

# Rethinking Secularization

Philosophy and the Prophecy of a Secular Age



# **Rethinking Secularization**

Philosophy and the Prophecy  
of a Secular Age

EDITED BY

Herbert De Vriese  
and Gary Gabor

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

Rethinking Secularization:  
Philosophy and the Prophecy of a Secular Age,  
Edited by Herbert De Vriese and Gary Gabor

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## INTRODUCTION

Secularization has proven itself to be one of the most successful paradigms for understanding modern Western society. Despite differing definitions as to what constitutes the secularization of a culture, Western scholars have generally concurred that, with the onset of modern life, the basic functions and structural conditions of society previously supplied by religion have been increasingly replaced by a variety of other cultural forces. This has been often described as the decline of religious authority and the loss of the social significance of religion.

Yet, even in its own history, secularization has always included a debate about whether the process was irreversible and progressing, or indeed whether any such a large-scale change was really happening at all. Would modernity result in the complete disappearance of religion? Were the apparent changes in the social and institutional forms of religion paralleled by similar differences in the nature of personal religiosity? In academic circles, questions like these were formalized into systematic research programs. This ultimately led to the development of various 'secularization theories' which attempted to describe and explain the historical transformation of religion in modern society. Although different root causes and mechanisms were identified, they were usually taken as intrinsic to the process of modernization as such. The ensuing tendency was to conclude that the effects of secularization were not only permanent and final, but also accelerating in pace.

The much-vaunted 'return of religion,' in both the public and academic consciousness, has however had the additional effect of casting doubt on the adequacy and usefulness of secularization theory. Each year yields an increasing body of scholarship devoted to 'rethinking secularization.' In the social sciences especially, a lively dialogue is underway, with some seeing indications of a paradigm-shift in the way these disciplines treat questions relating to religion's proper role, place, and significance in the modern world. Attention is shifting from the thesis

of the gradual displacement of religion to a research program of how religion was made modern. Some individual scholars have even taken the extreme position of abandoning secularization as a useful concept at all, declaring secularization theory to be at an end. Either way, it cannot be denied that the idea of secularization is under pressure.

One of the key assumptions of classical secularization theory—the thesis of the inevitable gradual weakening of religion in modernizing societies all over the world—must in any case be rejected as untenable. It has come to light in the last few years that the expected erosion of religion in the modern world should be confined to clear-cut geographical, cultural, and perhaps historical limits. Even in most Western nations, the situation on the ground appears to contradict the prediction of a linearly progressive obliteration of institutional and personal manifestations of religion. These perceptions stand in sharp contrast against the previously overwhelming success and general acceptance of the secularization paradigm in both academic and popular circles—a historical fact that is itself in need of explanation. To summarize the situation: the idea of secularization, once considered a necessary, world-historical force, is now increasingly being called into question as potentially one more cherished ‘article of faith’ of Western society.

Under the title *Rethinking Secularization: Philosophy and the Prophecy of a Secular Age*, this book seeks to examine the distinct role of philosophy within the context of the secularization debate. It asks how the philosophical tradition has helped shape the vision of a world-historical progression from a deeply religious past to an entirely secular future, and how contemporary philosophy might contribute to thinking more subtly about the future of religion.

In the midst of predominantly sociological attention to this issue, it is sometimes forgotten that philosophy has had a long-lasting and intimate connection to the history of secularization—both in shaping and legitimizing the concept of ‘the secular’ and in forming canonical versions of the secularization thesis. From the earliest Christian philosophy to the great medieval masters of high scholastic thought, reflection on the nature of time and the world has helped to delineate the ‘secular’ as a specifically non-religious domain; this in turn has laid the intellectual

foundations for the separation of Church and State in the West. In further differentiating a typically modern, secular view of history from earlier religious conceptions of 'salvation' history—a project which came to full fruition during the Age of Enlightenment—philosophy has had a major influence on the development of secularization theory. By first advancing the idea of cultural progress, then by constructing elaborate 'philosophies of history,' eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers not only created the theoretical framework for secularization theory, but also devised significant ideological and political programs to 'secularize' the Western world. Today, these former philosophical views have come under a fundamental critique, influenced as much by postmodernism as dialogue with other disciplines, and contemporary philosophers have developed a distinctive theoretical approach to secularization. This approach pays particular attention to the philosophical significance of the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times, and examines the degree of dependence the allegedly autonomous achievements of modernity have on deep-rooted religious beliefs, traditions, and thought patterns from the Judeo-Christian heritage of Western civilization.

All of this makes clear that the connection between philosophy and secularization is pervasive and long-standing. As such, this book has as its special task the clarification of how philosophical ideas and theories have helped develop and refine our understanding of secularization. At the center of this stands one of the key assumptions of classical secularization theory: the idea that, as societies become more modern, they will definitively emancipate themselves from religious institutions and commitments inherited from the past, eventually ushering in and replacing these with new secular outlooks and structures. This book seeks to establish to what extent philosophy itself has nourished this prophecy of a future secular age.

In this vein, the contributors to this volume take the relationship between philosophy and the prophecy of a secular age as the starting point for their critical reflections. Some primarily focus on the historical underpinnings of this relationship, while others provide a re-evaluation of the two in light of the changing realities of contemporary culture and society. All however show a sensitivity to how the current crisis facing secularization theory

in the social sciences also challenges traditional philosophical conceptions concerning the role, place, and significance of religion in the modern world. The shared project of the volume is to better understand philosophy's own relationship to the idea of secularization, especially the belief of a linear progression to an entirely secular age. How this inner relationship can be understood from within the philosophical tradition, and what should be offered in its place today, form the guiding questions of the present study.



In "The End of Secularization?" (ch. 1), GUIDO VANHEESWIJCK develops a broad, cultural-philosophical approach to the central topic of the book, one which incorporates and introduces many of the conceptual and historical issues raised in subsequent chapters. Vanheeswijck articulates the general question underlying contemporary philosophical debate on secularization, namely, whether secularization as a process has come to an end. In diagnosing secularization's current state of health in the West, Vanheeswijck notes that the issue cannot be resolved without first addressing the methodological and conceptual problems of what secularization is. In so doing, Vanheeswijck advances the view that any discussion on the *end* of secularization should start from a sufficiently nuanced account of what is meant by the *beginning* of secularization. This genealogical approach demonstrates the need to go beyond such simple binary oppositions as 'faith and reason' or 'science and religion.' Vanheeswijck's recommendation of a 'triangular approach' to the topic is a plea for the use of 'subtler languages' in the secularization debate.

Chapters 2 through 8 cover the historical development of the concept of the secular and secularization theory. JOSEPH CLAIR, in "The Concept of the Secular in Augustine's *City of God*" (ch. 2), traces the particular spatio-temporal sense given by Augustine to the word *saeculum*, superseding its previous exclusively temporal meaning in classical Latin. The move also highlights the new special status attributed to the world in Christianity as the secular 'City of Man,' in contrast to the heavenly 'City of God,' even as the fluidity of the concept allowed

a high degree of flexibility and intermixing between the two for Augustine. The examination of the Christian sense of ‘secular’ is continued in “Secular Medieval: The Revaluation of *Saeculum* in Thomas Aquinas” (ch. 3) by GARY GABOR, which focuses on the re-introduction of the work of Aristotle in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in Western Europe and its resulting effect on Thomas Aquinas’ understanding of the secular sphere. The main result of this influence was a new sense of the justification of natural reason in Aquinas, with a corresponding (relative) autonomy of the political sphere. The chapter also contains a critical ‘secularization’ of Aquinas’ own particular position, which hopes to show the continuing relevance of Thomas’ thoughts for contemporary liberal democracy.

The next five chapters focus on pivotal figures in the 20<sup>th</sup> century debate on secularization theory in philosophy. LIESBET QUAEGHEBEUR details “The Scope of Max Weber’s Secularization Thesis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*” (ch. 4), arguing that the German sociologist, famous for introducing the phrase ‘The Disenchantment of the World’ to the secularization debate, is best understood as offering a minimally descriptive account of the lessening of religious faith in modernity, with a more predictive bent afterwards added to Weber’s theories by later interpreters. In doing so, Quaeghebeur successfully undermines the conventional starting point for the so-called predictions and prophecies inherent to secularization theory. In the next chapter, “Carl Schmitt: Secularization and Political Theology” (ch. 5), SVEN BRASPENNING AND FERNAND TANGHE give a critical appraisal of one of the most controversial figures in the secularization debate of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the legal theorist and political philosopher Carl Schmitt, responsible for the provocative thesis that modern political theory is the product of secularized theological concepts. Encapsulated in the phrase ‘political theology,’ Schmitt’s theory came to be viewed as the ultimate denial of the legitimacy of modernity’s secularizing impulse. This view came to be challenged by Hans Blumenberg, Schmitt’s later interlocutor and intellectual adversary. As DANIEL FINCKE describes in “Hans Blumenberg and *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age: A Warning to Post-Secularists*” (ch. 6), Blumenberg’s critique of Schmitt amounts to a full-scale justification of modernity’s legitimacy and distinctness. Even in

this defense, however, Blumenberg was haunted by critiques from the later Schmitt, forcing him to revise and temper his own claims of modernity's uniqueness to the level of 'self-assertion' alone. However, by taking into account postmodernism's critique of modern 'foundationalist' epistemologies, and by attuning Blumenberg's analyses to an aesthetic constructivist account of knowledge, Fincke demonstrates Blumenberg's lasting relevance vis-à-vis the often overhasty conclusions of post-secularists.

In the past two decades, new voices have begun to emerge in the secularization debate. In France, Marcel Gauchet, drawing on both sides of the secularization debate while at the same time striking in a new direction, has proposed that secularization is a distinctively Christian phenomenon. As FERNAND TANGHE explains in "Marcel Gauchet and the End of Religion" (ch. 7), Gauchet views Christianity as the religion of '*la sortie de la religion*' ("the exit from religion"). While this does not mean that religion will cease to exist, it has, Gauchet thinks, lost its function as a socially-structuring force, perhaps irrevocably. A similar theme runs through the recent work of the Canadian Charles Taylor, as DAVID STOREY details in "Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*: Breaking the Spell of the Immanent Frame" (ch. 8). Taylor, however, seeks to provide an internal phenomenological description, from the 'inside out,' of what it means to live in a secular age, in contrast to one structured by religion. In drawing particular attention to the concept of a 'secular age,' Storey distinguishes Taylor's phenomenological account of secularity from preceding philosophical *prophecies* of a secular age. Taylor's work has generated a great deal of attention, spurring considerable contemporary philosophical interest in secularization theory.

Examples of such contemporary reflection on philosophy's relationship to secularization can be found in chapters 9 to 13. The first two chapters start from reflections on the personal, subjective experience of belief and unbelief. EOIN O'CONNELL, in a subtle work on "Secularization and the Experience of Futility" (ch. 9), addresses the feeling of disquiet caused by two different kinds of anxieties: the disquiet caused by new forms of religious fundamentalism, and the motivational crisis in confidence plaguing modern secularism today. Drawing on the work of

Kant, O'Connell advocates the need for philosophy to explain and address the demotivational aspects of modern secularism at the root of both, as well as how such a problem might be resolved. In a similar vein, HERBERT DE VRIESE in "The Charm of Disenchantment" (ch. 10) attempts to identify the motivational attractions behind secularization's irresistible rise in modernity, explicitly addressing the question of philosophy's contributing role to the prophecy of religion's inevitable demise. Starting from observation of the lasting convincing power of classical secularization theory in the face of lacking empirical evidence, De Vriese conducts an inquiry into the subjective origins underlying the appeal of secularization theory in general and the charm of disenchantment in particular.

The next two chapters, which serve as something of companion pieces, address the public and institutional manifestations of religion. In "Religion in the Public Sphere: How Deliberative Democracy Offers a Middle Road" (ch. 11), JOHN DAVENPORT argues in favor of the view that it is possible to give grounds for at least some religiously-neutral reasons in public political discussion, regardless of whether one is an adherent to religious beliefs or not. In contrast, BRENDAN PALLA AND ADAM WOOD contend in "Secularism as a Tradition of Inquiry: A MacIntyrean Critique" (ch. 12) that any so-called public reason is necessarily bound by the tradition that preceded and formed it, and that no such value-neutral reasons exist. Both chapters are in conversation with much recent analytic Anglo-American scholarship on secularization and religious epistemology in the past two decades, including the work of Robert Audi, John Rawls, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, while at the same time remaining sensitive to the concerns of Continental treatments of the subject. Taken together, chapters 11 and 12 offer an important contribution in assessing the practical import of secularization, as well as determining how the role of religion in the public sphere needs to be rethought in light of the changing realities of our contemporary world.

The final chapter returns to the general question which opened the book. In "The End of Secular Thought?" (ch. 13), MEROLD WESTPHAL offers the kind of nuanced account of secularization requested in the course of this volume. Westphal examines the extent to which the end of secularization can be

said to be reflected in both popular culture and the academic community. At the same time, he employs an internal philosophical approach in evaluating the prospects of secular and religious perspectives in philosophy. Westphal concedes that, even as the atmosphere is clearly different than it was fifty years ago, exact specification is a difficult task. What he thinks can perhaps be said is that the thematization of heteronomy by philosophy has left itself with both a different self-understanding, and a different account of its relation to religion. One thing though is clear: prophecies, whether implicit or explicit, are no longer the norm.

The final contribution to the volume, "The Return of Divine Providence," by the Belgian cartoonist OLIVIER SCHRAUWEN, is something of an "unscientific postscript" to the philosophical discussions of the book. For the sake of full disclosure, it should be mentioned that the editors contributed to the preparation of the dialogue's text; however, as with any visual work of art, the force of its images goes beyond that of words alone. So it is perhaps a fitting way to conclude a book on secularization and religion, in which so much is communicated by sensual media other than intellectual. For in the image, both icon and idol dwell.



Of course, the visual persuasion of Olivier Schrauwen's contribution to the book also has a more specific intention. It reinforces the contemporary significance of visual representation as one vehicle for the critique of religion. One cannot help but think of the international controversy over the Danish cartoons depicting Mohammed in *Jyllands-Posten*, which both caused such offense to Muslims worldwide and also sparked heated debate over freedom of expression in the West. One can say that the return of religion has also led to a renewal of the radical critique of religion. This has been noted in the academic field, and the past several years have witnessed a flurry of activity devoted to religious criticism in popular literature. As religions re-enter the public sphere with fresh energy and vigor, this has provoked an equally energetic response from those with a proselytistic zeal for spreading the good tidings of humanism and atheism.



Similarly, it is difficult to sketch the contours of the current state of affairs without specially mentioning a specter which runs over many of the reflections of this book: the increased rise of fundamentalist forms of religion in the late twentieth century. Militant Islamic fundamentalism is often seen as particularly dangerous in the West, but this is of course not the only contemporary form of a renewed religious fundamentalism. The West has just as many homegrown examples of religious fundamentalism, as well as many modern examples of the pervasiveness of religion's influence which call into question just what counts as 'fundamentalist.' In the United States for instance, it is said that almost half of all adults reject evolution and believe that God created human beings in essentially their present form 10,000 years ago, and only 13% think that humankind developed by evolution and that God had no part in the process.<sup>1</sup> Such reflections underscore the West's own tensions with reconciling the claims of faith and reason, as well as a prolonged history of skirting critical discussion of religious issues. As much might be said of the general ignorance of more secular and liberal members of society of what authentic religious sensibilities may or may not be. But it therefore comes as no surprise that the West has had its own history of problems with productively addressing its own forms of fundamentalism and intolerance, let alone those of other cultures.

Finally, a word might be said about the American-European cooperation behind this volume. This not only constitutes, at least to a certain extent, two different traditions of philosophy. It also involves the navigation of two different social and cultural realities. In many aspects of intellectual discussion and popular culture, modern lifestyles in America and Europe seem very comparable. Yet, when it comes to religion, there is a significant difference. In this context, it is interesting to refer to a nineteenth-century discussion between Karl Marx and Bruno Bauer. The latter was convinced that the separation of Church

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<sup>1</sup> In a continuously running Gallup poll since 1982, typically 44-47% of Americans agree with the statement that "*God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so.*" Frank Newport, "Third of Americans Say Evidence Has Supported Darwin's Theory," November 19, 2004; <http://www.gallup.com/poll/14107/Third-Americans-Say-Evidence-Has-Supported-Darwins-Evolution-Theory.aspx> (accessed June 23, 2009).

and State, or more particularly, the elimination of the political power of religion would eventually lead to its withering away in every form of its expression, in public as well as in private life. Marx, however, replied that the separation of Church and State in the United States of America had had the rather unexpected result of a renewed blossoming of religious life. In developing his argument that complete political emancipation was not in contradiction to the existence of religion, Marx referred to the famous testimony of Alexis de Tocqueville, who in *De la Démocratie en Amérique* (1835-1840) could hardly find enough words to express his astonishment over the vigorous vitality of religion in America. And even in the eighteenth century, one finds already reflections on the difference between Europe and America regarding religion and irreligion. When the British thinker Joseph Priestley emigrated to the United States, he noticed in his *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity* (1795):

Great as is the increase of infidelity in the present age, and even, as I am informed, in this country, I cannot help flattering myself that it will not be so extensive here, as on the continent of Europe; because a great cause of its increase in those countries is the establishment of a very corrupt system of christianity in them. (...) But happily, in this country, the *church* has no alliance with the *state*, every person being allowed to worship God in whatever manner he pleases, or not to worship him at all if he be not so disposed, without being liable to any civil inconvenience. In these circumstances truth has the best chance of being heard, and of recommending itself; and nothing is wanting to the universal reception of pure christianity, but a candid attention to it, if, as I doubt not, it be founded in truth.<sup>2</sup>

In retrospect, we may add to Priestley's eighteenth-century observations on the secularization of the West that the major difference between the United States of America and the European continent is not simply the abstract principle of separation between Church and State, but more specifically the social and political circumstances which inspired this separation. Freedom and religion: we often think that these terms have a clear, simple affiliation in the secularization debate. But this is not the case, as the combination of the terms will spontaneously

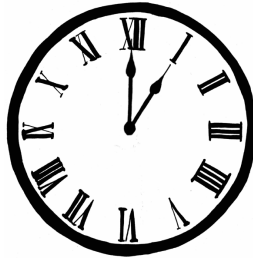
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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity* (Philadelphia: Printed for Thomas Dobson, 1797), xv-xvi.

be understood as ‘freedom *from* religion’ in a European context, while in America they will rather be read as ‘freedom *of* religion.’ These differences, especially in the context of the secularization debate, make for a particularly fruitful collaboration between and across the two traditions.

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# **THE END OF SECULARIZATION?**

**GUIDO VANHEESWIJCK**



# CHAPTER ONE

## THE END OF SECULARIZATION?

*Science comes into being when the gods are not thought of as good.*  
—Friedrich Nietzsche

*'Secularization' is a term which is much used to describe modern society; and it is sometimes even offered as partial explanation for features of this society. But it is more a locus of questions than a source of explanations.*  
—Charles Taylor

In the epilogue of his most recent book, *A Secular Age*,<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor explains his position on the origin and development of secularization in relation to other sociological and philosophical accounts.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, he introduces a distinction between what he calls the 'Intellectual Deviation Story' and his own approach, which he defines as the 'Reform Master Narrative.' The former tells the intellectual story of how certain conceptual and theoretical shifts in late medieval theology and philosophy, mostly by unintentionally undermining the central role of religion, eventually paved the way for humanity's self-preservation and self-assertion. The latter, the Reform Master Narrative, is a more general story, one which considers secularization as a mass phenomenon and therefore focuses on the various social and cultural changes that have been generated in the Western world since 1500. In Taylor's view, they are complementary stories, exploring "different sides of the same mountain, or the same winding river of history."<sup>3</sup> In his recent book, however, Taylor concentrates primarily on the Reform Master Narrative, leaving

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 773-76.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 774.

its complement aside.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I will direct my attention towards the Intellectual Deviation Story, so as to provide a modest addition to Taylor's great and inspiring account of the vicissitudes of secularization in *A Secular Age*.

At first sight, the term 'Intellectual Deviation Story' is a rather peculiar one. However, for anyone familiar with the Löwith-Blumenberg debate in Germany in the sixties, it epitomizes the quintessence of the philosophical dissent of opinion with regard to the interpretation of secularization.<sup>5</sup> In his book *Meaning in History*,<sup>6</sup> Karl Löwith stated that the modern belief in progress is merely a secularized version of the Christian view of eschatology. His associated interpretation of the transition from the Middle Ages into the Modern Age is a clear instance of the 'canonical model' of philosophical secularization theory, according to which secularization, defined as the ongoing process of gradual disappearance of any reference to the realm of the transcendent or the supernatural, is understood as a modification of elements or tendencies inherent in Christianity itself.

In reaction to this account, Hans Blumenberg presented in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*<sup>7</sup> an alternative philosophical theory to explain the phenomenon of secularization. While remaining fully attentive to the Christian context from which the process of secularization took its point of departure, Blumenberg emphasized a distinctively modern contribution to the process as well.<sup>8</sup> His alternative story stressed the importance of theological and philosophical controversies in the late Middle Ages. It explained how the emphasis on God's infinite freedom in late

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<sup>4</sup> For an in depth analysis of Taylor's account, see David Storey's contribution to the present volume, "Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*: Breaking the Spell of the Immanent Frame," Chapter 8, 177-208.

<sup>5</sup> For a very informative survey of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate, see: Robert M. Wallace, "Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate," *New German Critique* 22 (1981): 63-79.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History. The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

<sup>7</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966). English translation: Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. R.M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1985). All references are from the English edition.

<sup>8</sup> For an in depth analysis of Blumenberg's account, see Daniel Fincke's contribution to the present volume, "Hans Blumenberg and *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*: A Warning to Post-Secularists," Chapter 6, 127-152.



medieval nominalism eventually created the conditions under which a typically modern form of human autonomy could come into existence. In this context, Blumenberg focused specifically on the complex relation between transcendence and immanence—between an eschatological and a providential interpretation of God’s activity in redemptive history.

In the wake of Blumenberg’s defense of the ‘legitimacy’ of the Modern Age, a number of authors have adopted one or another variant of his ‘Intellectual Deviation Story’—a story in which controversies among the intellectual elites are considered to be largely responsible for the phenomenon of secularization. I shall take a number of these variants as a starting point for my analysis in this chapter. Although Taylor begins from a different starting point and only marginally refers to the proponents of the alternative theory,<sup>9</sup> he arrives at similar conclusions with regard to the issue of the end of secularization as those which can be drawn from an Intellectual Deviation account.

Before dealing with the specific issue of the possible end of secularization, three other questions should be raised. The first regards the *definition* of secularization and its counterpart, religion. Only if we agree upon a shared definition of both central terms, it is possible to enter into the controversy over whether the process of secularization has come to an end. The second question refers to the *beginning* of this process. In order to achieve meaningful debate on the end of a historical development, one first needs to gain insight into the way in which it came into being. So we need to ask: in what circumstances did secularization arise, where, how, and why did it start? Of course, there is no lack of theories (Marx, Weber, Schmitt, Löwith, Blumenberg, Vattimo, Gauchet, etc.) which document the genealogical history of secularization, many of which are presented in Monod’s excellent survey of the German tradition of interpreting the Modern Age.<sup>10</sup> But the figures to whom I am most indebted on this particular point are two authors from a different tradition, i.e. Girard and Taylor. My third and last

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<sup>9</sup> Taylor only refers twice to Blumenberg in *A Secular Age* (114, 775), while Löwith goes unmentioned.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Claude Monod, *La querelle de la sécularisation. Théologie politique et philosophies de l’histoire de Hegel à Blumenberg* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2002).

additional question is connected with the methodological problem. Which approach should be taken? Should it be an external, cultural approach—historical, sociological, and political as is the case with Gauchet?<sup>11</sup> Or is a philosophical approach, such as that adopted by Luc Ferry, one of Gauchet’s critics, more appropriate? Or should one rather opt for a third, internal and phenomenological approach, one where the inherent religious character is explained in terms which the protagonists themselves could recognize, as found in the writings of Girard and Taylor?

The aim of my approach is not only to tackle all these questions, but also to show their interrelatedness. As a preamble, I will first consider two conventional definitions of the concept of secularization. In the first substantial part, then, I will focus, in dialogue with different theories of secularization, on the historical origins of secularization. The second part will address the methodological question. Finally, in the third part, I will attempt to arrive at a tentative and modified conclusion with regard to the question of the end of secularization.<sup>12</sup>

### **Two Definitions of Secularization**

Traditionally, a binary contrast is made between belief and unbelief in order to distinguish between religious and secular institutions, worldviews, and ways of life. Within the context of this binary opposition, there are two definitions of secularization. For one, secularization refers to the decline of personal religious belief and practice, as evidenced by the decline of church-goers and the diminishing number of people who call themselves religious. For the other, it implies the retreat of religion from the public sphere, the gradual transformation of our institutions in the direction of religious and ideological neutrality and an increasingly strict separation between church and state.

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<sup>11</sup> For an in depth analysis of Gauchet’s account, see Fernand Tanghe’s contribution to the present volume, “Marcel Gauchet and the End of Religion,” Chapter 7, 153-176.

<sup>12</sup> These three questions refer to three different definitions of secularization that are analogous to the distinctions which Taylor makes in the introduction to *A Secular Age*, 2-4.

These two definitions of secularization suggest two different theories of secularization. According to the first theory, the withering away of personal belief leads to the inevitable decline of the authority and significance of religion in the public sphere. In the second, the order is reversed: it is the transformation of religion's public role within society which explains the decline of personal belief. The first theory reserves a central place for science in its explanatory model: it argues that, since the seventeenth century, the growth of science has steadily pushed people away from religion and has made the old beliefs seem incredible. In the second theory, the progressive, functional differentiation of the social system is given predominance, with the erosion of private religiosity as one of its major consequences. Both definitions and theories of secularization however share a similar understanding of the tension between transcendence and immanence. In my view, the binary opposition of these two terms is too simplistic and needs to be reconsidered in a *triangular* approach to adequately explain the phenomenon of secularization.

## **I. New Beginning or Secularized Christianity?**

Before attempting to develop this triangular approach, though, I must first deal with another question. No matter how one understands secularization, one fundamental problem remains unclear: whether it heralds in a completely new period, one which is fundamentally distinct and different from all previous eras, or whether it itself remains indebted to previous concepts from religion in general and Christianity in particular. The view that secularization has definitely closed off a religious period and started something completely new has been foremost defended by those who emphasize the explanatory force of natural sciences, suggesting that religion is something irrational, unscientific, and in fact antiquated.

Such a clear-cut distinction between science and belief however is untenable from a cultural-philosophical and cultural-historical point of view. Not only was the development of modern science interrelated with certain religious worldviews (especially late medieval nominalism, as Blumenberg points out) but it is obvious even today that scientific research can simulta-

neously inspire both deep forms of religion and of unbelief.<sup>13</sup> Because of this, cultural philosophers and sociologists primarily adhere to the second position and try to show that secularization originated within the framework of religion, and more specifically from a certain form of Christianity. Marcel Gauchet, one contemporary representative of this view, even holds that secularization is the *logical* continuation of a specific figure of religion.<sup>14</sup>

The problem is succinctly summarized by Monod: is modern Western culture a product of ‘secularized Christianity’ or is it to be considered as the beginning of something ‘completely new’?<sup>15</sup> My preliminary position, inspired by different ‘Intellectual Deviation Theories’ of secularization (Weber, Blumenberg, Gauchet), is that the idea of a ‘completely new beginning’ must be rejected—without, however, repudiating the existence of historical ruptures and denying the legitimacy of modernity’s emancipatory project.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 310: “The other factor which is thought to lead inevitably to unbelief is the spread of science and education. Here the ideological prejudice shows more clearly on the surface. People who hold this usually simply take for granted that religious belief is irrational and unenlightened or unscientific. If we step back from this prejudice, we can remember how much of the development of modern science was from the beginning bound up with a religious outlook—starting from the roots of mechanism in nominalist theology; and we can see how today, too, scientific questioning, can just as well inspire a kind of piety as it can unbelief.”

<sup>14</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985). English translation with a preface by Charles Taylor: *The Disenchantment of the World. A Political History of Religion*, trans. O. Burge (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Monod, *La querelle de la sécularisation*, 37-38: “Ce problème peut s’énoncer très simplement: il s’agit de savoir si la prétention de la modernité à trouver des normes rationnelles de légitimation ne fait que masquer la dette des Temps modernes vis-à-vis des contenus chrétiens seulement déplacés, et si donc l’époque moderne peut être pensée – en Occident – comme celle du ‘christianisme sécularisé’, ou s’il faut reconnaître le bien-fondé de la prétention de la pensée moderne à ‘commencer’ autre chose.”

<sup>16</sup> See the text of the cover of Monod’s book: “Comment faire la part des héritages dans les Temps Modernes, en refusant ainsi l’image mythique d’un ‘commencement absolu,’ sans pour autant nier les ruptures historiques et sans délégitimer le projet d’émancipation?”

### The Christian Roots of Secularization

That said, it is striking that every example of the Intellectual Deviation Story seems to focus on generally the same place and time for the subject matter of their account. They mainly concentrate on the transition from the late Middle Ages to the beginning of modernity (the period between the 14th and the 16th century), and stress that secularization is typical of Western Europe ('old Europe').<sup>17</sup> This coincides with their main philosophical points of attention: the late medieval nominalism and theological voluntarism developed in western European universities that serves as the main starting point for the religious and cultural transitions that ultimately gave rise to the phenomenon of secularization.<sup>18</sup> The conclusion then is that secularization is dependent on religion in general and on Christianity (particularly nominalistic Christianity) in specific. Christianity plays a central role because of a central characteristic, absent in the two other great monotheistic religions: namely, the complex combination—within its concept of God and in a derivative sense within its concept of ethics—of transcendence and immanence, which makes Christianity, in contrast with other religions, the religion of *incarnation* and *interpretation*.<sup>19</sup>

If this interpretation of the Intellectual Deviation Story has any plausibility, then it follows that, in order to properly explain the origin of secularization within the womb of Western European Christianity, one must concentrate on the particular significance of the Christian concept of *kenosis*. This is the theological mystery of the Trinitarian nature of God, and any attempt to understand the relation between transcendence and immanence in Christianity must be able to provide a satisfactory account of this concept and its significance. *Kenosis* has always been recognized as an (if not the) important concept in distinguishing Christianity from other religions, and awareness of

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<sup>17</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1953), 6: "I am not alluding to the last few generations of the European peoples on both side of the ocean; I mean the smaller Europe of the Reformation period, distracted as it was with wars and religious disputes."

<sup>18</sup> See also the famous Ratisbonne lecture by Pope Benedict XVI, focusing upon the same topic.

<sup>19</sup> Both Vattimo and Gauchet explicitly define Christianity as the religion of 'incarnation' and 'interpretation.'

its importance has never been absent from within Christianity itself. Theologians in the Middle Ages, in particular, attempted to explain the specificity of the relation between the one unique God and his creation. However, the way in which this was done centered around the concept of 'order.' God was seen as the omnipotent creator of the world as a hierarchical macrocosmos, structurally mirrored in the constitution of man as a microcosmos.

However, by the end of the Middle Ages, the ancient, Neoplatonically inspired confidence in the trustfulness of nature had completely disappeared. Up until this point, there had been a synthesis between the ancient assurance of a teleological world-view on the one hand and the Christian belief in creation on the other. It was thought that God, as the creator, had put an order into nature in which humanity could find shelter. This belief was founded upon a twofold conviction. For one thing, there was the Greek view that the natural order was determined by an ideal basic structure. In other words, the basic structure of ideas was the genuine reality, of which the perceptible reality was only its shadow. That is what is meant by philosophical *realism*. For another, there was the Christian-Neoplatonic canon that God has put this ideal order into reality and that man, because his mind is shaped in analogy to God's creative mind, can recognize, in full trust, his ordering thoughts and ideas.

This double conviction definitely disappears in the philosophy of *nominalism* at the end of the Middle Ages. The nominalistic starting point is the belief in the absolute omnipotence of God. Inspired by the spirit of the Franciscan Order, William of Ockham, the most important thinker of the 14th century,<sup>20</sup> emphasized that the God of Abraham and of the Christians is no philosophers' God. He is not an Absolute Impersonal Essence (as in Aristotelian philosophy), but a free willing subject, who desires a personal, loving, and trustful relationship with all of us. Precisely because the biblical God in Christianity is a free willing subject, he can create whatever he has in mind (e.g., whenever he wishes, he can change the natural order by letting stones climb instead of dropping them). Hence, it is illusory to think it possible to have

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<sup>20</sup> Ockham stood model for William of Baskerville, the protagonist in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.