

# Toward a Hermeneutics of Secularization

The Meaning and Usage of the Interpretative Category of Secularization

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Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen

Ariën Voogt

s1009298

Begeleider: Dr. Herman Westerink

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## **Abstract**

The hermeneutic use of 'secularization' for the interpretation of elements of secular modernity has sparked a debate on the meaning and validity of this category. This thesis contributes to this debate, first, by providing a genealogy of the concept of secularization; second, by reconstructing and evaluating the contributions of Hans Blumenberg and Giorgio Agamben; third, by offering a distinct account of the meaning of the interpretative category of secularization and of its valid hermeneutic use. It argues that secularization is not a concept that objectively signifies the religious features of a secular object; it is rather the strategic operation of an effective analogical relation between the secular and religious discursive domain, for the hermeneutic purpose of interpreting the meaning of an object.

**Key words** Secularization, Secularization debate, Concept of secularization, Genealogy, Hermeneutics, Blumenberg, Agamben

## **Samenvatting**

Het hermeneutisch gebruik van 'secularisatie' voor de duiding van elementen van de seculiere moderniteit heeft geleid tot een debat over de betekenis en geldigheid van dit begrip. Deze scriptie draagt bij aan dit debat, ten eerste met een genealogie van het secularisatiebegrip; ten tweede met een reconstructie en beoordeling van de bijdragen van Hans Blumenberg en Giorgio Agamben; ten derde met een eigen theorie van de betekenis van het interpretatiebegrip 'secularisatie' en het juiste hermeneutische gebruik ervan. Betoogd zal worden dat secularisatie geen begrip is dat objectief verwijst naar de religieuze eigenschappen van een seculier object; het is eerder de strategische hantering van een werkzame analoge relatie tussen het seculiere en religieuze discursieve domein, met het hermeneutische oogmerk om de betekenis van een object te doorgronden.

**Sleuteltermen** Secularisatie, Secularisering, Secularisatiedebat, Secularisatiebegrip, Genealogie, Hermeneutiek, Blumenberg, Agamben

## Introduction

Secularization is one of the burning issues of our time. Not because the decline of religion would be an inevitable if somewhat disconcerting feature of the modern world, as was still widely believed a few decades ago. It is precisely because religion has forcefully returned on the world stage that secularization changed from an accepted fact into a contested issue. Not only has religion refused to diminish outside of a few Western countries, which have effectively become the exception rather than the rule. Religion has also become a dominant political force again. These developments have transformed the academic discussion on religion, modernity and secularization. Since the nineties, academics in the social sciences and humanities have joined forces against the whole notion of secularization and the connected 'secularization thesis'. The secularization thesis, so the argument goes, has naively assumed that global processes of modernization, societal development and rationalization go hand in hand with and necessarily result in a decline of religion. Based on the empirical evidence that modernization has not at all led to the disappearance of religion, this thesis is now discredited, together with the notion of secularization as a whole. It is challenged by alternative notions, such as 'desecularization'<sup>1</sup>, 'neo-secularization'<sup>2</sup>, and the notion 'post-secular'<sup>3</sup> that now widely circulates in philosophy. The term secularization is attacked from a different direction as well: 'secular' would be a notion with an unmistakably Western background, meaning that 'secular' and 'secularization' cannot self-evidently, or at all, be treated as universal concepts that can be applied to other cultural spheres.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of secularization is thus under siege. But all proposed alternatives (desecularization, post-secularism) still rely on a prior conception of the secular and secularization. To discuss what it means to be 'post-secular' we first need to know what it means to be secular.<sup>5</sup> Secular and secularization therefore seem inescapable

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<sup>1</sup> As propagated by the sociologist Peter L. Berger, cf. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mark Chaves, "Secularization as Declining Religious Authority," *Social Forces* 72, no. 3 (1994); David Yamane, "Secularization on Trial: In Defense of a Neosecularization Paradigm," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 1 (1997).

<sup>3</sup> Often connected to the later Habermas, cf. "Notes on Post-Secular Society," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> On the different meanings of 'post-secular' that are circulating, see James A. Beckford, "SSSR Presidential Address Public Religions and the Postsecular: Critical Reflections," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51, no. 1 (2012).

categories in our discourse. But if anything becomes clear in these recent debates, it is the opacity and murkiness of these fundamental concepts.<sup>6</sup>

The current debate recalls an older debate on secularization that was carried out in Germany from the fifties until the seventies. It remains highly relevant, because it essentially posed the question that still underlies the contemporary debate: what is the relation of modernity to religion? More specifically, is Western modernity a clear break from its Christian past or not? And if we say that the modern world is a result of 'secularization', does that mean that it is the result of a *detachment* from the Christian world, or that it is the result of a *transference* of Christian elements from the religious to the secular domain? The debate, which was in the deepest sense about modernity and religion, crystallized on surface level around the contested concept of secularization. It became the key term in this debate, as the different positions regarding modernity and religion all had a certain perspective on the meaning of the secularization concept. But in contrast to the contemporary debate on secularization, which mainly pertains to social science and therefore understands secularization as an empirical, quantitative category for the observation of the supposed decline of religious activity, this earlier debate approached secularization from a philosophical and conceptual perspective. Here the category of secularization was not understood in an empirical and quantitative fashion, but in an interpretative, qualitative sense. To the participants of the debate, such as Karl Löwith, Hans Blumenberg, Carl Schmitt, secularization was about the interpretation of historical developments connected to the birth of the modern age, continuities and discontinuities between secular modernity and premodern Christendom, or in short how modern, secular phenomena are related to religious (i.e. Christian) phenomena. In contrast with the sociology of secularization, the field related to these issues can be described as the *hermeneutics of secularization*.

The two different senses of secularization – empirical and interpretative (or hermeneutic) – can best be illustrated by examples. The empirical sense is typically expressed in a statement like 'the secularization of Dutch society in the sixties'. The interpretative sense appears in a typical statement like 'the Marxist classless society is a secularization of God's kingdom on earth', or 'the spirit of capitalism is a secularization

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<sup>6</sup> For considerations on the various meanings of 'secularization' that are current in contemporary social science, see e.g. José Casanova, "The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig J. Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Detlef Pollack, "Varieties of Secularization Theories and Their Indispensable Core," *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 90, no. 1 (2015); Steve Bruce, *Secularization: in Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Nicos Mouzelis, "Modernity and the Secularization Debate," *Sociology* 46, no. 2 (2012).

of the Protestant ethic'<sup>7</sup> or even 'modern sports culture is a secularized religion'. Now despite the great differences among the latter examples of the interpretative category, it is clear that they all express something quite distinct from the empirical use in the first example. These latter examples, in one form or another, all qualitatively *interpret* something from the secular domain to pertain, derive from, or in any way relate to the religious domain. No such interpretation of the relation between the conceptual domains of the secular and religious is made by the empirical use of secularization in the social sciences, in so far as it assumes that we agree on what counts as religious, and that we can simply observe and measure its increase or decline in society. Yet what counts as religious, and what as secular, is precisely what the debate on the hermeneutics of secularization has questioned. If we identify a modern element as a secularization of something religious, what does this say about the supposed secularity, or perhaps of the hidden religiosity of this element?

Notwithstanding its different approach to secularization, in the hermeneutic debate the same questions surfaced as now in the sociological debate: what does secularization actually mean? What do you say when you speak of something as a secularization? What are criteria for its conceptual use, and for assessing whether it is valid to speak of secularization in a specific case? Or is secularization as such an invalid category? In a similar way as in the contemporary debate, these questions arose out of the opacity and vagueness inherent to the concept, but they were also directly connected to the complex, fundamental question of what makes something secular or religious, and what are the proper boundaries between these spheres. In any case, all these questions put into question the whole application of the secularization concept for hermeneutic purposes: if we cannot adequately address the criteria of use, validity or even the basic meaning of this category of interpretation, it makes no sense really to continue this kind of hermeneutics. The possibility of an agreed hermeneutic of secularization thus hinged on a shared conception of the correct meaning and use of the concept of secularization. Unfortunately, this was never achieved. The secularization debate of the last century never reached a conclusive end that could put the issue of the meaning of secularization to bed. And up to this day it incidentally flares up again, because the interpretative category of secularization remains in use among academics and in public discourse. But when asked what it actually means, we still don't know.

It therefore seemed a worthwhile attempt to again confront this question head on. If only because we all keep using secularization in this interpretative, qualitative way, so there must be some intuitive sense pertaining to the concept that we haven't yet been

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<sup>7</sup> These are not completely arbitrary examples, as they are popularized versions of famous theses of Karl Löwith and Max Weber, as we shall see in the next chapters.

able to make explicit, and to work out in a rigorous way. If a sound hermeneutics of secularization is to be made possible, this can only succeed on the condition that we reach an adequate understanding of the interpretative category of secularization. Hence the research question of this investigation: what is the meaning and valid usage of the interpretative category of secularization? In order to adequately address the research question, we first need to lay the groundwork. This is made up of two parts: the background of the concept itself, and the main strands of the debate on the concept so far. Only against this background can we hope to develop a distinct account of the hermeneutic category of secularization.

Now any investigation of such a complex and layered concept ought to start with a historical study of its etymological origins, semantic shifts, and paradigmatic appearances that have contributed to the way we currently understand the hermeneutic concept. This will be the concern of the first chapter. It presents a genealogy of the concepts of the secular and secularization, with a particular focus on the birth of the interpretative category, which is the concern of this research, rather than the development of the empirical category of secularization.

Next, we ought to get up-to-date as to the state of the art in the debate surrounding the hermeneutics of secularization. This requires, first, that we look at Hans Blumenberg's main contribution to the critique of secularization, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, in chapter two. The other participants in the secularization debate from the fifties until the seventies will also occasionally appear, but Blumenberg is among them the only one who consistently and extendedly elaborated on the meaning, ideological background and criteria of use of the concept of secularization. Although Blumenberg is most known for his criticism of the concept, it becomes clear in the analysis of chapter two that Blumenberg actually offers a productive account as well, which enables fresh understandings of what secularization might mean and how it can be used. The emphasis therefore lies on these productive aspects of Blumenberg's account, which so far have received little attention in the literature.

Regarding the state of the art, we ought to look as well at a significant contribution to the secularization debate by a contemporary author. This author is Giorgio Agamben. While there would be alternative contemporary authors who have written about secularization from a conceptual and hermeneutic perspective<sup>8</sup>, none of them has actually offered a systematic elaboration on the meaning and valid modes of use of the hermeneutic concept itself. Agamben has. Across fragments pertaining to his different works he can be seen to offer an original and insightful account of the meaning and

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<sup>8</sup> Most importantly Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, Marcel Gauchet, Jean-Luc Nancy, Gianni Vattimo.

hermeneutic application of secularization. Chapter three proposes a reconstruction of Agamben's account, which has never been done before in the literature.

Finally we arrive at the actual consideration of the research question in chapter four. Based on the insights from the concept's genealogy, and on an assessment and comparison of the accounts of Blumenberg and Agamben, this chapter proceeds to develop a comprehensive theory of the meaning of the interpretative category of secularization, and its valid modes of use in a hermeneutic of secularization. This chapter supports the claim that secularization is not a concept that objectively signifies the religious features of a secular object, but that it is the strategic operation of an effective analogical relation between the secular and religious domain, for the hermeneutic purpose of interpreting the meaning of an object.

The conclusion revisits some general principles and caveats regarding the concept of secularization and its hermeneutic use, and it draws some lessons from the secularization debate for our current thinking about the self-understanding of modernity, and the idea of secularization that this self-understanding inevitably entails.

## Chapter 1

### A Genealogy of Secularization

The concept of secularization can be understood nor interpreted apart from its history. This principle might apply to any significant philosophical concept, for the case of secularization it is exceptionally true. Since the early twentieth century, the term has played a central role in the collective self-interpretation of Western history and identity. It is no surprise that its frequent use in the public debate and in political narratives has burdened the term with ideological weight. But the concept has *always* had ideological significance. The root 'secular' is already a theologically and politically charged notion; the historical development of the term 'secularization' has only amplified the labyrinthine jumble of theological, metaphysical and political presuppositions and associations that come with it. Let us try to disentangle this knot.

The genealogy presented in this chapter is not a history of secularization. It is not concerned with secularization as a political or cultural process. If only because one would then already need a definition of secularization. This genealogy only presents, in a nutshell, the historical development of the concept of secularization. Why a *genealogy*? Although I do not necessarily adhere to Nietzsche's or Foucault's idea of genealogy, and use the term in a pretty broad sense, it is in agreement with their basic principle that genealogy breaks with accounts of a progressive teleological development of one self-identical idea or principle within history; accounts that trace this element from its original seed throughout its gradual evolution up to its present full-grown form. Genealogy is instead concerned with various incompatible development lines, the emergence and disappearance of new meanings which cannot ever be subsumed and made compatible by one narrative line or encompassing idea. Still, a genealogy can shed light on an idea in its present form. It reveals underlying problems, associations, structural relations and discursive constellations that might still determine its current use. On this basis the present chapter offers a *constructive* account, not a merely antiquarian panorama.

The focus of the present genealogy is the emergence of the hermeneutic concept of secularization, and it therefore leaves out most of its development as empirical category (which mainly took place in twentieth-century social sciences). It particularly deals with the significations and associations that the concept acquired before it turned into an accepted scientific category of historical-cultural interpretation in the first half of the twentieth century. The problem I am concerned with is hence not how the concept is currently used and how this current meaning emerged, but what conditioned the first paradigmatic applications of secularization as a hermeneutic

category (i.e. in the writings of Troeltsch, Weber, Löwith, Schmitt). It will be necessary not only to identify the concept's established meaning just prior to these authors, but to trace the genealogy of secularization down from its etymological forebears '*saeculum*' and '*saecularis*', through its emergence as a concept in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, up to its appearance in the late nineteenth and twentieth century as a scientific category of interpretation.

I rely on several studies. The first study is the influential one of Hermann Lübke<sup>9</sup>, which focuses on the history of the literal term secularization [*Säkularisierung*], particularly focusing on the ideological contexts in which it functioned. Because Lübke's study is exclusively concerned with the literal term, it has difficulty explaining the quite sudden transformation of secularization into a descriptive scientific category that is attested at the end of the nineteenth century. Hence, subsequent studies by Hermann Zabel<sup>10</sup> and Giacomo Marramao<sup>11</sup> criticized Lübke's narrow concern with the literal concept *Säkularisierung*/secularization/*saecularizatio*, and proposed to additionally look at the German term *Verweltlichung* and its independent development, as *Verweltlichung* has served as more than just the German translation of the original Latin forms. Only the combined treatment of the history of secularization/*Verweltlichung* enables comprehension of the concept's emergence as a hermeneutic category.

### ***Saeculum* in patristic Christianity**

The Christian interpretation of the Latin term *saeculum* has its roots in the Latin-speaking communities of North-Africa, as opposed to Christian communities in other parts of the Empire that primarily spoke Greek. The Greek *aion* closely corresponds to Latin *saeculum*, both meaning as much as 'lifetime', a generational life-cycle and in this connection also 'century'.<sup>12</sup> But because of the specific function that *saeculum* had acquired in the Roman Empire, the connotations of which were absent in *aion*,<sup>13</sup> the first recorded Christian use of *saeculum* has more significance in a politico-theological

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<sup>9</sup> Hermann Lübke, *Säkularisierung: Geschichte eines ideenpolitischen Begriffs*, 2 ed. (Freiburg/München: Karl Alber, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Hermann Zabel, "Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung: zur Geschichte einer Interpretationskategorie" (Dissertation, Universität Münster, 1968).

<sup>11</sup> Giacomo Marramao, *Die Säkularisierung der westlichen Welt*, transl. Günter Memmert (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Ernst Diehl, "Das *Saeculum*, seine Riten und Gebete. Teil 1: Bedeutung und Quellen des *Saeculum*. Die älteren *Saecula*," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 83, no. 3 (1934): 256. John F. Hall, "The *Saeculum Novum* of Augustus and its Etruscan Antecedents," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt II.16.3*, ed. Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1986), 2567.

<sup>13</sup> Diehl, "Das *Saeculum* I," 264.

sense than being a mere translation of *aion*. In imperial ideology, the *saeculum novum* heralded by Caesar Augustus denoted the sacredness of the 'golden age' supposedly prophesized by Vergil.<sup>14</sup> The religious narrative connected to Augustus's new age is interestingly enough already structured by the ideas of sinfulness of the old *saeculum*, redemption and rebirth in a bright future, the *saeculum Augustum*, inaugurated by Caesar Augustus, *salvator mundi*.<sup>15</sup>

The earliest registered Christian use of *saeculum* should therefore be understood as an uncompromising defiance and explicit reversal of imperial ideology. We find it in *Acts of the Scilitan Martyrs*. In the year 180 CE a group of Christians were brought before the Roman Proconsul in Carthage, who ordered them to swear by the lord emperor. The Christians reportedly answered that they did not recognize the "empire of this *saeculum* [*imperium huius saeculi*]", but only the lord God who is "emperor of kings and of all nations [*imperator regum et omnium gentium*]"<sup>16</sup> They "pay honor to Caesar as Caesar, but it is God we fear."<sup>17</sup> The rule of the emperor might perhaps be necessary as temporary government, but the meaning of *imperium huius saeculi* is radically altered from being a sacred realm ruled by the emperor as divine lord, to a temporary realm limited in time and space and ultimately subjected to the one, highest and invisible "Lord God who is in heaven."<sup>18</sup> Redemption and a golden age are not to be hoped for in this *saeculum*, only when God ends it can the eternal kingdom commence.

The term *saeculum* is in this connection already quite close to what we recognize as the traditional Christian understanding of the temporal world. But the definite theological underpinning of the relation between the spiritual and temporal realm, and therefore the meaning of *saeculum*, is found in Augustine's *The City of God* (written between 413-426). Augustine divides humanity in two invisible communities, gathered in the 'heavenly city' (*civitas caelestis* or *civitas Dei*) and the opposite 'earthly city' (*civitas*

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<sup>14</sup> The golden new age was itself connected to Augustus by Vergil. See the fourth Eclogue (around 40 BCE): "Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas; magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo" Vergil, *Eclogue* IV, 5-8. And the explicit invocation of Augustus as the founder of the new golden age in the sixth book of the Aeneid (23 BCE): "Augustus Caesar, divi genus, aurea condet saecula" Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6, 792. Cf. Ernst Diehl, "Das Saeculum, seine Riten und Gebete. Teil 2: Die Saecula der Kaiserzeit. Ritual und Gebet der Feiern der Jahre 17 v. Chr., 88 und 204 n. Chr.," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 83, no. 4 (1934): 349; Hall, "The Saeculum Novum of Augustus," 2577.

<sup>15</sup> Diehl, "Das Saeculum II," 352, 371.

<sup>16</sup> *Acts of the Scilitan Martyrs*, quoted in Matthias Riedl, "The Secular Sphere in Western Theology: A Historical Reconsideration," in *The Future of Political Theology: Religious and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Péter Losonczi, Mika Luoma-aho, and Aakash Singh (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

*terrena*). Now one must be careful not to identify the earthly city with *saeculum*: the two cities are spiritual communities, they invisibly exist side by side as long as we live in the current *saeculum*. Both the earthly and heavenly city are still “linked and fused together” in the *interim saeculo*, and “only to be separated at the Last Judgment”, at which the *saeculum* gives way to the new heaven and earth.<sup>19</sup> Empire and church are therefore both ‘secular’ entities, because they are temporal institutions in which the spiritual inhabitants of both cities are mixed (*corpus permixtum*).

Augustine’s *saeculum* does not so much denote secular power or imperium as against ecclesiastical power, but the whole transitory realm of human existence that is inherently sinful and miserable, in which Christians can only believe in things unseen, in a *spiritual* reality beyond the visible, and hope for a different world to come. The ‘secular’ is for Augustine thus not opposed to ‘religious’ or ‘ecclesiastical’, but to ‘eternal’ or ‘spiritual’ (in the sense of pertaining to God’s currently invisible realm). It is a clearly pejorative term, but only in so far as the *totality* of human life is miserable.

### **Saecularis in medieval Christendom**

Augustine’s schema remained widely influential in and far beyond the Middle Ages, but its understanding of *saeculum* underwent significant transformations. The meaning of *saeculum* and most of all the adjective (and substantive) *saecularis* changed and began to be applied to a set of persons and institutions. Contrary to Augustine’s understanding, ‘secular’ in medieval Latin Christendom no longer *generally* denoted *all* human, temporal and therefore ‘mixed’ activity until the Last Judgment, but was a category that applied to *specific* institutions, people and activity.

This was first a result of the emergence of monastic orders. Monasticism was conceived on the presupposition that one could flee from the world, even before the *interim saeculum*’s proper end. This brought a distinction between those Christians that remained in the *saeculum*, and those that had fled the world by taking monastic vows and following a *regula*, a specific monastic rule (e.g. the Benedictine rule). This eventually resulted in the formal designation of the *ordo regularis*, the ‘regulars’, as

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<sup>19</sup> “Perplexia quippe sunt istae duae civitates in hoc saeculo invicemque permixtae, donec ultimo iudicio dirimantur”. Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 1.35; *The City of God, Books I-VII*, transl. Gerald G. Walsh and Demetrius B. Zema (Baltimore: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 72. And further on “[civitates] quas in hoc interim saeculo perplexas ... invicemque permixtas”. *Civitate Dei* 11.1, *The City of God, Books VIII-XVI*, transl. Gerald G. Walsh and Grace Monahan (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 199.

opposed to the *saeculares*.<sup>20</sup> To the *ordo saecularis* belonged the priests and the clergy who performed their duties not in the seclusion of the monastery, but in the world.

A second transformation of the concept of the secular was of a similar juridical nature, but with much more drastic effects. The Gregorian Reform in the late eleventh and early twelfth century not only sparked the Investiture Controversy, it was the first step to the modern political meaning of 'secular'.<sup>21</sup> Before the Gregorian Reform, the church was mixed up with the feudal system. It is only after the Gregorian Reform that the Catholic Church became an autonomous body, and could distinguish itself from lay power.<sup>22</sup> Gregory VII (1073-1085), arranging the clergy into a strong hierarchy, effectively established the church as a political institution in sharp distinction with kingdom and empire.

Essential for this transformation was the new 'class consciousness' of the clergy. Before the Reform, the clergy was not a politically distinct group. Any form of unity was hampered by the sharp distinction between regular and secular clergy, which led completely different lives.<sup>23</sup> The reform of the clergy gave a unified identity to the clergy as a universal polity, in opposition to the laity, which now even included the emperor.<sup>24</sup> This new sharp distinction between clergy and laity gave a twist to the term 'secular'. The papal party, aiming to unify the two types of clergy, downplayed the difference between the secular and regular clergy by unifying them under the category of *spirituales*, and now transposed the term *saecularis* (or the synonym *temporalis*) to the extra-ecclesial realm – most of all the secular (we may now use the term) rule of the lay emperor and kings.<sup>25</sup> A smart political move: it not only consolidated the unified body of the clergy by distinguishing it from all worldly powers as a 'spiritual' institution (compare Augustine!), but it also made rhetorical use of the pejorative theological associations connected to the 'secular' in order to render imperial and royal power temporary, corrupt and sinful by nature.<sup>26</sup> If the church (for Augustine still part of the

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<sup>20</sup> Initially the distinction was between the *ordo regularis* and the *ordo canonicus*, or those who were not tied to a distinct *regula* but remained under the canonical rule of the bishop.

<sup>21</sup> See for a general discussion of the Gregorian Reform Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: the Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 85-119.

<sup>22</sup> Of course, the doctrine of the 'two swords' had long existed, but in the early Middle Ages the de facto authority and power was squarely in the hands of the emperor and feudal lords.

<sup>23</sup> Berman, *Law and Revolution*, 107.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>26</sup> Gregory VII wrote in a famous letter: "Kings and princes of the earth, seduced by empty glory, prefer their own interests to the things of the spirit, whereas pious pontiffs, despising vainglory, set the things of God above the things of the flesh. ... The former, far too much given

*saeculum*) was now essentially spiritual, all secular powers and authorities were necessarily degraded and subjected to its divine rule.<sup>27</sup>

Two important things happen in this conceptual shift. First, the emancipation of the spiritual (now identified with the ecclesiastical) from the secular also opened up the way for increased autonomy of secular politics.<sup>28</sup> In the later formation of the modern state, the theological, pejorative and subjugated sense of 'secular' disappears and it comes to simply denote the state's independence from church authority. The 'desecularization' of the church since Gregory VII therefore enables the modern political meaning of the state's 'secularity' – in a double sense of independence from the church and having a non-sacral foundation.<sup>29</sup> Second, the age of the Gregorian Reform inaugurated a huge transformation in the understanding of the *saeculum*. It is not a temporary and invariably miserable realm beyond hope. One can effect meaningful change. The seeds of the characteristically modern interpretation of 'world' as the realm of human autonomy and meaningful historical action have been planted.<sup>30</sup>

### **Three basic meanings of the secular**

So at the beginning of the modern era we have three interrelated but distinct conceptual uses of 'secular', and these three still compose the signifying core of the concept until today. 1) From the patristic age we have the notion of the secular as the totality of transitory human life until the Last Judgment. It originally had a pejorative meaning, as human existence in the world is essentially sinful and without hope of changing for the better. While the pejorative associations of 'world' and 'worldliness' are retained in many modern theologies, modernity increasingly understands 'world' or the totality of human existence in a neutral or even positive sense, as the realm of

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to worldly affairs, think little of spiritual things, the latter, dwelling eagerly upon heavenly subjects, despise the things of this world." Quoted in *ibid*.

<sup>27</sup> According to one of Gregory's propagandists: "The least in the kingdom of the spiritual sword is greater than the Emperor himself, who wields [only] the secular sword." Quoted in *ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> The first theories of state politics and secular law are born out of this development. K.J. Leyser, "The Polemics of the Papal Revolution," in *Trends in Medieval Political Thought*, ed. Beryl Smalley and Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), 60.

<sup>29</sup> See for an extended discussion of desacralization and the shift in the understanding of secular power after the Gregorian Reform, Marramao, *Säkularisierung*, 22-8; Berman, *Law and Revolution*, 107-15; Riedl, "The Secular Sphere." See Charles Taylor's extended treatment of the rational development of law and state on the basis of natural law theory, and the emerging modern, desacralized social imaginaries Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 125-30, 159-211.

<sup>30</sup> See Berman's discussion of the new understanding of the clergy's task of reforming the world in connection to an emerging consciousness of history and progress during the Gregorian Reform, Berman, *Law and Revolution*, 112-3.

autonomous action and historical improvement. The associated conceptual pair is eternal/secular or spiritual/secular, and it is similar to the pairs transcendent/immanent and otherworldly/thisworldly [*Jenseits/Diesseits*]. 2) In canon law we find the distinction between secular and regular clergy. This ecclesiastical categorization obviously undergoes important transformations, most of all during the Reformation. But the conceptual distinction itself (between those who remain in the world and those who flee the world) remains connected to the concept of the secular. The conceptual pair is regular/secular. 3) The Gregorian Reform engenders the modern political meaning of the secular. The secular in this sense means what is not part of the Church and the clergy in general. But it specifically applies to political power, law, the state and other political institutions independent of ecclesiastical authority. The conceptual pair is ecclesiastical/secular, but from the perspective of the church's monopolization of the religious and spiritual, we should also include religious/secular and spiritual/secular. The different meanings of 'secular' and 'secularity' in contemporary political discourse stem largely from this third constellation.

It is not a surprise that the transition process that would be denoted by 'secularization' is conditioned by a *terminus ad quem* – i.e. whatever is meant by 'secular' – but most importantly a corresponding *terminus a quo* – whatever is the opposite of 'secular'. These conceptual pairs of corresponding *termini* fall under one of the three basic meanings of 'secular'. For the genealogy of secularization it is crucial to keep in mind in what sense the historical source speaks of the secular, and this is for the most part determined by the corresponding opposed term. For the sake of conceptual clarity, we can subsume every use of secularization under one of the three established significations of 'secular'.

### **Secularization as a canonical and juridical concept**

We arrive at the historical emergence of the concept of secularization. The Latin *saecularizatio* is attested for the first time at the end of the sixteenth century in French church law, signifying the authorized transition of someone from *regularis* to *saecularis* (or *canonicus*), the return from a religious order to the world, either to the secular clergy (in case of a priest) or the laity.<sup>31</sup> The canonical meaning of secularization has remained practically unchanged to this day. The Codex Iuris Canonici speaks of an "indult [*indultum*] of staying outside the cloister, whether temporary, in which case it is an indult of *exclaustration*, or perpetual, in which case it is an indult of *secularization*

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<sup>31</sup> Marramao, *Säkularisierung*, 21. This account disproves the earlier scholarly consensus that is reflected in Lübke's 1965 study, that the canonical use of 'secularization' emerged only at the end of the eighteenth century, following the juridical-political use of the term, *Säkularisierung*, 26n6.

[*saecularizationis*]”, given only on authorization of the Apostolic See or the local Ordinary.<sup>32</sup> One who has obtained the indult of secularization “must put off the exterior habit or style, and in Mass and in the canonical hours and in the use and dispensation of Sacraments is considered a secular [*saecularibus assimilatur*].”<sup>33</sup> The secularized priest is absolved from all religious vows except the burdens attached to the priesthood,<sup>34</sup> and he is disqualified from specific offices (such as teaching at a seminary),<sup>35</sup> which implies that the status of being secularized is formally restricted and distinguished from both the secular and the regular (or religious) status.<sup>36</sup> According to the canonical historian Plöchl, the secularized priest is expected to wear a hidden sign of the religious order from which he originates, and to which he apparently remains connected.<sup>37</sup> This can be a ‘scapular’ (small pieces of garment or symbols suspended from the shoulders, worn under one’s clothes) or a medallion. The most original use of ‘secularization’, as far as current scholarship can tell, is therefore intimately tied to what I determined as the second signifying core of ‘secular’, i.e. the canonical opposition regular/secular.

Close to the first attested presence of *saecularizatio* in the late sixteenth century, we find a second one, with a completely different meaning. During the negotiations in Münster for the Peace of Westphalia (1648), the French envoy Longueville allegedly used the term *séculariser* as a diplomatic euphemism for the expropriation of ecclesiastical property such as bishoprics, convents and other estates.<sup>38</sup> The juridico-political meaning of secularization, as ecclesiastical expropriation at the hands of secular power (most of all the secular state), emerged as the dominant meaning of the concept in the eighteenth and most of all in the nineteenth century. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars led to widespread secularization.<sup>39</sup> The term moved to the center of the polarized political debate of the nineteenth century. Catholics and reactionaries vehemently opposed the illegitimate usurpation of ecclesiastical rights and property.

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<sup>32</sup> Codex Iuris Canonici 1917 (CIC), §638. English translation from: *The 1917 or Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law*, transl. Edward N. Peters (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 244.

<sup>33</sup> CIC, §640, *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> CIC §640, *ibid.* §648, *ibid.*, 248.

<sup>35</sup> CIC §642, *ibid.*, 245.

<sup>36</sup> See Lübke, *Säkularisierung*, 27.: “Die Quintessenz dieser und weiterer Bestimmungen ist: die Säkularisierung disqualifiziert. Der kirchliche Gesetzgeber scheint sie als einen Bruch im geistlichen Leben anzusehen, de legitim, aber im autobiographischen Sinne möglicherweise nicht heilbar ist.“

<sup>37</sup> Willibald M. Plöchl, *Geschichte des Kirchenrechts*, cited in *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Johann Gottfried von Meiern, *Acta Pacis Westphalicae Publica* (1734), cited in *ibid.*, 24.

<sup>39</sup> The culmination of which would be the 1803 *Reichsdeputationshauptschluss*, which, on Napoleon’s instigation, created new states within the Holy Roman Empire by secularizing and annexing large ecclesiastical domains east of the Rhine. *Ibid.*, 28.

Liberals appreciated the acts as wresting political power from the church, and legitimized the state's liquidation of ecclesiastical temporal power on the basis of historical progress, and national and political emancipation.<sup>40</sup> During the culture wars of the nineteenth century, 'secularization' functioned, in Lübke's words, as an ideological *shibboleth*.<sup>41</sup> One could recognize the other's ideological position by her positive or negative use of the concept. The concept of secularization thus dominated the cultural-political debate of the nineteenth century, but in the specific sense that we recognize as belonging to the third constellation of 'secular': the political distinction ecclesiastical/secular.

The polemical edge disappeared after a while, when even Catholics (Protestants obviously never opposed it as much) appreciated the spiritual gains of a loss of temporal power for the church. But the juridico-political meaning of secularization, and the related ideological positions as regards its (il)legitimacy, left its traces in the collective consciousness. This is important for understanding the twentieth-century debate on secularization, and especially Hans Blumenberg's book *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, in which he claims that the secularization concept essentially functions as an allegation of illegitimate appropriation of religious elements by secular thought. The next chapter will discuss this in more detail. But what we ought to note for now is that after the concept had long lost its importance in actual politics and appeared in scientific discourse, in which it was assumed to carry out a purely descriptive function, the juridico-political associations were still fresh. It seems that to many scholars only several decades ago, the *primary* meaning of secularization was that of secular appropriation of ecclesiastical goods, and only a *derivative* meaning that of the scientific description of a historical process. In this light Lübke can speak of "the power to provoke an ideological position" that would inhere in the secularization concept, and was still attested in the lexicographic definitions of his time.<sup>42</sup> Now it appears that this connotation has completely disappeared in our own time. Herbert De Vriese has observed that a wide cultural gap actually separates us from the secularization debate of the fifties, sixties and seventies, not only because of our society's different stance on religion, but also because we have become estranged from understanding

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 28-9.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>42</sup> "Selbst im feinen Unterschied solcher lexikalischer Definitionen meldet sich noch die Kraft zur Provokation ideenpolitischer Stellungnahme, die dem Säkularisierungsbegriff eignet." *ibid.*, 33. And: "Jedoch scheinen die alte Fronten bis heute selbst in der Sprache seriöser Information durch, welche die großen Lexika sprechen." *ibid.*, 32.

secularization as a category of historical illegitimacy.<sup>43</sup> This has great consequences for our interpretation of the secularization debate and especially of the account offered by Hans Blumenberg, as I will investigate in the next chapter. But this insight also applies to the genealogy of the concept.

Lübbe's study, in line with other accounts of his time, presupposed that secularization as an interpretive concept must have evolved from the primary juridico-political meaning. All different historical studies traced the current concept back to the Westphalian peace negotiations as its supposed source.<sup>44</sup> Marramao, after noting that this is in fact *not* the first attested use of secularization, explains the persuasiveness of this widespread theory on the basis of the symbolical nature of the supposedly simultaneous emergence of the new term and the birth of the modern state at the conclusion of the wars of religion.<sup>45</sup> Be that as it may, the genealogical problem we are faced with lies not so much in the 'source' or most original use of the term. The issue is rather what caused and enabled the concept's transition from a highly charged political domain to the relatively neutral field of scientific interpretation, in other words how it could come to be used and accepted as a hermeneutic category. Lübbe's account clearly fails to explain this transition.<sup>46</sup>

Hermann Zabel has conclusively argued that Lübbe's account fails, and necessarily so, because it only included the literal term secularization/*Säkularisierung*. In opposition to Lübbe's speculation that the scientific use of secularization must have derived from the political meaning of secularization, which was *then* translated to German as *Verweltlichung*, Zabel shows that *Verweltlichung* is in fact the true source of the contemporary scientific category of secularization.

### ***Verweltlichung* in nineteenth-century thought**

The attentive reader might have observed that with regard to the three signifying cores of 'secular', one possible meaning of 'secularization' is still unattested. This is the first

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<sup>43</sup> Herbert De Vriese, "Secularization as a Category of Historical Entitlement," in *Radical Secularization?: an Inquiry into the Religious Roots of Secular Culture*, ed. Stijn Latré, Walter Van Herck, and Guido Vanheeswijck (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 33.

<sup>44</sup> E.g. Martin Stallmann, *Was ist Säkularisierung?* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960).

<sup>45</sup> Marramao, *Säkularisierung*, 20-1.

<sup>46</sup> His presupposition is that the juridico-political concept has gradually widened, from designating the expropriation of ecclesiastical estates, to metaphorical application to the sphere of society as a whole, until it signified a general cultural emancipation from religious authority. Lübbe, *Säkularisierung*, 23. But Hermann Zabel has shown that Lübbe's two examples of metaphorical widening of 'secularization' either do not convey a political program of cultural emancipation, or do not really use 'secularization' (but for example 'secularism' in the case of the English *Secular Society*). Zabel, "Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung," 17-23.

meaning of 'secular', corresponding to the patristic understanding of *saeculum* as the totality of temporary human existence ruled by sin and death. From this meaning of *saeculum/saecularis* evolved the vernacular use of world/worldly or *Welt/weltlich* in the theological-moral sense of belonging to the world, and therefore engaging in the sinful activities that characterize fallen human nature: the vain pursuit of power, wealth, sensual pleasure and so forth. This is the background of the first use of *Verweltlichung*. According to Zabel, the term is included in lexicons since the beginning of the nineteenth century,<sup>47</sup> but already used in 1663 in a moral-religious sense: *verweltlichen* signifies the worldly corruption of a pious person.<sup>48</sup> Hence, it has a different etymological root as compared to the canonical and juridico-political term secularization. The German *Verweltlichen* is also, more than the Latin *saecularizatio*/secularization, able to signify, besides a transitive act that requires a distinct object, an intransitive and/or reflexive process: *weltlich werden* or *sich verweltlichen*, respectively.<sup>49</sup> These different linguistic characteristics are important for our understanding of the development of the interpretative category.

According to Zabel, the early nineteenth century introduced the first historical-interpretative use of *verweltlichen* in Protestant church historiography. Protestant historians describe the antique and medieval entanglement of the church in the world as *Verweltlichung*. It denotes the corruption and moral decay of the church and clergy that compelled the Reformers to bring the church back to its proper distance from the world. Here the term signifies a relapse of the church into illegitimate worldliness.<sup>50</sup> And of these nineteenth century works of Protestant church historiography, Zabel assumes that most authors that we will encounter below (Hegel, Feuerbach, Dilthey, Troeltsch, Weber) must have been familiar with them, or at least with the theological-historical category itself.<sup>51</sup> This entails that the emergence of *Verweltlichung*/secularization as interpretative concept could easily be connected to this theological-historical use of the term *verweltlichen*, more easily than the juridico-political secularization concept.

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<sup>47</sup> Zabel has neither found '*Verweltlichung*' or '*verweltlichen*' in a 1743 nor in a 1780 lexicon, but only in the 1811 Campe lexicon. Although the first lexicographic attestations sometimes relate *Verweltlichung* to secularization (in the juridico-political sense), these lexicons also recognize its derivation from the moral-religious adjective *weltlich*. Cf. Zabel, "Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung," 27-9.

<sup>48</sup> "Sein vor diesem frommes hertz ist nunmehr durch list der betrieglichen Eitelkeit mit verweltlichet" (sic) quoted in *ibid.*, 29.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-5.

The most important author that we encounter in the development of *Verweltlichung* is G.W.F. Hegel.<sup>52</sup> Not only do we find in his *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* the locus of the transformation of the term *verweltlichen* into a philosophical category, we also observe a radical departure from the pejorative understanding of worldliness. Hegel's thought is crucial for developing a positive understanding of modern worldliness from a Christian perspective, and seeing modern secular achievements as the state and the absolute value of the individual as the historical fulfillment of Christianity.

The terms *verweltlichen* and *weltlich werden* have an ambiguous meaning in Hegel's philosophy. The pejorative meaning that we found in Protestant church historiography is still present in Hegel's analysis of scholasticism in the *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*. Scholastic theology is characterized by the abstract application of finite concepts, derived from the empirical world, to spiritual content, and Hegel therefore says that the Scholastics have "*verweltlicht*" the ecclesiastical dogmas through wholly inadequate conceptualizations, "so that here we have the worst meaning of worldliness [*Weltlichkeit*] that there is."<sup>53</sup> The intellectual endeavor to abstractly rationalize the spiritual world of the *Jenseits* results in its degradation to the conceptual level of the sensuous world.<sup>54</sup>

Opposed to the scholastic *Verweltlichung* that effectively means the degradation of spiritual, ideal and infinite content to the realm of the finite, material and sensuous, we find in Hegel the good and adequate form of the reconciliation of the worldly and otherworldly. This comes down to the *transformation* of the world according to spiritual truth, and the *realization* in the world of the principles of Christianity. This is as such the historical goal of Christianity, and world history as a whole, to realize the divine spirit and therefore the idea of freedom,<sup>55</sup> and this must happen "in the world, not as a

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<sup>52</sup> The following analysis of Hegel follows *ibid.*, 40-54. Cf. Marramao, *Säkularisierung*, 31-6.

<sup>53</sup> "Man kann daher sagen, daß sie [die Scholastiker] den kirchlichen Lehrbegriff einerseits tief behandelt, andererseits, daß sie ihn durch ganz ungeeignete äußere Verhältnisse verweltlicht haben; so daß hier der schlechteste Sinn der Weltlichkeit ist, den man nehmen kann." G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie II*, Werke, vol. 19, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 579.

<sup>54</sup> In the same way as the *Meistersinger* Hans Sachs from Nürnberg "*vernürnbergert*" the divine history by downgrading it to the peculiarities of his time: "Eine völlige sinnliche Festigkeit, diese ganz äußerlichen Formen der Sinnlichkeit haben sie so in dies rein Geistige gebracht und es damit verweltlicht: wie Hans Sachs die göttliche Geschichte vernürnbergert." *ibid.*, 583.

<sup>55</sup> "Das Interesse, um das es sich jetzt handelt, ist, das Prinzip des Christentums, was weitläufig erläutert worden ist, zum Prinzip der Welt zu machen; es ist die *Aufgabe* der Welt, diese absolute Idee in sich einzuführen, in sich wirklich zu machen, daß sie versöhnt werde mit Gott" *ibid.*, 500.

kingdom of heaven, a beyond, but the Idea must realize itself in the actual world."<sup>56</sup> To Jesus's saying 'My kingdom is not of this world', Hegel retorts "that the realization would have needed to become worldly."<sup>57</sup> True worldliness is therefore not the Scholastic reduction of the divine to the finite world, but the elevation of the world to the divine that takes place in modernity.<sup>58</sup> Hence, Hegel reinterprets the term '*weltlich werden*' (though not literally *verweltlichen* or *Verweltlichung*) as, first of all, the aim and final fulfillment of Christianity, and, second, the actual historical development of modernity out of Christianity. The Hegelian philosopher Carl Ludwig Michelet in 1843 even literally speaks of the "*Verweltlichung des Christentums*" as the goal of history.<sup>59</sup> This approaches the constellation of meaning that later pertains to Troeltsch's and Weber's historical-interpretative use of secularization.<sup>60</sup>

Since Hegel we can observe a consequential transformation of the terms *Verweltlichung*, *Weltlichkeit* and *weltlich werden*. Although Hegel still used it occasionally in a pejorative sense, the main effect of his thought is the increasingly positive estimation of *Verweltlichung*. Hegel's reinterpretation both captures in the concept of *Weltlichkeit* the positive understanding of worldliness that had already existed in Enlightenment culture, and inaugurates *Verweltlichung* as a key concept of historical interpretation, and a cipher for a philosophical and political program.

In nineteenth-century post-Hegelian thought we see the concept pop up everywhere. In theology the term begins to emerge as a symbol for two central issues: how Christianity should understand and position itself to the modern age, and how Christian belief is possible under the conditions of modernity.<sup>61</sup> Liberal, protestant theologians (those of the 'Tübingen School', and Ritschl and Von Harnack) follow in Hegel's footsteps and generally praise the advance of modern worldliness as the

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<sup>56</sup> "[Daß] die Versöhnung Gottes mit sich sich vollbringe in der Welt, nicht als ein Himmelreich, das jenseits ist; sondern die Idee muß sich realisieren in der Wirklichkeit." *ibid.*, 501.

<sup>57</sup> "aber die Realisierung hat weltlich werden müssen und sollen." *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> See for Hegel's understanding of modernity as realizing Christianity in the world, Zabel, "Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung," 49-54.

<sup>59</sup> Carl Ludwig Michelet, *Entwicklungsgeschichte der neuesten Deutschen Philosophie mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Hegelschen Schule*, quoted in *ibid.*, 57.

<sup>60</sup> Lübke claims that neither Hegel nor his followers have used the concept of secularization [*Säkularisierung*] to describe their views of modernity as the realization of Christianity, *Säkularisierung*, 37. It follows, Lübke says, that we can only interpret Hegel's thought in terms of secularization in *retrospect*, only since Löwith's use of the term for his interpretation of Hegel in *Meaning in History*. However, we now see that *weltlich werden* (Hegel) and *Verweltlichung* (Michelet) are very much Hegelian concepts. Moreover, Zabel has observed that Löwith, regarding his use of secularization, himself refers to the work of Michelet, see "Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung," 59n100.

<sup>61</sup> See for a summary of the theological debate regarding *Verweltlichung*, Zabel, "Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung," 255-8.

cultural realization of (Protestant) Christianity. Opposed to this trend are theologians (like Overbeck and Von Hartmann) that hold on to the fundamental *Jenseitigkeit* of Christian belief and the required flight from the world. Overbeck's rejection of modern world-friendly theology leads to the radical claim that the history of the church and theology is as such the history of accelerating *Verweltlichung*, the accommodation to the world, of which Christians were supposed to expect its imminent end.<sup>62</sup>

In nineteenth-century philosophy we see a similar controversy with regard to Hegel's understanding of *Verweltlichung*.<sup>63</sup> Feuerbach criticizes the philosophy of his time (i.e. Hegel's) as being theology expressed in philosophical terms.<sup>64</sup> Yet the term *Verweltlichung* (and *Weltlichkeit*) retains its central position: it represents an *unfinished* politico-philosophical program. If modern philosophy has been an outgrowth of theology, and therefore conditioned by it, that only means that philosophy has still insufficiently '*verweltlicht*' itself! Under the banner of *Verweltlichung* (and later also secularization) we encounter a program that can be traced from Feuerbach and other Young Hegelians, to Nietzsche, Löwith, Habermas and many contemporary philosophers, of emancipating philosophy from its theological presuppositions. In a reversal of the Hegelian *Verweltlichung*, which pointed to a historical continuity between theology and modern thought, the new meaning of *Verweltlichung* for Feuerbach and co. is the *overcoming* of theology and its vestiges in modern thought, by completely cutting philosophy loose from its ties to theology. The process of *Verweltlichung* is positively interpreted as the progressive acceptance of the this-worldly.<sup>65</sup> Marx adds a further element.<sup>66</sup> The new interpretation of the world from a purely worldly perspective is not enough. The true *Verweltlichung* of philosophy would entail involvement in the concrete political, historical world through *praxis*.<sup>67</sup> The philosophical overcoming of religion is therefore only the beginning: it must now turn its "critique of heaven" into a "critique of the world."<sup>68</sup> Marx is keenly aware of the

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<sup>62</sup> "[Theologie ist] nichts anderes als ein Stück der Verweltlichung des Christentums." Overbeck, *Über die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie*, quoted in Marramao, *Säkularisierung*, 49. Cf. Zabel, "Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung," 98-107.

<sup>63</sup> See for a summary of the philosophical debate regarding *Verweltlichung*, Zabel, "Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung," 258-61. Cf. Marramao, *Säkularisierung*, 36-45.

<sup>64</sup> See for Feuerbach, Zabel, "Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung," 59-70.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>66</sup> See for *Verweltlichung* in Marx *ibid.*, 71-86; Marramao, *Säkularisierung*, 37-45.

<sup>67</sup> "Die Philosophie hat sich verweltlicht, und der schlagendste Beweis dafür ist, daß das philosophische Bewußtsein selbst in die Qual des Kampfes nicht nur äußerlich, sondern auch innerlich hineingezogen ist." Marx, *Brief an Ruge (September 1843)*, quoted in Marramao, *Säkularisierung*, 43.

<sup>68</sup> "Die Kritik des Himmels verwandelt sich damit in die Kritik der Erde, die Kritik der Religion in die Kritik des Rechts, die Kritik der Theologie in die Kritik der Politik." Karl Marx, "Zur

relation between religious and political critique: they cannot be separated because they are both structurally similar ideological structures that must be interrogated as to their material foundation

All in all, the post-Hegelian debate on *Verweltlichung* has conclusively elevated the term to the key position it still occupies in contemporary thought, but the debate also gave its meaning a new twist. While the pre-Hegelian meaning was the pejorative one of moral-religious corruption, and while Hegel used the concept in a positive sense to *reconcile* Christianity and modernity, the spiritual and worldly, a trend in post-Hegelian use of *Verweltlichung* is its positive designation of a complete *separation* of Christianity and modernity, the emancipation of pure worldliness from the *Jenseitigkeit* of theology and religion. Still, this complex shift of meaning fully takes place within the terminological bounds of the first conceptual core of 'secular' and 'secularization': what I described by the distinction eternal/secular, spiritual/secular, but also *Jenseits/Diesseits*, or transcendent/immanent. As such, the genealogy of *Verweltlichung* is to a large extent unrelated to the genealogy of secularization, which, as we saw, was mostly tied to the second (canonical) and third (juridico-political) significations of 'secular'.

#### ***Verweltlichung*/secularization as a hermeneutic category**

Around the turn of the century, *Verweltlichung* undergoes another crucial transformation, which still determines our understanding today. It changes from an (explicitly) value-laden concept to a (supposedly<sup>69</sup>) neutral descriptive and scientific category of historico-philosophical interpretation. Simultaneously, the separate terms of *Verweltlichung* and secularization [*Säkularisierung*] converge and become synonymous.<sup>70</sup> From its neutralization around 1900 we can therefore treat '*Verweltlichung*/secularization' as synonymous and as signifying a single concept.

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Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie: Einleitung," in *Marx-Engels Werke* (Berlin DDR: Dietz Verlag, 1976), 379.

<sup>69</sup> Whether its 'neutralization' has succeeded is of course up for debate.

<sup>70</sup> Lübke has argued that the neutralization took its departure from the juridico-political meaning of secularization as ecclesiastical expropriation, and he apparently assumed that this neutralization was subsequently transferred to *Verweltlichung* as the germanized term. Zabel, on the other hand, convincingly makes the reverse case that the new descriptive category derives from *Verweltlichung*, and is only subsequently connected to the term secularization. Zabel, "Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung," 25-6; 262. He supports this claim by pointing to Dilthey and Yorck von Wartenburg who primarily use the interpretative term *verweltlichen* and only, at several places, apparently translate it by using *säkularisieren*, which still had a juridico-political meaning. That would mean that they either playfully or unconsciously made use of the etymological connection between *verweltlichen* and *säkularisieren*, by translating the (mostly) intransitive *verweltlichen* to the (mostly) transitive concept of *säkularisieren*. This cannot have

The most important authors in the scientific reinterpretation of the concept are Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber. In Troeltsch's work many earlier interpretations of *Verweltlichung* come together.<sup>71</sup> Of particular importance is Troeltsch's 1906 lecture, *Die Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die Entstehung der modernen Welt*, as 'secularization' [*Säkularisierung*] is here used (though still hesitatingly) as the technical term to describe modern culture's genesis out of Protestant institutions and ethics.<sup>72</sup> Troeltsch interprets the Protestant turn to the world (i.e. its dissolution of the distinction between worldly and spiritual life) as the initiation of a broader process of secularization, out of which modern culture, notably the modern individual and the secular state, emerges.<sup>73</sup> This reminds of Hegel and other earlier interpretations, but Troeltsch's analysis departs from Hegel's on essential points. Troeltsch does not regard modernity as a continuation and historical realization of Protestantism, because the process of secularization at the same time implies a rupture regarding its religious roots. Additionally, the process of *Verweltlichung*/secularization is not part of a universal historical schema or ideological program. Instead, his account of modern secularization tries to provide a neutral description of a complex historical development.

In Troeltsch we do not only observe a neutralization of *Verweltlichung*/secularization, we also see an ambiguity arise that sticks to the concept in its ensuing dissemination. Secularization both refers to the religiously motivated turn to the world in Protestantism, and to the detachment from religion and the foundation of institutions and culture in pure immanence. It is simultaneously a Christian and anti-Christian development. In the words of Lübke: "In the process of secularization, Troeltsch

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taken place in reverse order. Ibid., 131-2; 132n59. This account is consistent with a grammatical feature: the descriptive concept *Verweltlichung*/secularization is (at least initially) mostly used *intransitively* or *reflexively*. The original concept *Verweltlichung* is similarly used in an intransitive or reflexive way (cf. *weltlich werden, sich verweltlichen*). But the original concept of secularization, both in the canonical and the juridico-political sense, is generally used *transitively* ('y secularizes x', 'secularization of x by y'). The grammatical characteristics of the hermeneutic category *Verweltlichung*/secularization correspond with and derive from *Verweltlichung* rather than secularization.

<sup>71</sup> Troeltsch was familiar with Overbeck's pejorative understanding of modern 'Kulturprotestantismus' as *Verweltlichung*, he was familiar with Hegel's and Dilthey's historico-philosophical accounts of Christianity and modern *Verweltlichung*, and also greatly influenced by Weber's ideas on Protestant 'inner-worldly asceticism' as opposed to the otherworldly monastic asceticism. See *ibid.*, 132-156.

<sup>72</sup> Lübke, *Säkularisierung*, 74; Zabel, "Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung," 151-5. Zabel notes, *pace* Lübke, that Troeltsch only uses the concept sporadically. He is far from claiming the concept as an all-encompassing historical explanation.

<sup>73</sup> "Damit ist die christliche Ethik allerdings säkularisiert, aber auch das Säkulum vergeistlicht." Troeltsch, *Schriften IV*, quoted in Zabel, "Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung," 139.

recognizes a process of self-dissolution of the Christian faith."<sup>74</sup> Secularization is in this sense a highly ambiguous process. This idea was already visible in the work of Weber, who was an inspiration for Troeltsch in his empirical-descriptive cultural historiography and in his understanding of Protestant and modern culture.

I present Max Weber after Troeltsch, because Weber in his early work does not seem to have used *Verweltlichung*/secularization as a scientific-descriptive category, not even in his famous *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905).<sup>75</sup> And even in his later work, the concept appears only in a handful of places.<sup>76</sup> More importantly, secularization never becomes a conceptual tool for Weber's theory or analysis – it has no *explanatory* function, only appears in the margins, and then only in the broad and privative sense of 'detachment from religion'.<sup>77</sup> Even though Weber himself neither explicitly defined secularization, nor made it a central piece of his conceptual apparatus, the reception of Weber's work has pressed its mark on the scientific and popular adoption of the term. The reason is that Weber's influential thought as a whole has become so interwoven with the idea and concept of secularization.

Marramao notes that Weber's understanding of secularization cannot be seen apart from his treatment of capitalism and the Protestant ethic, his idea of disenchantment, and his analyses of scientific and bureaucratic rationalization.<sup>78</sup> In fact, these concepts and theories form a constellation, together they structure Weber's take on Western modernity. Underlying the different phenomena of capitalism and rationalism, Weber

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<sup>74</sup> "Im Prozeß der Säkularisierung erkennt Troeltsch einen Prozeß der Selbstauflösung des christlichen Glaubens in seiner überlieferten Gestalt" Lübbe, *Säkularisierung*, 82.

<sup>75</sup> Notwithstanding the importance of the book for the secularization debate, the terms *säkularisieren* and *Säkularisation* are both only used once in it, in a sense unrelated to the main thesis. Contrary to a widespread belief, Weber did not actually claim that the spirit of capitalism would be a 'secularization' of the Protestant ethic. Max Weber, "Die Protestantische Ethik und der 'Geist' des Kapitalismus," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986).

<sup>76</sup> According to Daniel Weidner, Weber uses 'secularization' only twenty times in total – most often transitively in the traditional sense of juridical-political expropriation, and sometimes intransitively, in the broad meaning of emancipation from and disappearance of religion. Only rarely does Weber *metaphorically* extend transitive secularization to apply to a non-political context. It then appears with quotation marks, so it is not evident what the metaphorical meaning would exactly involve for Weber. See Daniel Weidner, "Zur Rhetorik der Säkularisierung," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 78, no. 1 (2004): 103.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 104. According to Weidner, this actually applies as well to 'disenchantment' [*Entzauberung*], which neither has an explanatory or methodical function. Only once would Weber have developed 'the process of disenchantment' in a conceptual way, as the gradual historical annihilation of magic instrumental to salvation. *Ibid.*, 103-4.

<sup>78</sup> Marramao, *Säkularisierung*, 57-9.

claims, is the religiously motivated dominance of goal-oriented, rational action in Puritanism and Calvinism. All these aspects are brought under the banner of what Weber calls the “characteristic secularization process, to which all these phenomena, that were born out of religious conceptions, succumb in the modern age.”<sup>79</sup> Weber accordingly uses secularization in a broad and somewhat vague sense, so much that in several places it appears equivalent to modernization, rationalization and disenchantment.<sup>80</sup>

The Weberian alignment of modernization, rationalization and disenchantment has influenced the contemporary notion of secularization, precisely because now it becomes generally associated with other essential features of Western modernity, e.g. rational administration, capitalism, technology and science. Most of all, ever since Weber, a narrative latches onto *Verweltlichung*/secularization regarding the inevitable ‘fate’ of Western civilization.<sup>81</sup> Secularization, rationalization and technification is for Weber the only legitimate prospect for Western society, if it is not to capitulate to the ‘old gods’<sup>82</sup> of ideology and absolute value systems.<sup>83</sup> Similar to Troeltsch but more pronounced, Weber’s work bequeaths an ambiguity in the concept and idea of secularization. Weber describes the Protestant turn to the world as a religious move, which at the same time initiates a gradual departure from religion and transcendence as a whole. Ever since Weber’s and Troeltsch’s analyses of Protestantism and modernity, secularization simultaneously refers to a religious *and* non- or anti-religious process.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> “[C]harakteristischen Säkularisierungsprozeß, dem solche, aus religiösen Konzeptionen geborene Erscheinungen in moderner Zeit überall verfallen.“ Weber, *Die protestantischen Sekten und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, quoted in *ibid.*, 61.

<sup>80</sup> Weber sometimes includes secularization in the grand historical process of disenchantment, that goes back as far as prophetic Judaism and Greek thought, and sometimes even identifies secularization with disenchantment. *Ibid.*, 61-2. Cf. Lübke, *Säkularisierung*, 69-70. The vagueness makes it possible for Weber to apply ‘secularization’ to non-Western cultures, a practice that is subsequently adopted by sociology and ethnography. Being conscious of possible inappropriateness in non-Western context, Weber puts ‘secularization’ within quotation marks. See examples in *ibid.*, 68; Marramao, *Säkularisierung*, 63-4. See for an extended discussion of Weber’s use of quotation marks, and its relevance for the secularization discourse, Weidner, “Zur Rhetorik der Säkularisierung,” 125-9.

<sup>81</sup> See for Weber’s idea of the fate of Western modernity, Lübke, *Säkularisierung*, 70.

<sup>82</sup> Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, quoted in *ibid.*, 71.

<sup>83</sup> The contemporary debate on ‘post-secularism’ or ‘re-enchantment’ most of all challenges Weber on this claim of secularization as the necessary fate of modern civilization, rather than on his historical account of Western secularization and the emergence of modernity.

<sup>84</sup> Recent historical accounts of secularization amplify this idea of the ambiguous relation of Christianity and secular modernity, determined by the peculiarity of Christian-infused transformations in modernity that also led to the exit from Christianity. Cf. Taylor, *A Secular*

## Twentieth-century reflections on secularization

Weber's reception and profound legacy in twentieth-century thought kick-starts the spread and popularization of secularization, but also definitively establishes its vagueness and ambiguity. It becomes a near synonym of modernization, institutional rationalization and differentiation, but also of disenchantment. In social science it becomes a general empirical category for describing Western, but also non-Western societies.<sup>85</sup> Yet in light of the present genealogy of the *interpretative* category, I will have to leave this aside. Alongside its empirical operation, secularization/*Verweltlichung* as a hermeneutic concept comes to dominate the spheres of philosophy, theology and cultural-historical interpretation. In the course of the twentieth century, a general 'secularization discourse' emerges in these spheres, particularly in Germany. The concept proliferates and becomes so ambiguous that it enables authors of all stripes to enlist the concept for their own ends. In this connection it becomes more and more difficult to trace the individual lines of the concept's development. I will stick to the most significant developments.

Theologians, especially Friedrich Gogarten and Karl Barth, proceed to legitimize secularization.<sup>86</sup> Secularization means for them a gradual becoming-secular of what was always supposed to be secular from a Christian perspective: namely all things related to temporary life in the world, in contrast with the otherworldly matters of faith. In their view, secularization is not only the disenchantment of the socio-political, cultural world and its detachment from religion and myth, but also the concomitant liberation of Christian faith from its entanglement in the world. It therefore signifies the legitimate and properly Christian disentanglement of faith and world, with the result that faith appears as pure unworldly faith, and the world is free to be worldly, i.e. profane, penultimate, finite. Secularization, the emergence of this secular world, is both the product and condition of Christian faith. With respect to the original Weberian ambiguity of the religious/a-religious implications of the secularization process, this particular theological account emphasizes the religious aspect and limits the anti-religious aspect to only apply to the particular domain of the worldly. That means, secularization is only a sharpening and crystallization of the divide between religious and secular – what 'becomes worldly' is only the *world* and not faith.

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Age; Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World : a Political History of Religion*, transl. Oscar Burge (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>85</sup> American sociology picks up the term and uses it to describe processes of decline in religion, church affiliation, the differentiation and emancipation of social and state institutions etc. From here, it migrates back to European social sciences. *Säkularisierung*, 60.

<sup>86</sup> See for Barth and Gogarten and secularization in 'crisis' or 'dialectical' theology *ibid.*, 99-100, 119-126; Marramao, *Säkularisierung*, 82-7; Zabel, "Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung," 157-93.

In philosophical discourses of secularization, the concept acquires a different function. For Troeltsch, Weber and the theologians Barth and Gogarten secularization/*Verweltlichung* was used in a mainly intransitive or reflexive form, which implied that something general like the 'world' or 'modern culture' became worldly, viz. detached itself from religion. Now in philosophy and historical-cultural interpretation, the *transitive* mode of secularization is increasingly used, which requires two grammatical arguments instead of one. That is to say, it comes to put a specific element A in a relation with a different object B, describing A as the result of a transition of B out of the religious domain. This transitive mode of the concept has become dominant in the hermeneutics of secularization, and it is mainly this form (A is a secularization of B) that will be investigated in the following chapters. This transitive use opened the way to a particular form of hermeneutics, namely as part of a program of unearthing the unavowed religious foundations of specific secular phenomena. What comes together in this use of secularization is, first, the historical paradox that was implicit in Weber's and Troeltsch's analyses, namely their account of the *religious* motivation of modern developments that move *away from religion*, and consequentially the religious roots of all socio-cultural secularization processes. Second, it harks back to Feuerbach's and Nietzsche's philosophical analyses concerning the hidden theological and Christian foundations of modern thought. This whole constellation seems now neatly captured by the interpretative category of secularization/*Verweltlichung*.

Already in 1922, Carl Schmitt in *Politische Theologie* famously uses secularization to unfurl the theological layers of modern state theory.<sup>87</sup> In a lapidary statement Schmitt lays out his main thesis that has since made countless appearances in the field of political theology: "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."<sup>88</sup> This statement has received numerous interpretations as to what Schmitt precisely means, yet what is clear is that the chapter in which this statement appears elaborates on the structural similarities between theological and modern legal models of sovereignty, law and power. Schmitt claims that secularization is both a similarity in systematic structure of the respective theological and juridical concepts, and also refers to a historical transposition.<sup>89</sup> Schmitt does therefore *not* talk about the general secularization of legal discourse and political theory in modernity, in the intransitive sense that it gradually detached from a theological and religious framework – that would be more in line with Troeltsch's and Weber's use of secularization. Instead, secularization means for Schmitt rather the

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<sup>87</sup> See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, transl. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). See also the next chapter for Blumenberg's critique of Schmitt's use of secularization.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

opposite: the transposition of theological concepts into a legal context means that modern juridico-political conceptuality, even if it moved away from an explicitly religious legitimation, is in a way still theologically determined. And what is also significant is that Schmitt uses secularization not to denote the shifting relation of the legal field in relation to theology *in general*, but to trace *specific* elements that moved from the field of theology to legal discourse.

The new hermeneutic function is most firmly established with the publication of Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History* (1949).<sup>90</sup> Here 'secularization' is used to excavate the theological presuppositions of modern historical consciousness, for which Löwith paradigmatically takes up modern philosophy of history.<sup>91</sup> Modernity has secularized the Judeo-Christian view on the decisive character of history, particularly the *future*, as the locus of expectation and hope for salvation.<sup>92</sup> This means that modern philosophies of history still depend on a theological consciousness of the future that a truly immanent worldview cannot ultimately sustain. Löwith's adoption of secularization is part of a program, stretching back to Feuerbach, the Young Hegelians and Nietzsche, of total emancipation from theological ideas, concepts and presuppositions. The hermeneutic use of secularization here functions as a *diagnostic*. It is tasked with sniffing out the traces of theological thought in order to eradicate them. Similar to Schmitt, Löwith emphasizes the *continuity* between theology and modernity, and secularization then makes manifest the crypto-theological nature of a particular secular element.

The present genealogy reaches its end. Much more could be said about the use of the concept by Schmitt, Löwith and later authors.<sup>93</sup> Following Löwith's paradigmatic hermeneutic of the secularization of historical consciousness, a great number of studies emerge that identify a secularization relation between a secular and religious phenomenon. It would go too far to analyze them piece by piece. More importantly, I cannot include these later reflective applications of the concept without substantially clarifying their respective positions on the meaning of secularization. In fact, any interpretation of the various applications of 'secularization' as a hermeneutic instrument would itself be an interpretation of the *meaning* of the interpretative

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<sup>90</sup> Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: the Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

<sup>91</sup> For Löwith, see Marramao, *Säkularisierung*, 91-6.

<sup>92</sup> See the introduction, conclusion, but especially the epilogue of Löwith, *Meaning in History*.

<sup>93</sup> The development of secularization is far from over and continues in later decades. Marramao in part three of *Säkularisierung* present an interesting overview of later philosophical reflections on secularization, like those of Arendt, Voegelin, Topitsch, Gehlen, Gellner and also sociological reflections.

category. But that is the purpose of this thesis as a whole, and cannot be accounted for in this limited genealogy of the concept.

## Conclusions

The main purpose of this genealogy was to establish the original uses of secularization/*Verweltlichung* and to trace their transformation until the emergence of the interpretative category. I must therefore stop here, before entering a substantial examination of the (still ongoing) debate on the meaning of secularization. Instead, it is time to briefly look back on the general characteristics and historical unfolding of secularization/*Verweltlichung*. The three basic cores of signification that inhere in secular/*weltlich* have respectively generated three general meanings of secularization/*Verweltlichung*. The conceptual pairs roughly correspond to the *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* of the transition denoted by secularization. The second constellation – the canonical meaning of the transition from a regular order to the world – and the third – the juridico-political meaning of secular appropriation of ecclesiastical goods – have not *directly* contributed to the emergence of the interpretative category of secularization. That does not mean that they indirectly, through associations, oriented an interpretation of secularization – and certainly in later reflections on the concept of secularization these other meanings pop up again. However, a *direct* line can be established from the first constellation of secular/*weltlich* and the ensuing term secularization/*Verweltlichung*.

The patristic understanding of *saeculum* as the total sphere of temporary, finite human existence and history – and the eternal, spiritual and transcendent as its conceptual opposite – is clearly where we encounter the most significant root of the hermeneutic secularization concept. The use of *Verweltlichung* is initially mainly intransitive and reflexive, following the root verb of *weltlich werden* and *sich verweltlichen*. Now regarding *what* can ‘become worldly’, there are several options within this conceptual constellation. The spiritual can degrade itself to the secular, which corresponds to the pejorative category of church history – signifying the corruptive involvement of the church in the world, but also to Overbeck’s and Von Hartmann’s use of *Verweltlichung*. Or the spiritual and secular can both be reconciled, which corresponds to Hegel’s *Verweltlichung*, but (with reverse valuation) also to Löwith’s use of secularization/*Verweltlichung* to diagnose the compound nature of modern elements. Or what becomes worldly can be the world as such. This can, in turn, either mean a reciprocal emancipation of the world from the spiritual and the spiritual from the world, which is the main thrust behind the dialectical theology of Barth and Gogarten; or it can mean the reduction of every sphere of life to the worldly, which one

encounters in Weber's sense of secularization and disenchantment. This would entail the complete annihilation of one pole of the conceptual pair, leaving only the secular.

I can briefly delineate some consequences of the derivation of *Verweltlichung*/secularization. In contrast with accounts like Lübke's and Blumenberg's<sup>94</sup>, the ideological charge supposedly inherent to the concept *cannot* be directly attributed to a genetic relation with the juridico-political concept of ecclesiastical expropriation. What in an 'ideological' perspective is more salient is the concept's inevitably *theological* character, as it refers to the patristic distinction between the secular and the spiritual (or eternal). This theological reference of *Verweltlichung* is explicit in Protestant church historiography but remains foundational to later (post)Hegelian use. That obviously raises the question to what extent a 'secular' philosophy or politics can use the concept of secularization without unwittingly entering the field of theology.

Now that we have concluded our genealogy of the secularization concept we can turn to actually investigating the meaning of the hermeneutic use of secularization. Yet before I propose my own account, we need to be aware of the critical debates that surround this issue, and understand how other philosophers have already interpreted the meaning and use of secularization. For that purpose the following two chapters elaborate on the accounts provided by Hans Blumenberg and Giorgio Agamben.

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<sup>94</sup> For Blumenberg see the following chapter.

## Chapter 2

### Blumenberg's Critique of Secularization

The most important contribution to the discussion on the concept of secularization is still Hans Blumenberg's *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, from now on LMA), more in particular the first part: 'Secularization: Critique of a Category of Historical Wrong'.<sup>95</sup> It is usually referred to in the context of the secularization debate between Karl Löwith, Hans Blumenberg, Carl Schmitt, Odo Marquard, Jacob Taubes and others, and which took place in Germany from the fifties to the seventies. Despite its name and reputation, the issue that was fundamentally at stake in this secularization debate was actually not the concept of secularization. Commentators of the debate frequently note that the secularization debate was less about secularization as such, than about philosophy of history, the legitimacy of secular modernity, or politics.<sup>96</sup> Compared to other debate contributions, Blumenberg's LMA is the most clear-sighted and explicit on the conceptual and methodological problems connected to secularization.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, one has to take into account that for Blumenberg too, the conceptual analysis of secularization was only a *means* for a more important *goal*: the defense of the 'legitimacy of the modern age'.

LMA offers an extensive critique of the concept of secularization, which to some commentators seems so effective as to have served the 'death blow' to the idea of secularization.<sup>98</sup> I think this judgment is quite overblown, but Blumenberg's criticism is still a good starting point for any interpretation of secularization, because it helps to avoid some pitfalls connected to the secularization concept. Moreover, Blumenberg

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<sup>95</sup> After first publication (1966), Blumenberg revised parts of his book, especially the first part. For my account I use this revised edition, found in Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit: Erneuerte Ausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996). The English translation of this edition is *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, transl. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

<sup>96</sup> Commenting on the debate, Odo Marquard notes the central importance of the issue of philosophy of history, the aversion of which was shared by the mentioned participants. Odo Marquard, *Schwierigkeiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 16. Sjoerd Griffioen has argued that what was at stake in the debate between Blumenberg and Löwith was not secularization as such, but a normative assessment of modernity. Sjoerd Griffioen, "Secularization between Faith and Reason: Reinvestigating the Löwith-Blumenberg Debate," *New German Critique* 46, no. 1 (2019). Cf. Joe Paul Kroll, "A Human End to History? Hans Blumenberg, Karl Löwith and Carl Schmitt on Secularization and Modernity" (Dissertation, Princeton, 2010).

<sup>97</sup> The other main contributions, Löwith's *Meaning in History* and Schmitt's *Political Theology I and II*, consciously use the concept of secularization, but do not devote more than a handful of lines to the meaning and hermeneutic application of the concept as such.

<sup>98</sup> Martin Jay, "Review of *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, by Hans Blumenberg," *History and Theory* 24, no. 2 (1985).

(almost unwittingly) prepares the ground for different understandings of the concept. In addition to a review of his critical account, I will therefore extensively consider its constructive aspects.

### **Blumenberg's aims**

Before plunging in Blumenberg's analysis, we should understand *why* in order to defend the legitimacy of modernity, he attacks the concept of secularization. Well, according to Blumenberg, because "the category of secularization contains at least a latent ideological element."<sup>99</sup> He claims that the 'secularization thesis' – the assertion that modernity in its essence derives from Christianity – would imply that the possessions and achievements of the modern age are in reality not a *legitimate* possession, because they originate in the religious sphere and have been misappropriated for the secular sphere. Hence, the secularization thesis would accordingly claim that secular modernity carries a *debt* or even *guilt* (the two meanings of the German *Schuld*) with respect to its religious past.<sup>100</sup> In making the analogy with 'property' and legitimate or illegitimate 'ownership', Blumenberg here consciously refers to the juridico-political meaning of secularization, the expropriation of ecclesiastical property by the secular state.<sup>101</sup> I elaborate on this below.

Blumenberg's overall concern with the ideological layer underlying secularization is that it challenges a key feature of modernity: autonomous reason. The modern age has always understood itself as breaking with its past, as developing its own models and ideas on rational grounds alone. If the secularization thesis would hold, then modernity's claim of rationality and autonomy with regard to its achievements (e.g. human rights, technological progress, the secular state) would be undermined.<sup>102</sup> The secular features of modernity would depend on non-secular conditions: "The illegitimacy of the result of secularization resides in the fact that the result is not allowed to secularize the process itself from which it resulted."<sup>103</sup> Hence, if it would be correct that the salient content of modern thought derived from theology, and if it would be unable to reclaim its own genesis through its own secular and rational categories, the legitimacy of the modern age would indeed be in peril. Blumenberg therefore directed all his efforts towards disproving the secularization thesis, by proving that modern thought is *not* the result of a transposition of content from the Christian to the secular realm.

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<sup>99</sup> Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 117.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 115, 117.

<sup>101</sup> See page 16ff.

<sup>102</sup> Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 116.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

A great part of LMA is hence devoted to discussing and disproving various examples of supposed secularization. In each case he shows that it is impossible to identify 'proper' religious content that is 'appropriated' by secular modernity. The central and most extensively treated example of Blumenberg's account is that of the modern historical imaginary being the secularization of Christian eschatology.<sup>104</sup> That the modern idea of historical progress would be the secularization of the Christian 'salvation history' [*Heilsgeschichte*] is, he claims, contradicted by the structural incompatibility of the two ideas of eschatology and progress. The idea of progress cannot possibly be understood as secularizing the extra-historical and transcendent character of eschatology into the immanent sphere – it runs directly contrary to its core attitude.<sup>105</sup> Regarding other modern ideas, Blumenberg similarly aims to show how at the onset of modernity they autonomously developed out of secular reason, often in opposition to dominant theological elements but not appropriating these elements.

The goal of Blumenberg's analyses is to defend modernity's intellectual property. Modern thought should be perceived as the 'self-assertion' [*Selbstbehauptung*] of human autonomy against the unreliability of the absolute God of late-medieval theology, not as the secular counterfeit of original religious goods. This should make clear that Blumenberg's criticism of secularization does not mean that in his view secular modernity is *unrelated* to its Christian past – in fact the opposite.<sup>106</sup>

There was no "worldliness" before there was the opposite of "unworldliness". It was the world released to itself from the grip of its negation, abandoned to its self-assertion and to the means necessary to that self-assertion, not responsible for man's true salvation but still competing with that salvation with its own offer of stability and reliability.<sup>107</sup>

Hence, modernity for Blumenberg certainly derives from its Christian past – just not in the way the secularization thesis asserts. Its assertion of pure worldliness was only possible because of the Christian distinction between the secular and the spiritual, the immanent and the transcendent. Yet, and this is crucial for Blumenberg's understanding of 'secular' and 'secularization', the becoming of the secular world

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<sup>104</sup> This is the claim Blumenberg attributes to Löwith's *Meaning in History*. That this is quite imprecise has received ample attention in the literature, but such particularities of the conflict between Löwith and Blumenberg are not relevant for our current purposes.

<sup>105</sup> Because we will have to stick to a discussion of Blumenberg's critique of the secularization concept, for an extended run-down of Blumenberg's analysis of eschatology and progress I refer to Robert M. Wallace, "Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate," *New German Critique* 22 (1981).

<sup>106</sup> "Much in the modern age is 'unthinkable without' the Christianity that went before it." Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 30.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

[*Weltwerdung*] is *not* a becoming-worldly or secularization [*Verweltlichung*], a transformation of something previously existing, but “the primary crystallization of a hitherto unknown reality”.<sup>108</sup> But what is exactly the difference between *Weltwerdung* and *Verweltlichung*? Let’s try to further analyze Blumenberg’s understanding of the secularization concept.

### **Critique of the secularization concept**

Blumenberg’s main problem with secularization is the transitive, interpretative use of the concept – in the form A is the secularization of B – as a transformation carried out on a specific religious object, with as result a specific secularization product.<sup>109</sup> He particularly questions the *explanatory* claim supposedly underlying this use: that the identification of A as the secularization of B is necessary to understand the phenomenon A. But what is the meaning of secularization here? – Blumenberg asks. What is it supposed to explain?

Blumenberg central assumption is that the secularization concept can only be understood in light of what he believes is its most original meaning: *saecularizatio* as juridico-political expropriation of ecclesiastical goods. This original meaning would then, in the concept’s current use, be metaphorically extended to signify a secular appropriation of an enduring ‘substance’ that originally (and properly) belonged to the religious sphere.<sup>110</sup> For example, ‘eschatology’ would be an identifiable substance, or content, that originally belonged to Christianity, but has been transferred to the secular sphere. As a consequence, the product of the secularization process is supposed to be *substantially* connected to its religious original.

If this is indeed what is presupposed in the use of secularization, Blumenberg continues, we may use this legal ‘expropriation model’ to put the hermeneutic application of the concept to the test. If one is to *validly* wield the category of secularization, the case has to fulfill three conditions.<sup>111</sup> These criteria follow from the characteristic juridical features of the legal proceedings of expropriation. 1) The identifiability of the expropriated property. 2) The legitimacy of its initial ownership. 3) The unilateral nature of its removal. The burden of proof now lies with the one who desires to speak of secularization, to show how her specific case satisfies these three criteria. It is no surprise that Blumenberg goes on to show how in the various claims of

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> The indeterminate, intransitive and quantitative use of the term secularization – meaning that “there are fewer sacred things and more profane ones” – is not the object of Blumenberg’s critique. Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 23-4.

secularization these criteria are impossible to satisfy. It is impossible – say, for ‘eschatology’ – to identify an unchanging ideal substance that is transferred from theology to philosophy of history; impossible to prove Christianity’s original ownership of it; impossible to accuse modern thought of the notion’s unilateral removal.<sup>112</sup>

The triviality of this conclusion comes to the fore when we realize that the fulfillment of these criteria is based on an impossible condition. It presupposes a *substantialistic* historical ontology.<sup>113</sup> Namely, it requires the existence of constant ‘substances’ (ideas, structures) in history, that can be identified throughout their many transformations, that can be assigned to a specific tradition from which they originate, that can be perverted by being illegitimately removed from their original sphere of meaning.<sup>114</sup> Obviously, no serious historian will readily commit to this problematic ontology. And neither, of course, does Blumenberg. But Blumenberg believes that as a matter of fact the employment of the secularization concept is very closely tied to a substantialistic ontology.<sup>115</sup> Blumenberg therefore invalidates the concept through a fundamental argument: secularization, if it is to mean anything at all, implies a certain continuity in substance or content. But this continuity cannot be identified, because there is no underlying substance that remains unchanged in the transformation towards secular modernity.

Blumenberg’s criticism, that the use of the secularization concept commits one to a substantialistic ontology of history, depends on a central assumption: that a sense of ‘expropriation’ is in the background. In this connection, the first critics of LMA have noted Blumenberg’s apparent fallacy of first employing a *metaphor* to interpret the hermeneutic meaning of secularization – namely invoking the juridico-political meaning – and then constructing on this metaphorical interpretation his criticism of the hermeneutic concept as such. Moreover, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the juridico-political term cannot in genealogical terms be directly connected to the hermeneutic category of secularization (which rather derives from *Verweltlichung*). In the second edition of LMA, Blumenberg responds to this criticism:

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<sup>112</sup> For an extended account of this impossibility as regards the issue of eschatology, see Wallace, "Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate."

<sup>113</sup> Blumenberg (according to Marramao, *Säkularisierung*, 104.) makes use of Ernst Cassirer’s distinction between ‘substance-concept’ and ‘function-concept’, the latter of which Blumenberg proposes (see below).

<sup>114</sup> “Only where the category of substance dominates the understanding of history are there repetitions, superimpositions and dissociations - and also, for that matter, disguises and unmaskings.” Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 9.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 29, 113.

I have ascribed no original and foundational significance whatever to the metaphorical usage, but only a methodical-heuristic significance with respect to an explanatory achievement of the concept, to which after all a claim is put forward when a statement is made of the type that describes a particular phenomenon as the successor of another, determined by the other's having gone before and intelligible only in relation to it.<sup>116</sup>

Hence – regardless of the concept's historical development – in the context of its transitive use, one must from a methodical-heuristic standpoint *necessarily* understand it from the perspective of the metaphor of expropriation. Particularly because no alternative interpretation seems available to him. One might try to define other conditions of the concept's application distinct from the legal context, and Blumenberg "would not exclude this possibility altogether *if it were the case* that the conceptual history to which Zabel gives us access could yield *other criteria of conceptual definition*."<sup>117</sup> That this is not the case is proven by the fact that "[t]he term 'secularization' is used for a very long time with an ambiguity that admits of no obligation, and in an occasional manner directed at anything but precision."<sup>118</sup> Hence, while secularization as an interpretative concept is not genetically related to the juridico-political act of expropriation, the relation *imposes itself* once clarification and definition of the interpretative concept is required – a 'retroactive definition' that orients itself towards its metaphorical background.<sup>119</sup>

Now whether Blumenberg's argument suffices is up for debate. In the previous chapter I observed that the juridico-political associations of secularization, which still seemed inevitable to Blumenberg and his contemporaries, have completely disappeared in our own time.<sup>120</sup> Blumenberg's alleged 'necessity' of reorienting the concept towards its juridico-political background is lost on current readers. Moreover, it is perfectly possible to propose an alternative interpretation of secularization, based on a different reference, whether etymological or analogical. This would allow shedding the legalistic conditions of 'expropriation' that Blumenberg's interpretation imposes on the concept's application. Our genealogical account has provided ample examples of secularization/*Verweltlichung* used in a sense unrelated to Blumenberg's proposed interpretation. One only has to think of Hegel's idea of *Verweltlichung*, not as

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 22., emphasis added. Blumenberg refers to Zabel, "Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung."

<sup>118</sup> Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 22.

<sup>119</sup> "[A] retroactive definition by orientation to the juristic concept would always suggest itself as soon as one felt a need to formulate the concept transitively, that is, to indicate a what and a whereto. [...] Thus the category of secularization need not have been derived from a metaphor initially; it is possible for it to have taken on the metaphorical orientation precisely for the purpose of conceptual definition." Ibid., 19.

<sup>120</sup> See page 17-8.

appropriation, but *fulfillment* and *realization* in the world. And in the next chapter we will see that Agamben takes up another paradigm for his account of secularization: the term's canonical meaning as the return from a religious order to the world.

So from the weakness of Blumenberg's presuppositions we can infer that his criticism of the concept will only be of limited value. In fact, his criticism only applies to *one particular* interpretation of secularization, namely the substantialistic one that perceives an underlying substance that is appropriated from the sphere of religion and transposed to the sphere of secular culture and thought. Let's therefore move on to the constructive dimension of Blumenberg's account: what does he propose in order to understand the process that we, perhaps wrongly, call secularization?

### **Functionalistic understanding of secularization**

Whereas Blumenberg unambiguously rejects a substantialistic ontology in historical analysis, he does not offer a full-fledged alternative ontology.<sup>121</sup> Yet he does provide some elements of how we can replace secularization with a different conceptual framework. Instead of the substantialistic account allegedly implicit in the secularization thesis, Blumenberg proposes a *functionalistic* account. This approach attends to the configuration of theoretical and existential *problems, functions* and *needs* of a historical epoch, and how these are inherited in the transition to a new epoch, requiring a new answer.

The continuity of history across the epochal threshold lies not in the permanence of ideal substances but rather in the inheritance of problems, which obliges the heir, in his turn, to know again what was known once before.<sup>122</sup>

An epochal crisis might render an old idea impossible that traditionally functioned to fill an existential or conceptual need. The new epoch, emerging out of the crisis of the old, discards the obsolete idea, but cannot in the same way simply discard the need that has already been internalized and has firmly taken root in collective consciousness. The new epoch is pressured to find a different idea that can function as an answer to the pending problem. Blumenberg calls this the 'reoccupation' [*Umbesetzung*] of a functional position.<sup>123</sup> In the context of the emergence of the modern age, this means that the problems that dominated late-medieval Christianity could no

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<sup>121</sup> "Our concern here is not at all to advocate another ontology of history in place of a substantialistic one; on the contrary, our purpose is only to set over against the unquestioned preference accorded to a certain implied philosophy of history the possibility of other lines of inquiry that it does not allow for." Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 113.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

longer be conveniently addressed by traditional theological reasoning, and were thus bequeathed to the new age, in need of an answer. Blumenberg specifically mentions the issue of *Heilsgeschichte* and the need for certainty of salvation. According to Blumenberg's general narrative that he develops in the rest of LMA, the nominalist understanding of God's sovereign, arbitrary will led, at the end of the Middle Ages, to an existential uncertainty regarding the stability of the cosmic order, and regarding whether one could really count on salvation by this erratic God. The certainty of salvation and *Heilsgeschichte* was put in doubt by nominalist theology. The modern idea of historical progress was forced to meet this outstanding desideratum.<sup>124</sup>

[T]he modern age found it impossible to decline to answer questions about the totality of history. To that extent the philosophy of history is an attempt to answer a medieval question with the means available to a postmedieval age. [...] As one of the possible answers to the question of the totality of history, [the idea of progress] is drawn into the function for consciousness that had been performed by the framework of the salvation story [...].<sup>125</sup>

The key difference between Blumenberg's functionalistic account and the secularization thesis is that progress is not 'secularized eschatology'. It is not derived from any theological element. It originates, he suggests, from the modern experience of natural science or aesthetics.<sup>126</sup> Hence, the idea of progress is according to Blumenberg an autonomous, modern invention. Yet it *takes on the function* of giving meaning to history as a whole.

The idea of 'reoccupation' says nothing about the derivation of the newly installed element, only about the dedication it receives at its installation. If one wishes to speak here of an alienation or expropriation, a reinterpretation or overinterpretation, then its object was not the theological substance of eschatology in its late, medieval forms; rather what was laid hold of was the independently generated idea of progress, the authentic rationality of which was overextended in the process.<sup>127</sup>

So despite Blumenberg's rejection of the secularization thesis, we see that he still admits a continuity between Christianity and modernity – if not in content, than certainly in theoretical needs and functions.

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<sup>124</sup> Modern scientific curiosity as to the objective laws governing the world was another phenomenon that, according to Blumenberg, emerged to counter this existential uncertainty.

<sup>125</sup> Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 49.

<sup>126</sup> Blumenberg elaborates that 'progress' might have resulted from the reality of scientific progress and the experience of the unity of methodically regulated theory developing over many generations. *Ibid.*, 31. Or alternatively, in the aesthetic realm, the idea could suggest itself in the course of the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*. *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

The only reason why 'secularization' could have become so plausible as a mode of explanation of historical processes is that supposedly secularized ideas can in fact mostly be traced back to an identity in the historical process. Of course this identity, according to the thesis advocated here, is not one of contents but one of functions.<sup>128</sup>

Hence, even if Blumenberg is correct that progress is not appropriated from theology, it still ends up occupying a 'theological' position, functioning as answer to an undeniably theological problem. Blumenberg describes this as 'overextension' or 'overexertion': the doomed attempt to inflate the idea, which originates in the limited sphere of science, technology or the arts, into a totalizing schema for the history of humanity. "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 an assertion."<sup>129</sup> Modern reason is "burdened by the no longer realistically fulfillable obligations towards the persisting 'great questions'."<sup>130</sup> That is, if modernity has been perceived as a secularization of Christianity, it is only the result of an inherited debt of unsettled religious questions that modern man tried, but failed to answer by autonomous, secular and immanent reason. It is not that original theological content was dressed up to appear modern and rational (as claimed by the secularization thesis). It is that original modern content was forced to dress up theologically to compensate for theology's unsettled debts!<sup>131</sup>

For Blumenberg, the secularization concept cannot explain historical phenomena: it presupposes that 'substances' are transposed from the religious to the secular sphere, whereas in reality the modern elements that are accused of being secularizations are substantially heterogeneous to their alleged Christian counterparts and can therefore not derive from them. Diachronic continuity between Christianity and modernity is therefore possible and present only in the functional economy of problems that are felt to require an answer. The appearance of secularization is in this sense a result of the inheritance of a system of prescribed functional positions from theology, and their reoccupation by new theoretical elements. Secular reason is therefore challenged from its very inception to overexert itself in taking on the burden of questions it cannot possible answer. Authentic modern thought would be possible by shedding the inheritance of overbearing theological questions.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 65. Note Blumenberg's reversal of the accusation of indebtedness: not modernity is in debt to Christianity because of illegitimate appropriation, but Christianity is in debt to modernity because it defaulted on its obligations and bequeathed the burden to the new epoch. Cf. Ibid., 115.

But is Blumenberg's functionalistic account as radically opposed to secularization as he claims? Could the continuity in *functional positions* between Christianity and modernity not easily be called 'secularization' as well? Odo Marquard has claimed that "it was the cunning of his reason that caused Blumenberg, with his very attack on Löwith's and Taubes's continuity theses, to provide the sole opportunity for their real defense: his functional model of history."<sup>132</sup> According to Marquard, Blumenberg's attack on the substantialistic meaning of secularization was trivial and rather unnecessary, as nobody had in fact claimed any identity of content, e.g. between theological eschatology and philosophy of history. Blumenberg's functional approach has therefore only reinvigorated the idea of secularization: it has offered an alternative interpretation of the concept, one that actually makes it viable as a hermeneutic concept. For Marquard it explained the real continuity that is at stake in the modern secularization of *Heilsgeschichte*: the persistence of the need for *salvation*.<sup>133</sup>

Now can we accordingly say that, for example, the functional position of salvation has become 'secularized' in modern philosophy of history? This is a rather awkward way of phrasing, and Marquard does not go so far as to use secularization in this way. But we could rephrase it in the following way: in the passage to modernity, the need and function of salvation was reoccupied by a secular idea (e.g. progress). Now, if we define the functional *complex* as composed of both the functional position and what occupies this position, the complex as a whole can play out either on a transcendent or immanent plane – what before was felt as the need for salvation, to be achieved in the transcendent realm, can later be felt as the same need for salvation, now to be achieved in the immanent realm of historical progress (at least, in so far Blumenberg's own thesis concerning continuity in need and function holds!). Hence, the whole complex of problem and answer, the whole functional economy of the need and what fills the need can be regarded as 'secularized', i.e. transposed from the transcendent (extra-historical) to the immanent (intra-historical) sphere. So with Blumenberg we can indeed say that the substance of progress is not a secularization of the substance of eschatology. However, against Blumenberg we can say that the *complex* of modern philosophy of

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<sup>132</sup> "Es geschah wohl durch die List seiner Vernunft, daß Blumenberg gerade mit dem Angriff auf diese Kontinuitätsthesen von Löwith und Taubes die einzige Chance zu ihrer wirklichen Verteidigung lieferte: durch seine Funktionsmodell der Geschichte." Marquard, *Schwierigkeiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie*, 16-7.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-8. Now this approach of Marquard to the secularization concept is not equal to the accusation that modernity in itself is a secularization of Christianity. It only asserts the endurance of 'counter-modernity' [*Gegenneuzeit*] within the modern age, i.e. elements that are *not sufficiently secularized*, for example where a notion of salvation is still involved. *Ibid.*, 16. Blumenberg agrees with the persistence of 'countermodernities' in the heart of modernity, an example of which would indeed be philosophy of history. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 60.

history (including the question to which it is an answer) can precisely be regarded as a secularization of the theology of history, in so far as modernity's account of salvation is a secularization of Christianity's account of salvation.

Although this alternative interpretation of secularization obviously requires further elaboration (which I will provide in chapter four), I have briefly introduced it at this stage, in order to highlight something. Namely that it is possible on the basis of Blumenberg's own account to provide an understanding of the secularization concept, which is both loyal to Blumenberg's own functionalistic account of history, and which also opens up a pathway to other accounts of secularization as I will propose in the following chapters. In my view it is mistaken to regard Blumenberg as an opponent of all forms of secularization discourse. He might, after all, be much closer to particular secularization accounts than his commentators and he himself seem to think. I support this claim by looking at another aspect of Blumenberg's analysis of secularization.

### **Secularization as a linguistic and rhetorical phenomenon**

Because the approach of functional reoccupation appears insufficient to fully explain all phenomena that are commonly described in secularization discourse, LMA includes a discussion of *linguistic* and *rhetorical* processes of secularization. Modern texts suggest the occurrence of secularization when traditional sacral terms are used to describe immanent and secular things. But in fact, Blumenberg claims, they can be explained by recognizing linguistic and rhetorical dynamics that are at play. Sacral language can outlive the religious horizon of meaning to which it belonged. He gives the following examples: the stylistic adoption of sanctioned idiom can be attributed to the desire to *conceal* radical and dangerous new ideas.<sup>134</sup> Or in the reverse case, it can be a deliberate *provocation*.<sup>135</sup> It can be an *artistic* device, as in the continuous lending back and forth of linguistic forms between mysticism and eroticism.<sup>136</sup> And the initial *deficiency* of language with respect to new thoughts must also be considered. To explain innovative ideas an author can coin new concepts, but more often she resorts to existing terminology. The development of a secular terminology could only proceed from the recourse to the traditional stock of theological expressions.<sup>137</sup> Or a traditional word had already become fossilized, which opened possibilities for secular *reinterpretation* and integration into a new meaningful context, while retaining the term's familiarity and consecrated status.<sup>138</sup> Or again, as we saw above, the similarity of

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<sup>134</sup> Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 77.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

language might only be an index of an identical *function* for consciousness that is attributed to a different substance.<sup>139</sup>

These rhetorical and linguistic phenomena can often be traced back to the fundamental operations of *analogy* and *metaphor*. Blumenberg elaborates on this in the context of a discussion with Carl Schmitt. Blumenberg mentions that the ‘political theology’ of the former seems more like a “dualistic typology of situations,”<sup>140</sup> based on analogy, than an assertion of secularization as a process of historical transformation. For example, the correspondence between God’s sovereignty and the monarch’s sovereignty, which Schmitt explains as a secularization, can better be described as an analogy, which was deliberately put to use by counterrevolutionary writers as a metaphor, a figure of speech, for which they had their rhetorical reasons (as Schmitt himself admits). The secularization Schmitt talks about is therefore not the emergence of theology in the political sphere, but merely a rhetorical phenomenon:

Accordingly, what underlies the phenomena of linguistic secularization cannot be an extensively demonstrable recourse to theology as such; rather it is a choice of elements from the selective point of view of the immediate need, in each case, for background and pathos.<sup>141</sup>

In this sense, secularization is reduced to the concept of a structural analogy, which “no longer implies any assertion about the derivation of one structure from the other or of both from a common prototype.”<sup>142</sup> This first of all implies that Schmitt’s political theology is only a ‘metaphorical theology’, as Blumenberg concludes.<sup>143</sup> But it extends to all different forms of linguistic secularization, in so far as, for particular and immediate purposes, authors deliberately (or unwittingly) make use of the derivation of terminology from the religious sphere of meaning. The continuity in language can only create the appearance of secularization, if to the interpreter the discontinuity in content is obscured.<sup>144</sup> Blumenberg infers that the linguistic phenomenon of secularization emerges from the strategic operation of metaphors and analogies between the religious and the secular. The concept of secularization would merely and at most be an index of the synchronic similarity that is constituted by analogy – perhaps useful, but not as a historical explanatory concept.

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<sup>139</sup> E.g. the terms for ‘happiness’ and ‘fulfillment’ that exist in antiquity, Christianity and modernity, while referring to radically different content, can all have a similar function for consciousness, e.g. awakening hope. *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-4.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

It is interesting to study for a moment the figure of the metaphor. A *metaphora* obviously refers to a 'transposition', 'transfer' or 'carrying-over', which also seems to underlie the meaning of secularization – the carrying-over from the religious to the secular domain. But what is actually carried over here? According to Blumenberg's account expounded above, the *metaphora* of secularization cannot mean a transfer of substantial content between these domains. The *metaphora* that takes place in secularization is only really a metaphor in the literal sense: the transposition of a semantic element into a different contextual field that gives it a new meaning.<sup>145</sup>

### **Assessing Blumenberg's account of linguistic secularization**

Now that we have understood Blumenberg's idea of secularization as a rhetorical phenomenon, we may again ask: is Blumenberg's critique as threatening to the concept of secularization as it seems? As we have seen regarding Blumenberg's functionalistic alternative to secularization's alleged substantialism, it may very well be possible that Blumenberg's own account of linguistic secularization does not so much offer the 'death blow' to the secularization discourse,<sup>146</sup> as it actually opens up new ways of appreciating and understanding the concept of secularization. The cursory outline in LMA regarding a linguistic approach to secularization does not suffice to elaborate a full-fledged theoretical framework on the basis of this text. And since the purpose of this study is not to investigate in detail how *Blumenberg* exactly conceived of a possible 'rhetoric of secularization', it will be more useful to move beyond Blumenberg to other possible authors and interpretations that do offer more comprehensive analyses. Yet before we turn to that, we can critically assess the value of Blumenberg's critique of linguistic secularization, and what it overlooks.

I want to highlight the peculiar understanding of language that is implicit in Blumenberg's account. Blumenberg obviously regards the claim of linguistic or rhetorical secularization to be much weaker than what according to him is the original claim of secularization, namely substantial continuity. The metaphorical transfer of words and linguistic elements only involves words, the dimension of form, rhetoric and embellishment, and not what the discourse ultimately is about. According to Daniel Weidner, Blumenberg's account indeed presupposes that the rhetorical dimension of secularization only concerns the appropriation of *words*, not of *substance*; only discursive *form*, not discursive *content*.<sup>147</sup> Linguistic secularization would imply

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<sup>145</sup> It is evident that the operation of the metaphor is more difficult and problematic than Blumenberg assumes, and I will briefly come back to it below and more extensively in chapter four.

<sup>146</sup> Jay, "Review of *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, by Hans Blumenberg."

<sup>147</sup> Weidner, "Zur Rhetorik der Säkularisierung," 100-1.

that a strictly secular discourse (in the sense that it discusses purely secular substance) involves religious words, without their regular religious meaning having any significant effect on the secular character of the discourse. So we need to understand Blumenberg's use in this context of the adjective 'linguistic' as a restrictive qualification – *only* concerning *language as medium* and not what it conveys.

On closer look, this account can only appear as an oversimplification, to say the least. It falsely assumes rhetoric is only ever a matter of form, only a use of the *signifier*, independent of substance, the *signified*. Of course, if twentieth-century philosophy has made one thing clear, it is that substance can *never* be rigorously abstracted from form, signified from signifier (and vice versa). And it is peculiar, Daniel Weidner notes, that Blumenberg's other works, those that are concerned with 'metaphorology', are devoted to claiming the irreducible presence and force of rhetoric and metaphor in all conceptual discourse.<sup>148</sup> Yet in LMA Blumenberg pretends that the appropriation of religious language in a certain text can be rigorously separated from the supposedly clear secular intention of the author. But can one really claim that the adoption of religious terminology and theological concepts remains *inconsequential* for the meaning of a 'secular' text?

This provision particularly applies to the operation of the analogy. While the rhetorical figure of the analogy may be employed as a *supplement* to the actual discourse, in order to produce a particular effect distinct from the discursive content (e.g. clarification, persuasion, invocation of pathos), on close inspection such a supplement cannot be rigorously separated from the discursive content. Because the analogy, if at all effective, presupposes the presence of a structural similarity. And this similarity can have profound implications for the orientation of the understanding as regards the meaning of the discourse. In this light it is impossible to sustain that the presence of an analogy only concerns a contingent use of rhetoric and language from which one can abstract the real content. The analogy may very well determine the *content* and not just the *form*. What these considerations concretely imply for the understanding of secularization, I will elaborate in chapter four. But for now, I can already set out the stakes: if secularization is indeed the establishment or demonstration of an analogy in a particular discourse that relates the secular to the religious (a 'dualistic typology of situations'), this linguistic operation may wind up inherently tying the secular content to the religious analogue, and providing a lasting orientation to the signification of the discourse. A hermeneutic of secularization would then need to closely observe the lasting effects that the particular interrelation between the secular and religious domain has on the meaning of the object.

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<sup>148</sup> E.g. *Paradigms for a Metaphorology; Work on Myth; Shipwreck with Spectator*. Ibid.

In light of these observations, we should end our analysis of Blumenberg's 'linguistic secularization' by marking where his account left off and where we must pick it up ourselves. Linguistic and rhetorical operations of secularization are, as opposed to Blumenberg's belief, not inconsequential for the meaning of a discourse. So what if we, more than Blumenberg himself, take seriously his suggestion that secularization is a linguistic phenomenon related to rhetorical operations such as the metaphor and analogy? What if we indeed approach secularization as the possibility of a 'dualistic typology of situations'? I think that we are then suddenly very close to other interpretations of secularization, which the next two chapters put forward.

More in general, I would suggest that Blumenberg's critique in LMA is not as disruptive for the concept of secularization as many commentators believe. It only convincingly repudiates the substantialistic understanding of secularization (which I think is not so widely shared), and actually inaugurates new constructive approaches to understanding the meaning and hermeneutic use of secularization. In alignment with the alternative approaches sketched by Blumenberg, secularization discourse could turn to analyze the functional reoccupation of theological positions by secular elements in the passage from medieval Christendom to modernity, or alternatively develop a full rhetorical and linguistic theory of secularization – which is actually not merely of the order of linguistic form but necessarily also substance – which is attentive to the operations of analogy and metaphor that move between the religious and secular sphere of discourse. I will elaborate on both possibilities in chapter four. But first we turn to another profound account of the term secularization, that of Giorgio Agamben, which can put Blumenberg's argumentative lines in a larger framework and on the basis of which we may get closer to devising a hermeneutics of secularization.

## Chapter 3

### Agamben on Secularization as a Signature

A contemporary philosopher that has recently inserted himself in the secularization debate is Giorgio Agamben. His philosophical works display a salient presence of religious topics and they conspicuously take up and engage in archaic theological debates from almost-forgotten corners of the Western tradition. The most famous example is Agamben's excavation of the enigmatic figure of the *homo sacer* – the 'sacred man' that is banished from the community of gods and men – from the depths of archaic Roman law, which he subsequently raises to the level of being the 'paradigm' of contemporary politics (in *Homo Sacer*<sup>149</sup>). But other works engage in medieval theological debates concerning monastic life and poverty of the Franciscan order (*The Highest Poverty*<sup>150</sup>); provide a commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans (*The Time That Remains*<sup>151</sup>); or trace the patristic development of the doctrine of *oikonomia* and the trinity (*The Kingdom and the Glory*<sup>152</sup>). But it is important to note that Agamben not only implicitly employs a hermeneutic of secularization in relating specific philosophical issues to theological or religious ones, but that he also provides theoretical reflection on this hermeneutic method itself, and to this aim on the meaning of secularization. Secularization is a *signature*, Agamben claims. What he means we shall have to find out.

In the introduction to *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben takes up Hermann Lübbe's treatise *Säkularisierung: Geschichte eines ideenpolitischen Begriffs* (which we encountered in chapter one), and its claim that secularization is not so much a neutral-descriptive term, but that it performs a strategic function in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century 'politics of ideas'. Affirming Lübbe's point of departure, Agamben states that the term's *ideenpolitisches* character is "equally valid for secularization in a strictly juridical sense [...] and its metaphoric use in the history of ideas."<sup>153</sup> While for Weber the strategic function of the term was, according to Agamben, the defense of disenchantment and the irreversible direction of 'detheologization' of the modern

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<sup>149</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, transl. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>150</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-life*, transl. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>151</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: a Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, transl. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>152</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: for a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, transl. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

world, for Schmitt the strategy appears to be the opposite. For Schmitt supposedly aims to show that “theology continues to be present and active in an eminent way”.<sup>154</sup> This is encapsulated in Schmitt’s famous thesis: “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”<sup>155</sup> And it seems that Agamben sides with Schmitt here. For while Agamben states that the Schmittian thesis is insufficient, and that Agamben’s own analysis in *The Kingdom and the Glory* entails the need to extend its validity beyond the juridico-political realm to include the economical realm as well<sup>156</sup>, the basic insight of Schmitt’s thesis and its strategic employment of secularization is apparently taken over by Agamben. So that means that Agamben is equally convinced that theology is still active in modern culture and thought, which explains his own profound engagement with theological debates. But in what way is theology still active in secular modernity? And what is the ‘strategic function’ of secularization that Agamben takes over from Schmitt? What is a ‘strategic function’ anyway?

### **Agamben on the secularization debate**

Preemptively defending himself from Blumenberg’s criticism on the substantialistic interpretation of the concept, Agamben puts a disclaimer that secularization “does not necessarily imply an identity of substance between theology and modernity, or a perfect identity of meaning between theological and political concepts.”<sup>157</sup> Instead, what Agamben reads in Schmitt’s thesis is that it “concerns a particular strategic relation that marks political concepts and refers them back to their theological origin.”<sup>158</sup> The relation between theological and political concepts is thus not one of historical appropriation, nor one of substantial or structural identity, but a *strategic* relation of *referral* of the one to the other (and vice versa, as we will see later). It is clear that this reading of Schmitt’s thesis goes against the latter’s own interpretation. Because in *Political Theology*, where his thesis originally appears, Schmitt explicitly states that it concerns the ‘historical development’ of political concepts, in so far as they were transposed from theology to state theory, and their identical ‘systematic structure’.<sup>159</sup> Agamben is actually aware of his departure from Schmitt’s own understanding, as in his methodological work *The Signature of All Things*<sup>160</sup> (original

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>155</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

<sup>156</sup> Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 2-3.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36. See page 28.

<sup>160</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, transl. Luca D’Isanto and Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

2008, almost contemporary with the publication of *The Kingdom and the Glory*), Agamben says the following about the original secularization debate:

The discussion was vitiated by the fact that none of the participants seemed to realize that ‘secularization’ was not a concept, in which the ‘structural identity’ between theological and political conceptuality (Schmitt’s thesis) or the discontinuity between Christian theology and modernity (this was Blumenberg’s thesis *contra* Löwith) was in question. Rather, secularization was a strategic operator that marked political concepts in order to make them refer to their theological origins.<sup>161</sup>

So contrary to Schmitt’s own manifest understanding of secularization as a concept denoting a ‘structural identity’ (and also historical transposition, which Agamben seems to forget here), Schmitt’s thesis concerning the secularization of theological concepts should rather be understood as a *strategic operation* that ‘marks’ and ‘refers’ concepts from the political back to the theological realm. Agamben continues: “To put it differently: secularization acts within the conceptual system of modernity as a *signature*, which refers it back to theology.”<sup>162</sup> What he initially called a ‘strategic operator’, part of the ‘politics of ideas’ (recalling Lübke’s claim), Agamben now identifies as something which according to his own methodological apparatus is to be properly called a *signature* [*segnatura*]. The same is said in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, and the passage deserves to be quoted as a whole:

In other words, secularization is not a concept but a signature in the sense of Foucault and Melandri, that is, something that is a sign or concept marks and exceeds such a sign or concept referring it back to a determinate interpretation or field, without for this reason leaving the semiotic to constitute a new meaning or a new concept. Signatures move and displace concepts and signs from one field to another (in this case, from sacred to profane, and vice versa) without redefining them semantically. Many pseudoconcepts belonging to the philosophical tradition are, in this sense, signatures that, like the ‘secret indexes’ of which Benjamin speaks, carry out a vital and determinate strategic function, giving a lasting orientation to the interpretation of signs. Insofar as they connect different times and fields, signatures operate, as it were, as pure historical elements.<sup>163</sup>

Secularization is a signature. Yet before we address the now pressing question of what a signature is, we should briefly examine in more detail the passage above. The first element that emerges is that secularization is not a concept with a determinate meaning itself. It does therefore not, from a neutral-objective standpoint, identify the

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 76-7.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 77., emphasis added.

<sup>163</sup> Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 4.

property of an object. In more concrete terms, this affirms that secularization does not objectively classify as originally religious an object that only appears secular; it neither diagnoses a substantial identity (historical, structural) between a religious and secular object. Instead of being concepts with concrete semantic content, signatures like secularization provide strategic orientation for the interpretation of concepts (and signs in general), by referring specific concepts to a determinate field and displacing them from one field to the other. For secularization, the fields in question are, apparently, the sacred and the profane. This is actually a problematic claim in the context of Agamben's own thought, but I will come to that. For now, what is important to note is that the displacement operated by secularization is apparently not a one-way process. It not only refers modern political theory to the theological field; it equally refers theological elements to a secular, e.g. political field.

The second element is that signatures like secularization operate as 'pure historical elements' – but it is crucial not to misunderstand this claim: secularization does not act as a historical force of *causality*, which explains and derives one historical phenomenon on the basis of the causal 'influence' of another. In this sense, a 'science of signatures', according to Agamben, "runs parallel to the history of ideas and concepts, and should not be confused with them."<sup>164</sup> In a similar manner ought the displacement enacted by secularization not to be understood as what Blumenberg has called the illegitimate appropriation of a religious element and its transference into secular hands. It is not the historical displacement of an identical substance; it is the possibility of giving an interpretation according to a different field to the same concept or sign. It thus *reflectively* establishes as a 'pure historical element' the relation between one historical time or field and another.

On closer inspection, the historicity of the relation implied by secularization is not so clear-cut across Agamben's different elaborations of the meaning of the secularization signature. Sometimes it seems as if Agamben *does* denote a historical relation of origin and result. In the passage from *The Signature of All Things* already referred to above, Agamben states that secularization strategically marks political concepts "in order to make them refer to their theological *origins*"<sup>165</sup>, or according to *The Kingdom and the Glory*, "it refers them back to their theological *origin*."<sup>166</sup> And in a similar way, the figure that Agamben provides to illustrate his understanding of secularization might further complicate his account, see the following passage from *The Kingdom and the Glory* (which appears in almost identical terms in *The Signature of All Things*):

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> See note 161, emphasis added.

<sup>166</sup> See note 158, emphasis added.

Just as, according to canon law, the secularized priest had to wear a sign of the religious order he had once belonged to, so does the secularized concept exhibit like a signature its past belonging to the theological sphere.<sup>167</sup>

This figure is crucial in more than one respect. But in relation to the problem of historical derivation we must acknowledge that it gives the impression that secularization is once again a matter of original religious elements subsequently moving to the temporal world. This would open the way to Blumenberg-type reproaches of the substantialism underlying the supposed displacement of 'original' elements from the religious to the secular sphere. It remains possible, however, to understand this causal-historical dimension, which is definitively noticeable in Agamben's elaboration of secularization, as merely the unfortunate result of Agamben's employment of a sloppy analogy.

Leaving this aside, Agamben's use of the figure of canonical *saecularizatio* is interesting from other perspectives. It flies in the face of Blumenberg's supposition in LMA that secularization in the hermeneutic sense can only be understood in reference to the single available model of the juridico-political act of expropriation of ecclesial goods.<sup>168</sup> Even if the juridico-political meaning did not historically influence the meaning of the hermeneutic term, Blumenberg ascribes a 'methodical-heuristic significance' to it, as one out of sheer need for clarification is forced to retroactively interpret the vague interpretative category on the basis of the juridico-political model. This supposed necessity is rebuffed by Agamben, perhaps deliberately, and he happily adopts the different model of the return of a 'regular' from the monastery to the world. Although the problem of historical substantialism is not solved, this model definitively enables to avoid the charge of 'illegitimate appropriation' that ever since Blumenberg is so connected to the understanding of secularization. The religious person's *saecularizatio* is a voluntary return to the world, legitimate and clerically approved by way of an official 'indult'.<sup>169</sup> But Agamben, I believe, mainly employs this model to focus on the status of the secularized priest and the sign that ties him to his former order. In chapter one we saw that a secularized priest in all respects appears as a secular, except that he is disqualified from certain offices and is therefore separated from both a religious and purely secular existence. And under his secular clothes, he wears a hidden sign of the religious order from which he originates, a 'scapular' or medallion. Just like the secularized priest cannot fully lead a worldly existence and is formally distinct from the secular, and always carries a hidden sign that betrays his original belonging to a

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<sup>167</sup> Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 4.

<sup>168</sup> See page 37.

<sup>169</sup> See page 15.

certain religious order, so the 'secularized' concept is never truly secular, but by a 'signature' exhibits his tie to the theological sphere. But what is this signature of secularization, and how is one to recognize it beneath a concept's immediate appearance?

### Theory of the signature

It is time to consider Agamben's theory of the signature. It is one of the pillars of his philosophical method, together with his theory of the paradigm and archaeology, and he discusses it in the second chapter of *The Signature of All Things*. Taking a detour that leads through Paracelsus's *De signatura rerum naturalium* and Jakob Böhme's *De signatura rerum*, Agamben starts by giving some examples of signatures: The eye-shaped plant *Euphrasia* that cures eye diseases, the yellow patch that Jews wear on their coat, the colored band that makes soldiers recognizable as belonging to either camp on the battlefield. Two further examples can best clarify the overall function of signatures. A signature (in the narrow, familiar sense) that signs off an official document or a work of art, and a mark on a coin.<sup>170</sup> In these instances, it is easy to see that these signatures do not act as signs that by themselves signify determinate content. The signature on a letter does not add further information to its content, and neither does it function to identify the sender, as this is already clear from the letter itself. Instead, the signature is an operation that *authorizes* the letter; it puts its particular declarations into force. The same is true for the mark stamped on a coin: often a face of the emperor or relevant authority. It is important to recognize that these are not signs themselves: the face of the emperor does not function to signify who is the current ruler, or under whose rule the coin was made. It is again an operation that *authorizes* the piece of metal as a coin; it puts its monetary value into effect. The coin itself acts as a specific sort of sign that signifies a specific monetary value, but this signifying quality of the coin is conditioned by its authorization that the mark *performs* (not signifies!). The same operation is carried out by the author's signature on a work of art, although this is more difficult to apprehend. We might think that the initials at the bottom of a painting signify the author's identity. Be that as it may, it is not the signature's primary *function*. It is not a sign that in addition to the painting itself refers to a signified, as if together with what the painting represents one ought to think of a particular natural person. It does not add to its signifying content, and the painting itself would not in any way be altered if the initials were removed. Or would it? In a different sense, it does alter the painting – it alters its *status*. That we become aware by the signature that a portrait is a Rembrandt is (in our culture at least) a transformative operation, puts it in relation with other Rembrandts we know, and determines how we approach and look at the

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<sup>170</sup> Agamben, *Signature of All Things*, 37-40.

painting. Similar to the stamp on the coin, a signature authorizes the signifying value of a work of art. Rather than being a sign itself, the signature is therefore the performative operation that puts into effect the signifying value of a sign.

In all these cases, a signature does not merely express a semiotic relation between a *signans* and a *signatum*; rather, it is what – persisting in this relation without coinciding with it – displaces and moves it into another domain, thus positioning it in a new network of pragmatic and hermeneutic relations.<sup>171</sup>

The signature enables, or rather effects the transition from the semiotic (the existence of signs) to the hermeneutic (the interpretation of their semantic value); it is an index that shows how a semiology must be deciphered.<sup>172</sup> Using Böhme's terminology Agamben states that the signature is "what makes the mute signs of creation, in which it dwells, efficacious and expressive."<sup>173</sup> The signature can be, as in the examples above, a visible institution that is materially present in or besides the sign itself (as the mark on a coin), but it can also be an linguistic operation, such as the formula 'I baptize you in the name of the Father etc.' that effectuates the sacramental value of the gesture of washing, and in which absence the latter would remain insignificant.<sup>174</sup> More importantly, the signature might only be *implicitly* present in addition to the sign – though it can never coincide with it. This is inevitable when we enter the field of language, as becomes clear from Agamben's treatment of Foucault's theory of the statement.

The statement, according to Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, is distinguished both from the mute, material sign and the semantic content (for example, the proposition expressed in it). It is not the grammatical or logical rule of construction or syntactical relation between a group of signs. Rather, the statement pertains to the dimension that there *are* signs, or rather that they are *signs*. The statement is not itself a distinguishable unit, but a *function*: "it is that which enables such groups of signs to exist."<sup>175</sup>

The statement is not therefore a structure (that is, a group of relations between variable elements, thus authorizing a possibly infinite number of concrete models); it is a function of existence that properly belongs to signs and on the basis of which one may then decide, through analysis or intuition, whether or not they 'make sense', according to what rule they

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 58-9.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>175</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, transl. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Random House, 2010), 88.

follow one another or are juxtaposed, of what they are the sign, and what sort of act is carried out by their formulation (oral or written).<sup>176</sup>

The statement is a pragmatic operation that enables one to understand signs as signs, and what content they signify or what sort of action is carried out in their expression. Foucault gives the example of a series of printing letters; physically spread out on a table, these material letters do not form a statement. But when the same series (e.g. QWERTY) emerges in a book, we recognize it as a statement (namely the statement of the first letters of an English keyboard).<sup>177</sup> The fact that it is a statement is conditioned by numerous pragmatic functions, such as the requirement that the position of an enunciating subject can be assigned (which is typically not the case for the arbitrary spatial arrangement of printing letters), the cultural institution of the book (as a meaningful and thematic whole assigning a particular status to the signs it contains), but also familiarity with the nature of keyboards (otherwise it would be quite impossible to recognize it as a statement and not a strange spelling error). Every discourse thus requires the pragmatic dimension of the statement in order to be understood as discourse, but this dimension is itself not a given, fixed once and for all. The same sentence or group of signs can correspond to many different statements, according to the different relations it forms with specific pragmatic fields (the status of the enunciating subject, the historical, institutional context etc.). The identity of the statement “is itself relative and oscillates according to the *use* that is made of the statement and the *way it is handled*.”<sup>178</sup> The determinate operation it carries out is conditioned by a discursive practice, “a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function.”<sup>179</sup> What Foucault called the statement, Agamben in the following central passage identifies as the signature:

Neither semiotic nor semantic, not yet discourse and no longer mere sign, statements, like signatures, do not institute semiotic relations or create new meanings; instead, they mark and ‘characterize’ signs at the level of their existence, thus actualizing and displacing their efficacy. These are the signatures that signs receive from the sheer fact of existing and being used – namely, the indelible character that, in marking them as signifying something, orients and determines their interpretation and efficacy in a certain context. [...] The theory of signatures (or of statements) rectifies the abstract and fallacious idea that there are, as it were, pure and unmarked signs, that the *signans* neutrally signifies the *signatum*, univocally

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 86-7.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 85-6.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 104., emphasis added.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 117.

and once and for all. Instead, the sign signifies because it carries a signature that necessarily predetermines its interpretation and distributes its use and efficacy according to rules, practices, and precepts that it is our task to recognize. In this sense, archaeology is the science of signatures.<sup>180</sup>

The signature's operativity differs according to the discursive practices of a historical period, the status of the subject, the functional relations with institutional fields – in short according to the statement's *field of use* – and this in connection not only to the sphere in which the discourse emerges, but also to its reader, who may belong to a different discursive sphere. This is a crucial aspect of Agamben's (and Foucault's) theory of archaeology: the signature (or statement) is not an objective reality coexistent with the sign that is instituted once and for all; in fact one can only improperly speak of its 'institution'.

This insight touches on the question of the signature's origin, supposed cause, or its *signator*. The examples above give the impression that it is a matter of institutional authority: it is the emperor, through his deputies at the mint, who authorizes the coin; it is the artist who signs off her work; it is the ordained priest who expresses the baptism formula. But Agamben also notes the examples of barely noticeable signatures that were only unconsciously left behind: such as the foot print in the mud on the basis of which only detective Holmes can identify the perpetrator, or the characteristic shape of the fingernails that allows the art historian to attribute the painting to the painter.<sup>181</sup> Here it is clear that the signature is not consciously 'instituted' together with the sign (the crime scene, the painting). Nor are these signatures ever meant to enable the interpretation of their respective signs. The thief or murderer would rather try her best to *prevent* the correct interpretation of the crime scene, and, were she aware of any traces she left behind, would erase them. In fact, the perfect crime is one that never makes a crime scene appear at all – which is to say that the complete absence of signatures debilitates the situation from becoming a meaningful and interpretable sign. Hence, these marginal elements are not operative signatures by themselves, and are not made operative according to the intention of the original 'author', but only become signatures by the observant activity of the reader.

Indeed, Agamben clarifies that in his theory of historical signatures the *signator* is not the contemporaneous cause of the object or phenomenon, not the writer of a text; it is not a matter of institution, nor of writing down. In reference to Hugo von Hofmannsthal (and with Benjamin in the background), Agamben declares that signatures require 'to read what was never written': "this means that the signature is

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<sup>180</sup> Agamben, *Signature of All Things*, 64.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-70.

the place where the gesture of reading and that of writing invert their relation and enter into a zone of undecidability. Here reading becomes writing, and writing is wholly resolved into reading."<sup>182</sup> The reader, who belongs to a different time than the historical phenomenon in question, retroactively inscribes a signature and so constitutes the phenomenon as an intelligible, legible sign. Agamben here explicitly invokes Benjamin's 'secret' or 'historical indices', which confer legibility to images only at a particular time. The 'production' of the signature that makes something intelligible is, in Benjamin's words, a 'flash': "It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation."<sup>183</sup> That means that archaeology, Agamben's historical method, is not a practice of passively reading historical signs that are given in a neutral, objective and unchanging manner. It is, rather, a type of reading in which a historical phenomenon is suddenly *made intelligible*, through the flash in which a signature becomes operative and forms a constellation of past and present. The appearance and recognition of the signature in the present constitutes the phenomenon in the past as a meaningful sign. The operative signatures in the present demand in the here and now what is to be read in the past as a meaningful sign.<sup>184</sup>

### **Secularization as signature**

Many questions remain about how we should precisely understand signatures, and how in philosophical archaeology one recognizes and employs signatures. At this point one also would have to investigate the relation of the signature with the other pillars of Agamben's method, the paradigm and the *arche* at stake in archaeology. But this is not the place to do that. So on the basis of this preliminary treatment of the signature, we should return to the issue of what it means that secularization is a signature. In light of what we perceived above regarding the operative mode of the signature, we can conclude the following about Agamben's understanding of secularization.

1. It is not a concept in the strict sense. It does not have a definable semantic content itself. That means, concretely, that it does not objectively denote the innate theological or religious character of a secular concept, nor does it identify a given, objective historical or structural relation between a theological and secular phenomenon. As a consequence, secularization is not a matter of historical transposition, or causal influence of a religious substance on a modern, secular substance. As a signature, it rather retroactively makes a

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>183</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, quoted in *ibid.*, 72.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 73.

concept or element legible according to a new field: for example, it enables reading the conceptuality of modern state theory in light of theological doctrine on divine sovereignty. These fields are fields of *use*, not objective historical realities. To refer a secular phenomenon to the theological field is not to trace an element that ‘properly’ belongs to theology and historically ended up in the secular field. It is to make new use of given elements by suspending their old use, in which one must keep in mind that neither use is original, proper or authentic. It should therefore be clear that such a hermeneutic is not a question of objective description (is this secular concept or practice not in fact, originally, secretly, theological?), but a question of interpretation (e.g. what is the meaning of this theological structure from the perspective of political theory? How does this theological debate shed light on contemporary societal practice?)

2. The employment of the signature of secularization is a strategic operation, not a neutral hermeneutic that can be performed anytime and by anybody in the same way. It is a particular use of given elements, and it is thus informed by one’s present conditions and questions, and one cannot presume to carry it out in a neutral, ahistorical fashion, in abstraction from one’s current time, society and position. To a certain extent, this reaffirms what Hermann Lübbe called the *ideenpolitisches* character of secularization, and also recalls Blumenberg’s claim about its ideological nature. The crucial question, therefore, is to determine every time how the signature of secularization is put to use: secularization is not the same operation every time. It may refer the secular to the theological (or vice versa) in a number of ways. We of course already saw that in the historical development of the term: secularization/*Verweltlichung* can effectuate the interpretation of worldly institutions as historical realizations of religious principles (Hegel), or instead programmatically call for the complete detachment of philosophy from theology (Feuerbach). Concerning the different strategies of secularization, Agamben, as I mentioned above, gives the examples of Weber and Schmitt, but also mentions Gogarten, for whom secularization is a “specific performance of Christian faith that, for the first time, opens the world to man in its worldliness and historicity.”<sup>185</sup> So secularization is not only a strategic operation (and not a neutral description), the single term stands for a plurality of different and mutually opposed strategic operations.
3. But the operation of secularization is not a merely ‘subjective’ one, arising out of particular whims and prejudices, and the results of which one can choose to either lay aside or adopt depending on whether or not it corresponds to one’s

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<sup>185</sup> Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 4.

ideological position. Or rather, secularization can of course be used in this flimsy way, but not all hermeneutics of secularization can be set aside as belonging to this type, as mere opinions. There exist rigorous, meaningful uses of secularization. Not one's opinions, but the historical constellation allows one to recognize the signature of secularization and to read the signs in a consistent way. The interpreter cannot invent, but must *find* the theological signature to be there in the secular object or vice versa – even if the signature was never an objective property forever residing in the historical phenomenon. That a signature becomes operative does not depend on the subject's convictions, but rather precisely because the subject's current historical position allows the recognition of a signature and to understand it.

4. The reading strategy of secularization often departs from marginal occurrences in discourse or historical practice that only present themselves to the attentive reader. It is therefore more often than not invisible to contemporary authors and writers themselves. Secularization is hence not a question of whether, for example, Marx meant to offer a secular millenarianism in his theory of the classless society; nor whether patristic debates on *oikonomia*, divine monarchy and the trinity were self-consciously carried out with manifest political motivations. The reader that employs a particular strategy of secularization must therefore attend to details that escape the concerns of the contemporaries of the historical object.
5. However, the detail in which one is to recognize the signature of secularization cannot be any at all, but ought to be essential in the sense that it connects to the inner operativity of a phenomenon. Just like the marginal element of the shape of fingernails on a painting stands in an essential relation to the crucial dimension of the painter's identity, so the signature that connects a secular phenomenon to the theological sphere must stand in an essential relation with its efficacy. That modern state theory is a secularized theology cannot be based on some arbitrary correspondences (e.g. solely on the basis of some individual remark of Hobbes that the state is the 'mortal god'), but is to be recognized in the specific structure of sovereignty (as developed by Hobbes and others), and how law and power take on a determinate form in modern politics that is analogical to theological elaborations, and that invests them with enduring efficacy in modernity.

### **Agamben's strategic use of secularization**

So much for Agamben's abstract and general theory of the signature of secularization. But this does not suffice to understand his own position. Because in correspondence with his own theory – that secularization can never be understood as one and the same

operation, but must be interrogated as to the particular underlying strategy – Agamben’s employment of secularization must necessarily *also* be a *specific* strategic operation. His various works testify to a reading strategy that makes a particular use of the secularization operator, which aligns him with certain authors from the secularization debate and puts him at odds with others. What is, hence, the strategic function of Agamben’s own use of secularization?

At the beginning of this chapter I already mentioned that Agamben seems to align himself with Schmitt’s adoption of secularization, and it is now time to explore this in detail. The position that corresponds to Schmitt’s use of secularization is, according to Agamben, that theology continues to be present and active in an eminent way in secular modernity. With this Agamben definitely agrees. In an interview Agamben says: “I would suggest to anyone who really wants to understand what is happening today not to neglect theology.”<sup>186</sup> So the operator of secularization, whenever Agamben employs it, must be understood to work in the same way in which Schmitt puts it to use: to show what remains of theology in the secular. But Agamben is clear that it also works in the reverse direction, namely that theological elements can be interpreted from a political angle or some other secular field.<sup>187</sup> However, I believe that the ultimate strategy underlying this operation is exactly the reverse for Agamben as for Schmitt. By affirming the continued presence of theology in secular modernity, the point for Agamben is not, as it is for Schmitt, to *reinforce* or even to *restore* this presence. What Schmitt in all probability tried to make convincing was the claim that political theory cannot ever escape from theology. What Agamben by contrast aims to achieve is precisely, by escaping from traditional political theory, to make the final escape from theology. Or what amounts to the same, to escape from the ‘biopolitical machine’ of contemporary politics by escaping from theology as it has established in the West. The means, however, is not to attempt once more to devise a secular theory of politics, legitimacy and power on purely immanent grounds – which is precisely what modernity tried and which, according to Agamben, was bound to fail from the start. Instead it is to confront the workings of Western theology on its own terms and to make it ‘inoperative’ (the central concept of Agamben’s apparatus). To see what this means, we ought to turn to one more text of Agamben, in which he explains the difference between secularization and profanation.

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<sup>186</sup> Giorgio Agamben, interview by Gianluca Sacco, March 8th, 2004, <http://aldiqua.blogspot.com/2005/06/agamben-from-political-theology-to.html>.

<sup>187</sup> “[T]he thesis according to which the economy could be a secularized theological paradigm acts retroactively on theology itself, since it implies that from the beginning theology conceives divine life and the history of humanity as an *oikonomia*, that is, that theology is itself ‘economic’ and did not simply become so at a later time through secularization.” Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 3.

## Secularization and profanation

In the essay 'In Praise of Profanation' from the collection *Profanations*<sup>188</sup>, Agamben speaks of the 'political task' of profanation which our age seems to have lost. The traditional organ for profanation, play, has in our culture rather reestablished the efficacy of the sacred and thus, in diametrical opposition to its profane vocation, functions to "secularize an unconsciously religious intention."<sup>189</sup> Agamben continues by elaborating on the distinction between these terms:

In this sense, we must distinguish between secularization and profanation. Secularization is a form of repression. It leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another. Thus the political secularization of theological concepts (the transcendence of God as a paradigm of sovereign power) does nothing but displace the heavenly monarchy onto an earthly monarchy, leaving its power intact. Profanation, however, neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use. Both are political operations: the first guarantees the exercise of power by carrying it back to a sacred model; the second deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized.<sup>190</sup>

In this short passage, Agamben condenses the strategy of his philosophy concerning secularization, namely that the ultimate aim is the *profanation* of products of secularization. Throughout his major *Homo Sacer* project Agamben attempts to show how structures and operations of sacrifice and sacral exclusion are still at work in secular politics and law. The same forces that were at work in Roman law, in the ban of the *homo sacer*, in God's economical government of the world in Christian theology, in liturgical doxology, are supposedly still operative in contemporary apparatuses of sovereign power, economy, government, law. This project is thus in a sense a radical extension of Schmitt's original secularization thesis, but in service of a radically different aim. While Schmitt's strategy was simply to point out theological remnants and show how they continue to operate in secular political theory, Agamben goes a step further and wants to 'neutralize' their operativity through profanation. Profanation strips the sacred – i.e. what was separated from normal use, from the law, from human community and interaction – of its aura and returns it to common use. By showing the parallel sacral structures of Western theology and politics, and by showing how the one can be profaned (or rendered inoperative), Agamben dismantles them both. That is at least the idea. How Agamben proceeds in his profanation campaign is not of our present concern, but it should be noted that it directly couples

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<sup>188</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, transl. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

to his understanding of inoperativity and messianism as well.<sup>191</sup> To profane the theological tradition does not mean to confront it from the outside, to fight it from an explicitly atheistic or humanistic position: it means to undo it *theologically*, i.e. from the inside, on its own terms, using its own conceptual reservoir. That is the reason for Agamben's concern with messianism. Western theology can be fought on its own terms, because of the messianic kernel contained in Christianity, in particular (but not exclusively) the Christianity of Paul.

Secularization is the operation that connects the secular to the theological (and vice versa), and thus effects the transition between the respective fields of secular theory (what traditionally is thought to concern the temporal, worldly and thus *profane*) and the theological (what traditionally is thought to concern the religious, divine and thus *sacred*). As we saw in chapter one, this distinction is itself a product of Christianity, and was subsequently passed on to modernity. The coupling of secular-political-profane as against theological-religious-sacred is a Western constellation that, according to Agamben, cannot and ought not to be sustained. The distinction secular/theological does not concern the division of profane/sacred, because the latter pair *pertains to both poles* of the former. Agamben stresses that the 'sacrificial machine', which is put into effect by the conceptual distinction profane/sacred, is operative in both regimes of what we in the West consider as the 'secular' and the 'religious'. Correctly understood, the division secular and religious is itself both surface effect and enabling factor of the underlying sacrificial structure of Western political ontology. That is because the separation itself legitimizes secular power, by simultaneously distancing itself from religious authority, but still drawing on the theological model of sacred divine power to guarantee its own efficacy. A hermeneutic of secularization can reveal it, but cannot make it undone. This explains why Agamben is in the last instance so dismissive of the term secularization. Secularization, according to Agamben's ultimate intentions, is insufficient to address the political task of uncoupling human practice from the model of sacrifice. The case of Schmitt shows that secularization can even function to reaffirm the same model. So the operation of secularization and the related dichotomy of secular/religious are still too much part of the Western tradition, and must be subjected to the final operation of profanation. In this sense, it is incomprehensible why Agamben, as I already noted in passing at the beginning of this chapter, would relate secularization to the fields of the sacred and profane, whereas the whole point is that the fields of secular and religious (or theological) *do not* correspond to the fields of sacred and profane.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Cf. Agamben, *The Time that Remains*; Agamben, *Profanations*, 79.

<sup>192</sup> See page 50.

In a way Agamben's strategy goes back not only to Benjamin but to Marx, with a peculiar twist. As we saw in chapter one, Marx brings in against Feuerbach's program of the *Verweltlichung* of philosophy that the emancipation from theology and religion is only the first part of a critical philosophy. The critique of religion is the prerequisite of all critique, but it must now move on to secular forms of alienation.<sup>193</sup> Agamben would agree, but not regarding the critique of religion having been completed. To adequately critique the secular present, one must once again return to the critique of religion. Thus, in a perfect reversal of Marx, Agamben would submit that the critique of *earth* turns into the critique of *heaven*, the critique of *law* into the critique of *religion*, and the critique of *politics* into the critique of *theology*.<sup>194</sup>

## Conclusions

Now that our analysis of Agamben's understanding of secularization has come to a close, we should first of all recognize that it comprises two levels. Agamben develops a *general* theory of secularization as a signature, which proposes that it is a strategic operator that enables one to refer an element to a new field of use – i.e. to move an element between the different discursive spheres of the secular and religious. A hermeneutic of secularization is not a neutral-objective description of historical fact, but a type of reading that performs a strategic function. Now what particular strategic operation is carried out differs for the various authors, and the determination of what strategy Agamben himself subscribes to, corresponds to the second, *particular* level of Agamben's understanding of secularization. I explored this second level to some extent, but in the context of the present investigation this particular level is less important than the first.

Many questions remain concerning the meaning of the signature, especially regarding its relation to the paradigm, to which Agamben devotes the first chapter of *The Signature of All Things*, but which he does not explicitly relate to the signature. Their interrelation seems to me a crucial dimension not only of Agamben's philosophical methodology but his understanding of secularization as well. That is because according to Agamben the paradigm functions according to a logic of *analogy*.<sup>195</sup> And as we saw at the end of the previous chapter, the analogy is a constitutive factor for (some) operations of secularization, and also seems closely related to how Agamben perceives correspondences between secular and theological elements. It thus makes

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<sup>193</sup> "Für Deutschland ist die Kritik der Religion im wesentlichen beendet, und die Kritik der Religion ist die Voraussetzung aller Kritik." Marx, "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie: Einleitung," 378.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 379. See page 22.

<sup>195</sup> Agamben, *Signature of All Things*, 19-21; 31.

sense to understand secularization through the lens of analogy, and in the context of Agamben's philosophy that would mean to include a comprehensive account of his theory of the paradigm. However, I cannot plunge that deep in Agamben's philosophy here, as we only try to develop a general account of the hermeneutics of secularization. I believe now we have got sufficient grasp of Agamben's conception of secularization as a signature in order to develop our own thoughts, and it is now time to do that.

## Chapter 4

### Toward a Hermeneutics of Secularization

It is time to connect some dots. What have we learned from the genealogy of the secularization concept and from Blumenberg's and Agamben's understanding of its meaning? And more importantly, do we have sufficient grasp of the term to draw the contours of a hermeneutics of secularization, and possibly to even make some way inland as to map its valid operation?

In the first chapter we were overwhelmed by a chaotic manifold of different interpretations and applications of the term secularization, but we also recognized a basic structure underlying the field of possible meanings. Secularization always requires a *terminus ad quem* and *terminus a quo* and hence an underlying dichotomy that can be formed by three conceptual pairs: the original one is the patristic distinction secular/spiritual (or secular/divine, secular/eternal, also closely related to the distinction *Diesseits/Jenseits*). Through the development of the term *Verweltlichung* in the German field, this first basic conceptual constellation has for the most part stamped the contemporary meaning of the interpretative concept of secularization. The second constellation – the canonical distinction secular/regular – is taken up by Agamben but has not really influenced the concept's further development. The third – the juridico-political terminology of secular/ecclesiastical or secular/religious (in the institutional sense) – has played important roles in nineteenth-century secularization debates and still informs the current political meaning of the secular, but, *pace* Lübke and Blumenberg, neither seems to have had a significant influence on the hermeneutic use of secularization. As a consequence, most hermeneutic employments of secularization, by virtue of pertaining to the first constellation, refer to the transition from the field of the divine, the spiritual, knowledge of the divine (*viz.* theology) and the transcendent, to the field of man's temporal existence, of profane history and thought (*viz.* philosophy, political theory), of the immanent.

#### Strategic functions of secularization

However, this first constellation of secularization (formed by the dichotomy secular/spiritual) still opens a wide field of different options, regarding the question *what* exactly 'becomes worldly', and most importantly *how*: the spiritual can degrade itself by becoming more worldly; the spiritual can realize itself in the world and reconcile the two spheres; the spiritual can secretly sustain itself by taking on a worldly form; or the world itself can become more worldly, in the sense of mutual detachment

of the secular and spiritual, or rather in the sense that the secular pole expands until it completely swallows up the other pole.

This list in all probability does not cover all types, and one could perhaps make the effort to make an exhaustive list of all logically possible forms of secularization that fit this conceptual topology. But I believe the important thing is not to enumerate the different forms in which secularization has been or could be used, but to understand *that* secularization can mean many different and contradictory things, and that it is useless to try to capture them all under one umbrella that would constitute *the one* fundamental meaning of secularization. Not because as with all concepts the precise meaning differs according to the context and changes over time. But because secularization is not a regular concept. Or better yet, it is not a neutral-objective concept that carries within itself a definable semantic content, that identifies a well-defined property in a given object. On this I side with Agamben, who perceives secularization as a signature and not a concept. But this view is also, to a certain extent, in agreement with Lübke's claim that it is part of the 'politics of ideas', and with Blumenberg's intuition that secularization contains a 'latent ideological element'. That is to say, the employment of secularization is never a statement of fact that can be objectively verified once and for all. Secularization is an *operator*, performing a *function* in discourse, producing an *effect*. To use secularization is therefore a particular *reading strategy*.

That secularization should ultimately not be taken to identify in an objective way whether a supposed secular object is 'actually' religious or theological, is immediately clear when we realize that the concept of the 'secular' (or 'spiritual') is itself not an objective given that means the same to all. It is a historically, culturally and ideologically colored concept. It is not just that the dichotomy of secular/spiritual mainly operates in the Western framework. Because even within the Western framework, what objects one subsumes under either category is itself not given, but is the result of a particular strategic operation. The operation of secularization can therefore only proceed on the presupposition of a certain level of agreement regarding what we typically understand as secular and what as spiritual or theological. In some cases, the agreement breaks down. For example, do we consider a comprehensive account of the meaning of history to be an inherently religious and theological viewpoint? Or can it also be secular? This issue is precisely what is at stake in the debate over whether the Marxist conception of history is a secularization of Christianity. Do we consider modern political theory to be inherently secular? Or can we also understand it as a theological or sacral enterprise? This is what underlies the controversial issue of political theology. It is impossible to draw a concrete line between secular and spiritual, without thereby performing an ideological, or to use a

better word, *strategic* maneuver. And what is implied by this strategic positioning is always a particular understanding of the relation between the two domains of secular and spiritual. This can be enmity, mutual support, careful balance, utmost indifference, territorial conflict etc. Hence every use of secularization corresponds to an implicit or explicit strategic position, regarding what *ought* to be secular and religious, and how they *ought* to relate. This explains why we encounter such an irreducible variety of usages of secularization.

In this connection we discern where Blumenberg is incorrect, namely that he only sees *one single* strategy or ideology at work in secularization discourse (namely the identification of illegitimate appropriation of the religious by the secular), whereas they can be many. In opposition to Lübke's understanding of *Ideenpolitik*, we should note that the operation of a hermeneutic of secularization cannot simply be reduced to the ideological convictions of the author that happened to employ it. While one may certainly interpret Weber's *Protestant Ethic* in light of his conviction of the irreversible disenchantment of the world, his hermeneutic claims concerning the spirit of capitalism and Puritanism should be taken seriously on their own. And while Schmitt's *Political Theology* is not accidentally the product of a conservative Catholic that resisted the detheologization connected to liberalism, one should not simply brush aside his claim of the secularization of theological concepts in modern political theory because one does not agree with his ideology.

A similar provision applies to Blumenberg's argument: the fact that secularization always contains a 'latent ideological element' (or a strategy) is not *eo ipso* a rebuttal of the secularization claim made. To strategically connect a secular phenomenon to the religious and to put it to certain use, even though it cannot claim objective validity on the basis of historical 'causality' or 'substantial continuity' (doubtful anyway), is not thereby at once purely subjective and of the order of fanciful opinion. As Hans-Georg Gadamer has famously argued in *Truth and Method*, to hermeneutic truth can and does not apply the criterion of objective validity.<sup>196</sup> Nevertheless, in analyzing or employing a hermeneutic of secularization, it is of great importance to carefully consider the particular strategic function it carries out. Not to dismiss it on the basis of its ideological and supposedly non-scientific claims, but to actually understand what happens and what is at stake in the operation. This is the only way to avoid misunderstanding and confusion between all different applications of the term. However, this is not all we can say about the operation of secularization. While secularization can refer to many different strategic operations, they still have much in

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<sup>196</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

common, and on this basis we can and will continue to speak of 'the' operation of secularization. How can we understand what actually *happens* in this operation, on what *conditions* may one employ it, and what *results* can it bring?

### Comparing Blumenberg and Agamben

In the previous two chapters we spent considerable time reconstructing and assessing the accounts that Blumenberg and Agamben offer regarding the meaning and application of secularization. It is possible to bring together Blumenberg's and Agamben's understanding of secularization? These accounts may seem quite heterogeneous, and it is unclear on first sight how we can think of the claims of the one from the perspective of the other. Agamben's is clearly more sophisticated, as he supports it with a comprehensive account of the signature and a whole new theory of philosophical archaeology and language. But Blumenberg's account has also provided us with useful insights, and we can try to connect his functionalistic and linguistic understanding of secularization with Agamben's idea of the strategic operation carried out by the signature of secularization.

The valid criticism of Blumenberg on the substantialistic understanding of secularization seems to leave us two alternative perspectives on the phenomenon of secularization that on first sight appear irreducibly distinct. On the one hand, we can interpret transformations from Christendom to secular modernity as *functional reoccupations*, filling vacant old needs with new concepts and ideas. Secularization (against Blumenberg's wish we keep the term) in this sense points to continuities of theological and religious needs in secular worldviews. On the other hand, Blumenberg tells us we can heed continuities and relations between religious and secular fields on the level of discourse. These linguistic phenomena should be understood as *rhetorical strategies* that put the hybridization of secular and religious terminology to functional use. Secularization is then a sign not of the *substantial* presence of theology in secular discourse, but only of a *metaphorical* or *analogical* presence, or in other words making use of a 'dualistic typology of situations'.<sup>197</sup> We saw that it makes sense to broaden Blumenberg's own understanding of analogy – as merely concerning the linguistic and rhetorical *form* as distinct from discursive *content* – and to perceive it in terms of the establishment of effective correspondences that gives a lasting orientation to the discursive meaning.

It is not directly clear how these two approaches (the rhetorical/linguistic and the functionalistic one) can be reconciled, let alone be combined with Agamben's account. But I believe that Agamben's broad framework precisely enables to encompass and

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<sup>197</sup> Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 92.

make sense of them both. The key is precisely the term 'function' or 'use'. In both Blumenberg's theory of functional reoccupation and of rhetorical strategy, the ideas of function and use are central. And Agamben's theory of the signature is precisely that it is an operator that performs a strategic *function* and places an element within a particular field of *use*. Let me elaborate.

### **Secularization and analogy**

In the field of what Blumenberg identifies as rhetorical or linguistic secularization, we deal for the most part with the discursive presence of metaphor and analogy. The author of an apparently secular text draws on religious or theological discourse, bracketing its usual associative field and putting religious structures and elements to new *use*. The analogy and metaphor thus perform a strategic function in discourse. How can we analyze this function? I proceed by looking at the metaphor and analogy separately. Regarding the specific operation of the *metaphor*, we encounter a particular semantic element being carried over to a new context. Examples of religious metaphors are all too familiar, from calling a lush place 'paradise', or a football star or politician the 'messiah', to denouncing a particularly bad person as the 'devil' or 'Antichrist'. It is safe to say that most of these metaphors are trivial and inconsequential appropriations of religious language that can hardly be called 'secularizations'. Some, however, do hint at greater significance of the religious metaphoric: the 'sacredness' of the American flag, the 'divine creativity' of an artistic genius, Hobbes' depiction of the state as 'Leviathan' and 'mortal god', Comte's 'positivist church' and 'religion of humanity'. The use of metaphor has more force here and the religious origin acquires more significance, because it relates the secular object in its *essence* to something from the religious field. The religious metaphor, correctly understood, is here not a mere rhetorical supplement to the proper secular meaning of the discourse. By carrying over a semantic element from the religious to the secular field, it essentially (though still partly) determines the discursive content. Despite Blumenberg's own understanding of this operation that it only concerns the (religious) word that acquires a totally new meaning (namely completely secular), and hence that a continuity in the signifier runs parallel to a discontinuity in the signified, we must realize that no such absolute distinction between signifier and signified is ever possible. A metaphor is never just a matter of words. The relation it *eo ipso* establishes between the actual (secular) discourse and the theological field is not reducible to either the specific linguistic element that constitutes the bridge between them, or to the circumscribed rhetorical intention of the author.

Let's look more closely at one of Blumenberg's examples, the continual lending back and forth of erotic and religious elements between lyric poetry, chivalric romance on

the one hand and theological, biblical, mystic discourse on the other hand during the Middle Ages and early modernity.<sup>198</sup> Blumenberg dismisses these operations as 'artistic devices', but it is impossible to sustain that one can neatly separate their literary or mystic 'content' from these artistic 'forms'. In fact, the meaning and cultural efficacy of these respective discourses are greatly influenced by the mutual influence and reinforcement of themes of divine and courtly love, the desire of God and of a noble woman, and by derivation this interconnection marked the general Western conception of love. In this light it becomes impossible to categorize the one discourse as clearly secular and the other as clearly religious, as the interaction between these fields provides their thrust. It is this element of secularization that is crucial to understand the actual development of the Western idea of love. The operation of secularization that is carried out in the 'rhetorical' transfer of meaning between the secular and religious here impresses an unmistakable and efficacious seal on the whole discourse of love. The religious metaphor carries out an essential *function* that relates to the inner efficacy of the secular discourse, and vice versa. However, this function is (at least analytically) distinct from the author's rhetorical intention, and can only be retrospectively determined. This example also shows that it is quite insufficient to focus on one religious metaphor in a specific text, as one cannot derive from this fortuitous linguistic presence alone whether there is a deeper interaction between the religious and poetical discourse. Whether the discourse can be said to 'secularize' something is hence difficult to determine on the basis of a metaphor alone. It rather concerns the particular effective relation that is established between the secular and religious, of which a metaphor can be a sign but which it cannot fully determine by itself. A more compelling approach to linguistic secularization is based on the operation of *analogy*.

Compared to the rhetorical figure of the metaphor, the analogy makes more clear that it is not a mere embellishment of speech distinct from the actual content. And neither can it be as easily dismissed as an opportunistic appropriation of something from the religious field for rhetorical purposes. Because the analogy must not only be of interest to whoever uses it, it must be 'there' in the first place. To work at all, the analogy ought to make sense, and therefore requires the presence of a structural similarity. That one can draw an analogy is *eo ipso* a sign of an existent relation of correspondence, sometimes superficial but possibly quite profound. The analogy is not a purely subjective reality, nor an arbitrary rhetorical supplement, but an existent relation of correspondence that in a certain sense is 'there' independent of the author's intention. So when one claims that secularization signifies the presence of an analogy (or a 'dualistic typology'), this is in fact a claim with far-reaching consequences. Because this

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 104. See page 42.

cannot merely designate a contingent use of a rhetorical figure from which one can abstract the real content. It means that one encounters an effective analogical relation, a productive similarity between the secular content and some religious element. And this similarity, regardless of whether it fully corresponds to the author's intention or is even consciously realized as such, can have drastic effects for the meaning and overall force and significance of the discourse. That is to say, the analogy may very well be an important factor determining the *content* and not just the *form*. To draw, in a self-consciously secular discourse, an analogy with something religious, is not irrelevant for the discourse's overall meaning, and may in the end wind up inherently tying the intended secular content to the religious *analogon*.

To be sure, the analogy from this perspective still functions as a strategic operation in discourse. However, and this is the crux that allows to move beyond Blumenberg, the strategic function it carries out does not coincide with the rhetorical function intended by the author and for whatever immediate purposes. Of course, the analogy *is* used by the author according to a circumscribed intention, and this should certainly be taken into account, but the establishment of the analogical relation has itself an effect on the whole discourse that cannot be foreseen. The presence of a religious analogy in a secular discourse might bring about the orientation of the interpretation to the religious analogical model. The use of an analogy can therefore have drastic consequences for the meaning and *efficacy* of a whole discourse, and can be quite different from the intention with which an author made use of it. And this historical efficacy, deriving from a particular interrelation of the secular and religious, is what secularization points to.

This can be clarified by looking at the example of Schmitt's use of secularization in the context of the relation between theology and modern political theory. More fitting than calling Schmitt's political theology a 'metaphorical theology' (as does Blumenberg<sup>199</sup>), would be to call it an *analogical* theology. Schmitt elaborates that the legal theorists of modernity could draw on the analogical model of divine sovereignty to develop their own theory of the sovereignty of the monarch (or later of the people). So to perceive Schmitt's use of secularization as the exposure of an analogical theology would be quite in agreement with Schmitt's own understanding. However, it would be mistaken to dismiss the presence of this analogical model as an opportunistic rhetorical reference to theology that is distinct from the 'proper' meaning of the legal discourse. The theological modeling of political theory, and the analogy that can be drawn between the two conceptual systems of theology and law, has crucial implications for the whole modern edifice of legal and political theory. The modern theory of sovereignty

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 101. See page 43.

becomes *inherently* and *inextricably* bound to the analogical model of divine sovereignty, and this analogical relation becomes essential for the overall meaning and force of modern political discourse.

But this example also shows something else. The analogy between legal theory and theology that Schmitt talks about is not often explicitly used as a rhetorical figure in the legal discourse itself. So what is the status of this analogy if it is not present in those original texts? One could say that the legal discourse of sovereignty, even if it did not deliberately or consciously draw on theology, could acquire its *efficacy* in the modern West precisely because of the analogical theological framework that was ingrained in the conceptual imaginary of Western consciousness. That is to say, the political framework corresponded to the ontological framework that determined the way people were used to conceive of *order* – both political and cosmic.<sup>200</sup> The analogy therefore need not be explicitly drawn by the author herself. That the analogical relation is historically effective can also be established in retrospect. The latter is clear in the example of Schmitt: he does not so much point to the deliberate rhetorical employment of theological analogy in modern legal discourse; he establishes the analogy himself and makes it convincing. We are reminded of Agamben's admonition that reading signatures often comes down to writing them, that recognition is indistinguishable from institution. The question is not so much who or what is the author, cause or origin of secularization; the question is whether it is productive and meaningful to recognize it as such.

We can put these thoughts in larger perspective to fully understand what is at stake here. The significance of analogies between politics and theology is actually not discovered by Schmitt, and is not restricted to modern political conceptuality. The analogy between political and cosmic order, between political ruler and the divine is fundamental for the 'political theologies' of premodern civilizations.<sup>201</sup> In general, before the onset of modern science, the analogy was not considered a rhetorical device, but a fundamental *ontological* structure. Wolfgang Hübener observes that Schmitt's claims remind of the *analogia proportionalitatis* (and the related *analogia entis*) that play such a big role in Western thought from Aristotle through Thomas Aquinas and

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<sup>200</sup> This is presumably what Schmitt meant with his 'sociology of concepts', that the conceptual edifice in a particular field (e.g. law) of a certain epoch, if it is to be effective, must correspond to the ontological framework, the fundamental way in which this historical epoch is able to think of the world. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 42.

<sup>201</sup> Cf. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: an Introduction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

Thomas Cajetan to Renaissance thought.<sup>202</sup> To reveal an analogy would accordingly be to make a claim regarding the structure of being, e.g. showing how the political order, the law and ruler relate to God and the divine order. Although the ontological claim pertaining to the analogy is mostly lost on the modern mind, and appears to us as a mere rhetorical device, it is highly doubtful whether the operation, meaning and effect of the analogy can be sufficiently understood in this modern, reductive sense. Even in a modern scientific worldview that does not believe in 'natural correspondences', the mind's capacity to draw analogies and to spot structural similarities remains indispensable for human understanding, if also somewhat mysterious. This is not the place to develop a theory of the analogy as such, and what ontological and epistemological characteristics pertain to it.<sup>203</sup> But in the context of secularization, we should recognize the undeniable reality of analogy (whether 'naturally' residing in things or only existing for the human mind does not make much of a difference), beyond a merely linguistic or rhetorical artifact. We should therefore allow, at least in principle, for the incessant possibility and significance of similarities between secular and religious structures or elements.<sup>204</sup> To call these analogies forms of 'linguistic secularization' is actually ill-suited to convey their reality beyond being rhetorical devices, even though it remains true that the operation takes place on the level of discourse.

But in any case, if one understands secularization as the recognition of these analogies, it should be added that it concerns *effective* analogies. So while one criterion for the analysis of secularization is obviously the degree of similarity – as not all analogies are profound, some only point to external, contingent likeness – another criterion is the degree of efficacy. What this means we will have to develop in more detail.

The analogy is a strategic operator. That means that it carries out a function to a certain effect. But perhaps, just like we saw for the majority of religious metaphors, perhaps an analogy that appears to carry out an operation of secularization actually remains *idle*. It might indeed be an inconsequential analogy that does not relate to the inner efficacy of

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<sup>202</sup> Wolfgang Hübener, "Carl Schmitt und Hans Blumenberg oder über Kette und Schuß in der historischen Textur der Moderne," in *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie I: Der Fürst dieser Welt. Carl Schmitt und die Folgen*, ed. Jacob Taubes (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink / Ferdinand Schöningh, 1985).

<sup>203</sup> For a theory of analogy Agamben refers to Enzo Melandri's 1968 study *Il Linea e il Circolo*, which unfortunately has not been translated.

<sup>204</sup> In this sense 'political theology' can never be abolished. There always remains the possibility to infer *per analogiam* the correct political order or desirable praxis from a theological model. Peter Koslowski, "Politischer Monotheismus oder Trinitätslehre," in *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie I: Der Fürst dieser Welt. Carl Schmitt und die Folgen*, ed. Jacob Taubes (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink / Ferdinand Schöningh, 1985), 34ff.

the discourse. It is the reader's task to interpret and decide, by investigating the efficacy of an operation of secularization. That is to say, to determine whether the established connection between the religious and secular gives a lasting orientation to the object's signification. To be sure, this is not the signification intended by the author. It is the signification and effect that the discourse has historically acquired and which can be recognized in the present. A hermeneutic of secularization pays attention to the efficacy that the legal discourse of sovereignty could acquire in the modern West precisely because of the relation with the existing theological framework, or to the Western conception of love in light of the efficacious interrelation of medieval lyric and mystic discourse. Secularization, if understood as the functional establishment (or recognition, which is to say the same) of analogy between the secular and the religious or theological sphere, must be able to simultaneously enact and reveal the significance that the object has acquired because of this structural similarity. I believe no further objective criteria can be given for the operation of analogy in the context of secularization: it must be 'seen', it must 'make sense', it must be 'productive'. But whether that is the case can only be left to the observer in the particular instance.

To summarize our account so far, secularization hermeneutics studies the whole complex historical operation in which a particular analogical relation between the religious and secular is established, which determines the meaning and efficacy of a specific discursive object. This account closely aligns with Agamben's account of the signature of secularization. In fact, it makes sense to conceive of his account through the lens of analogy. The signature of secularization is, according to Agamben, a strategic operator that enables one to refer an element to a new field of use, e.g. place a theological concept in the discursive field of political theory. This functional operation is precisely what is carried out in analogy – only then with the additional condition that it involves similarity. Even though similarity is not explicitly mentioned by Agamben, I think it is safe to say that a condition for referring an element to a new field of use is indeed a certain similarity – otherwise it is not clear how this relation could make sense.

### **Secularization and functional reoccupation**

The other approach that Blumenberg bequeathed us is secularization as *functional reoccupation*. How can we understand this according to the framework we have developed thus far? As Blumenberg underlined, there is no question here of a substantial relation between the (secular) object *in itself* and the religious field. The object is not 'appropriated' from the religious domain; it cannot even be said to be structurally similar to a particular theological object. The object (say, the idea of progress) rather takes on a religious *function* which it originally did not have (e.g. the

function of providing an overarching meaning of history, or to address the need for salvation). There is hence no obvious, directly visible relation between the secular and religious field, such as a continuity in words used or an analogy. The relation between the secular and religious is not a matter of manifest elements, but implicit *functions*. Compared to linguistic forms of secularization discussed above, in this case it is more evident that there is no conscious instigator of the relation between the religious and secular (which as we saw was eventually also true for linguistic secularization). The operation of secularization is instead only made visible in retrospect, by the interpreter. But that is not to say that interpretation is pure projection. As Blumenberg himself conclusively showed, various elements of modernity can with regard to their historical appearance and influence be productively understood in light of their performing a similar function as previous religious or theological elements.

Now Blumenberg would of course say that the functional reoccupation implies an *overextension* of the secular object in assigning a theological function which it cannot possibly fulfill.<sup>205</sup> But who decides what is an overextension and what not? It is not a given what for a particular object would count as its 'proper' secular function versus an overextended religious function. And more importantly, why separate the original idea from its acquired function at all, if what matters to us is precisely the efficacy of an idea in its dissemination in the wider discourse, which is to say the function it carries out in the overall sense-making edifice of a historical epoch? Indeed, Agamben's account is more useful on this point: historical interpretation, and secularization hermeneutics by implication, is not a matter of unearthing the 'original' element from beneath the layer of later acquired functions and reinterpretations, but precisely the analysis of the composition of this layer: the positioning of the element within an epoch's 'functional economy of problems' that Blumenberg talks about, and its historical efficacy within the formation of Western thought. Hence it is nonsensical to speak of 'authentic modern thought', which would be formed by secular conceptuality when it would take off the functional cloak of overbearing theological questions. Because one cannot simply assume that a particular object has an original and authentic meaning of itself, which is then covered by an inauthentic function that nonetheless does not alter its core meaning. Can one regarding an idea even separate substance from function at all? I do not think so. I think it is precisely the *function* that the object acquires in a historical constellation which forms its meaning. If modern conceptuality would indeed shed the functional cloak of overbearing theological functions, this, if anything, would only reveal a new functional cloak that is always already somehow related to the former cloak. So Blumenberg may very well be correct in his claim that a modern concept like 'progress' is *originally* unrelated to theology, but

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<sup>205</sup> See page 40.

this is completely beside the point. Hermeneutics of secularization is relatively unconcerned with the historical origins of an object. The crux of the matter is that the secular object *becomes* related to the religious field, in a manner that we still have to investigate.

Let's first see how all this relates to secularization. What is at stake in Blumenberg's functional reoccupation is that within the conceptual framework of an epoch a secular element comes to perform a function analogue to the one carried out by a theological element. But this is precisely, in somewhat different terminology, what secularization points to. As we saw above, secularization is the establishment and recognition of a functional relation between the secular and the religious or theological field. The establishment of this relation, if it is indeed a *functional* one – viz. an operation that literally 'makes sense' – must reveal something of the force, meaning, significance and therefore *function* that the object has acquired in wider discourse because of the interaction with the religious field.

Take an example of Blumenberg again: modern philosophy of history in its relation to theology of history. What does secularization mean here? It should be clear by now that this does *not* mean a continuity in substance, for the idea of progress as it emerged from the scientific or aesthetic enterprise of early modernity is not identical or even structurally similar to the theological conception of salvation history.<sup>206</sup> Instead, it is to draw the relation between the secular idea of progress and the theological conception of history with an eye to the significance that the idea of progress *acquired* and the *function it continues to perform* in the modern imaginary. The meaning of secularization here is not that modern philosophy of history appropriated the content of theology of history and moved its elements from the transcendent plane to secular history. It is that modern philosophy of history and its particular elements (progress, revolution, emancipation etc.) are interpreted according to the essential relation they formed with the theological account, namely regarding the function and significance they acquired in Western culture or in the collective consciousness *because* of that relation. On the basis of elaborate interpretation, this relation between the traditional theological account of history and the various modern philosophical accounts can be further characterized in concrete terms as antagonism, competition, defiance or rebellion – or perhaps affirmation, concretization, improvement. But a relation anyway. So even if the relation was a 'negative' one, and hence the opposite of a positive continuation, the law of dialectics tells us that this relation with theology of history still determined the essential meaning and form taken on by philosophy of history.

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<sup>206</sup> See page 39.

But in what way can we then speak of secularization? What precisely is to be called a 'secularization' in this case? With reference to the terminology of chapter two we can say that the functional complex of philosophy of history, composed of the functional position and the element that occupies this position – in other words the economy of the need and its fulfillment, problem and answer – stands in an essential and efficacious relation to the similar functional complex of theological *Heilsgeschichte*, whereby the former takes place on the secular, intra-historical plane and the latter on the spiritual, transcendent plane. Secularization here reveals that the efficacy and function of the secular idea of progress – and hence, to repeat, not its original meaning, whatever that may be, but the function it has gradually come to assume according to the contemporary interpreter – is unmistakably marked by the position it takes up in answering the need for the meaning of history and historical salvation, which in the West can only be understood with respect to the theological tradition. In this sense, and in this sense only, can the functional complex of philosophy of history be regarded as a secularization of Christian theology.

However, there remains the risk that we once again understand secularization as a historical relation of causality. But the transposition enacted by secularization can only signify an operation that strategically relates the two complexes pertaining to the theological and secular domain, on the basis of similarity and for the purpose of interpretative understanding, not on the basis of temporal or substantial continuity directed at causal explanation. The employment of a hermeneutic of secularization allows one to interpret the long-term effective operation in Western history of a particular view on history, in reference to the theological paradigm. It is to interpret what significance and form secular philosophy of history has taken on, because of a particular interconnection between the religious and secular sphere. The precise type of interaction between these fields can only be made concrete by thorough historical interpretation, and must hence remain abstract and vague here. In any case, in this connection Blumenberg's account of functional reoccupation appears too narrow, because it only employs the model of a diachronic change of guard where philosophy of history substitutes for theology of history. However, the relation might also be understood in terms of synchronic opposition and competition.

The mindful reader has perhaps already observed the reappearance within this second approach of the terms 'similarity' and 'analogy'. This should actually not surprise us, since the analogy, according to the account above, is precisely a relation of functional similarity between different fields that determines the meaning and efficacy that a specific discursive object acquires. The approaches of linguistic secularization and functionalistic secularization are thus in fact not so fundamentally distinct. Both boil down to the recognition of effective analogical relations between the religious and

secular sphere. Although at first sight the approach of linguistic secularization focused more on visible similarities on the level of discourse, and the functionalistic approach more on invisible similarities on the level of historico-cultural function, we realized that the first approach must also account for *implicit* analogies and how these put into force the historical significance and function of a discursive element. What we initially called linguistic secularization is hence very close or even identical to what we discussed regarding functional secularization. We can treat them as one, if at least we will now succeed in formulating a sufficiently comprehensive theory of the hermeneutic meaning and use of secularization.

### **The operation of secularization in concise terms**

We have now advanced inland and reached sufficient height that we can look down at the panorama that has so far unfolded before our eyes. I will start by putting our theoretical insights in the following concise proposition. *Secularization is the strategic operation of an effective analogical relation between the secular and religious discursive domain, for the hermeneutic purpose of interpreting the meaning and function of a discursive object.* I will now unpack this dense statement.

1. Secularization is first of all a hermeneutic strategy, a manner of reading, a performative operation that aims at understanding. It is therefore opposed to objective identification and classification, which would be concerned with determining whether an apparently secular object is 'actually' religious (at its core, in its origin). It is also unconcerned with relations of causality, and historical explanations on this basis.
2. The operation performed by secularization – by way of a transfer or transposition (a *metaphora*) between *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* – effects a relation between the domains of the religious (or spiritual, theological, transcendent) and the secular. These domains are discursive fields of use, which means that they should not be taken as well-defined, fixed areas that are objectively given in reality, and which can claim certain elements as their property. They are rather constituted in discursive praxis, and continually shift according to historical, cultural, ideological constellations. Moreover, these domains are not independent, but always already interacting and mutually determining. And the purpose of secularization is to reveal and interpret these interactions.
3. To effect the relation simultaneously means to *establish* and to *recognize* it. These two cannot be easily separated in the operation of secularization, because it happens somewhere between the historical object and the contemporary interpreter. That is to say, the relation is not necessarily visibly present in the

original object, nor consciously intended; yet on the other hand it cannot be fanciful projection by the observer. A better way to conceive of it is that the particular relation between secular and religious is not instituted at one given moment, but becomes efficacious because of the meaning, significance and form that the object gradually and historically has acquired because of that relation. And this is precisely what the interpreter can recognize in retrospect, by making this relation explicit herself.

4. Secularization effects an *analogical* relation. This implies a certain similarity between the secular and religious fields, which does not necessarily require explicit definition as to the nature and extent of the similarity. Without similarity, it would make no sense to link these domains. The analogy should not be understood here as a mere rhetorical artifact, but requires a return to the premodern ontological conception of analogy, namely to the idea that correspondences provide the key to unlocking the essence and meaning of things.
5. It concerns a *functional* or *effective* relation. From a hermeneutic perspective, it ought to reveal the efficacy, function and meaning of the discursive object in light of this relation. The operation of secularization, the analogical relation it establishes between the religious and secular domains, must allow for the object's *meaningful* interpretation, i.e. shedding light on its essential meaning, not merely some external, insignificant aspect. The efficacy, function and meaning it reveals on the basis of the analogical relation is not inherent to the object itself, nor resides in some original intention. It specifically refers to how it became used, the meaning it has acquired in the historical process; particularly its efficacy in the overall discourse that forms the worldview, conceptual edifice, cultural framework or structure of consciousness of an epoch.
6. The hermeneutic operation has a strategic dimension. The interpretation that depends on a particular relation between the secular and religious can be used for many different strategic purposes. The main reason underlying this strategic aspect of secularization is that the nature of the relation between the religious and the secular is itself highly controversial and prone to ideological decisions. A relation of secularization can be perceived through different lenses – the worldly corruption of the religious, the clandestine persistence of religious alienation in the secular and so forth. However, a rigorous and meaningful operation of secularization cannot be simply reduced to this ideological position of the interpretative subject. It is rather the case that the subject's position allows the recognition of secularization and to investigate and interpret it.

## Ideological substratum

As we have now frequently seen, secularization is capable of being evaluated and strategically employed in various ways. But I want to add one further note concerning the ideological or strategic dimension of secularization. All different strategic applications of secularization share a common ideological dimension: that of the originally *Christian-theological*, but deriving from that the typically *Western* distinction between secular and divine, temporal and eternal, immanent and transcendent. To use the term secularization, or to think according to the basic conceptual schema it implies, is to find oneself within this Western worldview, and perhaps even within an essentially theological framework. To identify something as 'secular' is *eo ipso* to position it in the polar field of secular/religious, and therefore to bring it *in relation* to the religious. Almost by necessity this lead to transitions and interactions between these polarities. In particular, the polar schema enables secularization; not only the concept itself but also the effective relations that we now understand by it. The foundational dichotomy entails that the secular has always already established itself in relation to what it is not, thereby opening the way to various operations of interaction and transition between them. The secular inevitably defines itself in opposition to the religious, spiritual or divine – in a relation of enmity and hostile resistance, in mutual support, peaceful coexistence, rivalry or competition and so forth. The basic dialectical insight here is that the secular is never *unrelated* to the religious. As Blumenberg notes: "There was no 'worldliness' before there was the opposite of 'unworldliness'."<sup>207</sup> We have seen that Blumenberg contrasts 'secularization' [*Verweltlichung*] with 'the becoming of the secular world' [*Weltwerdung*]; the first would be the transformation of something previously existing, the second the "crystallization of a hitherto unknown reality" in opposition to the dominance of the otherworldly.<sup>208</sup> But we now realize that the fact of the becoming of the secular world entails the fact of a dialectical relation with the non-secular, and as a *necessary consequence* the fact of secularization – because secularization is nothing other than the effective relation between the domains of the secular and religious in its determination of specific elements in these domains. *Weltwerdung* is nothing other than a particular *mode* of *Verweltlichung*. There is a single conclusion that we must inevitably draw from this. The use of 'secular' implies the polar field of secular/religious and hence secularization; the use of 'secularization' implies the typically Western conception of religion and of the secular. Secularization and the Western framework are inseparable.

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<sup>207</sup> Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 47.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

What have we learned concerning the meaning and viability of a hermeneutics of secularization? Certainly not enough to provide a guideline delineating step-by-step how one can proceed in identifying whether a historical object is a 'secularization' of something religious. In fact, we arrived at the conclusion that such a procedure of identification is quite problematic in itself. Nevertheless, what *can* we say about the hermeneutic use of secularization? The main lesson is that secularization should not be treated as a concept that has an objective signifying value. It does not identify an object that is secular at the surface as a 'properly' religious one. It does not point to an objectively demonstrable causal or substantial relation. Instead, secularization performatively effects a functional relation that retrospectively refers something from the secular field to its analogue in the religious field. This operation comprises a hermeneutic strategy, because it enables the interpretation of an object from the perspective of a different discursive field, and to understand its historical efficacy and meaning because of the mark impressed by this relation. It falls on the part of the interpreter to recognize in particular elements the usefulness of referring it to the religious field. What strategic function a particular hermeneutic of secularization performs can vary immensely, as it depends on how one looks at the relation between the secular and religious in general. As a consequence, the employment of the category of secularization might stand under the banner of a campaign against the traces of religion, or for the reinstatement of it, to show modernity's debt to Christianity or its improvement of it. It is crucial to be aware every time of the particular strategic function that *in casu* underlies the employment of secularization.

What is the reason there has been so much fuss around the concept of secularization? Secularization is in the end nothing mysterious. It simply arises naturally out of the fact that Western culture has made the foundational divide between the secular and the religious. And as we know, any separation generates dialectical relations and interactions. Secularization and the Western framework are thus inseparable. The fact that secularization discourse is so powerful and controversial is conditioned by the belief that has shaped modern self-understanding like nothing else: that the secular is the autonomous domain of the immanent world, that its foundational act has been to cut itself loose from the transcendent and the divine. But one can never completely cut oneself loose from something else, if only because the act of cutting loose still implies a relation. As long as modernity fundamentally conceives of itself, in its essence and origin, to be in opposition to religion, theology and the divine, operations of secularization will continue to take place, and hermeneutics of secularization will continue to be relevant.

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