the other hand will typically be more presentist, ‘honorific’ and thus more explicitly evaluative than the specialist research on which it partly draws. This means that *Geistesgeschichte* is able to bridge the gap between the historiographic enterprise on the one hand and current normative debates, in or outside of academia, on the other. While historical reconstruction can attempt to offer new, integrative overviews of ‘the’ past, *Geistesgeschichte* can ideally offer new, synthetical ways of making sense of ‘our’ past. However, whether an audience will accept or reject a *Geistesgeschichte* will not only depend on epistemic criteria but also on whether the ‘moral of the story’ is deemed desirable.

150 Ankersmit (1990) pp.232-239. Cf. Romein, *In de hof der historie* (1963) pp.17-67.

151 Ankersmit (1990) p.237: “De theoretische geschiedenis zoekt niet naar de (foundationalistische) *verworteling* van specialismen, maar naar de (synthetische) *integratie* ervan.”

152 Ankersmit (1990) pp.244-245.

153 Bernstein (1991) p.111. Cf. Ricoeur (1980) pp.169-190; Carr (2014) pp.75-76, 113-140.

154 Blumenberg (1983) e.g. pp.348-352, 637. Cf. Flasch (2017) pp.494-500.

155 Taylor (2007) e.g. pp.94, 144, 208-209.

Not only can *Geistesgeschichte* integrate a heterogeneous body of results from multiple specialist discourses and condense it into one narrative – thereby in all likelihood losing the scientific rigor and eye for detail that such monographies possess, but gaining in scope and a sense of relevance for the modern reader – it can also, as Bevir pointed out, “inspire new avenues of research” for investigations that are more empirically rigorous and less directly motivated by contemporary relevance.¹⁵⁶ Haskell Fain argues in this respect that “speculative philosophy of history” can yield paradigmatic theories that lay the conceptual groundwork for the more empirically inclined “ordinary history” (Fain’s suggestion is similar to how in Thomas Kuhn’s theory “revolutionary science” precedes “normal science”).¹⁵⁷ In Fain’s sense, economic history will, however implicit, have some kind of a conceptual indebtedness to Marx – including the non-Marxist variety –, while the same can be said of Hegel and the history of ideas. Rather than implying that all economic history is crypto-Marxist or all intellectual history is crypto-Hegelian, Fain’s theory rather indicates – when applied to our analysis – that because *Geistesgeschichte* tends to be more conceptually “self-conscious” this means that it can explicate and, if necessary, problematize the conceptual frameworks through which ‘ordinary historians’ conduct their investigations.¹⁵⁸ In this respect, *Geistesgeschichte* can also encourage ‘new avenues of research’ by pointing out possible new interconnections in history that only become conceivable on the higher conceptual level that these narratives occupy. Historical reconstructions, which tend to be epistemically cautious rather than ‘speculative’ (in Bevir’s sense), can subsequently investigate whether the historical source material indeed appears to lend itself to these *Geistesgeschichtliche* interpretations. Rather than being able to decisively ‘verify’ such an interpretation in a direct sense, a historical reconstruction can thereby add to the overall acceptability and persuasiveness of a *Geistesgeschichte* if it yields affirmative results.¹⁵⁹

Application of Rorty’s Model to the Secularization Debate

The Interaction between Historical Reconstruction and Geistesgeschichte

Bevir’s diachronic values indicate that *Geistesgeschichten* can fulfill a productive function in broader historiographical discourse. This raises the question whether we can recognize this kind of fruitful cooperation between *Geistesgeschichte* and historical reconstruction in the secularization debate. I believe that this is the case: if the debate between Löwith, Blumenberg and Schmitt is taken as an example we can indeed see that their polemic engendered a host of new research that positively builds on their contributions. This research investigates the conceptual connections made by these *Geisteshistoriker*, e.g. between eschatology and progress (Löwith), theological absolutism and self-assertion (Blumenberg), or on the essential interconnectedness of theology and politics (Schmitt).¹⁶⁰ The positive reception-history of their contributions includes not only accounts that themselves can be identified with *Geistesgeschichte* (e.g. Marquard and Taubes), but it also involves the conceptual analysis of Wilhelm Kamlah, and the ‘intellectual history’ of Hermann Lübbe, Hermann Zabel and Ulrich Ruh. We can furthermore find attempts to ‘apply’ the conceptual insights of Löwith, Blumenberg, and Schmitt in historical investigations that

156 Bevir (1999) p.103. Cf. Dray (1989) p.62; Paul (2015) p.78-81.

157 Fain (1970) pp.207-308. Cf. Kuhn (1962).

158 Fain (1970) pp.207-308. Cf. Ankersmit (1981) pp.44-45, 88; White (1973) pp.267-280, 426-434.

159 Cf. Zabel’s (1968, pp.39, 266) notion of “Tragfähigkeit”. Polkinghorne (1988) pp.170-176.

160 See for instance the Löwith-Festschrift *Natur und Geschichte* (Braun and Riedel Eds., 1967). For a more detailed analysis of the reception of the work of these authors, cf.: Ruh (1980), Zabel (1968) and Kroll (2010).

have a narrower scope and which focus more on historical detail. For example, although in terms of its primary aims Koselleck's *Kritik und Krise* (1959) should be regarded as a *Geistesgeschichte* – the political implications of which are partly derived from Schmitt's political theology – we can also discover in it an attempt to substantiate *historically*, through a historical investigation into the *philosophes* and 18th century secret societies, Löwith's thesis about the relation between the modern idea of progress and Christian eschatology.¹⁶¹ Jaeschke's *Die Suche nach den eschatologischen Wurzeln der Geschichtsphilosophie* (1976), which investigates the discontinuities between Christian eschatological thought and early-modern ideas of progress, operates more directly in the mode of historical reconstruction, but it explicitly does so in order to advance the *Geistesgeschichtliche* program of Blumenberg in his rejection of the 'secularization thesis'. In this sense, Jaeschke not only engages in "historische Kritik" against Löwith, but he also seeks to contribute – through close reading of historical texts – to the persuasiveness of Blumenberg's account of modernity.¹⁶²

Finally, in the three colloquia on *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie* (organized by Taubes) we can find multiple historical reconstructions that, directly or more indirectly, attempt to buttress with detailed historical analysis Schmitt's conception of secularization as the essential interconnectedness of theology and politics.¹⁶³ One example I have not mentioned in previous chapters is a paper by Hubert Cancik, 'Augustin als Konstantiner', in which he takes aim against Erik Peterson's early critique of Schmitt (1935). Peterson had attacked Schmitt's concept of secularization by asserting – with an appeal to Augustine – that Christian orthodoxy dictates a radical disconnection of theology from worldly politics. Against Peterson, Cancik instead depicts Augustine as an essentially 'Constantinian' theologian whose theology reflects the political constellation of his age.¹⁶⁴ This affirms, via historical reconstruction, Schmitt's conceptual claim that theology and politics are inseparable, namely by 'demonstrating' that even the Augustinian distinction between the *civitas Dei* and *civitas terrena* necessarily requires a political decision that is informed by a particular historical-political context.

Evidently, historical reconstructions are double-edged with regard to their relation to *Geistesgeschichten*. In the case of Jaeschke and Cancik it is already apparent that their confirmation of one *Geistesgeschichte* (respectively Blumenberg and Schmitt) entails the rejection of another (respectively Löwith and Peterson). In practice, historical reconstruction will thus attempt to operate as an arbiter of whether *Geistesgeschichte* offers plausible and more or less accurate portrayals of historical phenomena. It is in this vein, for example, that Blumenberg is criticized for his idiosyncratic depiction of late-medieval philosophy as a "gnostische Rezidiv" by Wolfgang Hübener, while Löwith in turn is criticized for the suggestive and 'ahistorical' manner in which he asserts a continuity between eschatology and modern progress by various authors, including Jaeschke and Zabel.¹⁶⁵ In this respect, Bevir's criterion of 'openness' to critique can be taken to refer to the extent in which historical-reconstructionist criticism can be meaningfully directed against a *Geistesgeschichte* in the first place. In other words, it relates to the question whether the conceptual claims that a *Geisteshistoriker* postulates invite historical validation or invalidation, or whether they remain too unspecific, abstract or idiosyncratic for such a type of engagement.

161 Koselleck (1988). Cf. Kesting (1959). See Chapter 5 for a discussion of Koselleck and Kesting.

162 Jaeschke (1976) pp.11-51, 325-331.

163 *Der Fürst dieser Welt. Carl Schmitt und die Folgen* (Taubes Ed., 1983); *Gnosis und Politik* (ibid., 1984); *Theokratie* (ibid., 1987). Cf. e.g. Maurer (1983) pp.117-135.

164 Cancik (1983) pp.149-151. Cf. Hübener (1983) pp.57-76.

165 Hübener (1984) pp.37-53; Jaeschke (1976); Zabel (1968) pp.199-239; Ruh (1980) p.266-277. For a more recent historical-reconstructionist critique of Blumenberg's *Legitimacy*, cf.: Flasch (2017, pp.496-500), and for a critique of his *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (1981b), cf.: Nauta (2005, pp.135-150).

Rorty's *Dialectic*, 'Intellectual History' and Self-Conscious *Geistesgeschichte*

At this stage it has become possible to zoom in on the special – and in my view important – function that the analyses of Zabel and Lübke fulfill in the secularization debate. In order to understand this special function it is necessary to take a detour and return to Rorty's categorization of the different genres in the historiography of philosophy first, focusing especially on the *dialectical pattern* of his argument. First of all, rational and historical reconstruction form an antithesis: one engenders immediate positive self-justification while the other creates a sense of negative self-awareness and contingency. Rorty claims that *Geistesgeschichte*, in turn, “is parasitic upon, and synthesizes, the first two genres ... It is self-justificatory in the way that rational reconstruction is, but it is moved by the same hope for greater self-awareness that leads people to engage in historical reconstructions.”¹⁶⁶ He concludes: “These three genres thus form a nice example of the standard Hegelian triad.”¹⁶⁷ In the final part of his article, Rorty introduces the genre “intellectual history”. This genre is a ‘higher’ form of historical reconstruction, antithetical to ‘normal’ *Geistesgeschichte*. Intellectual history creates a more profound sense of skeptical self-awareness by asserting the essential contingency of the conceptual framework in which *Geistesgeschichte* and historical reconstruction operate. On its own, intellectual history destroys the existing philosophical canons that have been generated by the more unreflective *Geistesgeschichten*. Thus, it does away with pretensions that the conceptual frameworks that *Geistesgeschichte* attempts to establish are anything more than contingent and contestable constructions.¹⁶⁸ Intellectual history thereby functions as a mode of critique vis-à-vis attempts by *Geistesgeschichte* to deliver reified accounts of historical events and to stake exclusive claims on the meaning of the essentially contested concepts involved. This genre is closely related to a special brand of *Geistesgeschichte* that Rorty calls a “fully self-conscious” or “*entzauberte Geistesgeschichte*”, in that it functions as the ‘final’ synthesis of his dialectic. Intellectual history questions the self-evidence of the established philosophical canons – provided by the ‘old’ *Geistesgeschichte* – in a way that exacerbates the sense of contingency and self-awareness attributed to historical reconstruction. It thereby creates opportunity for self-conscious, reflexive *Geistesgeschichten* to take the place of the older canons.¹⁶⁹ Self-conscious *Geistesgeschichte*, Rorty suggests, results in a higher form of self-justification that incorporates the skeptical self-awareness of intellectual history.¹⁷⁰

I propose that the analyses of Lübke (1965), Zabel (1968), and Ulrich Ruh (1980) fulfill a function in the context of the German secularization debate that approximates that of Rorty's genre “intellectual history”.¹⁷¹ These analyses form a skeptical counterweight to *Geistesgeschichtliche* attempts at consolidating specific interpretations of the concept of secularization. This becomes clear from the fact that these authors trace the controversial history of the use of the concept of ‘secularization’ rather than simply presupposing one definition of

166 Rorty (1984) p.61.

167 Rorty (1984) p.68. This dialectic, and my understanding of it, is partly indebted to the hermeneutics of Gadamer (2013, e.g. pp.278-289, 303-317).

168 Rorty (1984) pp.67-74.

169 Rorty (1984) pp.61, 72-73. Cf. Foucault (1984) pp.76-100. Evidently, this is not the end of the dialectic. Following the logic of Rorty's argument it is likely that self-conscious *Geistesgeschichten* will ‘degenerate’ into consolidated canons that are in turn rehashed by doxographies, making the historicist and conceptual critique of historical reconstruction and intellectual history respectively a continuous necessity.

170 Rorty (1984) p.61-74.

171 Lübke, *Säkularisierung. Geschichte eines ideenpolitischen Begriffs* (1965); Zabel, *Verweltlichung/ Säkularisierung* (1968); Ruh, *Säkularisierung als Interpretationskategorie* (1980).

this concept as a given, as historical reconstructions tend to do. Unlike historical reconstructions these intellectual histories do not seek to confirm or disconfirm one particular definition of the concept through historical research. Rather, they problematize the concept as such.¹⁷² As they analyze the multiple, incompatible ways in which it has been used in various polemics, the intellectual histories of Lübbe, Zabel, and Ruh identify the contested nature of ‘secularization’. They show that there are various seemingly reasonable interpretations of the concept available, each of which are informed by the narratives in which they occur, by the normative presuppositions of their authors, and by the polemical context in which they are employed. Intellectual history does not only problematize but it also historicizes the conceptual framework that is used by *Geistesgeschichte* and historical reconstruction. It is in this sense that Lübbe historicizes the secularization debate as a form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a practice that should be understood within a contingent historical context. Likewise, Zabel highlights the conservative ‘history of decline’ template that underlies many secularization-narratives and identifies it as a symptom of its time. Simultaneously he is mindful of the contestability of the counter-narrative that Blumenberg puts forward. Ruh, a latecomer to the debate, suggests that the debate on secularization cannot be resolved because it ultimately boils down to a conflict between fundamental, incompatible presuppositions on the nature of faith, history, and modernity, one that reflects the ideological divisions of post-war West Germany.¹⁷³

In sum, we can apply Rorty’s model as follows: first a *Geisteshistoriker* (e.g. Blumenberg or Schmitt) posits a ‘honorific’ definition of a concept such as modernity or secularization. This definition is then rendered either more or less historically persuasive through historical reconstruction. The genre of intellectual history subsequently attempts to demonstrate that this particular definition itself is historically contingent and controversial. It does this by showing that the concept was used differently in the past and that in the present there are reasonable alternatives, which are however predetermined by normative viewpoints that are often irreconcilable. Ultimately, Lübbe, Zabel, and Ruh come to a similar conclusion in this respect, namely that as a *Kampfbegriff* – the substantiation of which relies on incompatible normative-political standpoints – ‘secularization’ creates more discord than that it elucidates matters. Lübbe describes the resulting politicization of the polemic as follows:

Der Stil des Philosophierens verliert an argumentativer Kraft und wird bekenntnishaft. An die Stelle der Erklärung der Sache tritt die Erklärung des Willens, der für oder gegen sie eintritt. Die Leidenschaft der Vernunft wird zur Leidenschaft des Wertens und Stellungnehmens.¹⁷⁴

Ruh and Lübbe suggest that this pure polemicism should be avoided in academic discourse. They argue that the academic community should decide on a non-problematic, neutral-descriptive definition of the concept. Or, if this turns out to be impossible, Ruh adds that scholarship should perhaps reject any kind of secularization narrative.¹⁷⁵ Indeed, this indicates that intellectual histories such as these can lend themselves to a certain skepticism, given that

172 Cf. Jaeschke (1976).

173 Lübbe (1965) pp.109-133; Zabel (1968) pp.265-267; Ruh (1980) pp.352-364. Cf. Rorty (1984) pp.67-74. Gallie (1968, pp.150-158, 171-174, 189) argues that what he refers to as “historical understanding” should play a prominent role in understanding the nature and history of essentially contested concepts. I would suggest that Gallie’s notion of “historical understanding” is similar in function to Rorty’s genre of “intellectual history”.

174 Lübbe (1965) p.20, cf. pp.9-22; Zabel (1968) pp.265-267; Ruh (1980) pp.353-358.

175 Lübbe (1965) pp.17-22; Ruh (1980) pp.351-358. Cf. Adam (2001) pp.147-149.

they are more attentive to the open-endedness of the concepts that are up for debate and to the political interests that might underlie their usage. Especially if an intellectual history reaches the conclusion that such a debate is nothing more than *Ideenpolitik*, as Armin Adam for instance argues, it becomes reasonable to suggest that we should rather abandon the discussion altogether.¹⁷⁶ My own contention is that while a purely neutral-descriptive definition is unattainable if ‘secularization’ is indeed an essentially contested concept, this should not necessarily lead to the rejection of such a concept, not in the last place because contestability does not preclude the possibility of a rational debate.¹⁷⁷

Rorty’s model indicates that intellectual histories ideally pave the way for a type of self-conscious *Geistesgeschichte*.¹⁷⁸ This brand of *Geistesgeschichte* can fulfill a positive role by building on the critical insights of intellectual history. Whereas historical reconstructions might attempt to neutralize the ideological-political undertones of a concept such as ‘secularization’ or ‘modernity’ – which are still explicit in the overtly partisan *Geistesgeschichten* – intellectual history rather tries to unveil the underlying partisanship that historical reconstruction might have suppressed. Intellectual history can, for instance, point out the latent evaluative metaphors that are presupposed in concepts such as ‘modernity’ (a new age that succeeds a period of darkness) or ‘secularization’ (either expropriation or emancipation) which have potentially been obscured if they are only used as ‘colligatory concepts’.¹⁷⁹ A self-conscious *Geistesgeschichte*, in turn, can take the contestability of these concepts into account. Such an approach could use this awareness to either promote a radical shift in the conceptual framework or to attempt to salvage the conceptual framework from the tensions and contradictions that have been uncovered by intellectual history.¹⁸⁰ With regard to the latter option it is conceivable that, by being aware of its situatedness in a polemic context, self-conscious *Geistesgeschichten* might propose new historical diagnoses that attempt to ‘sublate’, in some way or another, the tensions earlier diagnoses have created.¹⁸¹

However, the type of fully self-conscious *Geistesgeschichte* that Rorty champions appears to be absent from the German secularization debate of the 1960’s to 1980’s – as far as I can tell, at least. The closest the German secularization debate comes to Rorty’s ideal of self-conscious *Geistesgeschichte* is the *intellectual history* of Lübbecke, Zabel, and Ruh. Judged by Rorty’s model it would follow that Zabel’s and Ruh’s conceptual skepticism therefore has the last word in the context of this discourse, because their intellectual histories have not been succeeded by a *Geistesgeschichte* that positively builds on the conceptual contingency that their

176 Adam (2001) pp.147-149; Rorty (1984) p.71: intellectual history creates a “healthy skepticism”.

177 Cf. Gallie (1968) pp.168-189, Connolly (1993) pp.xi-xii, 11, 226-227, Garver (1990) p.263, Collier et. al. (2006) pp.220-234.

178 Several historical theorists, such as White (1973; 1978), Munz (1977) and Fain (1970), claim that despite its neutral-objectivist aims “ordinary” historiography also relies on a conceptual framework that predetermines its understanding. This framework is itself historically contingent, and it is often implicit. White’s *Metahistory* (in) famously asserts that all historiography is essentially determined by a priori ontological assumptions, modes of emplotment and political predispositions. We however do not need to accept his determinism in still assuming, in vein with White (1973, pp.274-280, 426-434), that with the help of intellectual history *Geistesgeschichte* can be more conceptually self-conscious, which means that it should be better equipped to identify, and if necessary, problematize the conceptual framework in which historical reconstruction operates.

179 Cf. White (1978) pp.98-99.

180 Rorty (1984) p.72. Cf. Taylor (1984) pp.18-22.

181 In their contributions to *Philosophy in History* (1984), Charles Taylor (pp.18-28) and Alasdair MacIntyre (pp.42-47) suggest in this respect that the quality of a philosophical-historiographical narrative in part depends on whether it is able to take the existence of reasonable opposing perspectives into account and if it can then explain these counter-positions, or integrate (what is reasonable about) these perspectives into one’s own, thus enriching it and making it more convincing.

accounts assumedly reveal. A skeptic might question whether this type of *Geistesgeschichte* can exist in the first place, since no attempt at integrating, sublating or synthesizing different positions can ever be exhaustive and because any attempt at doing so will lead to new exclusions or new oppositions.¹⁸² Evidently, it is not realistic nor desirable to assume that there will be a ‘final’ *Geistesgeschichte*, one that decisively reconciles all tensions and ‘solves’ the debate. Still, historiographical discourse may be driven by the hope that more reflective, self-conscious *Geistesgeschichten* are always conceivable, forming diagnoses that overcome entrenched oppositions and that offer new insights into our shared historicity. Because a complete understanding of our historicity is unobtainable, however, the critical function of historical reconstruction and intellectual history – i.e., creating a sense of ‘self-awareness’ – will remain indispensable.

Guidelines and Gallie’s Pluralist Ethic

We have seen that *Geistesgeschichten* can play a meaningful role in the broader historiographical and philosophical discourse on how we relate to our past. Now it has become possible to reflect on the added value of having a plurality of different narratives in such a debate and to suggest certain tentative guidelines so as to make it more constructive. In short, I will put forward some recommendations based on Rorty’s and Gallie’s arguments, while also reflecting on the limits of their liberal pluralist ethic. The upshot of this pluralist ethic is that on the one hand it is necessary to acknowledge “the fact of reasonable pluralism” (to invoke Rawls), while on the other hand it is important that participants in a debate remain devoted to an honest defense of their own perspectives, which involves taking into account the aforementioned epistemic virtues.¹⁸³ Rorty mentions an ethical criterion that can be connected to Gallie’s theory, which is a notion of intellectual “honesty”. This criterion “consists in keeping in mind the possibility that our self-justifying conversation is with creatures of our own phantasy rather than with historical personages”.¹⁸⁴ This implies being aware of the possibility that our rational reconstructions and our *Geistesgeschichten* might be anachronistic self-serving projections and should therefore remain open to historical-reconstructionist critique. Historical reconstruction in turn can be advised to reciprocate this attitude by opening itself to the *conceptual* critique that intellectual history and self-conscious *Geistesgeschichte* can provide.¹⁸⁵ I add that the criterion of honesty should be expanded by involving a commitment to transparency in the engagement with the historical material, which entails that subjectivism and anachronism should not be ‘erected into a principle’, as Skinner already noted. This intellectual honesty relates to Gallie’s contention that a “general recognition of the essential contestedness of a given concept” gives rise to a type of debate that is more self-reflective, rational, and constructive, not only because it allows one to do justice to existing differences in a debate, but also because it enables constructive self-criticism.¹⁸⁶

Recognition of a given concept as essentially contested implies recognition of rival uses of it (such as oneself repudiates) as not only logically possible and humanly ‘likely’, but as of *permanent potential critical value* to one’s own use or interpretation of the concept in question; whereas to regard any rival use as anathema, perverse, bestial

182 Cf. Connolly (1993) pp.ix-xii.

183 Rawls (1993) pp.36. This means repudiating the mere “modus vivendi” view of plurality (cf. pp.135-150).

184 Rorty (1984) p.71.

185 Cf. White (1973) pp.276-278, 427-434; *ibid.* (1978) p.115.

186 Gallie (1968) p.187. Cf. Collier et. al. (2006) pp.220, 234.

or lunatic means, in many cases, to submit oneself to the chronic human peril of underestimating, or of completely ignoring, the value of one's opponents' positions.¹⁸⁷

It is conceivable how Gallie's theory can give rise to objections. One criticism is that the contestability of such concepts should be taken to imply that they are essentially *confused*, and that they should either be neutralized or abandoned. This is indeed suggested by intellectual historians such as Ruh and Adam with regard to the 'secularization thesis'.¹⁸⁸ Secondly, it might be objected that Gallie's notion of essential contestedness gives rise to an intellectual laziness that allows one to declare *any* concept to be 'essentially contested' as soon as it provokes even the smallest amount of disagreement. This either means an a priori fiat on all intellectual debate or it relegates debate to an aimless exchange of incommensurable 'points of view'.¹⁸⁹ Both criticisms, however, largely miss their mark. Gallie avoids the option of determining *in advance* which concepts are and which are not essentially contested. He rather suggests that the contestedness of concepts is a historically contingent affair.¹⁹⁰ It has to be determined per concept and via rational debate and historical analysis whether concepts are essentially contested or not. Hence, it is inadvisable to declare outright *all* difficult concepts to be 'essentially contested' beforehand, because that might stifle attempts at reaching a rational consensus on them. Nor does every debate automatically fare well by such a declaration, especially if such a debate does not exhibit signs of a "reasonable pluralism".¹⁹¹

'Secularization' and 'modernity' can be declared essentially contested because there is a demonstrable lack of agreement among a variety of plausible and reasonable interpretations of these concepts. Although there is a demonstrable lack of consensus, these concepts are evidently deemed so important and indispensable by interlocutors that it is considered worth the effort to continue debating about them. In line with Carr, one might say that a concept such as 'modernity' is deemed important because it ultimately revolves around the question who we are as modern individuals, the answer to which, in turn, involves questions about what we therefore can or cannot do. The upshot of the theory of essential contestedness is, first, that such a debate can be rational, argumentative, and oriented towards 'evidence'.¹⁹² Second, Gallie argues that the sheer importance of the concepts in question makes that their contestability is a positive feature, because a "continuous competition" between a plenitude of different viable interpretations is assumedly better than a hegemony of one interpretation that suppresses reasonable alternatives.¹⁹³ In short, Gallie and other commentators convincingly argue that a recognition of the essential contestedness of a concept such as

187 Gallie (1968) pp.187-188 (emphasis added). Cf. Garver (1990) p.259.

188 Ruh (1980) pp.357-358; Adam (2001) pp.147-149.

189 The latter objection also applies – albeit on a narrative level – to the decision to regard philosophical historiographies as '*Geistesgeschichten*' in Rorty's sense. Cf. Gallie (1968) p.189; Collier et. al. (2006) pp.214, 234; Clarke (1979) pp.125-126.

190 Gallie (1968) pp.168, 174. Cf. Garver (1990) pp.251-270.

191 Garver (1990, pp.252-264) suggests that the benefit of declaring a concept essentially contested depends on the discursive context. He argues that while it might be prudent to interpret 'Christianity' as essentially contested, the same does not apply to 'science'. We can imagine that the debate on 'climate change' does not necessarily improve in quality if this concept is declared essentially contested, i.e., if this means legitimizing pseudo-scientific positions in the discussion. The question of course is, to invoke Schmitt, "who interprets? who decides?". Garver asserts that the declaration of essential contestedness is, to some extent, a political decision that is not taken from a genuine meta-perspective outside of the debate itself. If this is the case then the same applies to my own approach. Cf. Collier et. al. (2006) p.221; Gallie (1968) p.167.

192 Gallie (1968) pp.183-187.

193 Gallie (1968) p.166.

‘secularization’ can increase the rationality of the debate, because it helps elucidate the nature of existing differences within it.¹⁹⁴ Moreover, this recognition confirms the significance and indispensability of the concept in question. The fact that ‘secularization’ was – and still is, as the postsecularism debate testifies – a subject of controversy that evokes a host of different incompatible but viable approaches can thus be interpreted in a more positive light: it is a collective, open-ended attempt at negotiating the equivocal implications of what it means to be ‘modern’.

However, this ethic has its limitations. The analogy that Gallie uses to illustrate his discursive liberalism – an imagined situation in which rival sports teams struggle for the championship but do not agree on what the sport is and on how excellence can be measured – not only indicates what is at stake but it also points towards the limits of his pluralism.¹⁹⁵ It shows that this pluralist ethic needs to steer a course between an illiberal fanaticism that does not tolerate the existence of other ‘teams’, on the one hand, and a defeatist relativism on the other. To extend this metaphor: it is important that each ‘team’ is allowed to be seriously convinced of the relative superiority of their position, while on the other hand acknowledging that, from a *different* perspective, one’s team is better off in a context where rivalling teams are also allowed to thrive – even if this means that one’s favored team could end up in the lower ranks of the competition. The problem with this metaphor, despite its merit in explaining the cognitive dissonance that liberalism assumedly requires, is that it forms grist to the mill of thinkers in the intellectual tradition of Schmitt, who scorn liberalism for its tendency to ignore real ‘difference’ by reducing politics and intellectual endeavors to mere *Spielerei*. This neutralization of difference coincides with a predilection for regarding ‘endless discussion’ as a goal in itself, regardless of *what* is being discussed.¹⁹⁶ It can be objected further that this ‘discursive liberalism’ not only excludes people who are fully convinced of their viewpoints – who cannot make room for the self-reflective reservation that is required – but, in trying to accommodate a multitude of incompatible viewpoints, it also fails to take any of them truly seriously.¹⁹⁷ This, arguably, is a real pitfall for the type ethic I recommend here, but it is one that can partially be circumvented by acknowledging the fact that the topics that are up for discussion – in our case ‘religion’, ‘modernity’ and ‘secularity’ – are social, cultural and intellectual issues of genuine importance and thus require serious debate. After all, they necessarily involve questions of personal and collective identity. It can be assumed that the discussion of these questions fares best if it is not dominated by one single outlook that might suppress reasonable alternatives.¹⁹⁸ I suspect that the fact that we are dealing with real identity-signifiers (‘religious’, ‘modern’) will imply that the majority of participants in such a debate are unlikely to adopt a stance of liberal Rortyan relativism, according to which the act of conversing is more important than the topic of the conversation. Recognizing this implies acknowledging the ‘agonistic’ nature of a debate on essentially contested concepts. We cannot

194 Cf. Connolly (1993) pp.ix-xii, 226-227; Collier et. al. (2006) pp.212-235; Gallie (1968) pp.166-189.

195 Gallie (1968) pp.157-168.

196 Cf. Schmitt (2017); Mouffe (2005). Cf. Garver (1990) pp.254-253.

197 In addition, one could argue that it is difficult to conceive of a debate as a game if the other – Schmittian – ‘team’ that one is up against regards ‘the game’ as an *existential* struggle over life or death. Adhering to the value of pluralism is difficult when some of the perspectives that this plurality attempts to enclose are themselves decidedly anti-pluralistic. Are these positions also of “permanent potential critical value” to one’s own? Cf. Rawls (1978) pp.216-221; Mouffe (1999) pp.1-6, 38-52.

198 This also entails that the ‘rules of engagement’ that ensure that a competition (on the ‘proper’ interpretation of contested concepts) is conducted fairly – i.e., the ultimate limits beyond which rival ‘sports teams’ cannot recognize each other as competitors in the same game – should *also* be up for debate so that they are not implicitly biased in favor of one perspective within it.

assume that everyone would agree with Rorty and Gallie that playing the game is more important than winning it, but it is necessary to convince potential players that the continued existence of the game itself, requiring the tolerance of other teams, serves a general as well as their own interest.¹⁹⁹

Conclusion

In sum, I have argued that *Geistesgeschichte* should be interpreted as a legitimate historiographical brand of practical philosophy and that the historical accounts this genre produces are not mere flights of fancy that only reflect the political-moral prejudices of their authors. On the contrary, *Geistesgeschichte* must be able to answer questions about what happened in the past in order for it to ascertain how this is relevant to us in the present. This means that *Geistesgeschichten* can be evaluated – although not exhaustively – with the use of epistemic criteria enumerated by Kuukkanen and Bevir. Not only should *Geistesgeschichten* be able to convey realistic-seeming historical narratives in order to be persuasive, they are also equipped to propose stimulating new ways of envisaging the past. A *Geistesgeschichte* can be judged both on its own merits as well as on the basis of its discursive “fruitfulness” and “openness” vis-à-vis the intellectual discourse it is situated in. *Geistesgeschichten* operate in a polemical context, and if one wants to determine their added value or quality it is necessary to determine the extent to which other types of historiography can engage with it meaningfully.

It has not been my purpose to establish a methodological framework first and then use it to determine which of the various narratives in the previous chapters is the best one. The goal is rather to provide structure to and guidelines for debates that involve multiple incompatible *Geistesgeschichten* and interpretations of essentially contested concepts, hereby moving beyond a naïve and unconvincing ‘let a thousand flowers bloom’ approach. That being said, it is possible at this stage to reflect briefly on the added value of the *Geistesgeschichten* of Löwith, Schmitt and Blumenberg in terms of their influence on the broader debate on secularization. First, it can be observed that the contributions of Schmitt and Löwith have gained more support in their immediate discursive context than Blumenberg’s work.²⁰⁰ One can see why they became influential: Löwith’s and Schmitt’s *Geistesgeschichten* can be condensed to single evocative templates – respectively, ‘progress is secularized eschatology’ and ‘the political is analogous to the theological’ – that invite the reader to project the image they evoke beyond the scope proposed by their authors.²⁰¹ This explains the positive reception of Löwith’s thesis in protestant theology and of Schmitt’s political theology throughout the political landscape. Schmitt’s theory makes it possible to imagine metaphysical analogies behind *any* political decision, while Löwith’s formula can be taken as an invitation to track down malicious secular *Ersatzreligionen* wherever they might appear. However, it would be problematic to simply equate the evocativeness or popularity of a *Geistesgeschichte* with its quality. Schmitt’s and Löwith’s formulas were widely appropriated because as conceptual proposals they remained rather imprecise, which means that they are adaptable and can be used for a variety of different purposes. However, an evocative or popular *Geistesgeschichte* is not necessarily “fruitful” in Bevir’s sense. One way of avoiding

199 Cf. Mouffe (2005); Connolly (1993) pp.ix-xvii.

200 Ruh (1980) pp.199-238, 279-281; Zabel (1968) pp.11, 39, 194-196, 231; Jaeschke (1967) pp.35-36. These three authors primarily focus on the reception of Löwith’s work. For the reception of Schmitt’s political theology, cf.: e.g. Müller (2003). Flasch’s (2017, pp.558-581) analysis suggests that Blumenberg’s *Legitimacy* was influential in the late 1960’s as a serious critique of contemporary theology, but that as such it attracted more resistance than approval.

201 Cf. Ankersmit (1981) pp.230-252; *ibid.* (1981b) pp.263-264.

mere 'suggestiveness' is by taking epistemic intellectual criteria such as those listed by Bevir and Kuukkanen seriously. A judgment on the quality of a *Geistesgeschichte* must take its discursive efficacy into account, but it is also necessary to distinguish mere popularity from markers of quality, e.g. through consideration of its intrinsic merits as a historical representation.

This is not to say that Schmitt's and Löwith's contributions to the secularization debate are without merit. On the contrary. Their accounts constitute paradigmatic theories on how the 'transitive' or 'qualitative' conception of secularization can be understood and it is in this sense that we can recognize a strong resonance between both theories and contemporary ideas in postsecularism on the secret survival of religious elements in modernity. Postsecularism forms a polemical renegotiation of the essentially contested concepts of 'modernity', 'secularization', and 'religion'. This renegotiation is characterized by a Schmittian heightened sensitivity towards political interests and decisions that might underlie seemingly self-evident religious-secular dichotomies and by Löwithian suspicions that secular-rational modes of thought (such as 'faith' in science and progress) might contain elements that it cannot account for and that possibly originated in religious worldviews.²⁰² Peter E. Gordon and Jonathan Skolnik, for instance, argue that the current attention to the problematic longevity of religion in modernity harkens

back to the so-called 'secularization debate' in Germany ... When considering this dispute, Blumenberg is often celebrated as the great modernist, the champion of humanism and self-assertion, but it is Löwith, who asserted that we are never beyond religion, who arguably most anticipated the current religious revival.²⁰³

Similarly, the political theology of Schmitt, which dictates that religion is inextricably political and that every political decision presupposes metaphysical assumptions, is particularly timely in an age where the ideal of liberal democracy is put under strain by religious terrorism on the one hand and burgeoning pleas for a religiously exclusive *Leitkultur* on the other.²⁰⁴ In short, the philosophies of Schmitt and Löwith can be used as a conceptual reservoir with which to analyze and problematize religion's ambivalent persistence in modernity. Evidently, this does not necessitate that one subscribes to their particular solutions to the problems they diagnose.

It is interesting to note that Blumenberg too is recently being rediscovered, both in and outside of Germany. Paul Fleming argues that the "belatedness" with which the thought of Blumenberg was received in the United States, already noticed by Rorty in his extensive review of *Legitimacy* (1983), is now being compensated by a "Blumenberg renaissance".²⁰⁵ This is not surprising: despite the complexity of its 'plot', the dense prose, and the relatively great amount of material it colligates, it can be observed that the polemical core of Blumenberg's narrative is quite attractive in its simplicity, as Marquard's work testifies. *Legitimacy* can be summarized with the formula 'human self-assertion against absolutism' – similar to how Blumenberg's entire oeuvre is more or less encapsulated by the phrase "*Entlastung vom Absoluten*".²⁰⁶ The core of Blumenberg's philosophy possesses a 'catchiness' that is comparable to Löwith's and Schmitt's, but it is only in recent years, it seems, that it is beginning to 'catch on' outside of German discourse. I suspect that Blumenberg's appeal might lie in his escape route from the false dichotomy

202 Cf. Harris (2015); Gordon and Skolnik (2005); Latré (2013); Schüssler Fiorenza (2019).

203 Gordon and Skolnik (2005) p.6.

204 Cf. Habermas (2011) pp.15-33.

205 Fleming (2017) p.119. Cf. Gordon (2019b); De Vriese (2016); Flasch (2017).

206 Marquard (2016) p.20.

between groundless postmodernism and positivistic scientism that seems to dominate the contemporary debate on the nature of modernity. He can be seen to overcome the problem of cultural relativism by advocating the desirability of modernity in atheistic terms without presuming a hypostatized conception of progress and without reiterating the positivistic “subtraction narrative” that simply presents modernity as an awakening from religious illusion.²⁰⁷

This raises the question what proponents of contemporary postsecularism can learn from this older secularization debate. In philosophy and the humanities it is safe to assume that the available ‘body of knowledge’ of a given subject does not increase in an accumulative manner, as is supposedly the case in the natural sciences (whether or not as the gradual perfection of a Kuhnian paradigm). Hence, whereas a natural scientist does not need to be cognizant of the *history* of her/his scientific discipline, in the case of philosophy and the humanities it is necessary to recollect and reconfigure continuously the vast field of past contributions that shaped the polemic one is presently situated in.²⁰⁸ Otherwise one runs the risk of reinventing the wheel or repeating past mistakes. The German secularization debate can function as a conceptual repository for contemporary attempts at understanding secularization. Knowledge of the older debate will help to appreciate the complexity, open-endedness, and the interpretative limitations of different approaches to the essentially contested concepts that are at stake. It shows a multitude of different ways of narrating the genealogy of the present condition vis-à-vis these concepts, as well the inherent problems that each approach might face.²⁰⁹ An ‘intellectual history’ of the German secularization debate – such as the one I present in this book – could thus be seen as an invitation to interlocutors in the contemporary polemic to either come up with new proposals that radically *diverge* from ideas posited earlier or to promote *advanced* versions of earlier standpoints that take into account the criticisms that these exemplary views encountered when they were first introduced.²¹⁰ Cognizance of historical precursors of the current debate makes it possible to provide new accounts on secularization that are more reflexive, nuanced, and argumentatively advanced than their predecessors, although – if one accepts the insights of Rorty and Gallie in this respect – it should ideally be accompanied by a sensitivity to the essential inconclusiveness of such a discourse. If it is possible to speak of ‘intellectual virtues’ then one can also imagine ‘intellectual vices’, one of which is a failure to acknowledge the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of a contemporary polemic. Such a failure not only makes a singular *Geistesgeschichte* appear naïve and unconvincing, but on a collective scale it creates the risk that, if we are dealing with the same set of contested concepts, contemporary interlocutors never move beyond earlier attempts at making sense of them.²¹¹ In short, I contend that ‘progress’ in philosophy (taken in a very limited sense) requires historical understanding

207 The term “subtraction narrative” is Taylor’s (2007, p.22). Cf. Griffioen (2016) pp.187-188.

208 Cf. Taylor (1984) pp.17-47.

209 Gallie (1968) pp.168-189.

210 Cf. Nauta (2008) pp.272-273.

211 Cf. Gadamer (2013) pp.311-318. This would be my criticism of a book such as *All Things Shining* (2011) by Kelly and Dreyfus. Based on a meager selection of works (ranging from Augustine to Melville and David Foster Wallace) the authors claim to have found the “hidden history of the West” (p.89), which is a decline of (polytheistic) sacrality in favor of modern nihilism. The authors lack awareness of the fact that they partake in a philosophical genre (which I call *Geistesgeschichte*) with its own tradition, and that there are libraries full of *other* ‘hidden histories of the West’. A discursive self-awareness would make a *Geistesgeschichte* such as theirs more reflective and thereby more convincing. In a similar vein, Breckman (2005, pp.103-104) suggests that Gauchet’s *Disenchantment of the World* (1997) displays a certain naivety that stems from a lack of knowledge of the German secularization debate, where theories that are comparable to Gauchet’s have long been points of contestation, for instance through Blumenberg’s critique of the secularization theorem. I suggest that the same can be said of, e.g., Gray’s recent *Seven Types of Atheism* (2019).

of a polemical *status quaestionis*, shaped by the contributions of predecessors. That is, “*Zukunft braucht [cognizance of] Herkunft!*”²¹²

Not only is it important for postsecularism to learn from this older debate so that contemporary accounts can positively expand on past ideas, it can also help prevent repeating past mistakes. As noted, I suggest in this respect that the German secularization debate demonstrates a detrimental lack of self-conscious or self-reflective *Geistesgeschichten*. Following Rorty and also Gadamer, we might say that *Geistesgeschichte* should ideally yield “a greater self-awareness”. Its aim should be ‘self-edification’ through the reflective incorporation of the alterity of other perspectives, rather than the complacent projection of one’s self-serving prejudices on the past.²¹³ In both cases the end result is a narrative of self-justification, but whereas the latter type typically leads to the further entrenchment of incompatible pre-given moral-political standpoints, a self-conscious *Geistesgeschichte* could possibly help to de-entrench the positions that are occupied in a debate. I believe that most *Geistesgeschichten* we have encountered in previous chapters belong to the type that furthers political entrenchment. Although nuance can be found in this debate, it tends to become overshadowed – if my reconstruction of the debate is correct – by a tendency towards polarization and the reification of opposition, as the post-1968 polemic between Taubes and Marquard exemplifies.

Even Blumenberg, who is often praised for his magnanimity and aversion to political ‘tribunalism’ cannot be fully exempted from this dynamic. He responded to anti-modern conservatives who denied the autonomy of modernity in virtue of its assumed dependency on Christianity – which suggests that any assertion of historical continuity indicates a full dependency on historical antecedents – by adopting their inference that any demonstration of historical discontinuity would amount to a proof of modernity’s illegitimacy.²¹⁴ Blumenberg thereby negates viable options that are excluded by the equation ‘historical continuity = illegitimacy’.²¹⁵ Recent contributions to postsecularism, such as by Habermas and Taylor, suggest that the assumption of a historical continuity between modernity and its religious past does not necessarily entail the former’s submission to the latter. They join postsecularist thinkers such as Vattimo in exploring ways of conceiving secularization (e.g. as *Verwindung*) that escape the dichotomies that were put in place by anti-modern conservatives and which were paradoxically reinforced by Blumenberg and Marquard. We have seen, for instance, that Habermas views secularization as a “learning process” by which religious ideas are placed in the service of modern secularity through “critical reappropriation”. Instead of considering this option, Blumenberg raised a rather dogmatic dichotomy between modern and religious concerns, the latter of which he banished beyond the “epochal threshold”. Arguably, a type of *Geistesgeschichte* that is more self-conscious – i.e., that regards the existence of alternative views as “of permanent potential critical value” to the quality of one’s own account – could enable the problematization of dogmatic ‘us versus them’ differentiations. Again, the admission of the essential contestedness of concepts, but also of the narrative configurations of these concepts, does not entail throwing the proverbial towel in the ring in advance of any meaningful debate. It should rather be envisaged as a recognition of the possibility that an opponent might have something of interest to say about those ideas one holds dear, something that can be adopted for the advancement and the enrichment of one’s own perspective.

212 Marquard (1989) p.75. Evidently, ‘progress’ would only be possible if the essentially contested concepts that are up for discussion somehow remain relevant. I suspect that a debate on such concepts will not reach a definite conclusion but that it simply dissipates once the concepts lose their appeal or sense of urgency.

213 Cf. Gadamer (2013) pp.278-317.

214 Vattimo (2002) p.65; Gordon (2019), pp.164-170. Cf. Gadamer (1968) pp.201-209.

215 Cf. Vattimo (2002) pp.65-70; Habermas (2013) pp.626-630; *ibid.* (2019) pp.66-68.

Conclusion

Grand philosophical histories or *Geistesgeschichten* tend to reflect the time in which they are written. They address, directly or indirectly, the perceived needs of a period, culture or a “we-subject”. In this sense, Blumenberg’s *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* can be taken to represent the cautious optimism of a new generation in Germany, one that tried to remedy societal problems not by reconnecting but by breaking with the religious past. Blumenberg’s “liberal modernity” not only proposes a relatively new beginning vis-à-vis its religious past, it also sets out certain limitations. Life in modernity is assumedly only bearable because the modern individual has learned to forgo hopes of ‘salvation’ or to suppress the inclination of bringing the human order into accord with an absolute cosmic or divine principle. Indirectly, this theory of modernity can be seen to function as a diagnosis of what went wrong in the period 1933-1945. It implies that totalitarianism is an anti-modern phenomenon that can be explained by the detrimental tendency to reintroduce ‘the Absolute’ into the human lifeworld or profane history. This analysis was meant to counter cultural-conservative diagnoses that proliferated in the 1950’s and the first half of the 1960’s that explained the ‘wrong-turning’ of modernity in terms of the alienation from an absolute, transcendent orientation point. Theological authors such as Friedrich Delekat, Alfred Müller-Armack and Friedrich Gogarten not only sought to ‘re-root’ modernity in the Christian tradition, they believed that it was the closing off from transcendence that caused the ‘totalitarian’ absolutization of immanence. While Löwith’s *Meaning in History* is in several significant ways far removed from theological pleas for a *Neuverwurzelung*, it can be placed in a similar conceptual field: that is, Löwith claims that modernity has run amok because, within it, humanity has lost its sense of proportion vis-à-vis an extra-human (cosmic) order.

It is in this abstract and generalized sense that Löwith’s and Blumenberg’s positions are fundamentally at odds with each other. If ‘re-rooting’ the human world in the natural world turns out to be an unviable option then Löwith seeks an ‘exit’ from the cave of the artificial cultural world, regardless of whether the world of nature proves to be hospitable or not. We can surmise that, ultimately, Löwith rejects anthropocentric images of ‘the world’ as false sources of meaning, stability and order. These images occupy the function that should actually be fulfilled by the immutable cosmos. Habermas may have criticized Löwith for ‘retreating’ from history into private solitary contemplation, but Löwith himself believed that he rejected escapism by facing up to the cosmic insignificance of human affairs and to nature’s indifference towards human life. If Marquard’s analysis is correct, then we can assume that Blumenberg defends the human right of retreat, either as a collective retreat from the extra-human Absolute or as an individual retreat into his “ganz private Schreibhöhle”, i.e., from the politicized intellectual climate of post-1968 German academia. In Blumenberg’s and Marquard’s eyes, the artificiality of this human world (or of the ‘private writing cave’), however, is not a reason for indictment: humans are destined to live in a human-made world. Ideas about an immutable cosmic order, such as those put forward by Löwith, are themselves

cultural products aimed at ‘compensation’ or ‘unburdening’. The question is not so much which ideas or artifacts best capture the eternal order of nature but, rather, which ideas make life more bearable by unburdening us from the absolutism of reality. This, I believe, is what the Löwith-Blumenberg debate ultimately boils down to.

Blumenberg’s theory does not contain a ‘decisive refutation’ of Löwith’s ‘secularization theorem’. My reconstruction thus aims to correct two misinterpretations: Löwith is not an adequate representative of the secularization theorem as Blumenberg describes it, nor does their polemic actually conceal a “grundsätzlichen Positionidentität”, as Marquard suggests. Blumenberg and Löwith are separated by a fundamental disagreement on the nature and value of modernity and by vastly different philosophical anthropologies. The fact that these underlying differences did not come to the fore clearly in their actual interactions (e.g., in Löwith’s review of *Legitimacy*) or that they have often been misunderstood by commentators raises the question whether we can, in fact, speak of a ‘Löwith-Blumenberg debate’ in the first place. Kurt Flasch, for instance, suggests that the real opponent of Blumenberg was ‘theology’ whereas Joe-Paul Kroll argues that Schmitt was Blumenberg’s actual adversary.¹ Were Löwith and Blumenberg then merely ‘two ships passing in the night’?² Perhaps it might be the case that, given their mutual misunderstandings and feelings of wounded pride, the actual exchange between Löwith and Blumenberg was not as fruitful as it could have been. However, I have argued that ‘the Löwith-Blumenberg debate’ is not merely a historical occurrence. It is also a prominent philosophical topos, a standard reference point in philosophical and theological literature on secularization and the contested place of religion in modernity. My analysis of ‘the Löwith-Blumenberg debate’ hence serves as a philosophical reconstruction of a juxtaposition of two influential intellectual positions on the nature of modernity and secularization. What is more, my reconstruction of the broader secularization debate shows that Löwith and Blumenberg can be seen to represent different ‘camps’ that themselves are heterogeneous and contain a variety of different positions in the ideological and intellectual struggle over modernity. Blumenberg defends, with Marquard and Wilhelm Kamlah, the modest right to start anew on human terms, whereas Löwith, together with Eric Voegelin and Rudolf Bultmann, among others, regards the denial of an extra-human dimension as a fatal hubris.

There is a tendency in recent scholarship to shift the focus from ‘the Löwith-Blumenberg debate’ to the exchange between Blumenberg and Carl Schmitt. This shift is defensible in light of the fact that, as their *Briefwechsel* shows, Blumenberg and Schmitt were themselves of the opinion that the interaction with Löwith had proven unfruitful. However, while it is true that Löwith was reluctant to openly engage with Schmitt, I have shown that it is nonetheless possible to reconstruct a meaningful polemic between the two. This “Kontroverse, die nicht stattfand” forms an illuminating counterpoint to the more well-known polemic between Blumenberg and Schmitt. By subsequently contrasting the positions of Löwith, Schmitt and Blumenberg with each other, we have discovered multiple lines of contestation that come to the fore. These lines help understand how each interlocutor viewed the others and how they tended to prioritize that which distinguishes their own position from the other two. For instance, Schmitt believed that Löwith and Blumenberg were united in a ‘secret plot’ against political theology, i.e., against his own firm belief in the essential inextricability of the political and the theological. Löwith, in turn, opposed not only Schmitt’s authoritarian decisionism but also Blumenberg’s neutralized liberal decisionism: his contemplative perspective indicates

1 Flasch (2017) pp.472-478; Kroll (2010).

2 I owe this characterization of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate to Herman Paul (personal exchange).

that both of these positions are characterized by a *Diessaitsaktivismus* that falls short of both authentic 'faith' and pure 'reason'. Finally, Blumenberg was distrustful of both Schmitt's decisionism and Löwith's contemplative skepticism because both positions are hostile towards his idea of modernity as an epoch where human autonomy is defended against infringements from the Absolute.

Blumenberg not only suspected an attempt to reinstall a 'fatal heteronomy' – a "schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl" – towards either God or the cosmos behind the thought of Löwith and Schmitt, but he believed this attempt to be behind a more general intellectual trend.³ He attacked this idea in the form of 'the secularization theorem'. I have argued however that if it is taken in the exact same sense as Blumenberg portrays it, this 'secularization theorem' is a straw man that is not fully congruent with any actual secularization narrative we have encountered. The defining characteristics of the theorem – substantialism and a claim of illegitimacy that is based on the juridical metaphor of expropriation – do not appear in the theories of Löwith or Schmitt for example. 'Secularization' does not fulfill a delineated normative function in Löwith's narrative, whereas Schmitt's interpretation of the concept is much more multifaceted than Blumenberg admits. In neither case, however, does 'secularization' serve as a simple substantialist claim of illegitimate expropriation. The same applies to 'second generation secularization theorists' such as Reinhart Koselleck and Hanno Kesting, who employ Löwith's formula because of its rhetorical effect, not because they deplore the theft of a religious substance by secular modernity. Authors such as Delekat and Müller-Armack come closest to iterating the ideal-typical secularization theorem. However, they do not refer to *Meaning in History*, which problematizes Blumenberg's claim that Löwith's theory had a direct "dogmatizing effect" on the secularization theorem. Rather than relying on the metaphor of expropriation, these theological authors instead tend to oscillate between what I have termed the models of 'deracination' (or the 'uprooting' of modernity from Christian soil) and 'idolatry'. The former model lends itself to the type of substantialist conservatism that calls for a reconnection with religious tradition, whereas the latter is more broadly applicable, as we have seen from our discussion of Walter Benjamin and Jacob Taubes.⁴

All in all, I would suggest that the technical discussion about 'substantialism' and 'expropriation' functions as a red herring. Blumenberg himself abandons these concerns when he enters into a debate with Schmitt and Taubes, presumably recognizing that they do not meet his specific characteristics of the secularization theorem.⁵ This suggests that Blumenberg's main aim was not so much to debunk the technicalities of the secularization theorem but rather to counter its perceived function: the attempted submission of the modern present to "a dimension of hidden meaning" that derives from a religious past. Indeed, it is true that the 'secularization theorem' *represents*, in this more general sense, a recognizable tendency among secularization narratives to connect the present, the human lifeworld, or immanence to something 'other', be it a revered religious past, nature, or transcendence. The contention of Blumenberg and Marquard is that this amounts to the *total* submission of the present to the past or to the denial of human freedom as autonomy. This is plausible, however, only if one accepts their specific understanding of human autonomy as the substantive self-sufficiency of modernity. It is on the basis of this assumption that Blumenberg, and with him Walter Jaeschke, regard any mention of substantive continuity with the past as a covert claim of illegitimacy.

3 This Schleiermacher-quote is invoked by Blumenberg in a letter to Schmitt: Schmitt-Blumenberg (2007) p.133.

4 Cf. Deuber-Mankowsky (2002) pp.12-19.

5 Specifically, the characteristics of substantialism, by which a claim of genetic derivation is made, and the illegitimate expropriation of an originally spiritual good or substance by 'the world'.

Whereas the model of 'deracination' can be seen to lend itself to the type of substantialist conservative narratives that is reminiscent of the secularization theorem, the model of 'idolatry' is more broadly applicable and arguably more interesting from a philosophical perspective. This model illuminates a significant disagreement between Blumenberg and his opponents, namely with regard to his *philosophical anti-absolutism*. 'Idolatry' functions as a narrative template that is used to critique a perceived failure in prioritization: something becomes an idol when it is wrongly taken as an end in itself, as an object of worship, or as a source of meaning. As such, it necessarily pertains to the Blumenbergian issue of 'absolutization'. Löwith, for example, rejects 'the historical world' when it is absolutized in post-Hegelian thought, obstructing our vision of 'the natural (i.e., real) world'. The model of idolatry, then, pertains not only to the historical 'roots' of the Modern Age but also, in a metaphysical sense, to the relation between 'immanence' and 'transcendence'. Authors such as Benjamin and Taubes can be seen to employ this model in yet a different way. They criticize 'liberal modernity' in so far as it pretends to have already fulfilled past promises of salvation, hope for a better world. They want to maintain a transcendent orientation point, which they identify as redemption, while leaving this position – "the Messianic" – vacant until further notice. Any attempt to fill this vacancy must be resisted as an idolatrous tendency to supplant the vacant "Messianic" space by false messiahs. Like Schmitt, Taubes and Benjamin desire to leave open the option of intervention from outside. They object to the absolutization of immanence, achieved by closing off the immanent order from any outside interruption. However, the idolatry-template can also be used to advocate an end to *all* worship and to defend the immanent sphere against outside absolutes, as I have suggested using a quote from Richard Rorty. Rorty argues – in line with Blumenberg and Marquard – that, after having rejected Reason or Nature as quasi-religious idols, we must "try to get to the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi divinity".⁶ In short, the idolatry-template offers insight into an important issue of contention in the secularization debate: does 'the world' need an absolute orientation point in order to prevent the absolutization of immanence or, as Blumenberg and Marquard argue, does the introduction of any reference to the absolute necessarily result in (theological or political) absolutism?

The debate between Taubes and Marquard brings clearly into view what political ramifications this question can involve. Taubes' antinomian conception of freedom is positively oriented towards this transcendent point, as an 'existential escape hatch', while Marquard believes that this preoccupation with extra-worldly salvation will necessarily lead to a fatal devaluation of *this* world. Marquard – following Blumenberg – seeks to establish a political equivalent of a closed off, monistic cosmos that can be considered inherently desirable because it is not compared to an extra-cosmic *absolute* good. Marquard neutralizes societal strife as 'disenchanted polytheism', portrayed as a condition in which the individual enjoys the freedom to be left alone by social-political forces. However, in Marquard's view this is only possible within a 'reified' cosmos that does not allow for an outside perspective. This dichotomy between total negation and unreserved affirmation reflects the polarized nature of their debate. Ultimately, Marquard rejects all 'critique' – which means that he also neglects the possibility of self-critique and instead blames 'anti-modernity' for all of modernity's problems – while Taubes tends to equate any immanent order with an oppressive 'system' that needs to be actively destroyed or passively negated. With the chapter on the Taubes-Marquard polemic, I have concluded my investigation of the development of the German secularization debate.

6 Rorty (1989) p.22. Cf. Gray (2019).

By now, roles have shifted: while Blumenberg defended ‘progressive’ modernity against conservative attempts at reconnecting it with a venerated Christian past, Marquard instead tries to ‘conserve’ modernity against a progressivist, revolutionary political theology. What has remained constant throughout this development, however, is not only a pervasive disagreement among the involved parties about the status of modernity and its relation to religion, but also an apparent need to continue debating about these contested issues, i.e., a need to make sense of the present through philosophical-historical narration.

In the final chapter I reflected on what interlocutors in the contemporary polemic on secularization – i.e., postsecularism – can learn from this older German debate. Arguably, each perspective has something to offer: Schmitt and Lübke help point out the *ideenpolitische* dimension behind much theorizing about secularization. The work of Löwith, Taubes and Voegelin, for instance, makes one attentive to analogies and continuities between modern anti-religious attitudes and those phenomena they pretend to reject or replace. Blumenberg and Marquard, in turn, indicate that even though modernity did not come into being *ex nihilo* this does not necessarily imply that it emerged seamlessly out of a religious background. However, such insights cannot be accumulated into a comprehensive view of ‘secularization’ or ‘modernity’. After all, these insights presuppose different, incompatible definitions of these very concepts that in turn are embedded in mutually exclusive grand philosophical histories or *Geistesgeschichten*. In short, while I would advise a contemporary *Geisteshistoriker(in)* who wishes to provide a new perspective on ‘secularization’ to draw inspiration from this older debate, this is not to say that this learning process would lead to a more ‘complete’ knowledge of this topic. It does, however, amount to a broader understanding of multiple, often incompatible ways of thinking about modernity and secularization, including the difficulties that will arise when these different conceptions clash in public or academic discourses. A *Geisteshistoriker(in)* must then creatively appropriate elements from earlier narratives – taking into account their polemical contexts – in the construction of a *new* narrative. This might even be one that ‘synthesizes’ elements from the theories of Löwith, Blumenberg, and Schmitt, but it can never be the result of their accumulation.

I approached the German secularization debate not primarily as a *Geisteshistoriker* but more as an ‘intellectual historian’ in Rorty’s sense of the term. Rorty’s depiction of the genre ‘intellectual history’ is congruent with my focus on the *ideenpolitische* dimension of the secularization debate and on the contingent and historically determined nature of the conceptual frameworks that are used within it. As such, my approach has favored a ‘dispersive’ reading: one that tends to focus more on covert heterogeneities rather than on affirming ‘reified’ oppositions between homogeneous ideological fronts. My portrayal of the debate indicates that, despite occasionally sharing overlapping objectives (which I have referred to as comprising heterogeneous ‘camps’), each single author conveys a unique story that cannot be simply reduced to an overarching perspective. I assume that this approach results in a greater awareness of the multifaceted and complex nature of the philosophical debate on modernity and religion. However, on a less positive note one could also say that it gives rise to a rather fractured image in which each individual narrative appears to constitute a self-enclosed world of its own. I have attempted to remedy this impression by arguing in the final chapter that it is possible to have a worthwhile and rational debate about and between multiple *Geistesgeschichten*, with the help of certain epistemic criteria, for instance. Moreover, I argued that historical reconstructions can and should attempt to criticize constructively or even positively build on these more ‘speculative’ and ‘presentist’ narratives. These methodological reflections indicate that one can make an informed – albeit never final – judgment on the quality of different narratives. In other words, while almost ‘everything is permitted’ in the genre of *Geistesgeschichte* – authors

are allowed, in theory, to make outlandish claims or postulate absurd narratives – this does not mean that every narrative is equally plausible or, for that matter, equally fruitful for the broader historiographical discourse. However, also in the more epistemically ‘virtuous’ and fruitful *Geistesgeschichten* there remains an inextricable element of contestability that historical reconstructions typically seek to avoid. A more general awareness of this element of contestation could presumably make for a more reflective and constructive debate on how we relate to history. The pluralist ethic of Walter B. Gallie indicates that in assuming the essential ‘contestedness’ of the relevant concepts in this debate – ‘modernity’ or ‘secularization’ – we do not give in to an intellectual defeatism but rather make room for a type of debate that is more reflective and constructive. Rather than implying that pluralism is an end in itself, as Gallie and Rorty do, I would suggest that an awareness of contestedness should not impede the different ‘teams’ in their serious attempts to stake a certain claim on a concept. Indeed, because the concepts in question involve personal or collective *identities* – since they pertain to questions on what it means to *be* modern or *who* may be included in this category – it is good to be mindful of the political efficacy of attempts at staking a claim on such concepts. In this respect it is important to avoid two pitfalls: a hegemony of exclusivist claims on these concepts and a condition of ironic relativism of the type that Rorty appears to propose. It might be better to leave these concepts relatively ‘open’ – not because the discussion about these concepts is an end in itself but so as not to preemptively suppress reasonable alternative understandings of these concepts.

Finally, I contend that the approach that I have adopted in this study – ‘intellectual history’ – creates a heightened awareness of the inherent contestability of any attempt at making sense of the present through normative and presentist *Geistesgeschichten*. Nonetheless, it is motivated by the hope that research such as this might lead to the introduction of fruitful new *Geistesgeschichten*. Rorty suggests that a “self-conscious”, “radically innovative” or “*entzau-berete Geistesgeschichte*” can be developed on the basis of the insights that intellectual history provides. Building forth on these insights, a new *Geistesgeschichte* can either sublimate tensions that have been created by earlier narratives or, based on knowledge of the problems that its predecessors encountered, it can propose a truly innovative perspective that eliminates these issues – at least until new tensions arise. Likewise, an awareness of the essential contestedness of the concepts that are at play can also increase the substantive quality of the narratives in which they are employed. The challenge is to provide a plausible alternative to earlier interpretations of a concept in a way that somehow solves or circumvents the objections that these concepts initially gave rise to. In this sense we can surmise that recent proposals – i.e., secularization as “*Verwindung*” (Vattimo) or as a multifaceted “learning process” (Habermas) – already appear more ‘advanced’ and reflective than assertions of either a seamless substantive continuity or a radical break. Lastly, with regard to the concept of ‘modernity’, I want to suggest that an awareness of the contestability of the concept may lead to new insights into how it can be understood. However, this involves moving away from statements about the concept of ‘modernity’ to statements about what the concept refers to. That is, we can regard the lack of agreement on what ‘modernity’ is to be uniquely modern. For lack of a shared, overarching worldview, modernity arguably *is* a continuous debate about, among other things, what ‘modernity’ is.

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Samenvatting

‘Secularisatie’ is een complex en meerduidig begrip: het beschrijft enerzijds het verdwijning-sproces van religie in de moderne tijd en anderzijds verwijst het naar de vaak ambivalente *transformatie* van religieuze elementen. In het licht van dit tweede secularisatiebegrip blijkt dat ogenschijnlijk seculiere fenomenen religieuze ‘wortels’ hebben of een (quasi-)religieuze functie vervullen: zo wordt voetbal een nieuwe religie genoemd, om een onschuldig voorbeeld te noemen, maar met dit ambivalente secularisatiebegrip worden ook grotere claims gemaakt, bijvoorbeeld de stelling dat de westerse moderniteit zelf, of de Europese beschaving, een inherente schatplichtigheid bezit ten opzichte van het christelijk verleden. In het recente post-secularismedebat wordt dit ‘transitieve’ secularisatiebegrip, dat duidt op de transformatie van iets religieus in iets seculiers, weer herontdekt. Hiermee ontstaan significante parallellen met een oudere discussie waarin het transitieve secularisatiebegrip een centrale rol speelde, namelijk het Duitse secularisatiedebat dat werd gevoerd tussen de jaren ’50 en ’80.

Het onderwerp van dit proefschrift is het debat tussen Karl Löwith, Hans Blumenberg en Carl Schmitt binnen de context van het bredere Duitse secularisatiedebat. In hoofdstuk 1 begin ik mijn onderzoek met een analyse van het Löwith-Blumenberg debat. Dit debat is bekend in de wetenschappelijke literatuur, maar het wordt mijns inziens vaak verkeerd geïnterpreteerd. Commentatoren zijn van mening dat Löwiths theorie definitief ‘gefalsificeerd’ wordt door Blumenberg of men denkt dat deze filosofen in werkelijkheid veel dichter bij elkaar stonden dan Blumenbergs kritiek op Löwith doet vermoeden en dat hun polemiëk niets meer is dan een schijngevecht. Mijn analyse laat echter zien dat beide interpretaties correctie behoeven: het Löwith-Blumenberg debat vormde een wezenlijk geschil dat ten diepste draaide om fundamenteel verschillende visies op moderniteit, religie, geschiedenis en de menselijke natuur.

In hoofdstuk 2 tot en met 4 introduceer ik de ‘politiek theologoog’ Carl Schmitt. Deze omstreden jurist-filosoof heeft een belangrijke rol gespeeld in het secularisatiedebat door de latent politieke dimensie in deze discussie te expliciteren en verder te thematiseren in het licht van zijn politieke theologie. Veel commentatoren wijzen erop dat de polemiëk tussen Schmitt en Blumenberg vruchtbaarder was dan hun beider discussies met Löwith; vandaar dat wordt gesuggereerd dat het Schmitt-Blumenberg debat het ‘echte’ secularisatiedebat was. Mijn reconstructie toont echter aan dat het debat tussen Löwith en Schmitt filosofisch gezien significanter is dan dit commentaar doet vermoeden, en dat de situering van de drie filosofen tegenover elkaar belangrijke elementen in hun denken blootlegt die anders impliciet zouden zijn gebleven. Het toont de ‘Schmittiaanse’ kant van Blumenberg, de ‘theologische’ kant van Löwith en het werpt nieuw licht op het ‘antisemitisch crypto-katholicisme’ van Schmitt.

In hoofdstuk 5 tot en met 7 reconstrueer ik het Duitse secularisatiedebat in bredere zin. Door het Löwith-Blumenberg-Schmitt debat te contextualiseren laat ik niet alleen zien welke rol ze hebben gespeeld in de ontwikkeling van dit bredere discours maar ook hoe hun bijdragen zelf de tijd en plaats van hun totstandkoming weerspiegelen. Hoofdstuk 5 focust op de historiografische dimensie, hoofdstuk 6 op de theologische dimensie, en hoofdstuk 7 op de

politieke dimensie van het Duitse secularisatiedebat. Hoofdstuk 7, het laatste deel van dit drieluik, beschrijft hoe het secularisatiedebat na 1968 politiseerde. Deze politisering zorgde niet alleen voor polarisering, het betekende ook dat de polen in het politieke landschap verschoven: het progressivisme van Blumenberg leek nu conservatief in vergelijking met het radicalisme van Nieuw Links. Het feit dat Nieuw Links gebruik maakte van politieke theologie om haar verhaal kracht bij te zetten betekent dat 'theologie' nu aan de kant van vooruitgang en verandering stond in plaats van 'behoud', zoals in de jaren '50 nog het geval was. Binnen deze nieuwe context komen Odo Marquard en Jacob Taubes naar voren als de nieuwe vaandeldragers van het inmiddels gepolitiseerde secularisatiedebat. Marquard representeert het liberaalconservatisme van Blumenberg, terwijl hij zich ook het scepticisme van Löwith toe-eigent, en Taubes vertegenwoordigt een Nieuw-Linkse variant, beïnvloed door Walter Benjamin, van Schmitts politieke theologie.

Hoofdstuk 8, tot slot, is gewijd aan methodologische reflectie. Ik onderzoek hierin de narratief-historische dimensie van de secularisatietheorieën. De verschillende betogen over secularisatie zijn namelijk niet alleen abstracte filosofieën, ze pretenderen ook het verleden te representeren. Aan de hand van Richard Rorty's begrip '*Geistesgeschichte*' beargumenteer ik dat dergelijke 'secularisatieverhalen' filosofisch én historisch van aard zijn. Ik veronderstel dat ze onderscheiden moeten worden van andere vormen van geschiedschrijving, met name van een Rankeiaans historisme, en dat het genre waar ze toe behoren, *Geistesgeschichte*, zijn eigen functie en legitimiteit bezit. Daarnaast analyseer ik de rol van 'wezenlijk betwiste begrippen' (*essentially contested concepts*) zoals 'moderniteit', 'christendom' of 'secularisatie' in het genre *Geistesgeschichte*. Ik betoog dat *geistesgeschichtliche* discussies over dit soort begrippen, als vorm van 'ideeënpolitiek', waarschijnlijk niet snel beslecht zullen worden, maar dat de kwaliteit van deze debatten wel kan worden verbeterd met behulp van rationeel-ethische maatstaven en epistemische criteria.

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