The Postmodern Condition and the Meaning of Secularity

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The Postmodern Condition and the Meaning of Secularity

A Study on the Religious Dynamics of Postmodernity

Postmoderne seculariteit

Een studie over de religieuze dynamiek van de postmoderniteit

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

Contents

Preface

It has always fascinated me that our postmodern culture is at the same time blatantly religious and increasingly secular. In political debates the role of religion in society is often met with the highest suspicion, whereas other domains of culture – such as management, psychology and art – are shot thorugh with (quasi) religious notions. When I got the opportunity in 2003 to work on a dissertation project in the field of postmodern philosophy of religion, I saw this as a chance to get more insight in the nature of this paradox. Departing from the work of Richard Rorty – on whose work I had just written an MA thesis – I discovered the fascinating thought of John Milbank, who sees exactly in secularity the kernel of postmodern culture. Together with the thought of Gianni Vattimo these authors are the pillars on which this study is built. I hope that this study will contribute to a better understanding of their writings and of the meaning of secularity in postmodern culture.

I am most grateful to my thesis directors prof. dr. Dirk-Martin Grube and prof. dr. Peter Jonkers, who have been most patient and encouraging and who have given me the privilege of working in a stimulating, academic atmosphere. My years at the department of theology at Utrecht University would not have been so rewarding without the support and friendship of my fellow doctoral students dr. Coen Constandse, dr. Willem Maarten Dekker, dr. Izaak den Hulster and dr. Arwin van Wilgenburg. Furthermore, I would like to thank dr. Maarten Wisse for his work on the typesetting of this book and Elisabeth Houdijk-Abbess MA for her valuable corrections of my English texts. Lastly, I thank my father dr. Ad Prosman for correcting the final manuscript and for years of encouragement and inspiration.

Looking back over the years of research and writing, I can only have admiration for my wife Linda and our children, for supporting me and accepting my persistent physical and mental absence. I dedicate this work to her and our future together.

Woerden, May 22th 2011.

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Can there Be a Postmodern Secularity?

There is in postmodernism a return of religion. This thesis is well known and often discussed by philosophers of religion and social theorists. Postmodernism also knows – and this is less evident – a return of the secular. The reaffirmation of secularity in postmodern philosophy is not self-evident. On the contrary: the postmodern condition is generally seen as implying a post-secular turn. Prominent theorists of postmodern philosophy and theology have defended a post-secular position as the implication of postmodern epistemology. John Caputo says: "If the word postmodern were not overused as it is now, its most worthwhile definition would be postsecular."[1] Contemporary philosophers are deeply divided on the meaning of postmodernism for secularity. Some assert that postmodernism means an end to secularism, whereas others hold that postmodernism is the achievement of secularity.[2] The argument goes as follows: Secularity is one of the key values of modernity and sometimes it is even seen as identical with the history of the West.[3] The relationship of modernity and secularity is more-or-less evident. Modernity presents itself as emancipation from religion and tradition and autonomization of reason. Religion and tradition are undermined 'by the reflexivity of modern

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[1] John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 41-2. Hent de Vries says that, "…the apparent triumph of Enlightenment secularization, manifest in the global spread of political and economic structures that pretended to relegate the sacred to a strictly circumscribed private sphere, seems to have foundered on an unexpected realization of its own parochialism and a belated acknowledgment of the continuing presence and force of 'public religions'." Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, 'Preface', in: Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, editors, *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), ix.

[2] Paul Kurtz sees postmodernism as a genuine threat to secularity: "Today's post-modernists prophesy an end to the Enlightenment and the end of the secular century." Paul Kurtz, 'Will Secularism Survive?', in: Vern L. Bullough and Timothy J. Madigan, editors, *Toward a New Enlightenment. The Philosophy of Paul Kurtz* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 115.

[3] "La 'sécularisation' serait à la fois la marque de l'epoque moderne, ce qui fait sa singularité et de son sens." Jean-Claude Monod, *La querelle de la sécularisation. Théologie politique et philosophies de l'histoire de Hegel à Blumenberg* (Paris: Libraire Philosophique J.Vrin, 2002), 16. and: "De revolutionaire geschiedenis van het westen tot aan de huidige tijd is welbeschouwd één steeds voortgaand, onstuitbaar en onomkeerbaar seculariseringsproces." A. Th. van Leeuwen, *Het Christendom in de wereldgeschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Paul Brand, 1966), 278.

social life, which stands in direct opposition to it.'[4] In postmodernity, doubts are cast on the autonomy and self-sufficiency of reason. What are the consequences of this shift from a modern to a postmodern account of rationality for the concept of secularity? All relevant authors in hermeneutical philosophy today are regauging the meaning of secularity and its traditional counterpart, the sacred. Does the alleged parochialism of secularism force us to leave the idea of secularity behind as a mistake, or does it mean something else? For instance, that secularity has been interpreted too one-sidedly? How can we understand the meaning of secularity, under the parameters of postmodern philosophy? Before addressing these questions in detail, I will first give an outline of my central concepts and distinctions. I will define postmodernism, secularization, political and ontological secularity and post-secularity.

1.1 FIELD OF RESEARCH & CENTRAL CONCEPTS

The argument thfat the postmodern condition forces us to regauge secularity is relatively simple: Secularity is one of the central achievements of modernity. When in postmodern philosophy the credentials of modernity are under severe criticism, the secular character of modernity is called into question as well. Secularity has always been one of the most typical features of the modern project. Modernity can, without exaggeration, be described as '...a secular movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organization in order to liberate human beings from their chains.'[5] Enlightenment philosophy is considered as emancipation from the tutelage of institutions and traditions and inaugurated the autonomization of reason.[6] Postmodern critique of the foundations of modernity has ramifications for the political meaning of secularity.[7] I therefore distinguish between secularization, ontological secularity and political secularity.

In the first place I single out the secular as dealing with the socio-historical process of secularization. This socio-historical use is the most speculative use of the concept and it often functions to suggest a certain legitimation to contingent history. Subsequently, I will distinguish between a meaning of secularity in an ontological sense and secularity in a political sense.[8]

Ontological secularity concerns the (relative) autonomy of the world and the human capacity to know this world. A.E. Loen, for instance, speaks of the *Säkularisation*

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[4] Anthony Giddens, *The consequences of modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 109-110.

[5] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Malden: Blackwell, 1990), 13.

[6] As for example in Kant's philosophy. Kant writes: "Daß die Menschen, wie die Sachen jetzt stehen, im ganzen genommen, schon im Stande wären, oder darin auch nur gesetzt werden könnten, in Religionsdingen sich ihres eigenen Verstandes ohne Leitung eines andern sicher und gut zu bedienen." Immanuel Kant, 'Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?', in: Ehrhard Bahr, editor, *Was ist Aufklärung? Thesen und Definitionen. Kant, Erhard, Hamann, Herder, Lessing, Mendelssohn, Riem, Schiller, Wieland* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 1974), A491.

[7] See Ankersmit for epistemology and political philosophy as interconnected vessels. He speaks of a policing of reality in Rorty's philosophy of solidarity. Frank Ankersmit, 'De grondslagenvijandige politieke filosofie van Richard Rorty', in: Rene Boomkens, editor, *De asceet, de tolk, en de verteller. Richard Rorty en het denken van het Westen* (Amsterdam: Krisis Onderzoek, 1992), 58–75.

[8] This distinction between an ontological and a political account of secularity accords with Monod's definition, which contains two elements: first, a departure from religion as a dominant sector of culture and second, a self affirmation of man as a reasonable being. Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 23.

des kosmischen Weltbildes.[9] The emergence of a scientific attitude in modernity changed the relation of man and world. In the place of speculative knowledge of reality, rational thought concerns the inner nature and regularity of the world. Implied here is that the relation to the world changes from an experience of belonging to the world to an experience of mastering the world.[10]

Political secularity concerns the relation of religion to various domains of society and the state. Social institutions '. . . become gradually distinct from one another and increasingly free of the matrix of religious assumptions.'[11] Political secularity in a modern sense refers to a social ordering where religion plays a limited role, or no role at all, in civil affairs. Moral and social life are no longer experienced as participating in an *ordo*, but are redefined as autonomous domains from the ground up. In the following chapters those aspects will continuously be distinguished, they can however not be treated in complete isolation from each other.

1.1.1 Secularization

In the nineteenth century, the critique of religion is expressed in the terminology of positivist science, as for example in Comte.[12] In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, secularism is a standard assumption for virtually every intellectual.[13] Secularity as the *often unstated* assumption of modernity plays a role that is as important as it is obscure. The irony Casanova sees in the modern, intellectual mindset is that the most central assumption is itself neither tested, nor explicitly developed as a theory. Nevertheless, the assumption was that religion in the end would wither away. Van der Veer's apt description of this tradition goes as follows:

> From Kant to Habermas there is a liberal Enlightenment tradition in the West which emphasizes the public use of reason as the arbiter of true knowledge. In this tradition religious arguments are seen as disruptive in the public sphere and thus to be relegated to a private sphere.[14]

Throughout the twentieth century, the project of modernity has been criticized, but not neccesarily its secularity. The *Frankfurter Schule* criticized the rationalistic and bureaucratic nature of modernity, but not its secular nature. And in the post-war period

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[9] He writes: "Säkularisation ist der historische Prozess der allmählichen Ersetzung des mittelalterlich-thomistischen durch das moderne Weltbild." Arnold Loen, *Säkularisation* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1965), 18.

[10] Antoon Vergote, *Het meerstemmige leven. Gedachten over mens en religie* (Kapellen: DBN, 1987), 94.

[11] Bryan R. Wilson, 'Secularization', in: Lindsay Jones, editor, *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (Gacl, 2002), 8214.

[12] Positivism is typically secular in the sense of Kolakowski's definition: ". . . positivism constantly directs its criticism against both religious interpretations of the world and materialist metaphysics, and tries to work out an empirical position entirely free of metaphysical positions." Leszek Kolakowski, *Positivist Philosophy. From Hume to the Vienna Circle* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 19.

[13] Casanova writes: ". . . from Karl Marx to John Stuart Mill, from Auguste Comte to Herbert Spencer, from E.B. Tylor to James Frazer, from Ferdinand Tönnies to Georg Simmel, from Émile Durkheim to Max Weber, from Wilhelm Wundt to Sigmund Freud, from Lester Ward to William G. Sumner, from Robert Park to George H. Mead. Indeed, the consensus was such that not only did the theory remain uncontested but apparently it was not even necessary to test it, since everybody took it for granted." Jose Casanova, *Public religions in the modern world* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 17.

[14] Peter van der Veer, 'The modernity of religion', *Social History* 20/3 (1995), 369.

in Europe, the anti-ideological philosophies of Sartre and Camus rejected the central features of modernity, but wholeheartedly endorsed its secularism. It is therefore fair to say that not until the postmodern era, has secularity itself been subjected to a philosophical critique.

The postmodern era in philosophy begins with the publications of Lyotard and Rorty.[15] Their primary targets were a dominant, scientific rationality and the tradition of positivism. Postmodern criticism belies the neutrality of scientific discourse and interprets it as a part of a dominant, Western tradition. Although Rorty's philosophy is in many ways in continuity with secularism, there is in postmodernism from the outset a religious dynamic that no longer takes for granted the secular character of philosophy.[16]

In postmodernity it became possible to break with the secular tradition, for reasons that are closely related to the epistemological critique of postmodernity. Postmodernism bid farewell to the abstract and ahistorical reasonings of transcendental and analytical philosophy and took a more positive attitude toward tradition and history.[17] For Rorty, all human thinking is situated historically. In his historistic approach the idea is crucial that a scientific and political culture is always to be conceived of as a historical, or temporal construct. This, in Rorty's eyes, makes it impossible to argue for the legitimacy of knowledge by referring to direct observation or to base politics on absolute principles. Postmodern historicism makes every stereotypical image of a secular culture as non- or anti-religious problematic. The postmodern critique of such honorifics as 'neutrality', 'objectivity' etc. changes the relation of religion to 'secular' culture incisively. For when we epistemologically underscore the historical and social situatedness of rationality, there are no hard criteria to decide on religious beliefs and the demarcation between the religious and the secular, the public and the private and so on. Although Rorty himself has not applied his epistemological critique to the concept of secularity, other postmodern writers, such as Derrida and Vattimo, have taken a whole new perspective on religion and have introduced religious concepts and perspectives into hermeneutic philosophy.

The modern account of secularity is determined to a great extent by a positivist rationality. In postmodernity, this account of secularity is no longer taken for granted. The transition from a modern to a postmodern rationality makes the idea of secularity, implicit in modernity as an anti-religious notion, less plausible. If secular society is itself constructed in a narrative fashion, how credible are its claims to religious neutrality and its 'timeless' principles of liberty and equality? Owen, for instance, asserts with regard to the failure to ground secularity: "If liberalism is a faith, what becomes of the

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[15] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). For Lyotard see: Jean-Francois Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983).

[16] As McClay explains the role of postmodernism: "…Western secularism's claims to universal truth and impersonal rationality are decried as a form of cognitive imperialism. As a result, the claims of religion are no longer so easily bracketed as speculative and subjective. In the postmodern dispensation, where knowledge is understood as inseparable from the discourse of particular communities, religious assertions have as good a claim as anything else, and a better one than most on the mantle of 'truth'" Wilfred M. McClay, 'Two Concepts of Secularism', *The Wilson Quarterly* 24 (Summer) (2000).

[17] Kevin Vanhoozer, 'Theology and the condition of postmodernity. A report on knowledge (of God)', in: *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 10,11.

separation of Church and state?"[18] The postmodern-pragmatic position, as defended by Rorty, thus challenges the traditional report on secularity and might even provoke an *Ideenstreit* between religious and secular perspectives.[19]

The concept of secularity is used in a variety of ways and fields of research.[20] It is applied in the sciences, when science is seen as dealing only with the immanent world. The history of science can in this light be defined as a history of secularization.[21] In the nineteenth and twentieth century, a whole set of cultural phenomena are explained in terms of secularization. For example, Max Weber has explained capitalism as a secularized Calvinism.[22] In art, secularization is used to describe the changed role of creative expression. Modern painting expresses less and less the possibility of metaphysical comfort. In this sense the work of Edward Hopper for example has been called secularized.[23] In literary criticism, Fens has written on the stature of literature in the time of modern media and pop art and concludes that 'literature is secularized.'[24] This tally could be continued with examples from virtually every domain of culture and science. It is necessary therefore to limit the range of meanings that will be discussed in this study.

1.1.2 *Ontological Secularity*

The former section dealt with secularization. Secularization is often used in a quite speculative, socio-historic sense. The concept is employed more concrete in two contexts. In the first place in the context of the relation between the religious and the political. The second context concerns the secular as a 'definition of reality'.[25] Secularization processes not only deal with the 'horizontal' relation between domains of culture, such as the social, the political and the Church. Secularization also applies to 'vertical' relation between the transcendent and the immanent. Secularization is used in an ontological meaning, when it expresses a sense of immanentization. The secularity of the world refers to the idea that less and less religious and philosophical presup-

[18] Judd Owen, *Religion and the Demise of Liberal Rationalism: The Foundational Crisis of the Separation of Church and State* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2001), 1.

[19] See Yong Huang, *Religious Goodness & Political Rightness. Beyond the Liberal-Communitarian Debate* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001), 128. See also Bowlin on the non-foundational character of philosophy as *Geistesgeschichte* in Rorty and Milbank in: John Milbank, 'Introduction: Parts, Wholes, and Opposites. Milbank as *Geisteshistoriker*', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32 (2) (2004), 264-268.

[20] Owen Chadwick, *The secularization of the European mind in the nineteenth century*, The Gifford Lectures in the University of Edinburgh for 1973-1974 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 264.

[21] Steffen Ducheyne, 'Seculariserende tendensen in Newtons onto-theologie', *Algemeen Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Wijsbegeerte* 98/1 (2006).

[22] M.M.W. Lemmen, *De godsdienstsociologie van Max Weber. Haar methode en inhoud aan de hand van het rationaliteitsbegrip* (Nijmegen: Dekker & Van de Vegt, 1977), 165-167.

[23] Ivo Kranzfelder, *Hopper* (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2000).

[24] Fens writes: "Het werk, het boek is niet langer het hiernamaals van de schrijver, hoogstens zijn aarde, in de slechtste gevallen zijn vagevuur. De literatuur lijkt . . . geseculariseerd." Kees Fens, 'Verboden in de halen. Wegversmalling. Toekomstperspectieven van de Nederlandse letterkunde', *Raster* 6(3) (1972), 272-3.

[25] I take this term from Nijk, who speaks of secularity as a 'werkelijkheidsdefinitie'. As Nijk sees it, a dominant concern in modern theories of secularization is to save from Christianity, which is crumbling down in modernity, a definition of reality. The argument in Gogarten and Van Leeuwen is that secularization in fact remains with the Christian definition of reality as the autonomous domain, clearly separated from God. A.J. Nijk, *Secularisatie. Over het gebruik van een woord* (Rotterdam: Lemniscaat, 1968), 326-330.

positions are taken for granted.[26] In theology, this secularization is acutely relevant, because traditional theology entirely depended on the reality of such transcendent entities as God, revelation and scriptural inspiration. A secularized approach to religion deals with religion as a 'social system ... legitimated by claims to the authority of some superhuman power'.[27]

Philosophers of religion do not interpret the postmodern condition unambiguously. As Kevin Vanhoozer explains, "... the postmodern condition would seem to be a swing back to the authority of tradition, in particular, to the authority of interpretative traditions."[28] For Vanhoozer, the postmodern turn might turn out positive for religious discourse. Under postmodern parameters, the traditional criticism of religion no longer makes sense. As postmoderns realize that there is not one single epistemic rule, but that different contexts have different epistemic standards, it becomes plausible for Vanhoozer to say that the testimony of the Bible, for example, can provide a serious 'epistemological standard'.[29]

This postmodern turn can be very well understood as a counter reaction to reductionist tendencies in post-war theology. Harvey Cox, for one, has proposed to rephrase traditional theology in innerworldly terms. David Martin writes about Cox' book *The Secular City* that '... one only needs to prod beneath the surface to find the three Comtean stages of history: the theological, the metaphysical, and the stage of positive science.'[30] In protestant theology, the secular character was even more emphasized in the report *Church for Others* of the World Council of Churches. A protestant theologian like Bonhoeffer called for a more *weltliche Theologie*, that was formulated *etsi deus non daretur*.[31] The secular turn in theology can be partly understood against the background of the tremendous prestige of the sciences and the idea that the traditional, religious vocabulary was no longer convincing. As Houtepen notes, the radical death-of-God theologies of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, were formulated against the background of a positivistic concept of truth.[32] Likewise, Van Buren sees his secular theology as designed for those who take empiricist thought more or less for granted.[33]

[26] For the 'secularity of the world', see: Hans Weder, 'Appendix: Metaphor and Reality', in: John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, editors, *The End of the World and the Ends of God* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2000), 293. Ahmet Davutoglu makes a similar disctinction. He speaks of an institutional and an ontological level of secularization. Ahmet Davutoglu, 'Philosophical and Institutional Dimensions of Secularisation. A Comparative Analysis', in: Azzam Tamimi and John L. Esposito, editors, *Islam and Secularization in the Middle East* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000), 176

[27] Luther H. Martin, 'Secular Theory and the academic study of religion', in: Mikael Rothstein and Tim Jensen, editors, *Secular Theories on Religion: Current Perspectives* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000), 141.

[28] Vanhoozer, 'Theology and postmodernity', 149.

[29] "... this testimony is not only irreducible, but scripture should enjoy epistemic and existential primacy in the life of the Church.' Vanhoozer, 'Theology and postmodernity', 167.

[30] David Martin, *The Religious and the Secular. Studies in Secularization* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 71.

[31] Anton Houtepen, 'Getemperd ongeduld: J.C. Hoekendijk', in: A. De Groot en O.J. De Jong, editor, *Vier eeuwen theologie in Utrecht: bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van de theologische faculteit aan de Universiteit Utrecht* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2001), 297.

[32] Anton Houtepen, *Theology of the 'Saeculum'. A study in the concept of 'saeculum' in the documents of vatican II and the world council of churches, 1961-1972* (Kampen: Kok, 1974), 23.

[33] He speaks of "... certain empirical attitudes which we feel may be widely shared by Christians in the West today." Paul van Buren, *The secular meaning of the gospel based on an analysis of its language* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 193. Van Buren defends a modified verification principle. For the relation of analycity and secularity in Van Buren's theology, see Henk Vroom, *De Schrift alleen?* (Kampen: Kok, 1979), 114-115.

Secularization in theology means that the religious is seen as dependent on super-natural claims, that have become increasingly implausible in modernity. Gabriel Vaha-nian for example writes that discussions about the secular usually are '...governed by a false notion of a dichotomy between the sacred and the profane: by the assumption that religion necessarily and exclusively means supernaturalism and by the presupposition that the reality of God stands or falls with the possibility of a substantialist metaphysics or any of its latter-day variants.'[34] Death-of-God-theology functioned against the back-ground of a very specific account of truth and rationality. This point needs some em-phasis, because those theologies are often seen as themselves already postmodern. But exactly in defining themselves in opposition to modern science, they are entirely depen-dent on it. As Winquist sees it, radical theology was a 'catching up with the hermeneu-tics of suspicion but was not yet postmodern.'[35] The 'scienticist' background changes in the advent of postmodernity and this incisively changes the perspective on religion. The postmodern turn for the first time in the twentieth century opens the possibility of a radical critique of modern secularity.

This is only one side of the story and it is often told by those who have a positive valu-ation of the return of religion. Others argue that the postmodern turn is a more radical achievement of secular immanence. In this interpretation of the postmodern condition, possibilities for a renewed understanding of religious discourse are downright rejected. For instance, Gilles Deleuze has argued that absolute immanence is the mark of the postmodern.[36] Although the immanentism of Deleuze has certain mystic overtones, it is entirely constructed as a secular discourse, which precludes the possibility of tran-scendence.

Likewise, Jean Baudrillard is even more radical, as he considers the possibility of an unambiguous relation to immanence as utterly problematic. Baudrillard speaks of a 'murder of the real' in postmodernism and defines the conception of reality in post-modernism as illusory.[37]

Very close to Baudrillard's approach is Peter Sloterdijk's project of *spherology*: a postmodern, philosophical anthropology and philosophy of culture. The central ques-tion for philosophy always has been, says Sloterdijk: 'What is man?', but it should be: 'Where is man?'[38] In a voluminous work on spheres of life, Sloterdijk investigates

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[34] Gabriel Vahanian, 'God and Secularity', *Theology Today* 25 (1968).

[35] Charles E. Winquist, 'Postmodern secular theology', in: Clayton Crockett, editor, *Secular Theology. American radical theological thought* (London: Routledge, 2001), 27.

[36] Deleuze writes: "Although it is always possible to invoke a transcendent that falls outside the plane of immanence, or that attributes immanence to itself, all transcendence is constituted solely in the flow of immanent consciousness that belongs to this plane. Transcendence is always a product of immanence." Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence. Essays on a Life* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 30-1. As Oosterling has elucidated Deleuze's concept of the plane of immanence, it should not be confused with mere materialism. "It is neither a concept, nor a meta-concept, but it is the invisible, unnameable source of light things stand out against. It is the place where the empirical and the transcendental, the outer and the inner are completely entangled. Immanence is at the same time the most intimate imaginable and the absolute outer." Henk Oosterling, *Door schijn bewogen. Naar een hyperkritiek van de xenophobe rede* (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1996), 444.

[37] See Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). Welsch sketches Baudrillard's view on reality as follows: "Das Reale ...existiert nicht mehr, weil es von seinen klassischen Kontrasten wie Beschreibung, Deutung, Abbildung, nicht mehr unterschieden werden kann." Wolfgang Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne* (Weinheim: VSH, 1988), 149.

[38] Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären I. Blasen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 644.

what in late modernity, in a time of global destruction of our lifeworld, a credible relation of man to his environment might look like. Theological conceptualizations play a dominant role for Sloterdijk to express the problematic experience of the world in postmodernity. But even though, for example, trinitarian theology plays a considerable role for his conceptualization of the postmodern condition, it is clear for him that today the possibility of transcendence is excluded. All we can hope for is an 'ecstatic immanence'. In this sense, Sloterdijk too, sees the postmodern condition as a secular condition. Sloterdijk sees the modern world as an heir of Christianity. In Christianity, there was an ascetic experience. Sloterdijk sketches a continuing secularization in Christianity, from a rigid dualism, through monasticism, to a more worldly experience. In expressive language, Sloterdijk says that first the anachoretics left the desert behind and became monastic monks, later the monks left the monastery and in modernity, *contemptus mundi* entirely disappeared. Finally the world has been accepted as all there is. But does this really bring man to live in this world alone? No, says Sloterdijk. Living in this world alone is impossible for modern and postmodern man, for the same process that killed God, destructs any form of inherited traditios and belief.[39] The myth of Western analytic science and philosophy was that man is most fundamentally an individual. Sloterdijk asserts that coexistence precedes existence and that man most fundamentally exceeds his existence in an ecstatic immanence.[40]

In the history of Western thought, immanence is increasingly important. After the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and positivism, postmodernism, increasingly inhabits immanence, attempting to see it no longer as contrasting transcendence. Sloterdijk's philosophy can be seen as a continuation of this tradition of 'non-dialectical materialism'. The secular is the absolutely immanent. Sloterdijk's emphasis is on the anthropological inclination to create inner worlds. Man creates spheres of intimacy and immunity that protect him from the outer world: the more fundamental *Ungeheure*, or *das Grosse*. The presence of *das Grosse* gives Sloterdijk's 'vitalistic materialism' an undertone of despair.

1.1.3 Political Secularity

In the socio-political context, secularity refers to the autonomy of politics with regard to religion. The term secularization has been used in the last two hundred years in a variety of ways, sometimes to express opposite ideas. It has been used in German idealism to give an account of the continuity between Christianity and Enlightenment Europe. For others, secularization was the watchword of those who wanted to free Europe from all remnants of Christendom. As a political doctrine it functioned after the French Revolution to legitimize the repression of the Church in Germany.[41] In the second half of the twentieth century, it functioned to describe a process of religious decline in Western societies. The secularization theories then were determined to a great extent by a positivist and progressive view: science would gradually replace religion in Western

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[39] Sjoerd van Tuinen, *Sloterdijk. Binnenstebuiten denken* (Kampen: Klement Pelckmans, 2004), 53.

[40] Van Tuinen, 57.

[41] See for a comprehensive discussion: Nijk, 1-79. And see also: Jan Bremmer, 'Secularization: Notes Toward a Genealogy', in: Hent de Vries, editor, *Religion. Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 432–437

societies. The secular rationale on its turn guarantees neutrality and objectivity, to be preferred over religious prejudices. Philosopher of law Scheltens asserts that 'the secular provides a space where one can argue following no particular view of life but in a universal mode and on a purely human basis.'[42]

That positivistic paradigm has now been largely abandoned. Especially in the face of the horrors of the second World War, radical doubts were cast on the progressive and 'humanitarian' character of the Enlightenment. "Aufklärung ist totalitär, wie nur irgendein System," write Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialektik der Aufklärung*.[43] They no longer believe that science and rationalization can help us overcome the powers of myth and religion. Rather, they see the scientific age as a radicalization and the ultimate victory of a mythological worldview.[44] In the postmodern era the strong belief in a progressive rationalization and the possibility of a secular culture has been shattered.

The postmodern uncertainty concerning the foundations of modern secularity does not leave modern secularity untouched.[45] Doubts are cast on the possibility of an absolute justification of secularity. When we take seriously the criticism of the postmodern and post-colonial voices,[46] who regard secularism as an aspect of Western imperialism, it is possible to re-evaluate typically modern developments, such as rationalization, differentiation and secularization.[47] Social theorist Jürgen Habermas defends, in the face of these circumstances, an autonomous, procedural secularity. Habermas holds that the '...constitution of the liberal state is self-sufficient with regard to its need for legitimation, that is, that it can draw upon the resources of a set of arguments that are independent of religious and metaphysical traditions.'[48]

In contemporary social thought, there are two opposite reactions to the postmodern condition and the return of religion. The first reaction welcomes the new vitality of religion and proposes a reconsideration of the liberal interpretation of secularity. For them, the postmodern condition enables us to leave secularization behind and ushers

[42] He writes: "De christelijke levensvisie moet de mens ertoe brengen, met elke mens, ongeacht zijn levensvisie, op seculiere en louter humane basis in gesprek te gaan en samen te werken." D.F. Scheltens, *Open en gesloten seculariteit*, Afscheidsrede uitgesproken bij zijn heengaan als hoogleraar in de wijsbeegerte van het recht, aan de Katholieke Universiteit te Nijmegen (Nijmegen, 1989), 1.

[43] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1988), 31.

[44] They write: "In der aufgeklärten Welt ist Mythologie in die Profanität eingegangen. Das von den Dämonen und ihren begrifflichen Abkömmlingen gründlich gereinigte Dasein nimmt in seiner blanken Natürlichkeit den numinosen Charakter an, den die Vorwelt den Dämonen zuschob. Unter dem Titel der brutalen Tatsachen wird das gesellschaftliche Unrecht, aus dem diese hervorgehen, heute so sicher als ein dem Zugriff ewig sich entziehendes geheiligt, wie der Medizinmann unter dem Schutze seine Götter sakrosankt war. Nicht bloss mit der Entfremdung der Menschen von den beherrschten Objekten wird für die Herrschaft bezahhlt: mit der Versachlichung des Geistes wurden die Beziehungen der Menschen selber verhext, auch die jedes einzelnen zu sich. ...Der Animismus hatte die Sache beseelt, der Industrialismus versachlicht die Seelen." Horkheimer and Adorno, 34.

[45] Peter van Rooden, 'Vroomheid, macht, verlichting', *De Achttiende Eeuw* 32 (2000), 57-58.

[46] See for a post-colonial critique of secularization in the Arab world Tariq Ramadan, 'Democratie in islamitisch perspectief', *De Helling. Kwartaalblad voor linkse politiek* 1 (2008).

[47] As Heelas notes: "It is arguably the case that dedifferentiation has also taken place with regard to the secular-sacred boundary. In measure, the religious has become less obviously religious, the secular less obviously secular." Paul Heelas, 'Introduction: on differentiation and dedifferentiation', in: Paul Heelas, David Martin and Paul Morris, editors, *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

[48] Jürgen Habermas, 'The secular liberal state and religion', in: Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, editors, *Political Theologies. Public religions in a post-secular world* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 251-260.

in an entirely new understanding of religion and secularity. A good example of this position is offered by John Caputo, who understands the postmodern condition as essentially a post-secular condition.[49]

The other response contests the desirability of some form of post-secularity. According to them, postmodernism requires an affirmation of secularization. According to philosopher of law Paul Cliteur, for example, postmodern pluralism and relativism call for clear, secular principles for public morals and politics and a reaffirmation of the separation of Church and state.[50] Likewise Herman Philipse suggests that Dutch society would be better off if it were modeled on the French principle of *laïcité*.[51]

These two positions are not merely philosophical debates. They are reflected in the actual debates over the position of religion in the Netherlands. Appeals to secularity are heard in discussions on the influence of religion in schools. The classical debate on religious schools was always about Christian and to some extent Jewish denominations. Only recently has the Muslim minority founded Islamic primary schools. This has given the debate on religious schools a second life. Comparable debates are occasioned by the funding of religious, political parties. On September 7th. 2005, the court in The Hague decided that orthodox-reformed party SGP (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij) was no longer to receive government subsidies. In December 2007, the court of appeals reversed the judgment.[52] Public funding of religious broadcasting corporations and various other cases demonstrate that secularity is intensely debated in the Netherlands. As in many other European countries, there is a lively debate on the relation between state, society, and religion. On the level of scholarly reflection on these issues, one of the most striking examples of a rather positive evaluation of the return of religion is provided by the publication of the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) which published an extensive report on religion and the public domain.[53] Van de Donk and others see the need for a positive contribution of religion to Dutch society.

The debate on secularism is fueled by several incidents of religious terror in the Netherlands. Especially after the religiously motivated murder of film director Theo van Gogh, the debate has a certain urgency. A scholar in the science of politics, Buijs, has argued that the state can no longer be a neutral spectator, but has to interfere actively in religious affairs and has to encourage moderate and tolerant forms of religion and is called to oppose those groups that set out to weaken, or even throw down liberal institutions.[54] An insistence on state neutrality and secularity as a separation of Church and state is not likely to serve this purpose. Kennedy and Valenta express a similar concern when they voice the question '...if and how the state can reassert its supervisory role over religion's public role in the face of the increasing independence and diversification of Dutch religious life.'[55]

[49] Caputo, *On Religion*, 37-49.

[50] Paul Cliteur, *Moreel esperanto* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 2007).

[51] Annette van der Elst and Herman Philipse, 'Sprekende denkers', *Filosofie Magazine* 14(2) (2005), 10–13.

[52] See for background information and the exact reasoning of the court. Sophie van Bijsterveld, 'Scheiding van kerk en staat: een klassieke norm in een moderne tijd', in: Wim van de Donk et al., editors, *Geloven in het publieke domein. Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 227–260.

[53] Wim van de Donk et al., editors, *Geloven in het publieke domein. Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006). For Belgium and France see Alain Dierkens, editor, *Laïcité et sécularisation dans l'Union européenne* (Bruxelles: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2006).

[54] Frank Buijs, "Overheid moet scheiding kerk en staat nu loslaten", *Trouw* June 15th. (2006).

[55] James Kennedy and Markha Valenta, 'Religious pluralism and the Dutch state. Reflections on the

In the political landscape, Christian democratic parties too are inclined to welcome religion as a social factor and advocate a less strict separation of religion and politics. According to them, the secularity of society does not imply an anti-religious policy, but allows – much more than, for example, in France – for religion to be visible in the public sphere. A Christian-democratic approach, as opposed to *laïcité*, sees a secular society as compatible with religious devotion and sees religion as a means to social integration and emancipation. The flourishing of a democratic society cannot allow its isolation from moral and religious sources: rather it needs these sources for its survival.[56]

Others see the return of religion and postmodern relativism as a potential threat to the future of liberal society and call for a renewed understanding of secularity.[57] For these researchers, the changes in the religious landscape make it necessary to question the privileged position of religious groups and churches in the legal system. This privileged position comes out most of all in the extent to which they have an internal, judicial practice, that has a great deal of autonomy with regard to public law. The question in the present situation then is: is this autonomy also to be applied to, for example, Islam and the sharia?[58]

The relation of secular society to Islam gives the debate a special urgency. According to social theorists such as Sam Harris, the threat of religious fanaticism makes it all the more urgent to underscore secularity as a necessary precondition for freedom. "We can only hope that the forces of secularism and rationality will keep the missiles in their silos for a while yet", asserts Harris dramatically.[59] The emergence of political Islam started in the early twentieth century, but has caused serious concerns only recently. The clash of civilizations between the secular West and the Muslim world, has given way to publications that reflect on the specific dynamic between the Islam and secular discourse. A very influential study in this respect is Talal Assad's *Formations of the secular*. Asad criticizes the typically modern privatization of religion and asserts that when religious believers enter the public sphere, they also express their views on '. . . how the economy should be run, or which scientific projects should be publicly funded, or what the broader aims of a national education system should be.'[60]

future of Article 23', in: Wim van de Donk et al., editors, *Geloven in het publieke domein* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 337–351.

[56] Ernst Hirsch Ballin, 'De ideële wortels moeten de rechtstaat blijven voeden', *Christendemocratische Verkenningen* Zomer (2006), 262. And Marcel ten Hooven, 'Religie verdeelt Nederland. Een oude scheidslijn in een nieuwe gedaante', in: Marcel ten Hooven and Theo de Wit, editors, *Ongewenste Goden. De publieke rol van religie in Nederland* (Amsterdam: Sun, 2006), 20.

[57] The 2008 report 'Schurende relaties tussen recht en religie" writes: "In combinatie met de opkomst van nieuwe godsdiensten, zoals de Islam leidt dit proces ertoe dat het waardensysteem in Nederland niet meer homogeen is en het pluralisme meer verscheidenheid vertoont dan ooit te voren. Van een homogene publieke moraal kan niet langer gesproken worden. Er breekt een nieuwe fase aan in het traditioneel verdedigde standpunt van scheiding tussen kerk en staat in Nederland. Er dient gezocht te worden naar de wijze waarop aan die verhouding in een geseculariseerde samenleving waarin het religieuze deel van de bevolking sterk heterogeen van aard is een nieuwe invulling kan worden gegeven." F.T. Oldenhuis et al., *Schurende relaties tussen recht en religie* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2007), ⟨URL: http://www.gmw.rug.nl/~elm/iswsite/Schurenderelaties.pdf⟩, 12.

[58] The existence of such tribunals in the UK and the Netherlands gives great offense to the political right. The political left, arguing from a multiculturalist perspective, sees such tribunals as positive contributions to society. 'See for instance: Harry Veenendaal, 'Shariarechtbanken geen bedreiging voor rechtstaat' (2009), 11.

[59] Sam Harris, *The End of Faith. Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 225.

[60] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University

An interesting book from the perspective of Muslim intellectuals is *Islam and Secularism*.[61] In particular the contribution of Abdelwhab Elmessiri[62] offers highly challenging reflections on secularism as a discourse that is much more than a set of rules for plural societies, it is itself a *Weltanschauung* at odds with other *Weltanschauungen* such as Islam and Christianity.

A more favorable attitude toward the coexistence of Islam and secularism is offered by Sadik Al-Azm. He points toward paradoxical developments in the Western world, such as the way orthodox Muslims perceive the situation in Saudi-Arabia, where the monarchy promotes an ultra-orthodox Islam in a highly modernized society and doing so in fact promotes a strict separation of religion and public life. Orthodox Muslims contest this state of affairs and plead for a more 'secularized' version of Islam, that integrates more in social life.[63]

Political secularity is by some promoted as the most promising perspective for non-western nations, while others discredit it as a Western heritage, that in a post-colonial context needs to be challenged seriously. What makes the debate on Islam and secularism relevant is that it is a test case for the possibility of a secular sphere outside the influence of Christianity. In a challenging study on the political authority of secularism, Elisabeth Hurd makes a case for a more 'provincial' account of secularism. In the face of failed attempts to export democracy to countries with a different religious history, it becomes clear that secularism has very specific theological roots that cannot be understood as a purely formal, political mechanism.[64] She deems it necessary to distinguish between two sorts of secularism: Judeo-Christian secularism and laicism:

> Laicism refers to a separationist narrative in which religion is expelled from politics, and Judeo-Christian secularism refers to an accommodationist narrative in which Judeo-Christian tradition is perceived to be the foundation of secular democracy.[65]

Many debates on secularity turn on the idea that secularity means that society and public deliberation are – or ought to be – atheistic. Especially in the French ideal of *laïcité* this is the case.[66] Traditionally the model of *laïcité* entails a strict separation between church and politics, but it is not the only possible meaning of secularity in a modern, Western society, as many politicians and opinion leaders suggest.[67] The model of *laïcité* seems to be a very contextual arrangement as it functions most of all

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Press, 2003).

[61] Azzam Tamimi and John L. Esposito, editors, *Islam and Secularization in the Middle East* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000).

[62] Abdelwhab Elmessiri, 'Secularism, Immanence, and Deconstruction', in: Azzam Tamimi and John L. Esposito, editors, *Islam and Secularization in the Middle East* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000).

[63] Sadik Al-Azm, 'Islam en secularisatie', in: Fatima Mernissi, Sadik Al-Azm and Abdulkarim Soroush, editors, *Religie en Moderniteit* (Amsterdam: De Geus, 2004), 154.

[64] See: Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, 'The Political Authority of Secularism in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 10 (2004). See also: Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 36.

[65] Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, 'Secularism and international relations' (2008), ⟨URL: http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/category/secularism-international-relations⟩.

[66] See on laïcité Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 30. and Yolande Jansen, 'Laïcité, or the Politics of Republican Secularism', in: Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, editors, *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

[67] For some contributions in the Dutch secularity debate see August Hans den Boef, *Nederland Seculier!* (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 2003). See also Boris van der Ham, 'De Grondwet is niet joods-christelijk maar seculier', *NRC Next* 18 juli (2007).

in Roman Catholic countries, where a real tension has existed between the state and a powerful, hierarchic Church. In the countries where the protestant Reformation has been influential, such as Germany and the Scandinavian countries, the Church is much more allowed to play a role in public life.[68] The arrangement in the United Kingdom has even less in common with *laïcité*. The great role of common law, the existence of a state-Church and other political arrangements, show a model of secularity that is much closer to the medieval model of a duality of Church and state. It is in protestant countries that the term secular and its derivates are most often used.

The doctrine of *laïcité* prescribes a strict separation of the life of the *citoyen* and the religious beliefs of a person. It also defines education as a task of the state and there too religious influence is abjured.[69] The French constitution defines France as an 'indivisible, secular (laïque), democratic and social Republic, securing equality before the law for all its citizens without distinction of origin, race or religion'.[70] Audinet analyzes the French situation further and concludes that the idea of *laïcité* cannot deny the fact that at a deeper level there is a profound and enduring influence and formative power of religion in French culture. The connection between religion and politics – denied at an articulate level – appears to be very influential at an inarticulate level. The official denial of religion cannot hide, argues Audinet, that our whole idea of what it is to be in the world; our experience of time, social bodies, the experience of life and death are formed by the Christian tradition. Audinet asserts: "All the great symbols that enable identification of this secularized nation bear the impress of ages of religion."[71]

1.2 POSTMODERNISM AND SECULARITY: THE CURRENT DEBATE

The secularization debate has changed as a consequence of postmodern critique. The intertwinedess of secularization and the postmodernism debate can be clarified as follows: Against the background of postmodernism, philosophical attempts to provide a justification for liberal institutions have proved to be problematic. In the wake of a postmodern critique of philosophical foundationalism, there is a foundational crisis of liberal democracy. The alleged neutrality of secular discourse might itself be a highly normative worldview.[72] Those committed to political liberalism realize that modernity did not lead to a homogeneous secular and rational culture.[73] Defenders of secularity ask whether its 'philosophical foundations are sufficiently robust to support its political ambitions and whether political liberalism can provide citizens with reasons for acting

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[68] Van Gennip speaks of a French model of absolute separation and of a German model of cooperation in autonomy. Jos van Gennip, 'Religies en het publieke domein. Vier vragen bij de eigentijdse discussie', in: Henk Vroom and Henk Woldring, editors, *Religies in het publieke domein* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2002), 16.

[69] Jaques Audinet, 'A Culture without religion? The Case of France', *Concilium. International Journal for Theology* 136 (1980), 41.

[70] As cited in Jean-Paul Willaime, 'Teaching religious issues in French Public Schools', in: Robert Jackson et al., editors, *Religion and Education in Europe. Developments, Contexts and Debates* (Münster: Waxmann, 2007), 57–66.

[71] Audinet, 45.

[72] "Method is not innocent or neutral. It not only presupposes an understanding of what constitutes social and political life; it has become a powerful factor in shaping (or rather misshaping) human life in the modern world." Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 45.

[73] Eric MacGilvray, *Reconstructing Public Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 230.

in certain ways.'[74] The discourse of secularity, which is an inalienable part of political liberalism, has been claiming a neutrality with regard to views of life and sees itself as independent of a particular moral tradition or an idea of the good life.[75] This alleged neutrality has been challenged in recent years and those committed to the liberal ideal of religious neutrality have to ward off accusations of commitment to values that are prior to the liberal praxis itself. This not only leads to a crisis of legitimation of secularity, it is also accompanied by a renewed awareness of the liveliness of religion in the West and in the rest of the world.

The postmodern condition is a challenge for secularity as the context in which secularity is redefined. But what is the postmodern condition? For an initial definition of the term I will make no difference between, for example, post-structuralism and postmodernism and, for example, the archaeological theories of Foucault, the psychoanalytic strand in postmodernism as in the work of Slavoj Žižek. I regard such criticisms of modernity as postmodern, in the sense Welsch ascribes to it, when he writes on Lyotard:

> Die Grundthese ... ist die von der Verabschiedung der Meta-Erzählung der Neuzeit ... und ihrer Nachfolgeformen. Die Grundoption gilt dem Übergang zur Pluralität, zur Anerkennung und Beförderung der heterogenen Sprachspiele in ihrer Autonomie und Irreduzibilität. Die Verteidigung der unterschiedlichen Lebenswelten, Sinnwelten und Anspruchswelten macht die emphatische Inspiration dieses philosophischen Postmodernismus aus.[76]

Philosophically, I regard postmodernism as a post-foundationalism and in epistemology a non- or anti-representationalism. Further characteristics are a critique of the correspondence theory of truth and of the idea of objective knowledge about the world. Postmodernism is not a strict philosophical doctrine, but essentially an experience of discontent with modernity or aspects of modernity. In this respect we should not understand the term postmodern in a chronological sense. The postmodern can be seen as a radicalization of anti-rationalistic, romantic objections that have been raised since the Enlightenment.[77] In some radical forms of postmodernism, such as Derrida's and Lyotard's free, differential play, any integrated account of a process of secularization is implausible. They tend to replace the entire ontological and political constellation with a post-secular philosophy of difference, whereas more moderate accounts of postmodernism tend to reconcile their positions with some discourse of secularization.

A good example of the latter is offered by Jürgen Habermas. He discusses the crisis of the legitimacy of secularity in his 2004 discussion with Joseph Ratzinger, the later pope Benedict XVI. According to him, secular society is challenged with the problem

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[74] Paul Kelly, *Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 112.

[75] We can think here of Habermas's 'morally neutral discourse principle', cogently commented upon by Apel in: Karl-Otto Apel, 'Regarding the relationship of morality, law and democracy: on Habermas's Philosophy of Law (1992) from a transcendental-pragmatic point of view', in: Mitchell Aboulafia, Myra Bookman and Catherine Kemp, editors, *Habermas and Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 2002), 17–30.

[76] Welsch, *Postmoderne Moderne*, 79.

[77] Molendijk writes: "The growing uneasiness about the project and the alleged blessings of modernity, which accompanied it almost since its beginnings, is radicalized by introducing the term 'postmodernity'. But if we define modernity by saying that it is structurally the legitimation of permanent change by human intervention, it is hard to see how 'postmodernity' could be something radically new compared to the old situation." Arie L. Molendijk, 'A Challenge to Philosophy of Religion', *Ars Disputandi* 1 (2001), 4.

of an autonomous legitimation of the democratic state, independent of religion and tradition. A secular culture that fails to justify its own morals, but is dependent for that on other sources (religion, tradition), is then a rather local affair and cannot per se offer a framework for any given culture in the pluralist society.[78] In this sense, the postmodern condition is a post-secular one. For if we define modernity as a growing autonomization of reason, postmodernity demonstrate the impossibility of such autonomy and thus of the secularity of culture. For Habermas, a proper definition of the post-secular would be the following:

> The expression post-secular does not merely acknowledge publicly the functional contribution that religious communities make to the reproduction of desired motives and attitudes. Rather, the public consciousness of post-secular society reflects a normative insight that has consequences for how believing and unbelieving citizens interact with one another politically. In post-secular society, the realization that the 'modernization of public consciousness' takes hold of and reflexively alters religious as well as secular mentalities in staggered phases is gaining acceptance. If together they understand the secularization of society to be a complementary learning process, both sides can, for cognitive reasons, then take seriously each other's contributions to controversial themes in the public sphere.[79]

For Habermas the modern account of secularity can no longer be taken for granted. With regard to the sociological process of secularization, he sees a trend that largely contradicts earlier expectations of the demise of religion. Having realized this, however, he sees no need to drastically reconsider the notion of secularity. Rather, the secular and the religious are preparing for their continued existence in modern liberal societies. It means, secondly, for Habermas, that society treats religion differently than expected under modern parameters. Religion is no longer banished to the private realm or the Church only, rather religion becomes fragmented and dispersed over many other sections of society and becomes instrumental to the goals of those sectors.

For Habermas, the question concerning the problematic foundation of a secular society, is a reason to give a more pragmatic account of secularity. His pragmatism falls out into two questions. First, whether the idea of a legitimation of liberal culture still applies and second, even if it were possible to provide for a legitimation, what the motivational worth of such a legitimation would be in a religiously and culturally plural society.[80] Whereas philosophy has widely abandoned the demand for a *Letztbegründung*, Habermas affirms the practical necessity of a secular culture. Liberal, secular society is

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[78] …das würde den zu weltanschaulicher Neutralität verpflichteten Staat zwar angesichts der Tatsache des Pluralismus (Rawls)in Bedrängnis bringen …Jürgen Habermas, 'Vorpolitische Grundlagen demokratischen Rechtstaates', in: Jürgen Habermas, Joseph Ratzinger and Florian Schuller, editors, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung. Über Vernunft und Religion* (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 16.

[79] Habermas, 'Secular liberal state', 258.

[80] "In kognitiver Hinsicht bezieht sich der Zweifel auf die Frage, ob politische Herrschaft nach der vollständige Positivierung des Rechts einer säkularen, das soll heissen einer nichtreligiösen oder nachmetaphysischen Rechtfertigung überhaupt noch zugänglich ist (1). Auch wenn eine solche Legitimation zugestanden wird, bleibt in motivotionaler Hinsicht der Zweifel bestehen, ob sich ein weltanschaulich pluralistisches Gemeinwesen durch die Unterstellung eines bestenfalls formalen, auf Verfahren und Prinzipien beschränkten Hintergrundeinverständnisses normativ, also über einen blossen *modus vivendi* hinaus stabilisieren lässt. Auch wenn sich dieser Zweifel ausräumen lässt, bleibt es dabei, dass liberale Ordnungen auf die Solidarität ihrer Staatsbürger angewiesen sind – und deren Quellen könnten infolge einer 'entgleisenden' Säkularisierung der Gesellschaft im ganzen versiegen." Habermas, 'Grundlagen'.

in the end entirely grounded in interhuman solidarity. In this sense, Habermas's notion of postsecularity is typically modern.

Habermas thus provides a clear example of current changes in the debate on secularity. On the one hand, he holds that typically modern groundings of secular political culture are no longer convincing. On the other hand, he does not reconsider secularity as a political directive, but rather argues for a more pragmatic justification of secularity. The definition of secularity in postmodern culture thus seems to have a certain pragmatic character. No theological or philosophical foundations are possible, but this does not lead us to abandon secularization, rather we need an encouraging pragmatic perspective on the course of Western society.

The confusion in Habermas on the difference between a postmodern or pragmatic secularism and post-secularity is very telling for the contemporary debate, not only in Europe but in the United States as well. A negotiation of the intersections of the sacred and the secular is undertaken there in the name of 'public theology'.[81] Postmodernism and especially Richard Rorty's postmodern pragmatism has had a far-reaching influence on this debate. Rorty's case is all the more interesting because he takes a radically historicist stand on epistemology, but is nevertheless strongly committed to the secularity of society and he opposes religion in the name of a secular humanism. In other words, for Rorty, postmodernism does not imply post-secularism. Rorty's philosophy makes it possible to obtain a view of the challenge postmodernism poses for secularity. Postmodern critique invites such questions as: What are the implications of postmodern, historicist critique for the demarcation of the secular and the religious? Does the sphere of the secular, coincide with the sphere of objective inquiry and religious neutrality? Or have such sharp demarcations become implausible under postmodern parameters?

The differences within the postmodern camp can be understood as a different valuation of secularity. Postmoderns as Rorty stress the continuity of postmodernism with modernity, whereas the more radical representatives try to cut the last ties that bind them to modernity, by working out a post-secular position. Often the terms postmodern and post-secular are used interchangeably. I want to distinguish between them in the following way: I see postmodern secularism as the reaffirmation of secularization in the context of postmodernism. The perspective of post-secularity, on the contrary, no longer reckons with traditional dualities such as that of the religious and the profane, religion and atheism, but construes a new functioning of religion, prior to or beyond the secular-sacred distinction.[82] Thus the chapter of secularity is closed and a post-secular perspective is opened. As Caputo says, post-secular thinkers try to go beyond the Enlightenment suspicion of religion and carve out a new space for religion in the modern world.[83] Post-secularism can thus be understood as the deconstruction of the antinomy

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[81] Victor Anderson, *Pragmatic Theology: Negotiating the Intersections of an American Philosophy of Religion and Public Theology* (New York: Suny Press, 1999). and Ronald Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology. The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Press, 1991). and Mary Doak, *Reclaiming Narrative for Public Theology* (New York: Suny Press, 2004). and Linell Cady, *Religion, Theology, and American Public Life* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993).

[82] The perspective of post-secularity, as defended for example by Lieven Boeve, entails that the postmodern condition leaves secularity behind as the context for theology. The new relevant context for theology and religion is plurality. Lieven Boeve, *God onderbreekt de geschiedenis. Theologie in tijden van ommekeer* (Kapellen: Pelckmans, 2006), 115-117.

[83] "…contemporary philosophers have grown increasingly weary with the 'old' Enlightenment. Their tendency has been more and more to unmask the modernist unmaskers, to criticize the modernist critiques,

of sacred and secular, and decisively differs from postmodern secularism.[84]

Post-secular thinkers try to unearth and criticize presuppositions of western, secular culture. In social theory, for instance, secularity implies the autonomy of a political economy. It is secular in the sense that no transcendent values or obligations can interfere in the economy. In both socialism and liberalism, secularity stands unchallenged. Bill Martin voices the question as to what would have happened if Marx and Engels had criticized secularity as an aspect of bourgeois culture.[85] The logic of this question applies to the relation of postmodernism and secularity as well: What if postmodern thinkers, in their critique of modernity, call into question not only its rationality, reductionism etc., but also its political secularism and secular immanentism? According to Martin, a postmodern perspective that does not question secularity is fated to be nothing more than a radicalized secularism. To his mind, a post-secular perspective would be truly liberating. He sees post-secularity as an alternative to a hyper-secular framework.[86] Martin argues that Marxist secularism has seen the destruction of traditional communities as a necessary step to a future reinvention of community *ex nihilo*. For Martin the goal of a postsecular social theory would be to "rearticulate the idea of global community – and to understand the forces arrayed against this community's emergence ..."[87] Both liberalism and Marxism, in our postmodern age, leave secularism unchallenged. Martin's concern is that postmodernism enables us to go beyond the secular and to come to a post-secular community in which the truth of a rational or efficient economy no longer reigns supreme, but the concern for 'a space for mutual flourishing'.[88]

Another example of a post-secular interpretation of the postmodern condition can be found in the work of Julia Kristeva. For her, a post-secular perspective is motivated by a discontent with the universalizing spirit of modern politics. The central notion in the politics of the French republic, the *citoyen*, creates a universal, political subject, discarding bodily and sexual differences.[89] Her suspicion towards the western, secu-

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to grow disenchanted with the disenchanters, to question modernity's prejudice with prejudice, and to look around for a new Enlightenment, one that is enlightened about the (old) Enlightenment. That has inevitably led to a break within their own ranks on the hot topic of religion, where even otherwise 'secular' intellectuals have become suspicious of the Enlightenment suspicion of religion." Caputo, *On Religion*, 37.

[84] "The post-secular perspective reconsiders the place of religion in society, the possibility of a religious component in philosophical anthropology and the necessity of a religiously neutral public reason. Others assert that social theory is by nature secular and that a return of religion distorts the very principle of Western democracies." Gregor McLennan, 'Towards Postsecular Sociology?', *Sociology* 41(5) (2007), 857–870. Hent de Vries describes the post-secular condition as one which is 'suspended between, on the one hand, an Enlightenment project and a democratic republicanism and liberalism originally premised upon rationalization, differentiation, and privatization, and, on the other, a less explicit process of reenchantment, if not outright remythologization.' Hent de Vries, 'Preface', in: Hent de Vries, editor, *Religion. Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), xiii

[85] Bill Martin, *Politics in the impasse. Explorations in postsecular social theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 8.

[86] Martin writes: "A post-secular social theory is to be counter-posed to a capitalism that has become postmodern and hyper-secular: coldly secular, stifling of the ability to generate ethical vision, of a fundamental regard for the other. Life itself becomes calculation. Too many Marxists simply attempt to play this game, though supposedly with post-capitalist aims. Despite their good intentions, I argue that hyper secular Marxism turns out to simply be the next stage of a society built around calculation." Martin, *Politics in the Impasse*, 8.

[87] Martin, *Politics in the Impasse*, 9.

[88] Martin, *Politics in the Impasse*, 10.

[89] Cecilia Sjoholm, *Kristeva and the Political* (Abington: Routledge, 2005), 60.

lar tradition motivates her to formulate a post-secular ontology and political theory. According to one commentator, Kristeva holds that '...the deferral to a universal imperative of rights is no longer possible ...a multicultural politics can no longer simply refer to a secular ethics.'[90] For Kristeva, there is the possibility of a religious ethics after the secular. A crucial aspect of this post-secular religion is that it leaves behind the truth claims that are commonly associated with religion. She sees art as capable of replacing traditional religion, for '...whereas religion may serve as a repressive instrument of desexualisation, art has liberated a space where *jouissance* and metaphor, transgression and meaning, are kept alive in a unique combination.'[91]

Advocates of post-secularity thus draw different conclusions from the postmodern critique of modernity. Post-secularity allows a return of religion and sees its presence no longer in terms of a separation of religion and politics. This becomes clear in Höhn's definition of post-secularity. He sees the dispersion and the return of religion as two aspects of the postmodern condition.

> Das 'postsäkulare Moment' dieses Prozesses der Dispersion des Religiösen besteht darin, dass sich eine kulturelle Permanenz der Religion an den nicht-religiösen Aneignungen und Verwertungen religiöser Stoffe und Traditionen in den nicht-religiösen Segmenten der Gesellschaft (Politik, Wirtschaft, Medien) festmachen lässt.[92]

His definition does not replace religion with art as is the case in Kristeva's theory. Höhn sees the presence of religion as characteristic for a post-secular constellation. The post-secular perspective is not without problems either. It has its own embargoes on what can be allowed in religion and what is to be kept out of the public arena. One can ask whether the priority of some mode of secular reason is still at work in post-secular positions. How fundamental is the questioning of secular reason in Höhn's definition, when he writes that 'auch im postsäkularen Zeiten ist nur das religiös zumutbar, was vor der Vernunft verantwortet werden kann?'[93] This – it seems to me – is what Žižek means, when he speaks of post-secular religiosity as a 'disavowed spirituality'.[94]

The debate on post-secularity makes clear that postmodernism often still operates with a positivistic notion of immanence. The criticism of representationalism and foundationalism touch but on parts of the modern frame. The more fundamental idea of modernity – the secular as a closed immanent realm – remains untouched. Jean-Luc Nancy, for example, problematizes the immanent experience of the world and develops notions of an immanent experience of meaning.[95] For Nancy, the postmodern turn by no means guarantees that we pass beyond the closedness of modern immanence. On the contrary, postmodernism in many forms even more radically affirms the closed-off

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[90] "...principles of sovereignty and universality may serve national strength as well as international solidarity, but they also inspire mechanisms of foreclosure that they are unable to address." Sjoholm, 80-1.

[91] Sjoholm, 86.

[92] Hans-Joachim Höhn, *Postsäkular. Gesellschaft im Umbruch - Religion im Wandel* (Paderborn: Schöning, 2007), 10-11.

[93] Höhn, 11.

[94] "It is as if the form of spirituality, the ultimate, I am almost tempted to say, iconoclastic spirituality ...is a kind of spiritual commitment which shouldn't be positivized in a set of beliefs ....." Eric Dean Rasmussen and Slavoi Žižek, 'Liberation Hurts: An Interview with Slavoj Živzek', url: http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/endconstruction/desublimation (2004).

[95] B.C. Hutchens, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future of Philosophy* (Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing, 2005), 34.

character of the immanent. This immanent closure is contested in the name of a reality of 'finite transcendences'. Nancy struggles with the sense of an immanent world that lacks any transcendent source of meaning. Postmodern man lacks the possibility of reference and has to make sense of the world itself: a world that no longer relates to anything outside it.[96] The sense of the world can be experienced only in a transimmanent way: '. . . in bursts of contact between singularities as it appears to divagate across their relations.'[97] The case of Nancy makes clear that the meaning of secularity in a political sense is renegotiated in postmodernity. Faced with the disappearance of Christianity, postmodernism is challenged to give new meaning to the secularity of society and the separation of Church and state. Christianity gave the western world a duality of Church and state. Now Christianity is disappearing, will it leave the political autonomous? Or will the religious return in a way we cannot yet comprehend? That is what Nancy signals in attempts of postmodern authors such as Rorty and Derrida. Such attempts are symptomatic of a reinvention of a political order that can never be really autonomous.[98]

As the subject of research in this study, I have distinguished secularization, ontological secularity and political secularity. My research takes place in the context of contemporary, postmodern thought. Postmodernism, understood as a foundational crisis in social theory, provides a challenging context for reconsidering secularity in its historical, socio-political, and ontological dimensions. The postmodern condition confronts us with the fact that we are living within the limits that a contingent world sets us. Becoming worldly means being exposed to the world as such, without the comfort of a *Hinterwelt*. Whereas in modernity and in premodern religion, the 'meaning of the world' was thought to be 'out there', postmoderns realize that we are in this world alone. After the 'death of God', the subject died in the hands of postmodern deconstructors. The subject is secularized as well and cannot make up for God. Postmodernism means that meaning has to be found in the world; it cannot be ascribed to it, either by the word of God, or by human constitution.

1.2.1 Selection of Authors

The field of research is further narrowed down by a choice for three main interlocutors, who represent three different paradigms in the debate on postmodernism and secularity. I will motivate my choices and give some insight into their place in the debate on postmodernism and secularity.

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[96] He writes: ". . . as long as the world was essentially in relation to some other (that is, another world or an author of the world), it could *have* a sense. But the end of the world is essentially that there is no longer this relation, and that there is no longer essentially (that is existentially), anything but the world 'itself'. Thus, the world no longer has a sense but it is sense." Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

[97] Hutchens, 37.

[98] Democracy can never be a purely formal system. In postmodernity there is, as a heritage of civil religion and the revolutionary 'fraternité' a 'residual minimum of political affect'. The affect that is necessary for every political 'being together' leads Nancy to say that: '. . . even if we disagree about the term, this only leads us to substitute for it other terms with an affective denotation or connotation: *friendship* for Derrida, or elsewhere *solidarity* or even *responsibility*, terms that cannot be entirely divested of an affective tonality.' Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Church, State, Resistance', *Journal of Law and Society* 34(1) (2007), 3–13.

In the first place I will explain my choice for Richard Rorty. In this study, considerable attention is paid to the tradition of North-American pragmatism and neo-pragmatism. As a distinctive, American philosophy, pragmatism shows a different dynamic with respect to the theme of secularity. Whereas the European context saw a close alliance between political rule (most of the time in the form of monarchies) and the clerical hierarchy against which the Enlightenment protested, in North America, this constellation has never functioned.[99] This is not to say that religion and politics were always separated. From the beginning of the colonization, there has been a strong concern with religious freedom on the one hand and with the idea of America as a religious, chosen nation on the other. In Anglo-American thought, pragmatism turns out to be a very fertile soil for the debate on secularity. Pragmatism, though, is deeply divided on the subject. This becomes all the more clear in the philosopher who has inspired the recent revival of pragmatism: Richard Rorty. The religious and the secularist component in pragmatism return in the work of Rorty. His elaborations on James, for example, clearly show an openness toward religion and civil religion. On the other hand, there are writings that radically do away with religion in the public sphere.

In philosophy of religion, Rorty's philosophy has drawn considerable attention. Alvin Plantinga criticizes Rorty's theory of truth in his *Warranted Christian Belief*.[100] Although Plantinga recognizes a considerable overlap between Christianity and postmodern philosophy, such as the rejection of classical foundationalism, he parts company with the postmoderns in three respects. First, in the claim that God is dead. Second, in the denial of objective, moral standards. And third, in their rejection of truth. Another prominent philosopher of religion, D.Z. Phillips, discusses Rorty's views on foundationalism in *Faith After Foundationalism*.[101] In a valuable critique of Rorty, he writes that he agrees with him in eschewing any desire for 'philosophical legitimacy' (In this sense he criticizes both classical foundationalism and Reformed Epistemology), yet he thinks that Rorty is wrong to take a hermeneutical course. Phillips agrees with Rorty's epistemological thesis, but as he sees it, you cannot infer from that a non-realism.[102]

The implications of Rorty's epistemological critique for the study of religion were the subject of discussion at a conference of the Highland Institute.[103] As a rule, the contributions to this conference offer a mildly critical view on postmodernism and see possibilities for a form of God talk 'after Rorty'. Various contributors offer proposals to develop theology in line with Rorty's pragmatism. A very positive reception of Rorty for the philosophy of religion is offered by Wesley Robbins. He sees perspectives for

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[99] As Rothfork sees it, the early American experience was one of '…communities that spawned their own texts, elevated their own authorities, and offered their distinctive explanations; and none of them had to fight against a monolithic, entrenched historical authority, such as an established Church or hereditary aristocracy.' John Rothfork, 'Postmodern Ethics: Richard Rorty & Michael Polanyi', *Southern Humanities Review* 29:1 (1995), 15–48.

[100] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[101] Dewi Zephaniah Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[102] "…religious certainties, like any other certainties, have their sense within human, epistemic practices. Yet, why should *that* fact lead us to say, with Rorty, that we do not interact with non-human realities? …What I am protesting against is the *a priori* thesis that from the epistemological considerations we have been given by Rorty, it follows that no realities in our experience can be called non-human realities." Phillips, 145.

[103] Lectures held at this conference were published in Charley D. Hardwick and Donald A. Crosby, editors, *Pragmatism, Neo-pragmatism, and Religion. Conversations with Richard Rorty* (New York: Peeters, 1997).

religious discourse that fully benefit from a radically non-foundationalist position. He speaks of Rorty as a 'religious humanist.'[104] As he writes elsewhere, he appreciates in Rorty a 'residual theology as the innovative power of human linguistic behaviour'.[105] For Robbins, the philosophy of Rorty encourages us to be self-reliant. Human beings are creatively developing new vocabularies in the sciences, just as much as in the arts and in religion. To have confidence in that creative capacity means replacing a traditional theistic vocabulary with a naturalistic and humanistic religion.

A more critical approach toward the use of Rorty for philosophy of religion is Grube's. In his *Unbegründbarkeit Gottes?* he defends a 'coherentist holism' as a middle road between a realist position and Rorty's non-realism.[106] He takes from Rorty the distinction between truth and justification but criticizes him for a too polemical approach of truth. He favors a more moderate usage of the distinction, in which justification is indeed contextual whereas truth is seen as a *Grenzbegriff*.[107] Grube's account of religion is to a certain extent very postmodern, as it emphasizes the contextual character of justification and is lukewarm with regard to 'capital T truth claims'. When it comes to the necessity to judge on the desirability of religion from the perspective of social criteria such as tolerance, his approach is typically modern.[108] Grube is not the only one who sees Rorty's philosophy as a promising perspective for theology and the philosophy of religion. Hendrik Hart speaks of Rorty as a latter-day king Cyrus who – without being himself a believer – makes possible a liberation from exile in modernity. In Rorty, Hart sees a kindred spirit of the Christian philosopher Herman Dooijeweerd who was equally critical of philosophical foundationalism.[109]

Lieven Boeve pays considerable attention to Rorty's theory of metaphor and develops a theory of open narratives. He sees valuable elements in Rorty's criticism of analytical philosophy and his proposal for a radical hermeneutical philosophy. Boeve applies this to Christianity, claiming that Christian faith is not a static set of dogmas but is itself an open narrative. It does not provide believers with a fixed identity or an indubitable hierarchy of values but offers the possibility of a recontextualization of their lives.[110]

Although the implications of Rorty's philosophy for religion have drawn considerable attention, the function of the concept of secularity has hardly had any attention paid to it. Gary Gutting offers a comparison of the political philosophies of Richard

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[104] Wesley Robbins, 'A Neopragmatist Perspective on Religion and Science', *Zygon* 28(3) (1993), 341.

[105] Wesley Robbins, '"You Will Be like God": Richard Rorty and Mark C. Taylor on the Theological Significance of Human Language Use', *The Journal of Religion* 72(3) (1992), 389.

[106] See Dirk-Martin Grube, *Unbegründbarkeit Gottes? Tillichs und Barths Erkenntnistheorien im Horizont der gegenwärtigen Philosophie* (Marburg: Elwert Verlag, 1998). See also: Dirk-Martin Grube, 'Empirisme, Postmodernisme en Godsdienstwijsbegeerte. De postmoderne kritiek op het empiristische denken en de consequenties voor de godsdienstwijsbegeerte', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 57/4 (2003).

[107] Dirk-Martin Grube, 'Die Pluralität der Religionen in Lessings Ringparabel und die Unterscheidung zwischen Rechtfertigung und Wahrheit', in: Christian Danz and Ulrich H. J. Körtner, editors, *Theologie der Religionen. Positionen und Perspektiven evangelischer Theologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2005), 180.

[108] 'Tolerierung von Religion' and the idea that we could condemn certain religious groups with reference to human rights. Grube, 'Pluralität der Religionen', 182-3.

[109] Hendrik Hart, 'Richard Rorty', *Beweging* 62(1) (1998), 26. In the same tradition of Reformational philosophy we can think of H.G. Geertsema, who bases his criticism of the epistemological tradition on Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Henk Geertsema, *Het menselijk karakter van ons kennen* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1992).

[110] Lieven Boeve, 'Spreken over God in 'open verhalen': de theologie uitgedaagd door het postmoderne denken', Ph. D thesis, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (1995).

Rorty, Alasdair Macintyre and Charles Taylor. His aim is to develop a 'pragmatic liberalism'.[111] The book is entirely devoted to the problem of a justification of liberalism; the liberal and secular character of Western society is not problematized but presupposed.

Graeme Garrard places Rorty in a long tradition of Counter-Enlightenment. He discusses 'the curious Enlightenment of professor Rorty,'[112] emphasizing the fact that Rorty has proposed criticism of the Enlightenment only as a philosophical project and that he is very determined to defend and continue – what he calls – the political Enlightenment. Unfortunately, Garrard focuses only on the all-too-familiar point of the relationship between irony and liberalism; a point elaborated on in much more detail by – for one – Rudi Visker.[113] Garrard's discussion of Voegelin's thesis of the origin of totalitarianism in the secularization of the political Enlightenment would have made the question relevant as to how Rorty's vision of a political Enlightenment, still to be pursued, relates to violence and totalitarianism.[114] So, despite the interest in Rorty's political philosophy and his controversial publications on religion, the theme of secularity and secularization has hardly received any attention. Even in some monographs on Rorty's political philosophy, secularity is not discussed.[115]

Rorty uses the notion of secularization to explain the shift from a philosophical to a post-philosophical and postmodern culture. It is very rewarding to read Rorty as a philosopher of secularization, and it has hardly drawn the attention of interpreters of his oeuvre. One of the few authors that deal explicitly with Rorty on secularity is Gabriel Vahanian. In his article *Démocratie, solidarité, utopie*, Vahanian reads Rorty as a Lutheran of sorts, who refuses to let matters of ultimate concern, religion, be mixed with temporal concerns, politics.[116] In Vahanian's view, Rorty's postmodernism is close to a protestant concern of religion as an existential relationship with God.[117] Through an analysis of the terms 'secular' and 'secularization' in Rorty, Vahanian succeeds in giving an original and genuinely theological interpretation of Rorty's writings.

Henry Ruf discusses the secularism present in Bernstein and Rorty. He sees them as 'thoroughly secular and humanistic, rejecting as useless all talk about anything other than the social and historical."[118] Ruf regards this as a remnant of positivism and an in-

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[111] Gary Gutting, *Pragmatic liberalism and the critique of modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[112] Graeme Garrard, *Counter-Enlightenments from the eighteenth century to the present* (London: Routledge, 2006), 104-8.

[113] Rudi Visker, ''Hold the Being': How to split Rorty between irony and finitude', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 25(2) (1999), 27–45.

[114] Garrard, 90-1.

[115] See for instance Gideon Calder, *Rorty's politics of redescription* (Cardiff: University of Whales Press, 2007).

[116] Gabriel Vahanian, 'Démocratie, solidarité, utopie', in: Gilbert Hottois, Marc Van den Bossche and Maurice Weyembergh, editors, *Richard Rorty. Ambiguités et limites du postmodernisme* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1994), 299–315.

[117] Vahanian sees Rorty's use of the concept of secularity as a radicalization of the traditional use. He writes that in Rorty's use of the secular, "…it acquires an even more radical meaning than, especially in the wake of the reformation, is normally associated with it. Originally serving to distinguish the so-called secular from the regular clergy, it attenuates or even extenuates all rigid opposition between the world – secular – and faith. Though it has no meaning except through the religious, it enjoys its own franchise." Gabriel Vahanian, 'The Denatured Nature of Ethics: In Praise of the Secular', in: Marc M. Olivetta, editor, *Philosophie de la religion entre éthique et ontologie* (Padova: Cedam (Bibliotehca dell'Archivio di Filosofia), 1996), 506.

[118] Henry L. Ruf, *Postmodern Rationality, Social Criticism, and Religion* (St.Paul: Paragon House, 2005), 126.

consistency in the heart of Rorty's postmodernism. Although postmodernism provides an opportunity to take seriously the concrete, linguistic practices people are involved in, Rorty's positivism leads him to a-priori abduct religious language and practices.[119]

Jean-Claude Monod signals the relevance of Rorty for a hermeneutics of secularization, but as his study is mainly concerned with German writing on *Säkularisierung*, he does not give an extensive treatment of the subject. He does not interpret secularization in Rorty as a 'remnant of positivism', but as consistent with his non-foundationalism.[120]

The theme of secularity is a more explicit concern for Gianni Vattimo, my second interlocutor. Rorty and Vattimo are both involved in the debate on secularity. Nancy Frankenberry criticizes both authors from the perspective of (Donald Davidson's) semantic holism. She stresses that neither Rorty nor Vattimo are really interested in the actual functioning of religion in people's lives. Rather, both their positions are framed by the thesis of secularization, that reckons with the disappearance of religion. Rorty defines religion as a 'noncognitive relation to a non-human person'. But, asserts Frankenberry, this is an invented religion for the educated, that entirely negates the concrete religions in our society. Vattimo likewise invents a weakened religion of love, bereft of any cognitive particularities, that is no longer recognizable as any concrete religion.

Wolfgang Welsch's discusses Vattimo's postmodernism in *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*.[121] Welsch interprets postmodernism as still in the tight grip of modernity. Postmodernism repeats the modern anthropocentrism. The world is *humanworld*. Following the trail from Diderot, to Kant, via historicism and Nietzsche to postmodernism, he sees the postmodern condition as still entirely framed by the *conditio humana epistemica*.[122] The causality of the human is widened throughout the history of philosophy, but not fundamentally changed. The horizon of the 'history of effect' is widened from the Kantian subject to cultures as a whole. And in postmodernism, so Welsch's story goes, the anthropic perspective is widened to an infinite range of cultural specifications.[123] According to Welsch, Vattimo, in following Nietzsche and Heidegger, offers a postmodern philosophy, that in the end does not question the anthropcentric framework of modernity. Just as Heidegger merely replaced onto-theology with onto-anthropology, so Vattimo stringently limits all of reality to human conversation. The problematic character of Vattimo's position is that he absolutizes dialogue. But how can we decide which position in the dialogue should be preferred? Vattimo says that *caritas*, love, is an absolute value. Welsch, however, is not convinced. Love, too, is but an opinion, and he regards the lack of sufficient criteria as the greatest problem in Vattimo's hermeneutics.

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[119] He writes: "Rorty rejects efforts by European philosophers to indict the rationality and existing practices of ordinary people, but he indicts, marginalizes and excludes from consideration the religious language games and practices of millions of ordinary people in many different cultural worlds. Such people, he seems to suppose, are still trapped in historical backwaters and psychological infancy while the progressive march of history has moved on to secular humanism." Ruf, 135.

[120] "La sécularisation aboutit ici a l'abandon de tout principe d'adoration et de toute prétention de pouvoir attachée a la possesion d'une 'verité': la pretention de la philosophie a 'fonder' (la morale, la connaissance, la politique) est alors dénoncée comme un reliqaut religieux et/ou métaphysique, effet d'une insuffisante secularisation" Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 24.

[121] Welsch, *Postmoderne Moderne*.

[122] Wolfgang Welsch, 'The Human - Over and Over Again', in: Santiago Zabala, editor, *Weakening Philosophy. Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 88.

[123] Welsch, 'The Human', 92.

My third interlocutor is John Milbank. I choose Milbank's paradigm of secularity, because he has – as no other theologian in recent years – put the theme of secularity on the agenda. His thesis, that secularity can be interpreted as itself a metaphysical construction, has deepened the discussion on the relation between religion and secular culture. For many conservative theologians, Milbank is right in that he leaves behind any form of liberal theology that takes secularity for granted. Ethicist Stanley Hauerwas has interpreted Milbank's work as in agreement with his own non-foundational theology of witness.[124] The witness character that Hauerwas praises, is reason for Alister McGrath to criticize Milbank for his 'postmodern particularism.'[125]

The more dominant reception of Radical Orthodoxy criticizes the conflict it sees between religion and secularity. A 2005 collection of essays is entirely devoted to a deconstruction of Radical Orthodoxy.[126] This volume has a contribution by Robertson, who sees Milbank's position as an unwelcome and unnecessary opposition of religion and secularity. Instead of interpreting modernity one-sidedly as an alienation from the world, and a violent distortion of Christianity, Robertson sees modern secularity partly as a justified reaction to problems that Christianity itself created. As a defender of secularity, he claims that the turn to the subject in modernity for the first time makes it possible to experience the world by giving up on premodern otherworldliness. Modern secularity in his view '…is a return to nature and bodily existence from out of the medieval elevation above these.' At the same time, '…it carries into its return the alienation from nature achieved in medieval spirituality.'[127]

1.2.2 Research Questions & Method

The former section offers enough background to place my research questions adequately. The central question I want to answer in this study is: How is the notion of secularity regauged in the context of postmodern critique? The 'context of postmodern critique' is still too broad. In order to narrow down the field of research, I single out three schools of thought within postmodernism. In the first place, Richard Rorty's neopragmatism, the second school of thought I will scrutinize is Weak Thought, represented primarily by Gianni Vattimo, and in the third place I will focus on Radical Orthodoxy, more specifically the work of John Milbank.

My central question falls out into the following research questions:

1. What is the philosophical and theological background of the concept of secularity?

2. What are the ramifications of postmodern criticism for the philosophical legitimacy of secularity, understood as the (relative) autonomy of the world (ontological secularity)?

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[124] See the essay *Creation, Contingency, and Truthful Nonviolence: A Milbankian Reflection* Stanley M. Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings. Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), 188-198.

[125] Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, Volume 2: Reality (London: Continuum, 2002).

[126] Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley, editors, *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005).

[127] Neil Robertson, 'Milbank and Modern Secularity', in: Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley, editors, *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric And Truth* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 95.

3. What are the ramifications of postmodern criticism for political secularity and how is this related to the return of religion (political secularity)?

The first question will be answered by studying the most important developments of the usage of the concept in the history of Western thought. In the first place, I will scrutinize the premodern origins of the concept. For this, I will make use of an overview of the recent writings of Charles Taylor. Then I will discuss some contexts in which the German equivalent of secularization, *Verweltlichung*, has been employed. In my discussion of twentieth century thought I will focus on the debate occasioned by Carl Schmitt's notion of secularization.

Questions 2 and 3 will be discussed in three paradigms of secularity in postmodernism. From Richard Rorty we can distill a postmodern secularism. On the one hand, he is an advocate of an almost militant secularism, on the other hand his epistemological position seems to problematize the concept of 'secularity as neutrality.' When we relate secularization to the Enlightenment idea of the autonomy of reason, every criticism of this Enlightenment ideal will contest the legitimacy of secularity. The tendency of Rorty's social philosophy is toward a pragmatically justified secularism.

After my discussion of Rorty on the legitimacy of secularism, I will discuss Radical Orthodoxy. John Milbank offers a critique of traditional accounts of secularization, yet insists on the relevance of secularity. The secular is the common element in both modern and postmodern philosophy. In clinging to secularity, the postmodern is not really beyond modernity, rather is deeply indebted to the metaphysical tradition supposedly overcome. Milbank holds that, in order to be really postmodern, we must go 'beyond secular reason.'[128]

Subsequently, I will discuss Gianni Vattimo's 'weak thought.' Vattimo gives an account of secularity as *kenosis*. Vattimo understands secularity not as neutrality, but as incarnated, or *kenotic* religion. He differs from Rorty's account in that he interprets secularization as a phenomenon that is understandable only as a consequence of notions from Christian theology.

This study is located at the cutting edge of theology and philosophy. I will not make a sharp distinction between the two genres. As will become clear, all the writers discussed in this book cross the boundaries between theology and philosophy from time to time and all make sidesteps to comparative literature. I feel free to do so as well. In a way I am forced to do so, since the discussion on the possibility of a clear separation between theology and philosophy is a central question in the discussion on secularity. Can one demarcate philosophy and theology in a clear cut way? Does the possibility exist of a purely autonomous reason, uninformed by religious notions? In a way this is the central discussion in the debate on secularity and postmodernism.[129]

I do not refer to theology as knowledge of any concrete revelation, at least not in a supernatural sense. I will refer to theology as the speech made possible within the historical context of the Church and the tradition of Christianity. Unless explicitly mentioned otherwise, theology is understood as Christian theology. The reason for this is that the Christian theological tradition has been the historical context for the

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[128] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
[129] Phillip Blond, 'Introduction. Theology before Philosophy', in: *Post-secular philosophy: between philosophy and theology* (London: Routledge, 1998).

development of the concept of secularity. It is almost impossible to tell the story of secularization for the whole of Christianity. As I see it, Western Christendom, in its Protestant and Roman Catholic form, is the relevant context here. The situation of the Orthodox Church is different and more complex as its political situation was during a long period influenced by Islamic rule. As Islam knew no separation of Church and state, it dealt with the Church as an empire.[130]

Other religious traditions, such as Islam, have discussed the concept of secularity in a more indirect way, as Islam was challenged by Christian theology and Western political regimes and cultural influences.[131] In this study we cannot discuss the relation between Islam and secularization at length, although we will pay some attention to presence of Islam in the West as one of the factors that have stirred the recent debate on secularity.

In this study, I will use a hermeneutical method, in the first place because the authors discussed are themselves hermeneutical writers. Our method thus fits the material under scrutiny. In the second place, the question as to what pathways are open to us from our postmodern context for the meaning of secularity is itself not a static object of research. Rather we find ourselves in a position in which there is great uncertainty as to what the current meaning might be. Secularity as a 'social imagination' is continuously being redefined. We cannot, as with some objects in the natural sciences, isolate it and analyze its constituents. What we can do is to locate its place in a larger narrative and evaluate its conceptual adequacy, its consistency and coherency in a larger whole. In doing so, we are always already in a certain position: we cannot give objective analyses and definitions from a neutral spectator's point of view. As Kaufman states, there is neither in the sciences, nor in theology the possibility of talking of the world as such, let alone of God as such. A hermeneutical method uses as standards '…only criteria of coherence and pragmatic usefulness to human life.'[132]

This does not mean that I am a relativist with regard to truth in theological and philosophical debates. I see the hermeneutical nature of these disciplines as enabling a competitive dialogue between different views of life and interpretations of our current cultural and political predicament.[133] In this study I will set out to assess the views of three authors in the field of secularity and postmodernism and attempt to formulate

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[130] Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin, 1993), 89. Ware discusses the Early History of the Orthodox Church as a constellation in which the Church and the state were organically related, without one ruling over the other. "Each of these elements had its own proper sphere in which it was autonomous." Ware, 41.

[131] Nazik Saba Yarid, *Secularism and the Arab world (1850-1939)* (London: Saqi Books, 2002). See also: Al-Azm, 148–159. Al-Azm holds that Islam is dogmatically irreconcilable with secularism, but historically it has often been so.

[132] "But where it is the world-self we are trying to conceive, the whole within which everything else falls -including not only all facts but also all our symbols- there is nothing outside our conception against which we can place it to see whether it 'corresponds': just as everything is within the world, so also everything must be conceived as included within the conception of the world. With this conception, then, criteria of correspondence cannot be applied: only criteria of coherence and pragmatic usefulness to human life are relevant and applicable. If these considerations hold for the concept of world, how much more must they apply to the concept of God, built up as it is through even more elaborate imaginative constructive moves." Gordon D. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method*, Third Edition (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 88.

[133] As Gordon Kaufman says: "The most a theologian can do is attempt to show that the interpretation of the facts of experience and life, which he or she has set forth, holds within it greater likelihood than any other for opening up the future into which humankind is moving - making available new possibilities, raising

a possible trajectory. Strictly speaking, hermeneutics is not a method, it is a meta-methodological paradigm. A method has to provide the possibility of an intersubjective test. Although I deny the possibility of an objective test to reality, there is the possibility of something like a *tertium comparationis*. I want to do something more than give just three possible interpretations. I want to compare them to a preliminary definition of secularity I develop in chapter Two. This definition will offer some minimal requirements of a historically determined definition of secularity. I will use this definition to compare the three postmodern definitions in the subsequent chapters. Thus, I can test the coherence of my concepts and obtain a clear view of the way in which my interlocutors work with the historical material they received.

I will work out my research in the following steps: Chapter Two discusses the concept of secularity in its historical context. Whereas the focus of the study is on the transition from modernity to postmodernism, this chapter follows Charles Taylor in his discussion of the transition from a premodern, Christian understanding of secularity, to its typically modern variants. Developments in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth are discussed from the work of Jean-Claude Monod.

The third chapter discusses our first postmodern paradigm. It discusses the interpretation of the secularization process in the work of Richard Rorty. Then I will devote a section to his idea of secularity as the autonomy of the world. (3.3) For a criticism of his idea of a secular world, I will draw on the analysis Frank Farrell gives of Rorty's position. Section 3.4 discusses Rorty's account of political secularity. His position will be discussed in relation to a holistic theory of interpretation, most of all from the interpretation theory of Terry Godlove. The problematic character of Rorty's secularism is set out in section 3.5. There I will argue that the return of the sacred in Rorty's postmodernism necessitates a reconsideration of the relation between secularity and religion.

Chapter Four discusses a second paradigm; the theological school known as Radical Orthodoxy. I will draw on the writings on secularity by Anglican theologian John Milbank. His central thesis concerns the intertwinedness of postmodernism and secularity. Milbank's position will be problematized for its philosophical presupposition from the critique of Gavin Hyman. Jeffrey Stout will function as an interlocutor for his political views.

Chapter Five articulates a third paradigm: the theological hermeneutics of Gianni Vattimo. I use Vattimo's analysis of secularization in order to demonstrate the relevance and the critical potential of theological hermeneutics. Vattimo agrees with postmodern criticisms of foundationalism, but, different from Rorty, he asserts that secularity can only be understood in its historical continuity with Christianity and Christian theology.

Chapter Six is a concluding chapter. It contains an outline of what are the perspectives of the respective paradigms and it tentatively formulates a theory of secularity that can be a valuable aspect of postmodern culture.

new hopes, enabling men and women to move to new levels of humanness, instead of closing off options or inhibiting growth into a fuller humanity." Kaufman, 88.

2

Secularity: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern

Niemals war die Welt mehr Welt,
nie ärmer an Liebe und Güte.

F.W. Nietzsche.[1]

2.1 PREMODERN ORIGINS OF SECULARITY

This chapter discusses the concept of secularity as it developed in the course of Western thought. My aim is to give an impression of different contexts in which the term secularization has been employed. Thus I will give the terms used in the first chapter more historical depth. Secondly, I will use this historical survey to come to a tentative definition of secularity. I will use this definition as a point of departure for my research into the postmodern hermeneutics of secularity. What are the traditions the authors received and how did they work with these traditions?

Secularity is in essence concerned with the problem of the status of the world.[2] 'World' here applies both to political reality as distinguished from the religious and to the world as the immanent reality of the empirical sciences. Secularization in a broad sense comprises both the political and the ontological. It is the downfall of a Christian cultural synthesis, which was not only a political arrangement, but was present in architecture, the calendar and the experience of the world. Laeyendecker takes up both elements in his definition when he speaks of secularization as the '…loss of societal significance of a Christian transcendental definition of reality.'[3] Schrey speaks of it as

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[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen', in: Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, editors, *KSA 1* (München: De Gruyter, 1999), 366.

[2] Heinz-Horst Schrey, 'Einführung', in: *Säkularisierung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981), 1.

[3] He speaks of a '…Verlust an gesellschaftlicher Bedeutung der christlichen überempirischen Wirklichkeitsdefinition.' Schrey, 2.

the loss of an encompassing, sacred order.[4] As he sees it, the political developments of secularization are paralleled by a spiritual-cultural process, which ends in the affirmation of the world as totally profane and of science as an instrument for dominating the world.[5]

From the 1930's the term secularization is used to describe a process in Western culture in which the religious is gradually regressing and is being replaced by a more profane experience of the world.[6] So there is a more strict sense of secularization as an aspect of modern society and the more speculative thesis that this process was already at work in earlier times, such as the Renaissance.[7] Even if we assume that such a process took place, the way we can understand this process leaves us with more than one possibility. Monod suggests there are two metaphors to explain secularization as an exit from religion. It can either refer to a transfer, as in moving from one place to another and leaving the place behind, or to a process of bringing forth, as in a mother giving birth to a child. In the latter case there is a continued presence of religion in secularity. Religion plays the role here of the womb of secularity.[8] The notion of secularization has served exactly this goal; to envisage the complexity involved in, on the one hand, the modern divide between the age of faith and the age of reason, and on the other hand, the great extent to which the religious is still present in modernity and postmodernity.

For Monod, Heidegger is instructive for understanding the ambiguous role secularization plays in Western philosophy. In his lectures on Nietzsche, Heidegger has rejected the category of secularization, precisely because it suggests a continued presence of Christianity in modernity. It tends to obscure the decisive development: that Christianity has lost its 'mittelalterliche, geschichtsbildende Kraft.' According to Heidegger, then, the role of Christianity is much more the point of resistance for modernity.[9] So in a negative sense, as a tearing loose from Christianity, modernity can be seen as a

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[4] '...die zeigen wie das Volk der Christenheit unter einem heiligen Gesetz lebte, das durch ein immer hierokratischer werdendes Herrschaftsregime sanktioniert und durchgesetz wurde. Ein allumfassender sakraler Ordo-Begriff setzt die Normen und führt zu gesellschaftlicher Fixierung.'

[5] Schrey, 3. He also speaks of secularization as a process "der zugleich ein geistesgeschichtlicher und ein politischer ist" and sees as its main characteristic that it "bedeutete insgesamt eine Aufwertung der Diesseitigkeit gegenüber der jenseitigen Welt". Schrey, 5.

[6] The first time the term is used in this sense is in 1935 in 'der grosse Herder.' There it is understood as "...die allgemeinen Verweltlichung im Sinn einer Loslösung des einzelmenschen, der Gemeinschaft und Kultur von einer übergeordneten göttlichen Bestimmungswelt, namentlich soweit sie sich in kirchlichen Bindung und kirchlichen Denken aüsert ...die Säkularisation wurde hervorgerufen durch Humanismus, Renaissance, Aufklärung, Liberalismus, Bolschewismus usw." See: *Der grosse Herder. Nachschlagewerk für Wissen und Leben* as quoted in Hartmut Lehmann, 'Säkularisation-Säkularisierung II Geschichtlich', in: Hans Dieter Betz and Don S. Browning, editors, *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, 4. Auflage. 7* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck Verlag, 2004), 778.

[7] Reading Petrarch, scholar of the Renaissance Ricardo Fubini characterizes the writings of Petrarch as secularized. He emphasizes that the term secular should not be defined as non-religious, rather: "The opposite of 'secularization' as it is defined here, would be 'prescriptive', to be understood in the sense of a culture that obeys canons established by the common agreement of ecclesiastical, ethical, and educational institutions." Riccardo Fubini, *Humanism and secularization: 'from Petrarch to Valla'* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 3. For Fubini, secularization is a development that is compatible with religion and an experience of transcendence. The secular character of a cultural expression is determined by its anti-authoritarian character.

[8] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 8. Others speak of modernity as a child of Christianity. John Thornhill, *Modernity. Christianity's Estranged Child Reconstructed* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). or of modern secularization as a Christian heresy. Marcel Gauchet and Luc Ferry, *Religie na de religie. Gesprekken over de toekomst van het religieuze* (Kampen: Klement, 2005), 89.

[9] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 9.

secularization of Christianity. It seeks to replace religious certainties with certainties founded in the autonomous reason of the human subject. In this sense secularization is determined by what it rejects. Heidegger thus says that in Christianity's fixation on the certainty of salvation we find a mediation of modern humanism, with its self-founded certainties. Therefore, Heidegger rejects secularization. Monod says that, for Heidegger, secularization constitutes a comprehension of modernity that gives a unifying explanation of the history of Western philosophy on the one hand (modern secular culture as a secularization of Christianity closely related to the philosophy of Hegel) and can unite this with the scientific vigor of modern sociology of religion (Weber and Troeltsch), on the other hand. He agrees with the idea of secularization only in its sense of its disappearance, not of Christianity's continued existence.

Heidegger's case already shows that secularity is a delicate case for theologians and social theorists. It is often used to describe a process in which religion gives way to a secular culture, yet at the same time it is through this process that religion and secularity are organically related. Secularity not only separates us from religion, it also connects us to our religious past. In fact, it relativizes the revolutionary character of Modernity. Secularity, after all, is a pre-modern phenomenon. Unlike other premodern institutions, like the feudal system and the guild system, religion and the Church are by no means things of the past.[10] When we discuss the secular, we have to realize that it is a concept that has received transformations of meaning from the premodern to the modern and from the modern to the postmodern and that it connects us with a complex of traditions that reaches back to the earliest ages of Christianity. The fact that the concept has such deep roots in European culture also makes it possible to see continuity in these transformations. A recognition of secularity's roots within the Christian tradition and a recognition of an interaction between Christianity and secular culture also gives an opportunity to better understand religious belief and it opens a conversation between secularity and the religious traditions in which the concept was first developed.

The origins of the twofold meaning of secularity (as the autonomy of the world and as the duality of religion and politics) lie in premodern times (late antiquity) and received a more articulate character in the high Middle Ages.[11] This can be explained from the emergence of Christianity in the Roman Empire. The doctrine of creation made it necessary to rethink the ontological status of the world. The world was no longer a necessity, but had its origins only in the free will of a creative God.[12] Politically, the emergence of the Church as an institution independent of secular hierarchies in many ways challenged the sacred character of Roman rule and provoked a debate on the relation between religious adherence and loyalty to the throne.

As recipients of a sacred history, the Christians of the first centuries AD faced the problem of a double history. There was the secular history of the Roman Empire and the newly received biblical history of the creation, the election of Israel, the incarnation and the awaited *parousia.* How was the unity of history possible? The term secularity

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[10] Raymond Aron would add to these the army and the university as surviving premodern institutions. Raymond Aron, *In defense of a decadent Europe* (Lanham: Regnery Gateway Inc, 1977), 231–233.

[11] Schrey, 1.

[12] Christianity introduced a new sense of contingency as a consequence of an infinite qualitative difference between God and the world. Antoon Vos, 'Altijd bij de tijd. Over de onveranderlijkheid van God', in: Gijsbert van den Brink and Marcel Sarot, editors, *Hoe is uw naam. Opstellen over de eigenschappen van God* (Kampen: Kok, 1995), 60.

as such played no explicit role in the early Christian and patristic era. The relation of state and Church, however, was a central concern. The way in which this relation was explained often changed with circumstances. When Christians were regarded as a potential threat to peace and as irrational sectarians, an author as Justinus Martyr emphasized the rationality of Christianity and pictures Christians as loyal citizens. For an author as Theophilus of Antioch, the Christian prayers for the emperor, provide sufficient evidence of the harmonious relation of state and Church.[13] O'Donovan speaks of the "elusive logic of the pre-Nicene Church."[14]

Augustine is important as virtually every author on the nature of the secular after him enters into discussion with the model Augustine developed. Augustine inherited the distinction between the 'historia gentium' "and the history of salvation".[15] For Augustine sacred and secular history are two different narratives. The key to sacred history is provided by Scripture.[16] Unlike many of his contemporaries, Augustine saw sacred history as a reality that can be known only through prophetic revelation. This was, however, not the only response to the relation of sacred and profane history. Others, such as Eusebius, interpreted the history of the Roman Empire and the victory of Christianity over polytheism as essentially one history, according to which the *tempora christiana* were a decisive phase in the single history of humanity. Augustine reacted against this idea of a realization of salvation through the Roman empire. Eusebius of Caesarea saw the reign and conversion of Constantine as a part of God's plan for uniting humanity.[17] The Eusebian scheme interpreted the empire in theological terms as an image of Christ's kingdom and the emperor as a representation of the divine logos.'[18] For Augustine, a significant goal of his doctrine of the two cities was to belie this Eusebian tradition of 'Rome-theology'. Roman rule was not some *preparatio Evangelicae*, much more a 'new Babylon'.[19] Although the idea of a Christianized, Roman Empire as a phase in the history of salvation had some attraction on him in his earlier writings, the later Augustine of *De Civitate Dei* finds it increasingly difficult to attach revelatory value to any phase in history after the incarnation of Christ.[20]

A second front for Augustine's notion of secular and sacred history was the negative view of apocalyptic literature. In a vocabulary derived from the book of Revelations, this view identified Rome solely with such figures as Babylon, the great harlot etc. Hippolytus, in his *Apostolic Constitution*, defended a polemic position with regard to the requirements for baptism. A baptized Christian had to keep himself distant from the military, pagan literature etc.[21] In Augustine's days the Donatists held such a negative position and applied it to the institutional Church. The outward splendor of the Church

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[13] Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, editors, *From Ireneus to Grotius. A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 9.

[14] O'Donovan and O'Donovan, 40.

[15] Robert A. Markus, *Saeculum. History and society in the theology of st. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 7.

[16] Markus, 15.

[17] Markus, 49–50.

[18] Markus summarizes Eusebius' position as follows: "The empire and the Church are 'twin roots of blessing'; they represent God's sovereign authority and the saving teaching of Christ respectively. Ultimately, in this vision of history, the two are facets of a single reality, only partially and provisionally distinct, and destined to merge in a single Christian 'polity'." Markus, 50.

[19] Markus, 53.

[20] Markus, 44.

[21] O'Donovan and O'Donovan, 2.

was but a continuation of the outward glory of Rome and they insisted on the believer's purity in a fallen world. For Augustine, though, the external rule of Church and state have their own integrity. Christians have their responsibilities also in political office.[22]

The historical origins of the notions secularity and secularization can be found throughout the Patristic era. The term *saeculum*, the Vulgate's translation of the Greek *aioon*, referred to the temporal as distinguished from the eternal and to this world as distinguished from the world to come.[23] In the early Church emerged a duality of sacred and secular in which the sacred, monastic life was regarded as superior. The clergy was concerned with eternal things, whereas the laity was concerned with temporal affairs. Jerome, for example, wrote on the *duo genera christianorum*. So the distinction between worldly and sacred affairs was developed within the Church of the West. The distinction was not a rigid duality but over time it grew more and more complex, for example in the class of the rulers. The kings of the Middle Ages were not strictly secular but neither were they clerical. They were anointed, but had no religious tasks.

In the Middle Ages, the concept of secularization functioned most explicitly in canonical law. It refers to '...the passage, transfer, or relocation of persons, things, functions, meanings, and so forth from their traditional location in the religious sphere to the secular spheres.'[24] A priest could live either in a monastery or in 'the world'. The transfer from the monastery to the world was referred to as secularization in canonical law. Another context is the division of property between the clergy and the feudal lords. The Carolingian kings, when they took on the protection of the Church, received taxes and land in exchange.[25]

A decisive phase in the Middle Ages for the secularization of politics was the Investiture controversy. The *Dictatus Papae Gregorii VII* called for a far-reaching *Libertas Ecclesiae* and the desacralization of the emperor.[26] The Investiture controversy was a power struggle between the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire during the late 11th and early 12th centuries. It began with a dispute about the lay investiture of bishops and abbots. Prelates held land and often exercised secular as well as ecclesiastical functions. For this reason, lay lords had a great interest in their appointment. Pope Gregory VII condmened lay investiture (1075) After his condemnation he disputed with emperor Henry IV (1056-1106) whether the pope or the emperor should dominate the Church.[27] The investiture controversy in the Middle Ages shows that the proper demarcation of the secular was debated continuously. The persistence of this debate also shows that the distinction of sacred and secular as such was presupposed.

José Casanova explains that this distinction is still relevant for the meaning of secularity. As he sees it, there is a certain continuity to this medieval sense of differentiation. His conclusion is that the differentiation of the religious and other spheres of society

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[22] O'Donovan and O'Donovan, 107.

[23] "The profane time, the time of ordinary historical succession, which the human race lives through between the Fall and the *parousia*." Charles Taylor, 'Modes of Secularism', in: Rajeev Bhargava, editor, *Secularism and its critics* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 32.

[24] Casanova, 13.

[25] Hans-Otto Binder, 'Säkularisation', in: Gerhard Müller, editor, *Theologische Realenzyklopedie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 597.

[26] Schrey, 1.

[27] Gregory VII believed that '...subjection of the lower ranks of the Church, both clerical and lay, to papal authority was inescapably political and legal as well as spiritual, required by the justice (justitia) and the law (ius) of Christ.' O'Donovan and O'Donovan, 232.

is the still-defensible core of the theory of secularization.[28] In medieval Christianity, the secular functions within a dual structure. The sacred and the secular are relatively autonomous spheres, neither of which is submitted to the other. This is also visible in the emerging universities '...where faith and reason became separate but parallel epistemological foundations supposedly leading to one single Truth: God.'[29] For Casanova it is essential to see that in the Middle Ages, the concept of secularity not only refers to a horizontal relation between Church and world, but also concerns a vertical relation between this world and a transcendent realm. Secularity thus functions at two levels. The distinction between the sacred and the secular has to be distinguished from a second distinction between this world and the other world. The dual reality of this world and the transcendent reality of God is reflected in the duality in the world of the secular world and the Church. This tripartite structure was present in the structuring of time and the reality of the Church.[30] The nature of the Church in this constellation was sacramental, in that it mediated between the natural and the supernatural and the religious and the secular. In the Reformation this division was contested and a sense of immediacy was introduced.

The Reformation inaugurated a decisive change in the distinction between sacred and secular. Luther opposed the duality of laity and clergy and asserted that every believer was to see his life as a ministry for God. His theology meant a gigantic shift in the relation of laity and clergy. Luther stressed the strict separation of the two. This was also a protest against the gigantic power the Church had in secular affairs. In *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* he protests against '...eine solche weltlichte, aüsserliche Herrschaft und Gewalt.' But not only did the Reformation insist on a separation of sacred and secular, it also tried to restore the sanctity of the profane. To use Max Weber's phrase, in the Reformation the 'monastery walls were torn down'. Luther writes that the distinction between the world and the Church is not dissolved, but that the Church should not be concerned with worldly power, rather with humility.[31] In this sense, the

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[28] Casanova, 6. He adds to this that '...the related proposition that modern differentiation *necessarily* entails the marginalization and privatization of religion, or its logical counterpart that public religions necessarily endanger the differentiated structures of modernity, [are] no longer defensible.' Casanova, 7.

[29] Casanova, 14. According to Casanova, it was the truth theory implicit in theology that caused the modern secularization of philosophy. As Casanova has it, '...the self-assertive rational philosophy, which rejected its ancillary relationship to theology, and then of early modern science, which asserted its claims that the Book of Nature should rank along with the Book of Revelation as separate but equal epistemological ways to God.'Casanova, 14.

[30] "One may say that, properly speaking, there were not two 'worlds' but actually three. Spatially, there was 'the other world' (heaven) and 'this world' (earth). But 'this world' was itself divided into the religious world (the Church) and the secular world proper (*saeculum*) Temporally, we find the same tripartite division between the eternal age of God and the temporal-historical age, which is itself divided into the sacred-spiritual time of salvation, represented by the Church's calendar, and the secular age proper (saeculum). Ecclesiologically, this tripartite division was expressed in the distinction between the eschatological 'Invisible Church' (the Communio Sanctorum), the 'Visible Church' (The una, Sancta, Catholica Apostolica Roman Church'), and secular societies. Politically, there was the transcendental City of God (Heavenly Kingdom), its sacramental representation here on earth by the Church (The Papal Kingdom) and the City of Man proper (the Holy Roman Empire and all Christian kingdoms)." Casanova, 14.

[31] "Was ist denn fer ein Unterschied zwischen den Priestern und Laien in der Christenheit, wenn sie alle Priester sind? Antwort: Es ist dem Wortlein 'Priester', 'Pfaff, 'geistlich'' und desgleichen Unrecht geschehen das sie von dem gemeinen Haufen ebertragen worden sind auf den kleinen Haufen, den man jetzt nennet geistlichen Stand. Die Heilige Schrift gibt keinen anderen Unterschied, denn das sie die gelehreten oder geweiheten nennet ministros, servos, oeconomos, das ist: Diener, Knecht, Schaffner, die sa sollen den anderen Christum, Glauben und christliche Freiheit predigen. Denn obwohl wir alle gleich Priester sind, so konnten

intention of the Reformation was not to immunize the secular realm from the sacred, as many (in the line of Weber) interpret the Reformation, as itself an agent of secularization. It is also possible to see the Reformation as intending to counter secularization and to recover from an undesirable tainting of religion by secular interests. Gerard Ritter interprets Luther's doctrine of the two regiments in this sense. He sees Luther as opposing the "allgemeinen Säkularisierung des Denkens und Fühlens".[32] The factual outcome can indeed be seen as tragic: the unintended consequence of the revolt against the clergy was that secular rulers could become absolutist monarchs. The Reformation coincided with the religious wars, that necessitated a renewed constellation of the state to the churches. No longer was there one Church, but several, and governments had to deal with this situation properly. In the 16th century, several secularizations took place in the context of this revision of Church-state relations. The most important secularizations were the change of Deutschordenland into a worldly duchy (1525), the insertion of the diocese of Utrecht into the duchy of Bourgondy and the secularization of the dioceses Metz, Toul and Verdun in France. After the peace of Westphalia, several other such secularizations were carried out.[33] In the peace of Westphalia the possessions of the Catholic Church were secularized. For the first time, in the French language the words *séculariser* (1586) and *sécularisation* (1559) were being used.

2.2 SECULARITY IN MODERNITY AND ENLIGHTENMENT

In the politics of the age of Enlightenment, secularization is bound up with the emergence of the nation state. Enlightened Monarchs such as Joseph II and Friedrich II liquidated hundreds of monasteries and the legitimacy of clerical principalities was no longer taken for granted. The secularizations can be regarded as symptoms of the emergence of a secular sphere, which no longer tolerates the existence of a clerical power parallel to the nation state. This process has two components: In the first place the emergence of the nation state and in the second place the independence of political rule from religious institutions.[34] In France, the year 1789 meant the end of feudal privileges and Church taxes. As a consequence of this, the Church was often forced to agree with secularizations. In 1790 all the religious orders were abolished. In 1801 the pope acknowledged the secularizations in a concordat.[35] After the French revolution, secularization became a central, political doctrine functioning in civil law. In France, and later in the Netherlands, Church properties were taken from the Church and transferred to

wir doch nicht alle dienen oder schaffen und predigen. So sagt Sankt Paulus I. Kor. 4(1): 'Wir wollen fer nichts mehr von den Leuten gehalten sein denn Christus' Diener und Schaffner des Evangelii.' Aber nun ist aus der Schaffnerei geworden ein solch weltliche, aeserliche, prachtige, furchtbare Herrschaft und Gewalt, das ihr die wirkliche weltliche Macht in nichts gleichen kann, gerade als waren die Laien etwasanderes denn Christenleute. Damit ist hinweggenommen das ganze Verstandnis christlicher Gnade, Freiheit, Glaubens und alles dessen, was wir von Christo haben, und Christus selbst; haben dafer eberkomen viel Menschengesetz und -werk, sind ganz Knechte geworden der alleruntechtigsten Leute auf Erden." Martin Luther, 'Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen', in: Ulrich Köpf, Helmar Junghans and Karl Stackmann, editors, *Weimarer Ausgabe. 37.Band. Predigten 1533/34* (Stuttgart: Böhlaus, 2000).

[32] Schrey, 3.

[33] Binder, 597.

[34] Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *State, Society and Liberty. Studies in Political Theory and Constitutional Law* (New York: Berg, 1991), 26-7.

[35] Binder, 598.

the state. The *Encyclopédie* of 1765 defines secularization as 'l'action de rendre séculier un religieux, un bénéfice ou lieu qui était régulier' and adds to this definition that it is desirable that secularization will serve to take from the richness of the Church.[36]

The secularizations of 1803 surpassed all the preceding ones. After the 1795 peace treaty of Basel between France and Prussia and later in peace treaties with other German principalities, secularizations were executed to compensate for the losses of the German rulers of their territories. In 1803 the secularizations received the assent of the German emperor and the *Reichstag*. In Germany this secularization marked the end of the old political system and the existence of a *Reichskirche*. In the modern era, secularization thus became a political doctrine that entirely rearranged the relation of the Church and the state. From now on the state took a position of neutrality in religious affairs. Nevertheless, in Bavaria for example, a predominantly Catholic area, the Church preserved certain privileges.[37] In the whole of Germany, in the first decades of the 19th Century, the dioceses and archbishoprics were drastically reorganized. The protestant denominations were also reorganized according to the territorial principle.

Secularization refers initially to a judicial affair, in which the material goods of the Church are transferred to secular rule, but as the discourse of republican politics develops, the term is used to establish the autonomy of government at the expense of the Church and takes place against the background of a changed, religious landscape that is decisively shaped by the Reformation. The term becomes a category of interpretation of the legitimate course of history.[38] A lively example of this paradigmatic function of secularization is from Jules Ferry, who looks back upon the Revolution's centennial. He proposes applying the secularist principle to the educational system as well.[39] For Ferry, secularization has received a connotation that exceeds the context of canonical and public law. In addition to a secularization of civil government, Ferry speaks of a secularization of philosophy and he urges his hearers to secularize the educational system. As Ferry uses the word secularziation, it is unmistakably directed toward a banishing of religion from the public sphere and the establishment of not only an autonomous polity, but also an autonomous, religiously neutral educational system.

Monod refers to this type of secularization as self-foundation. The development of secularization as *laïcization*, with a strong antireligious tainting, is typical for the French Enlightenment. The German Enlightenment is much more open to religion and the Christian past.[40] Whereas the French notion of secularization amounts to an emancipation from religion, German philosophy, most notably the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel, amounts to a 'secularized Christianity'. In the philosophy of Hegel, the term secularization, or *Säkularisierung* does not occur. Instead, the term *Verweltlichung* is frequently

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[36] "Il serait à désirer que l'on eût recours à la sécularisation pour tirer des mains des ecclésiastiques des biens que l'ignorance et de la grandeur temporelles détournent des fonctions du ministère sacré, auxquels ils se doivent tout entiers." Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 21.

[37] Binder, 600.

[38] 'catégorie d'interprétation de l'histoire permettant' Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 28.

[39] He says: "Il y a cent ans, Messieurs, on a sécularisé le pouvoir civil. II y a deux cents ans les plus grands esprits du monde, Descartes, Bacon ont sécularisé le savoir humain, la philosophie. Nous, aujourd'hui, nous venons suivre cette tradition ; nous ne faisons qu'obéir à la logique de ce grand mouvement, commencé il y a plusieurs centaines d'années, en vous demandant de séculariser l'école …" Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 28. (Quote completed by me, HJP)

[40] '…réalisation plutôt que comme liquidation de la religion reçue.' Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 29.

used.[41]

The term *Verweltlichung* as a legitimate translation of *sécularisation* makes clear that the concept is, at least in part, rooted in Christendom. Scholars who define secularization in this sense tend to stress the historical continuity of Christianity and Modernity and hold that the latter is always dependent for its sustenance on its Christian substrate. Vergote, for instance, speaks of secularization as '. . . a cultural and religious phenomenon.' He asserts that secularization is product of a Western, Christian civilization. He even ascribes to secularization a certain historical necessity.[42]

I will deepen this idea of continuity between Christianity and Western secularity by a discussion of the work of Charles Taylor. Charles Taylor has written on secularization as a part of his larger project on the origins of modernity. He sees secularization as inherent to a proper definition of modernity.[43] Crucial to Taylor's approach is that he understands the possibility of a secular society as the emergence of a whole background, a paradigm as it were. The secular was not a clearcut possibility, which solved the supposedly evident problem of the religious wars, but was itself part of a moral order that changed the way the intellectuals in the West came to see politics, the world, God's providence, social relations and so on. In Taylor's approach, the debate on secularity takes shape within an analysis of the emergence of a new moral order. The religious wars are not the evident problem to which the secularization of European politics was the evident answer. Rather, in Taylor's view, the more encompassing context of the religious wars was the 'domestication of the nobility' and the 'internal pacification of modern societies.'[44] This happened against the background of an emerging culture of nobility and civil virtues, that replaced the earlier warrior ethics. The disciplining of society and religious devotion in a new social order was very ambivalent. It could serve both to produce a modern, disciplined society, over which the monarch can exercise absolute control, as well as an impetus for the relevance of republican selfrule.[45] This more encompassing context is crucial in understanding the phenomenon of secularization. Often secularization is simply seen as an answer to typical, religious errors as religious warfare and witch burning, to which privatization of religion was the evident solution. A more richly informed, historical approach would significantly change this picture.[46]

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[41] The legitimacy of a continuity between the premodern secularization and the German *Verweltlichung* is widely discussed. Hermann Lübbe does see the connection, Ulrich Barth denies it. See: Ulrich Barth, 'Säkularisierung I', in: Gerhard Müller, editor, *Theologische Realenzyklopedie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 603. As he sees it, the modern secularization as *Verweltlichung* has its origins in the theological context of a critique of a deterioration of Christian integrity and is also applied in a more encompassing critique of Christianity. I agree with Monod who sees the connection. He explains the choice for *Verweltlichung* and the absence of the terms *Säkularisation* and *Säkularisierung* from the concrete secularizations after the Napoleontic wars, which gave the word a very negative connotation of national humiliation. Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 46.

[42] ". . . secularisatie is een product van de Westerse christelijke beschaving. Zij moet dus tot het wezen van die beschaving en van die religie behoren en zij kan niet een historisch toeval zijn." Vergote, 86.

[43] He writes that modernity is a ". . . historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality); and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution)" Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

[44] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 37,48.

[45] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 48.

[46] Like Taylor, Cavanaugh understands the so called religious wars against the background of the 'tam-

Secularization is thus inherent to the modernization process in Europe. At the same time the term secular is of Christian origin.[47] But how did modernity change the original idea of the secular? Already in premodern Christianity one was aware of the distinction between Church and state, the sacred and the secular. And the secular was not only a limitation of the power of the Church imbued by government, but was motivated by the Church itself. Taylor says:

> The existence of these oppositions reflected something fundamental about Christendom, a requirement of distance, of non-coincidence between the Church and the world. There were, through the medieval centuries great overlap and great conflict between Church and state, but in all versions, and on all sides, it was axiomatic that there had to be a separation of spheres. From one side, the standpoint of one party, this might appear as an attempt to maintain the integrity of the political function; but more fundamentally, the need for distance, for a less than full embedding in the secular, was understood as essential to the vocation of the Church. One of the motivations for defining a space of the secular has always been theological in Christendom, and continues to be so today.[48]

Challenged by the new situation after the Reformation and the religious wars, Taylor sees two paradigms emerge. The first is a strategy of common ground: an ethic of peaceful coexistence common to all Christians and theists. This common-sense approach would be a positive account of secularity and would stress common beliefs, based upon a sense of natural theology. Taylor sees attempts in this direction reflected in the work of Locke, Pufendorf and Leibniz.[49]

The second strategy Taylor discerns is to formulate an independent political ethic. This version of secularity steers away from religious traditions and is based on a rationalistic account of human agency. Our rational nature gives us reason '...to accept certain norms, whatever else we believe about human life and God's demand to us'.[50] Thomas Hobbes and Hugo Grotius are founding fathers of this 'independent ethic' strategy. This strategy is much more repressive toward religion and creates a dualism of public and private. The neutral-ground strategy attempts to clear a demarcated space for religion. This is evident in the second part of Hobbes' *Leviathan*, that is entirely devoted to bringing Scripture into agreement with the new account of neutral politics and sovereignty.

Both models are expressions of a certain kind of secularism, though the second is more negative concerning religion. Taylor stresses that defining secularity only in opposition to religion by no means follows from the intention of secularity as such. The common ground approach too is an expression of secularity, but phrases it in terms of an equal treatment of confessions. As Taylor says: "The goal is a state which is evenhanded between religious communities...rather than one where religious reasons play no overt role."[51] In the history of the United States, while the separation of Church and state has

ing of the nobility'. Witch burning, to use another example, is a phenomenon of early modernity in which modern rationalization represses other modes of (esoteric) knowledge. William Cavanaugh, 'The City. Beyond secular parodies', in: John Milbank, Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock, editors, *Radical Orthodoxy. A new Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[47] Taylor, 'Modes', 31.
[48] Taylor, 'Modes', 32.
[49] Taylor, 'Modes', 33.
[50] Taylor, 'Modes', 34.
[51] Taylor, 'Modes', 35.

been never been unequivocally modeled on either one of them, the common ground approach certainly has had considerable influence.

A simple choice between either the common-ground approach to secularity or the neutrality approach has become impossible. The idea of a common ground has become highly problematic as a result of a growing pluralism in modern society. This does not imply that the second approach of an autonomous ethic is unproblematic in our day. According to Taylor, the independent political ethic approach in the days of Grotius and Hobbes in fact rested on a tacit, Christian consensus. But the absence of religious consensus makes the model of an independent politics all the more problematic. The official absence of religion in politics and society posed no serious problems. The *etsi deus non daretur* was a theoretical possibility that did not require people to actually lay down their beliefs. But in the world of today, atheism and agnosticism are no longer hypothetical options. The differences between the religious and the non religious are more evident and Christianity is no longer the single dominant religion. This makes the question acute as to how to formulate a substantial ethic, when there are no particular traditions that can serve as moral reservoirs.

Today, it even turns out that secularity can turn itself against religion.[52] And secularists consider religion to pose a threat to a secular society. So the situation emerges in modern society that the real controversy is not between a modern secular and a premodern religious outlook on society, but between a Christian secularity and a secular secularism.

Secularization as Disembedding

The 17th century saw an incisive transformation with regard to the place of religion in European countries. The religious wars had created the necessity of another paradigm for state-Church relationships and to secure a peaceful coexistence of diverse Christian confessions. Taylor asserts that in the context of the 17th century, there was not one clearcut paradigm for giving shape to the new constellation of religion and politics. The development of a secular society is not an isolated event, rather it parallels other developments, such as democratization, the emergence of market economies and so on. Modernity is a stage in history in which certain imaginations get a grip on the minds of Europeans and in which a certain ontology is expressed. Taylor stresses the historicity of consciousness and expresses a certain suspicion toward a view of secular modernity as a natural state of affairs. He uses the noun 'imaginary' to indicate the historical contingency of the emerging modern social ontology. As Benedict Anderson contested the idea of the nation state as a natural unit and explained it as an imaginative community, so Taylor contests the natural, given character of modern secular society.[53] When Taylor discusses the nature of the secular he stresses that modern secularity is by no means 'given', but a product of historically contingent developments. Secularity cannot be convincingly thought of as residual ideas, which, like individualism and mutual benefit, would simply remain once the religious and metaphysical plumage had

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[52] "...what the unbelieving secularist sees as a necessary policing of the boundary of a common independent public sphere, will often be perceived by the religious as a gratuitous extrusion of religion in the name of a rival metaphysical belief." Taylor, 'Modes', 36.

[53] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

been done away with. To speak of secularization as an imaginary, does justice to the fact that humans are actively shaping the social world in which they live. Seeing it as a formative process means that modernization and secularization can be seen as 'socially shared ways in which social spaces are imagined.'[54]

The modern understanding of the social emerges in contrast with the medieval ordering of society and the medieval understanding of what it means to belong to a society. The most relevant shift is that in pre-modern times society was seen as a given *ordo*. Typically for this idea of *ordo* was a Platonic idea of form, which was at work in the world. Parties in social relations complemented each other, but did not necessarily have to be on the same level. "Rather they formed a hierarchy in which some had greater dignity and value than others."[55]

Taylor does not only understand Christianity as the prehistory of Modernity, Christianity is itself also an heir of what Karl Jaspers has called the religious transformations of the *Achsenzeit*. Christianity (and other premodern religious traditions such as Buddhism and Judaism) are characterized by a certain duality, which implies a tension between the world as such and religious experience. On the other hand, primitive religion has a sense of unity between the religious and the social. The religious transformations of the *Achsenzeit* introduced a new concept of individuality. Already before the Enlightenment, religion was in a way disembedded from culture. Before the *Achsenzeit*, there was a certain unity of the transcendent and social in the notion of cosmos, social order and human good.[56] Religion was, as it were, embedded in social life. In the *Achsenzeit* this relation becomes more complicated and religious devotion becomes separated in a way from the social. Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity articulate a rather tense relation toward society and nature. Taylor describes this development as a 'disembedding' of religion from the natural and social context it was originally in. The central idea Taylor articulates is that the situation of premodern Christianity, and religion in general, was very well aware of the distinction between the secular and the sacred. Modernity did not change *that*, rather modernity sacrificed the one for the benefit of the other. Primitive religion and modern humanism have a monism in common. Taylor's challenging thesis is that in its preference for paganism and polytheism, 'modern exclusive humanism' shows a certain resemblance to pre-axial religion.[57]

Taylor's narrative places secularization in the larger context of two transitions: first from primitive religion to high religion, and second from high religion (Christianity) to modernity. The latter is commonly referred to as secularization. But for Taylor this does not only mean a decline of religion in modernity: in a way Christianity is also continued in modernity. Modernity was a continued disembedding. Taylor's thesis is thus, that we can understand modernization as in continuity with the '. . . earlier radical attempts to transform society along the principles of axial spirituality".[58] The relation is,

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[54] Taylor, 'Modes', 38–9.

[55] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 11. "The modern idea of order differs from the medieval one, in three perspectives. First, it gives no ontological status to hierarchy or any particular structure. Second, the modern idea of order departs from individuals and their debt of mutual service. Divisions fall out as they can discharge this debt most effectively. Third, the pre-modern idea of society is that hierarchy was to bring each of its parts to the greatest virtue. In the modern age, the social relations are merely *instrumental*, to guarantee life, liberty and the sustenance of self and family." Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 12,13.

[56] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 57–8.

[57] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 57.

[58] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 64.

however, not simply one of continuity. Modern secularization also meant a corruption of Christianity, in the sense that the believer is no longer in any relation to the sacred. Modernity introduces a new image of God as the designer.[59] As Taylor explains, the disembedding was not, in Christianity, intended to leave any kind of belonging behind, but to participate in an order of love.

The Emergence of Political Secularity

For Taylor, secularization is not limited to the negative development of disembedding. Secularization is also the emergence of a new order. He mentions the emergence of an autonomous economy, the invention of the people as a self-governing polity and the emergence of a vocabulary of natural and human rights as first formulated by Locke and Grotius. The aspect of modernity that is most important for understanding modern secularity is the emergence of a public sphere. The public sphere in the modern age is not merely public in the sense that people can have an assembly on whatever topic or occasion. Taylor's interest is not in this 'topical' idea of public space. Rather he is interested in the *imaginary* character of the public sphere as a 'metatopical' place for deliberation and discussion on issues of mutual concern. Essential here is that in modern times the idea arose of a self-governing people capable of secular founding acts without recourse to transcendent principles.

The first aspect that marks this metatopical space as modern is that it is *extrapolitical*. Taylor explains this as an association, '. . . which owed nothing to political structures, but was seen as existing independently of them.'[60] It is exactly the lack of foundations that marks out the public sphere as secular. Compared to the premodern period, in which people lived under two irreducible principles, the sacred and the profane, the *civitas terrena* and the *civitas dei*, the emergence of a secular public sphere is a genuine novelty, precisely because of the lack of a foundational principle. Taylor sees the meaning of secularity primarily as this (lack of) ontological status of the public sphere. In opposition to pre-modern society, the modern concept of a public space is not an element in a pre-ordained order.

Taylor chooses to use the word secularization for this development. He thereby distances himself from 'subtraction theories' according to which the secular was the substrate, which remained after Europeans left behind their religious quarrels. He employs the term secular because it marks in its very etymology what is at stake in this context. It explains how the emergence of a public sphere and a modern liberal polity incisively changes the way human society inhabits time.[61] Taylor speaks of a radical secularity for two reasons.

In the first place, pre-modern social life embodied a metaphysical *ordo* and people acted within a framework that constituted and preceded their action.[62] Modern secularity is a radical rupture with this experience, because it leaves behind any notion of divine or historical foundation of society. The second reason is that modern secularity breaks with any idea of society constituted in something that transcends contempo-

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[59] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 65.
[60] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 92.
[61] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 93.
[62] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 93.

rary common action.[63] As Taylor insists, the secular is a space which is – so to say – evoked by human, collective action and speech and would dissolve if citizens stopped deliberating this way. It is radically contingent and not given in any way.[64] The crucial distinction between the modern and the premodern idea of secularity is given in the absence or presence of a transcendent, constituting principle. Where there is something that transcends common action the association is non-secular: where the constituting factor is nothing else than common action, the association is secular.[65] For Taylor, thus, secularization is partly rooted in the axial spirituality of Christendom, but is radicalized in the emergence of modern society. In Christendom, the experience of time – saeculum – and sociality participated in a higher time and a higher order. Modernity breaks with this duality and places social life in a single, homogenous, profane time.[66]

The secularization process as the establishment of a uniform, profane time, severely influenced new forms of Christianity in Europe. The new protestant denominations, such as Methodism, were based on a principle of individual assent and were modern organizations based on voluntary association. In this respect Taylor speaks of forms of evangelical Christianity and forms of Islam, like the Nation of Islam movement as typical expressions of a secular age.[67] Thus, the secular is not merely a negative separation of politics and religion, rather it is a refashioning of the entire social imaginary. State, society, and social life are reordered in an entirely immanent sense.

The consequences of this immanentization of the social imaginary are partly paradoxical. Firstly, it gives way to a greater sense of freedom as earlier orderings collapse and an ideal of equality is introduced. This increasing sense of immanence, however also created a problem as society becomes more and more a horizontally structured system. Collective identities are, in modern society, more and more constituted against the background of an awareness of belonging to a social group. Typical modern phenomena, such as fashion and public life function in a society that has 'ambiguous places of mutual display', characteristic of a kind of secular religion.[68] This collective aspect of identity is visible in fashion and the appearance of the dandy and the flâneur. Modern, secular citizenship is not only a rational, contractual affair, rather in belonging to a society human agents are continuously involved in games of self exposure and recognition. Taylor describes the meaning of such collective identities as follows: "It matters to each of us as we act that others are there, as witnesses of what we are doing and thus as codeterminors of the meaning of our action."[69] Social action in modern, secular culture, is thus for Taylor never entirely rational. Following Durkheim he speaks of '…times of collective effervescence as founding moments of society and the sacred.'[70]

The fusion of individual agents to a collective agent can also lead to violent outbursts. The emergence of secular culture as such does not banish violence, but gives

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[63] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 93.

[64] The secular is "constituted by nothing outside the common action we carry out in it." Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 94. The social is "fondé sur lui-même." Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 188. See also Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 267.

[65] Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, 269.

[66] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 99.

[67] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 151. See also: Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 450–3.

[68] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 168–71.

[69] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 168.

[70] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 169.

violence its distinctive, modern shape, which '…offers as much cause for fear as hope.'[71]

The Emergence of Ontological Secularity

"The political appropriation of faith inevitably led to the emergence of the doctrine of immanence", Blandine Kriegel claims.[72] Political secularization, in other words, does not leave our experience of the world untouched. In Taylor's account of modern society as an imaginary, the new conception of society goes hand in hand with a new experience of the way man understands his being in the world. Taylor discusses this modern condition in relation to the experience of time and space. This section discusses how time, space and secularity are related according to Taylor.

In the first place, Taylor sees a significant change in a secularized experience of time. In the Christian worldview, time was understood as *saeculum*. Time was secular, in the sense that it was the time of the world, as opposed to God's time: eternity. The time of this world was not the time of God, but this did not make it meaningless. Far from that, the time of the world was *kairotic*. *Kairos* in Greek is an experience of time as qualified, more than mere durative time (*chronos*). In the New Testament this meaning is radicalized as it refers to the advent of Jesus, as a decisive event that qualifies all other time.[73] The secular is not divine, but it is meaningful as it takes place between meaningful events such as creation, incarnation and the last judgment. In the Middle Ages the idea of the *saeculum* was the ordinary time; he who lives in the *saeculum* lives in the normal time of the world, whereas others such as priests and monks have turned away from the secular to live closer to eternity.[74]

Taylor underscores that this distinction between the temporal and the eternal is different in Platonism and Christianity. For Plato the eternal was stable, whereas the temporal transient. The real was thought to be eternal, outside of time, and the more temporal something is, the less real it is. Christianity did not drop the distinction between time and eternity as such, but came to a fundamentally different appreciation of the temporal, because of the introduction of the notion of creation. Especially because of the importance of creation and incarnation and crucifixion, the temporal becomes relevant in a way that would have been impossible in Platonism.[75] Taylor thus opposes the idea that the Christian distinction between the secular and the sacred was a world-denying trait of Christianity. As Taylor sees it, it is only in Plato and Plotinus that eternity can be understood as an escape from time. The Christian notion of the time-eternity distinction is different from Greek metaphysics on the one hand and from modern, secular time on the other. Apart from the merely, horizontal secular time, there is a vertical dimension in premodern thought, "so das alles zu mehr als nur eine Art von

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[71] Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 170. Taylor repeatedly remarks that the theme of violence in modern society needs further exploration, especially from the theorizing of René Girard. He speaks of the '…dark side of our modern, Western social imaginary: its connections with our sense of civilizational superiority and its possible relation to the persecution of scapegoats.' Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 182–3.

[72] Blandine Kriegel, *The State and the Rule of Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 129.

[73] Hans Christian Hahn, 'Kairos', in: Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther and Hans Bietenhard, editors, *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament* (Wuppertal: Theologischer Verlag R. Brockhaus, 1979), 1462–1466.

[74] Charles Taylor, 'Die Moderne und die säkulare Zeit', in: Krzysztof Michalski, editor, *Am Ende des Milleniums. Zeit und Modernitäten* (Stuttgart: Klett Cotta, 1998), 44.

[75] Taylor, 'Moderne Zeit', 45–6.

Zeit in Beziehung steht."[76]

In a Christian experience of time, liturgical curves and connections mark out episodes in time in a qualified way, for example, in relation to the crucifixion of Christ. In modern thought, the experience of time differs greatly from the Christian experience. The modern experience of time is, says Taylor with the words of Walther Benjamin, 'leer und homogen'. Taylor comments on this characterization of Benjamin: "Nach dieser Auffassung ist die Zeit ebenso wie der Raum zu einem Behälter geworden, der seinem Inhalt gegenüber gleichgültig ist."[77] Secularization is thus a very specific construction of time. The contingent nature of this undertaking is a central concern for Taylor:

> Die Zeit ist zu einem kostbaren Rohstoff geworden, der nicht vergeudet werden darf. Das Resultat ist die Schaffung einer engen, geordneten Zeitumgebung. Sie umhüllt uns bis sie uns wie etwas Natürliches vorkommt. Wir haben eine Umwelt aufgebaut, in der wir eine einförmige, eindeutige, säkulare Zeit leben, die wir zu messen und zu steuern versuchen, um die Dinge zu erledigen.[78]

Taylor shows that the experience of sociality, time and space is laid on the procrustean bed of modernity. The idea of a hierarchical order in the world is reorganized by the equal citizenship phrased in rationalistic and contractual terms. Taylor sees the unnatural character of this undertaking illustrated by its disciplinary character. In early modernity, folk culture and religion are repressed and the goal is a more rational and efficient (*Zweckrationales*) society.[79] The emerging secular culture of the 16th century was, therefore, not so much an emancipation from religion, rather a changing experience of what it means to be in the world and to be in time. The premodern experience of time can be defined as complementary; the spiritual and the temporal complemented each other and in a way alternated. The modern experience, on the other hand, is homogeneous and empty. The premodern experience of time was 'kairotic' and multi-layered, whereas the modern experience is of a single, linear process.

As an example of the premodern approach to social order and experience of time, Taylor mentions the carnival and other religious festivities such as pilgrimages. These events can only make sense, says Taylor, in a Christian hierarchical order. In carnival, things are turned literally upside down, and people live for a while in a different social order and a different time. The current order is relativized, for it is only provisional. Carnival expresses an anticipation of a new order and Taylor offers an account of modernization as a diminishing willingness to live with such experiences of time as *kairos*. The religious and political reforms in the early modern era no longer tolerated the provisional character of Christian experience. The modern era is ambitious with regard to a re-modeling of social order and the order of life and has an optimism about the human capacity to restructure the world economically, religiously, and politically.[80]

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[76] Taylor, 'Moderne Zeit', 49.

[77] Taylor, 'Moderne Zeit', 49.

[78] Taylor, 'Moderne Zeit', 52.

[79] Taylor sketches this development in four stages. He seems to agree to a large extent with the anthology of modernity as put forward by Michel Foucault. See especially Taylor, 'Moderne Zeit', 55–9.

[80] Taylor, 'Modes', 63. "…im Namen der Religion oder der Zivilität habe sich mehrere aufeinander folgende Wellen neuzeitlichen Reformstrebens bemüht, durch Organisation und Disziplin eine menschliche Ordnung zu schaffen, in der das Guten dem Schlechten oder weniger Guten nur taktische und kontingente Konzessionen zu machen braucht. Die Disziplinierungsweisen der 'Zivilität' …haben zur Beseitigung der Komplementarität entscheidend beigetragen. Dabei haben sie uns aus einer Welt, in der die höheren Zeiten

In the second place, the experience of the world is secular in the sense that space is experienced as a closed immanence. A 'closed world structure' or 'structures that are closed off to transcendence' underly modern intuitions concerning the reality of things. There are, however, several expressions of closed world structures.

The first expression of a closed world structure is epistemological. This structure operates with a representational theory of knowledge, through which human agents build up their understanding of the world.[81] In the second half of the twentieth century this epistemological structure has become increasingly problematic. Heidegger has, to Taylor's mind, given the most incisive critique of the model. Without running through all his arguments, it suffices to mention that in Heidegger's philosophy and in later, postmodern critique the priority of theoretical, representational knowledge is contested. Instead, such authors stress that things appear for us in a certain, concrete form and meaning. Theoretical knowledge is often abstraction in hindsight.[82]

Taylor's complaint concerns the alleged, theoretical necessity of a secular world-view. The impossibility of belief in God is a simplification. The modern closing of the world is not only a matter of doing away with transcendent and metaphysical entities, rather, modernity installs a secular order that is far from disinterested itself, but carries with it substantial values. It is in this context that Taylor's argument takes a rather pragmatic turn. Pragmatic in the sense that Taylor does not try to prove the rationality of religious belief, but demonstrates how religion and atheistic humanism in our day stand in a relation of competing 'views of life'. The postmodern condition is for Taylor a condition in which the battle is not primarily about epistemic legitimacy, but about competing imaginations, on what life could ultimately be. Modern epistemology and the romantic-postmodern tradition of the death of God both imply a closed world structure. As views of life, they are in some sense competing with Christianity, that understands secular life as meaningful primarily as an 'analogical imagination' (Tracy).

The second expression of a closed world structure is theological. It is theological because it came about only in Western Christendom, especially due to its invention of a clear distinction of the natural and the supernatural.[83] Taylor is not ambiguous about the way the distinction between natural and supernatural gave way to a complete separation of the two.[84] From Christianity itself there was a tendency to separate religious

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im Alltag sinnvoll wirkten, in eine andere Welt geleistet, in der der Alleinspruch der säkularen Zeit im Bereich des öffentlichen unangefochten ist." Taylor, 'Moderne Zeit', 64–5.

[81] "Characteristic of this picture is a series of priority relations. Knowledge of the self and its states comes before knowledge of external reality and of others. The knowledge of neutrality as neutral fact comes before our attributing to it various 'values' and relevances. And, of course, knowledge of the things of 'this world', of the natural order, precedes any theoretical invocation of forces and realities transcendent to it." Charles Taylor, 'Closed World Structures', in: Mark Wrathall, editor, *Religion after Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 49.

[82] Taylor, 'Closed World', 50.

[83] Taylor, 'Closed World', 48.

[84] Taylor writes: "This kind of clear demarcation was foreign to any other civilization in history. There have always been distinctions between, for instance, the sacred and the profane, higher beings and worldly beings, and so forth. But in the 'enchanted worlds' that human beings inhabited in earlier times, these two kinds of reality were inextricably interwoven. The sacred was concentrated in certain times, places, acts, or persons. The natural/supernatural distinction implies a great sorting out, in which the 'natural' becomes a level which can be described and understood on its own. This is the precondition for going the further step and declaring this the only reality. The 'supernatural' can be denied only from a firm footing in the 'natural' as an autonomous order." Taylor, 'Closed World', 48.

devotion from the order of society. The effect of this disembedding with regard to modern society is, as we saw above, a growing capacity for secular society to stand on its own. Intellectually this autonomy was worked out in the works of John Locke, Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes. Grotius is a key figure in the attempt to formulate such an independent, political ethic. A view on political and social life that could function autonomously, *etsi deus non daretur*. The development of modernity is thus in the direction of a growing autonomy of society, the invention of religion as a private affair and a theology that is, paradoxically, more and more functioning to guarantee this secular order, but is fewer and fewer connected with the secular. Theology serves the need of an emerging secular culture with its self-deleting construction of an 'intelligently designing God'. Only under the aegis of such a perspicuous and rational theology can the world be perceived as an autonomous secular world, understandable on its own terms.

In the 18th century there emerged a similar idea of the natural world. The universe was seen as a system of '…interlocking parts, in which the purposes of each kind of creature mesh with those of all the others.'[85] Taylor suggests that modernity is not only a departure from religion and a growing influence of religiously neutral language. Rather, in the emergence of modernity theology itself designs an order of secular autonomy after which theology itself becomes a superfluous activity: for the order is visible in nature itself.[86] This modern notion of providence is the 'key entry point to secularity'[87] and a decisive factor in the growing opposition between religion and secularity. This particular notion of providence made it possible to think of the created world as an autonomous realm.[88] It is through this invented deism, that the conception of time is also changed. Religion, as the narration of God's acts in the world, becomes a threat to this order, as it applies another concept of providence and another experience of time and place. The affirmation of the secular as a self-enclosed space irons out the actual experience of God, although it is generous enough to accept "milder positions which espouse deism, or some carefully controlled and parsimoniously dosed religion."[89]

A third expression of a closed world structure emerges from the Nietzschean critique of the representationalist paradigm and is at once postmodern and neo-pagan. The protest of this closed world structure comes from a deep-felt discontent with the rationalistic heritage of modernity. But this critique does not initiate a return to a traditional, religious worldview. Rather, there is considerable sympathy for a polytheistic experience. As opposed to the allegedly static monotheism of Judaism and Christianity, polytheism corresponds to the unlimited range of human experiences. Instead of the one true description of the world that modernity aspires to, from a Nietzschean perspectivism, there is a multiplication of perspectives. Taylor speaks of an 'immanent counter-Enlightenment'.[90] The critique of modernity's rationalism is not intended to

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[85] Taylor, 'Closed World', 63.

[86] Taylor writes: "This order was thought to be evident in the nature of things. Of course, if we consult Revelation, we shall also find the demand formulated there that we abide by it. But reason alone can tell us God's purposes. Living things, including ourselves, strive to preserve themselves. This is God's doing." Taylor, 'Closed World', 63.

[87] Taylor, 'Closed World', 64.

[88] "Within this somewhat stripped-down notion of Providence and divinely sanctioned order, one which made ordinary human flourishing so central, it became more and more conceivable towards forms of deism, and ultimately even atheistic humanism. Indeed, religion could be portrayed as a threat to this order."

[89] Taylor, 'Closed World', 65.

[90] Taylor, 'Closed World', 66.

initiate a return to Christianity. Rather, there is a tendency – at least in Nietzsche's case – to stress the continuity between Christian monotheism and modern rationality. In the case of such thinkers as Nietzsche, there is considerable sympathy for a polytheistic position that '...rejects the notion of a single, dominant moral code.' In Heidegger's notion of 'das Geviert' a sense of the divine returns, which still holds that the God of Christendom is dead.[91] Taylor interprets the postmodern return of religion in line with the modern project of world closure. It is a polytheistic mode of closing the world off to transcendence.

Taylor severly criticizes the homogeneous and one-dimensional character of secular modernity. This immanentization, however, also gives way to a significant counter development in expressivism and bourgeois culture. Modern culture deals with time more homogeneously, but the distinction between the public and the private is not only intended as the marginalization of religion, it is also the place where one can experience new dimensions. Taylor sees the emphasis on the private character of this experience as an indication that these experiences have to make up for the increasingly rationalistic and instrumentalistic character of public life [92] Taylor's crown witness for this idea of 'private transcendence', this capacity to invent private experiences of ultimate concern, is Marcel Proust. In his *À la recherche du temps perdu*, he invents modes of experiencing life and time in a way that transcends secular time.[93]

The romantic imagination is thus for Taylor a crucial phase for understanding the sources of postmodern human agency. Postmodernism is undoubtedly the heir of a romantic expressivism. The romantic reinvention of transcendence and the romantic criticism of Enlightenment rationality do not as such effectuate a return of religious transcendence. On the contrary, the idea of the death of God affirms the closed world structure. Although post-moderns do not believe in science and rationality as independent of human construction, the postmoderns do not allow a return of God. This is an important shift in our thinking on secularity. Under modern parameters – so goes Taylor's line of thought – the secular character of society was backed up by a positive ideal of objective knowledge. This ideal of objectivity no longer seems convincing to the postmoderns, yet it is in the postmodern era that the death of God is being proclaimed. Taylor thinks the rhetoric of 'the death of God' is very much a moral ideal and

[91] Taylor, 'Closed World', 66.

[92] Taylor writes: "...der Gegenstrucktur sei in diesen Gesellschaften ein neuartiger Platz eingeraumt worden, und zwar im privaten Bereich. Die Unterscheidung zwischen öffentlichen und Privatem sowie das weite Gebiet der negativen Freiheit bilden in diesen Gesellschaften einen Teilbereich, der den Umkerhrungsfesten früheren Gesellschaften entspricht. Hier, wenn wir uns allein, unter Freunden und Angehörigen oder in freiwilligen verbänden befinden, können wir aussteigen, unsere kodifizierte Rollen ablegen, mit unserem ganzen Wesen denken und fühlen und verschiedene intensiv gelebte Formen der Gemeinschaft ausfindig machen. Ohne diesen Teilbereich wäre das Leben in der Moderne Gesellschaft gar nicht auszuhalten." Taylor, 'Moderne Zeit', 40.

[93] "...der Erfinder neuer, erfahrungsimmanenter Möglichkeiten zur Wiederherstellung dieses Zusammenhangs. Das Leben in einer Welt der säkularen Zeit in der also das ältere Bewusstsein von höheren Zeiten geschwunden ist, hat es gestattet, ja geradezu bewirkt, dass sich neue Arten des Zeitempfindens und der Erinnerung entwickeln konnten. Eine der frappierendsten Möchlichkeiten dieser Art wird in der *Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit* vor unseren Augen geschaffen....was uns dabei von Proust geschenkt wird ist ein Gefühl für die höhere Zeit, das aus dem Empfinden eines modernen Menschen, der im Strom der säkularen Zeit lebt, geschaffen wird." Taylor, 'Moderne Zeit', 81–2. The term private should not be taken too narrowly here, for this private sphere creates its own semi-public spheres. According to Taylor a strictly private imagination would do poorly. Taylor defines the realms of art, music and literature as private realms: "...während seine öffentlichen Sphären durch rein freiwillige Beteiligung aufrechterhalten werden." Taylor, 'Moderne Zeit', 40.

not motivated in terms of objective knowledge. Taylor says: "In Western modernity the obstacles to belief are primarily moral and spiritual, rather than epistemic."[94]

2.2.1 Verweltlichung

According to Joachim Ritter, for Hegel, the French revolution posed the central problem of his time: the unity of history. The continuity between the Christian past and the revolutionary logic of the Enlightenment endangered the continuity of history. The concept of *Verweltlichung* could perfectly account for this desired continuity.[95]

In German philosophy Monod sees three concepts of secularization being developed. In the first place, the notion of *Verweltlichung*, anticipated in Hegel and radicalized in Feuerbach and Marx. Monod sees this line lead to a 'sociological neutralization', most notably in the work of Max Weber. The second development is the application of the concept of secularization to modernity itself, most explicitly by Carl Schmitt. The third development is the protest against the use of secularization and a self-affirmation of modernity as autonomous with regard to religion in the work of Hans Blumenberg.[96]

This section discusses secularization as *Verweltlichung*. Monod explains the notion of *Verweltlichung* in the thought of Hegel in three stages. First, in the lectures on the philosophy of history and the philosophy of religion, Hegel is concerned with the initial split between the temporal and the eternal, the world and the divine, secondly its provisional solution in medieval Christendom, and thirdly the true reconciliation of world and spirit announced in the Reformation and completed in speculative knowledge. In *Der Geist des Christentums*, Hegel paints Jesus as the one who promised a unity of life in which the boundary between the temporal and eternal, the political and the religious would be erased. The problem that faces Hegel is that the actual history of Christianity does show a separation of the sacred and the secular. The concept of secularization fulfills precisely the role of solving this problem. Christ's death meant the echec of this vision and the Church shares in this fate of her Lord.[97]

In his *Philosophie des Rechts*, Hegel writes that modernity is the necessary detour for understanding the truth of Christianity. Modernity offered the principle of individuality, alien to the ancient Greeks. In the Reformation, the division fundamental to medieval Christianity is overcome. The Reformation criticizes the concentration on the exteriority of faith (such as in the Crusades, the institution of the Pope and the veneration of the host in the Eucharist) and secularizes faith. For Hegel this is obvious in

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[94] Charles Taylor, 'A Catholic Modernity?', in: James L. Heft, editor, *A Catholic Modernity?: Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 25.

[95] As Monod explains: "C'est précisément l'idée de sécularisation qui s'impose alors pour rétablir une continuité en réinterprétant les contenus 'modernes' essentiels non plus comme négations mais comme 'réalisations' du christianisme: la 'mondanisation' est comprise comme 'incarnation', dans l'ordre temporel-politique, de principes jusqu'alors affirmés sous une forme religieuse (chrétienne), c'est-à-dire abstraite ..."Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 30.

[96] "...une réinterprétation de l'idée de modernité dégagée du schéma de sécularisation – comme époque de l'auto-affirmation humaine, par la science et la technique, rendue possible et nécessaire par l'autodestruction de la théologie de la 'tout-puissance divine'" Jean-Claude Monod, 'Mythe, Métaphore, Modernité. Les mondes de Hans Blumenberg. Presentation', *Archives de philosophie* 67(2) (2004), 206.

[97] "...tel es son destin: l'Église et l'État, le service de Dieu et la Vie, la piété et la vertu, l'agir spirituel et l'agir temporel ne peuvent jamais se fondre en une unité." Hegel in *Geist des Christentums*, as cited in Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 49.

the appreciation of marriage and sexuality, and the sanctification of ordinary life. But the Reformation needs completion for Hegel. The Reformation achieved an interpretation of Christianity in quotidian terms. Yet Hegel sees reconciliation as a historical reality, whereas Luther thought of it as something in the heart of man. This invites a turn from the religious interiority to the exteriority of political life.[98] Monod sees this *Durchführung* as the meaning of secularization in Hegel. It gives way to a reconciliation of the spiritual and the profane, the sacred and the secular. The Church is no longer seen as only spiritual and the state is more than only secular.[99] In its spiritual meaning, the kingdom of God is in the here and now. In the modern state, the dualism of secular and profane has been reconciled. The secular is no longer thought of as detached from God and the Christian revelation realizes itself in the secular.[100] This makes the secular not simply non-religious, but receptive to the truth of Christian faith and the Church can no longer be regarded as exclusively owning transcendent truth, for it is realized in the immanent reality of a political community.

Hegel is the central figure in philosophical reflection on secularization. Yet there is a recurring problem in all his interpretors. On the one hand, the left wing Hegelians understand *Verweltlichung* as a continuing secularization of Christianity. The ultimate consequence of this would be that secularization in the end leaves the Christian faith behind. The other line of thought would question the possibility of such a refusal of the Christian heritage.[101] Whereas for Hegel, *Verweltlichung* served to reconcile Christianity and modernity, the left wing Hegelians applied the concept of secularization to do away with the Christian substrate of Hegel's philosophy. Feuerbach in a way inverts Hegel's idea of *Verweltlichung*. For him, Christianity is not an incarnation of the divine, but a divinization and sublimation of the human. Feuerbach suggests replacing devotion to God with a devotion to politics and giving up protestantism for republicanism.[102] Therefore, Marx calls into question whether Feuerbach has really overcome Christianity. He interprets him as still in the grip of the Christian schema, merely replacing God with the state as object of worship. ("Der Staat ist der Inbegriff aller Realitäten, der Staat ist der Vorsehung des Menschen.")[103] Engels and Marx respond to Feuerbach in order to come to a more radical understanding of *Verweltlichung*.

After Feuerbach, Marx gave a proposal for a complete secularization of philosophy. Marx's program of *Ausgang* is a double secularization, which will not allow philosophy to take the place left vacant by religion. Secularization would entail an exit from philosophy and a passage to practice and politics. Abstract philosophy cannot be said to be truly secular; it deals with abstract truth and principles, and is a mere transforma-

[98] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 57.

[99] Monod, 'Mythe, Métaphore, Modernité', 60.

[100] Monod places this in the larger context of Hegel's philosophy: "L'Aufhebung de la religion revelée dans le 'savoir' a ainsi pour corrolaire 'mondain' l'Aufhebung – comprise comme réalisation – du Christianisme par l'État moderne: celui-ci parvient à faire exister le principe de la liberté infinie de la subjectivité dans un ordre objectif, là où le Christianisme *comme tel* n'a d'abord offert à 'l'individu qu'une 'liberté dans le vide', ou une non-liberté. Le concept de sécularisation porte avec soi l'idée d'un progrès constitué par le 'pas' des formes anciennes de l'autorité religieuse vers les formes modernes de la reconaissance sociale. La défense de ce processus implique pour Hegel de contester la hiérarchisation traditionnelle des institutions, qui situe l'Église au-dessus de l'État." Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 59.

[101] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 63.

[102] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 67.

[103] Ludwig Feuerbach, 'Nothwendigkeit einer Reforme der Philosophie', in: F. Joddl, editor, *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1904), 220.

tion of Christianity.[104] Marx wants to let philosophy be about the principles taken from the world itself.[105] A secularized philosophy would not be a realization or incarnation of Christianity, nor would it divinize reality, rather it would submit philosophy to the test of its account of the world itself. As Marx sees this world no longer as a given, or theoretical reality, but as the social reality of acting, human agents.[106] Marx makes up for the deficiency of Feuerbach's replacing of religion by politics and argues that the critique of religion should be extended to a critique of politics.

For Marx, nineteenth century Germany was not a truly political state, but essentially religious. The illustration of this is to him the so called *Judenfrage*. To Marx this can only be explained out of the religious heritage of Germany. The Jews are wrong in their struggle for emancipation, when they demand recognition from an essentially Christian state.[107] Marx points out that, in the idea of a double constellation, medieval society and modern bourgeois society are very much alike. The Middle Ages know a duality of Church and state, modern bourgeois society knows a duality of public and private. They both allow man to live in two domains and thereby promotes a fundamental alienation.[108] As Marx sees it, the privatization of religion is the accomplishment of the Augustinian idea of two cities in political (bourgeois) emancipation.[109]

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[104] In the theses on Feuerbach he explains this by referring to the family: "Feuerbach geht aus von dem Faktum der religiösen Selbstentfremdung, der Verdopplung der Welt in eine religiöse und eine weltliche Welt. Seine Arbeit besteht darin, die religiöse Welt in ihre weltliche Grundlage aufzulösen. Aber daß die weltliche Grundlage sich von sich selbst abhebt und sich ein selbständiges Reich in den Wolken fixiert, ist nur aus der Selbstzerrissenheit und Sichselbstwidersprechen dieser weltlichen Grundlage zu erklären. Diese selbst muß also in isch selbst sowohl in ihrem Widerspruch verstanden als praktisch revolutioniert werden. Also nachdem z.B. die irdische Familie als das Geheimnis der heiligen Familie entdeckt ist, muß nun erstere selbst theoretisch und praktisch vernichtet werden. " Karl Marx, 'Thesen über Feuerbach', in: *Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels Werke - Band 3* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1969), 5.

[105] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 71.

[106] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 71.

[107] "Der christliche Staat kann seinem Wesen nach den Juden nicht emanzipieren … der Jude kann seinem Wesen nach nicht emanzipiert werden. Solange der Staat christlich und der Jude jüdisch ist, sind beide ebensowenig fähig, die Emanzipation zu verleihen als zu empfangen. … Die starrste Form des Gegensatzes zwischen dem Juden und dem Christen ist der religiöse Gegensatz. Wie löst man einen Gegensatz? Dadurch, daß man ihn unmöglich macht. Wie macht man einen religiösen Gegensatz unmöglich? Dadurch, daß man die Religion aufhebt. Sobald Jude und Christ ihre gegenseitigen Religionen nur mehr als verschiedene Entwicklungsstufen des menschlichen Geistes, als verschiedene von der Geschichte abgelegte Schlangenhäute und den Menschen als die Schlange erkennen, die sich in ihnen gehäutet, stehn sie nicht mehr in einem religiösen, sondern nur noch in einem kritischen, wissenschaftlichen, in einem menschlichen Verhältnisse. Die Wissenschaft ist dann ihre Einheit. Gegensätze in der Wissenschaft lösen sich aber durch die Wissenschaft selbst." Karl Marx, 'Zur Judenfrage', in: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, editors, *Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels - Werke Band 1* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1976), 349.

[108] Marx writes: "Religiös sind die Glieder des politischen Staats durch den Dualismus zwischen dem individuellen und dem Gattungsleben, zwischen dem Leben der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft und dem politischen Leben, religiös, indem der Mensch sich zu dem seiner wirklichen Individualität jenseitigen Staatsleben als seinem wahren Leben verhält, religiös, insofern die Religion hier der Geist der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft, der Ausdruck der Trennung und der Entfernung des Menschen vom Menschen ist. Christlich ist die politische Demokratie, indem in ihr der Mensch, nicht nur ein Mensch, sondern jeder Mensch, als souveränes, als höchstes Wesen gilt, aber der Mensch in seiner unkultivierten, unsozialen Erscheinung, der Mensch in seiner zufälligen Existenz, der Mensch, wie er geht und steht, der Mensch, wie er durch die ganze Organisation unserer Gesellschaft verdorben, sich selbst verloren, veräußert, unter die Herrschaft unmenschlicher Verhältnisse und Elemente gegeben ist, mit einem Wort, der Mensch, der noch kein wirkliches Gattungswesen ist. Das Phantasiegebild, der Traum, das Postulat des Christentums, die Souveränität des Menschen, aber als eines fremden, von dem wirklichen Menschen unterschiedenen Wesens, ist in der Demokratie sinnliche Wirklichkeit, Gegenwart, weltliche Maxime. Marx, 'Judenfrage', 361.

[109] Marx writes: "Die Spaltung des Menschen in den öffentlichen und in den Privatmenschen, die Dis-

Marx thus sees in modern liberal society, a realization of the same alienation Christianity promoted. The German situation is somewhat different from the French situation. In the Reformation, Germany already went through a partial revolution; partly liberating, partly alienating. It turned the laity into clergy and emancipated the nobility from the authority of the pope. But it did not make the people human agents, who made their own history. To really leave the dual model of clergy and laity, public and private behind, the people have to become a proletariat.[110] It is in this context that Marx uses the word *Säkularisierung*. In the last phase of feudalism, secularization meant that the feudal lords took goods from the Church. The decisive change for Marx would be to end any form of private ownership and to centralize all means of production.[111] Secularization is in Marx usage 'insribed in the immanent dynamics of the economy and production'.[112] Monod obserevs that the concept of secularization returns to its original political-economical context.

Monod speaks of Nietzsche as 'penseur de la sécularisation-liquidation totale.'[113] The terms *Säkularisierung* and *Säkularisation* do not occur in his work, but the term *Verweltlichung* does occur in his writings of 1871–1874. Nietzsche's goal is to bring about a complete secularization of philosophy. The philosophies of Kant and Hegel were to him a continuation of Christianity that had to make room for a non- or antichristian philosophy.[114] This more complete secularization of philosophy also meant that he attacked the great ideologies of the nineteenth century such as scientism, socialism and positivism. For Nietzsche they were nothing but substitutes for religion.

In Nietzsche, however, there is no desire to dedivinize culture; on the contrary, the culture Nietzsche desires is as religious as it is anti-Christian. He sees the flowering of the gods in the Greek polis as exemplary. *Verweltlichung* is a negative development, which he associates with the rise of the Roman empire. Nietzsche writes in *Der Geburt der Tragödie* that he sees Rome as an extreme form of secularization ('äusserster Verweltlichung'). It has divinized the people in the form of the state.[115] For Nietzsche, Greece holds the middle line between Indian ascetism and Roman secularism. Niet-

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lokation der Religion aus dem Staate in die bürgerliche Gesellschaft, sie ist nicht eine Stufe, sie ist die Vollendung der politischen Emanzipation, die also die wirkliche Religiosität des Menschen ebensowenig aufhebt, als aufzuheben strebt." Marx, 'Judenfrage', 357.

[110] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 78.

[111] "Und wenn die protestantische Verwandlung der deutschen Laien in Pfaffen die Laienpäpste, die Fürsten samt ihrer Klerisei, den Privilegierten und den Philistern, emanzipiert, so wird die philosophische Verwandlung der pfäffischen Deutschen in Menschen das Volk emanzipieren. Sowenig aber die Emanzipation bei den Fürsten, sowenig wird aber die Säkularisation der Güter bei den Kirchenraub stehenbleiben …" Karl Marx, 'Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie', in: *Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels - Werke Band 1* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1956), 386.

[112] Monod: "La sécularisation s'inscrit ainsi dans la dynamique économique et dans le mouvement immanent de la production." Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 80.

[113] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 83.

[114] Monod also describes him as a '… représsentant par excellence d'une sort de sécularisation au carré, sécularisation des instances premières de sécularisation.' Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 83.

[115] Nietzsche writes: "Von dem Orgiasmus aus führt für ein Volk nur ein Weg, der Weg zum indischen Buddhaismus, der, um überhaupt mit seiner Sehnsucht in's Nichts ertragen zu werden, jener seltnen ekstatischen Zustände mit ihrer Erhebung über Raum, Zeit und Individuum bedarf: wie diese wiederum eine Philosophie fordern, die es lehrt, die unbeschreibliche Unlust der Zwischenzustände durch eine Vorstellung zu überwinden. Eben so nothwendig geräth ein Volk, von der unbedingten Geltung der politischen Triebe aus, in eine Bahn äusserster Verweltlichung, deren grossartigster, aber auch erschrecklichster Ausdruck das römische Imperium ist." Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik', in: Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, editors, *KSA 1* (München: De Gruyter, 1999), 133.

zsche sees this absolutization of the present as an analogue to the advent of modernity and the emergence of historical consciousness. He speaks of the European mind as seeing everything 'sub specie saeculi'.[116] Nietzsche opposes this secular perspective to the Greek perspective that saw everything *sub specie aeterni*.[117]

For Nietzsche, the development of secularization is a loss of religious ecstasy. It is for this reason, that Nietzsche's critique is aimed at both the modern rationalist spirit and bourgeois Christianity, which to Nietzsche's mind share the same axiology. He sees an undesirable *Verweltlichung* in the preference for the timely over the eternal, the material over the spiritual and the system of worldly institutions over individual liberty.[118] As Nietzsche expresses his contempt for such immanentism and rationalism: "Niemals war die Welt mehr Welt, nie armer an Liebe und Güte."[119] There is a need – for Nietzsche – for a second secularization. A secularization of, and against, the instances that first enabled secularization.[120] Nietzsche attacks all the substitutes for religion, such as science, patriotism etc. He sees the resistance against the Church as in line with the Enlightenment. And sees it as his goal 'Verweltlichung zu bekämpfen.'[121] Secularization, in this sense, is a proposal to end all continuations in modern culture, replacing religion with science, philosophy etc. This is to prevent faith in God being replaced with faith in the world, or faith in secularization itself.[122] All the politically,

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[116] "Diesem Zustande haben wir uns, seit der Wiedererweckung des alexandrinisch-römischen Alterthums im fünfzehnten Jahrhundert, nach einem langen schwer zu beschreibenden Zwischenacte, in der auffälligsten Weise angenähert. Auf den Höhen dieselbe überreiche Wissenslust, dasselbe ungesättigte Finderglück, dieselbe ungeheure Verweltlichung, daneben ein heimatloses Herumschweifen, ein gieriges Sichdrängen an fremde Tische, eine leichtsinnige Vergötterung der Gegenwart oder stumpf betäubte Abkehr, Alles sub specie saeculi, der 'Jetztzeit': welche gleichen Symptome auf einen gleichen Mangel im Herzen dieser Cultur zu rathen geben, auf die Vernichtung des Mythus." Nietzsche, 'Tragödie', 149.

[117] "Bis dahin waren die Griechen unwillkürlich genöthigt, alles Erlebte sofort an ihre Mythen anzuknüpfen, ja es nur durch diese Anknüpfung zu begreifen: wodurch auch die nächste Gegenwart ihnen sofort sub specie aeterni und in gewissem Sinne zeitlos erscheinen musste. In diesen Strom des Zeitlosen aber tauchte sich eben so der Staat wie die Kunst, um in ihm vor der Last und der Gier des Augenblicks Ruhe zu finden. Und gerade nur so viel ist ein Volk – wie übrigens auch ein Mensch – werth, als es auf seine Erlebnisse den Stempel des Ewigen zu drücken vermag: denn damit ist es gleichsam entweltlicht und zeigt seine unbewusste innerliche Ueberzeugung von der Relativität der Zeit und von der wahren, d.h. der metaphysischen Bedeutung des Lebens." Nietzsche, 'Tragödie', 147–8.

[118] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 87.

[119] Nietzsche writes: "Die Gewässer der Religion fluthen ab und lassen Sümpfe oder Weiher zurück; die Nationen trennen sich wieder auf das feindseligste und begehren sich zu zerfleischen. Die Wissenschaften, ohne jedes Maass und im blindesten laisser faire betrieben, zersplittern und lösen alles Festgeglaubte auf; die gebildeten Stände und Staaten werden von einer grossartig verächtlichen Geldwirthschaft fortgerissen. Niemals war die Welt mehr Welt, nie ärmer an Liebe und Güte. Die gelehrten Stände sind nicht mehr Leuchtthürme oder Asyle inmitten aller dieser Unruhe der Verweltlichung; sie selbst werden täglich unruhiger, gedanken- und liebeloser. Alles dient der kommenden Barbarei, die jetzige Kunst und Wissenschaft mit einbegriffen." Nietzsche, 'Betrachtungen', 366.

[120] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 88.

[121] "Er muss seine Macht zu seinem hohen Culturziele anwenden. Die Verweltlichung zu bekämpfen. Der Kampf gegen die katholische Kirche ist ein Aufklärungsakt, nichts Höheres, und stärkt sie unverhältnissmässig: was gar nicht zu wünschen war. Natürlich hat sie im Allgemeinen Recht. Wenn Staat und Kirchen sich gegenseitig auffressen wollten! Die Adoration des modernen Staates kann geradezu die Vernichtung jeder Cultur herbeiführen. Der metaphysische Sinn des Daseins ist auch der Sinn jeder Cultur." Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente 1874', in: Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, editors, *KSA 7* (München: De Gruyter, 1999), 784.

[122] Nietzsche writes: "Der politische Wahn, über den ich so lächle, wie die zeitgenossen über den religiösen Wahn früher Zeiten, ist vor allem Verweltlichung, Glaube an die Welt, und aus-dem-Sinn-Schlagen von 'Jenseits' und 'Hinterwelt'. Sein Ziel ist das Wohlbefinden des flüchtigen Individuums: weshalb der Sozial-

emancipatory movements of the 20th century, such as socialism and anarchism, repeat the egalitarianism of Christianity.

Nietzsche's responds to the continuation of Christianity in the egalitarian ideologies of the West with his idea of eternal recurrence'.[123] Nietzsche needs the quasi-religious and neo-pagan notion of eternal recurrence to put to an end the latent Christianity in the social philosophies of the West. This already indicates how secularization and the return of religion are intrinsically connected.

2.2.2 Secularization and Political Theology

In the twentieth century the concept of secularization inspired a controversy in the field of political theology. The concept of secularization was given a drastically new meaning that casted radical doubts on the current definition of secularization as religious neutralization. Carl Schmitt argued that all the great concepts of modern politics, are theological concepts in a secularized form. The secular lawgiver in modern politics is, according to Carl Schmitt, a secularization of the almighty God and the structure of modern law and politics reflects the structure of traditional metaphysics.[124] The modern secularized political constellation can thus not claim to have overcome religion, rather is – according to Schmitt – entirely dependent on it. Schmitt's interpretation of modernity is not that religious devotion is withering away, rather that it is transposed to other domains of culture.[125]

Carl Schmitt represents a more radical perspective on modern secularity. He defends a position that sees modern politics as a transfer of metaphysics from the domain of religion to the domain of the state viz. politics. For example, he sees monarchy as a secularization of monotheism and constitutionalism as a secularization of Deism. Schmitt argues that late medieval theology and early modern politics were tailor-made for each other. In his analysis, the emergence of the nation state was possible only in the context of Deism. Deistic theology differs from the traditional theistic picture in that deism does not allow exceptions. The deistic God has created an immanent, closed causal world. Deism provides the model that in a way excludes God from the world and the possibility of miracles as exceptions to causal determination.[126]

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ismus seine Frucht ist." Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente 1881', in: Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, editors, *KSA 9* (München: De Gruyter, 1999), 11,163.

[123] As Monod says: "L'eternel retour du même peut être vu plutôt – avec Löwith – comme l'exact opposé de la quête d'un salut extra-mondain, la pointe antichrétienne d'une volonté dépasser les dualismes chrétiens qui faisaient chercher le salut dans un autre vie, un autre temps." Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 93.

[124] Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie* (Berlin: Dunker & Humblot, 1970), 37.

[125] For Monod, Schmitt is a representative of secularization as transposition. He writes: "L'une des cibles théoriques de Schmitt – et lúne des typiques de la catégorie de sécularisation – est bien de rationalisme constructiviste des Lumières. ...la traduction éthico-politique serait l'absolutisation de l'humanité, sa pretention à vivre sans Dieu, dans une immanence reconquise. En ce sens, on peut dire que Schmitt joue le théorème de sécularisation (ou le la sécularisation-transfert) contre le processus de sécularisation (liquidation)." Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 159. Schmitt uses the term secularization once again in a polemical sense: "La catégorie de sécularisation a cessé pour Schmitt de n'être qu'une catégorie sociologique pour redevenir une catégorie polémique: la 'neutralisation' de la catégorie de sécularisation opérée par la sociologie historique de Weber et Troeltsch." Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 192.

[126] Schmitt writes:: "The idea of the modern constitutional state triumphed together with deism, a theology that banished the miracle from the world. This theology and metaphysics rejected not only the

Monod sees as Schmitt's central idea that anarchism, liberalism and Marxism cannot live up to their claim to have passed beyond traditional metaphysics, rather they continue metaphysics in a disguised manner and their theories of political reality themselves rest on decisions of faith. Schmitt's concern with secularization is not limited to the transfer from late medieval thought to modern sovereignty. He has also sees secularization as a process in modern Western societies. He explains this process in *Der Begriff des Politischen* as a process of neutralization. The secularization of religion in modernity does not mean an end to the absolute, rather it means that religion is no longer available as a neutral domain. Neutralization for Schmitt means that in modernity this neutrality is transferred to the domain of politics in the seventeenth century. The transposition typical for the twentieth century is from a nation-based idea of sovereignty to a post-political culture. In the twentieth century Schmitt sees an abolishing of the nation state and the development of the idea of a reconciled humanity.[127] Schmitt focused on the discourse of human rights and humanity. He sees in this modern, natural law tradition a successive de-theologization. The theology of the Church gave way to the 'theology' of traditional metaphysics, which in turn was replaced by a theology of national sovereignty. In the twentieth century, as Schmitt sees it, national sovereignty (politics) is depoliticized and gives way to a new absolute: the human itself.

Secularization made an end to the religious wars, but with its shift to national sovereignty it also inaugurated a new *Zentralgebiet*. From now on, antagonistic relations of friends and enemies were formed around national concerns. In the 20th century, with its elevation of humanity and absolute human rights above politics, wars are fought for the sake of peace and human dignity. In Schmitt's view, the process of depolitization is very ambiguous. On the one hand it makes an end to religious wars and wars between nation-states. On the other hand this new notion of humanity does engender a new, absolute enmity, namely the possibility of resisting the advent of a reconciled humanity.[128] Depolitization thus paradoxically enables totalitarianism.[129] Precisely the absence of a concrete, political enemy, produces the 'enemy of humanity'. This, for Schmitt, explains why in the twentieth century wars were fought for the sake of humanity, or for humanitarian goals only.[130]

The secularization of liberal humanism, which does away with transcendence and defines solidarity to include the whole of humanity, falls short for Schmitt. In the sec-

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transgressions of the laws of nature through an exception brought about by direct intervention, as is found in the idea of a miracle, but also the sovereign's direct intervention in a valid legal order. The rationalism of the Enlightenment rejected the exception in every form. Conservative authors of the counter-revolution who were theists could thus attempt to support the personal sovereignty of the monarch ideologically, with the aid of analogies from a theistic theology." Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36–7.

[127] Monod spraks of a: '…paix comme réconciliation finale, post-politique, post-nationale, post-étatique, de l'humanité avec elle-même.' Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 162-3.

[128] Theo de Wit, *De onontkoombaarheid van de politiek. De soevereine vijand in de politieke filosofie van Carl Schmitt* (Ubbergen: Pomppers, 1992), 332–6.

[129] Monod: "…l'opposition ami/ennemi détachée de son socle politique 'concret' et agrandie aux dimensions fatales. ('totales') de l'humanité." Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 169.

[130] "…loin d'être un progrès, la criminalisation de l'adversaire et la nouvelle notion de guerre juste humanitaire constituent une régression vers l'époque des guerres des religion et des croisades, l'autorité ecclesiastiques en moins. Rien ne paraît alors plus néfaste aux yeux de Schmitt que l'invocation du Droit, de la Paix ou de l'Humanité au fins de 'disqualifier' radicalement l'ennemi, de le placer 'hors l'humanité'…" Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 165.

ularization of religion and later the secularization of sovereignty, Schmitt fears a tendency toward an entirely materialist and frivolous logic that dissolves politics in endless conversation. Secularization, for Schmitt, is thus essentially a process of neutralization and depolitization.[131]

Schmitt has proposed reuniting political and religious authority. He sees the secularized state as a consequence of a Judeo-Christian tradition, that via Augustine separates the political and the religious. Instead he argues for a pagan-Christianity that restores the unity of power in Leviathan.[132]

Although I do not share all Monod's judgments on Schmitt, I think he rightfully asserts that a reaffirmation of politics should entail to some extent the "démêler la confusion theologico-politique." I do not see why Monod sees this as bound up with a "préséance de l'instance séculière (État) sur l'instance sacrale".[133] Carl Schmitt especially problematizes the modern suggestion to radically separate religion and politics. He argues that such a decision can never be either purely political or purely theological. As Monod has it: "La théologie de la séparation des sphères est une theologie politique".[134] Schmitts critique concerns a definition of secularization as a 'pacification des conflicts en tant que celle-ci tend ultiment.'[135] For Schmitt, the idea of a secularization as an immanent realization of what was once a religious category crosses a boundary that should remain intact. The idea that Utopia can be realized here and now, is a denial of original sin.[136] For Schmitt, modern secularization denies exactly the unfinishableness of history. The awareness of a secular time that is not itself the ultimate reality is replaced by a conception of secularization that says that there is only this time and world and that Utopia can be realized here and now. Monod concludes that for Schmitt:

> …la conscience de cette limite distingue précisément l'ère chrétienne de la modernité sécularisée, qui ne conçoit rien au-delà de sa propre historicité, et en l'absolutisant de la sorte, la clôt sur elle-même.[137]

In another way, Karl Löwith has used secularization to indicate the continued presence of Christianity in the consciousness of the West. Secularization is not a mere decline of religion; it is also a continuation of it. Löwith sees two sources of modern secularization. First: it is a return of paganism and its fixation on the world, but it takes from Christianity a linear concept of history, while dropping its occupation with transcendence. Modern philosophies of history are thus at the same time Christianized

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[131] Monod: "L'opposition de Schmitt au processus de sécularisation en tant qu'il aboutirait à une société entièrement 'materialiste' et frivole implique logiquement la contestation des 'neutralisations' libérales qui'il assimile à des 'dépolitisations' succesives." Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 192.

[132] Monod writes: "Dans cette perspective, le sens de l'unité réconquise entre politique et religion sous l'egide de l'État-Léviathan serait une réaction à la coupure radicale introduite par le 'judéo-christianisme' et le protestantisme entre politique et religion." Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 173.

[133] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 194.

[134] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 176.

[135] Monod writes: "L'idée d'une société totalement sécularisée est ainsi repoussée par Schmitt à la fois comme figure 'antechristique' de retour a l'animalité d'une existence toute d'immanence, mais aussi – tant l'affirmation du 'sérieux' theologique est inséparable, dans cette pensée, de l'affirmation du politique – comme figure d'une société où la 'dépolitisation' libérale aurait si parfaitement fait son oeuvre que toute conflictualité serait étouffée sous la règne de la consommation et du divertissement." Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 179.

[136] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 179.

[137] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 181.

paganism and Christian heresy.[138] This leads Löwith to see secularization as a double secularization. It comes after Christianity: after a religion that has already removed myth from the world. But as it is now bereft of a sense of transcendence, secularized Western culture is more *Entzaubert* than any culture before has ever been.

For Löwith, the theology of Joachim of Fiore, provides a paradigm that enables a secular interpretation of Christian eschatology. Löwith emphasizes that Joachim of Fiore offered for the first time a theological historicism. Patristic Christianity did not think of a Christian existence in this historicist sense. For Augustine, Löwith asserts, God was equally close in every epoch and there was no real development in history.[139] For Löwith, modern philosophies of history are secularizations of this typically historicist interpretation of Christianity. This thesis implies for him at least three things: First that modern secular philosophies of history, such as Marxism, can as well be understood as framed by a Christian perspective on history.

Second, that there is a more original Christianity that was not historicist. Hence, his critique does not concern religion or Christianity as such, rather the mixture of a certain kind of Christianity and modern progressive philosophies of history. For Löwith, stoicism provides a non-religious and non-historicist philosophy, which enables a more direct relation to the world, undiluted by ideas of progress in history.

Third, the philosophies of history that have abjured their origin in a Christian worldview are inherently unstable, as the goal of history cannot be read off from history itself. As Löwith sees it, decisionism is one of the practical consequences of this.

As a reaction to the political theology of Carl Schmitt and Löwith's thesis of the dependency of secular philosophies of history on the Christian worldview, Hans Blumenberg has responded with his thesis of the legitimacy of the modern age. Blumenberg interprets the theological language of the early modern writers on politics as a mode of expression, and as a rhetorical function. He contests the attempt of Schmitt to see it as a permanent and ineradicable, political theology. He contests the idea of a 'substantialist historical ontology'.[140] Far from a continuation of some absolutist metaphysics, Blumenberg sees modernity as a genuine alternative to traditional metaphysics. For Blumenberg, to escape the fatal direction of a secular religion of the goal of history, we should leave our ideas concerning the end of history open. Modern man needs to accept that Christianity and modernity offered absolutist models. He finds an alternative in an Epicurean materialism.[141] Blumenberg proposes granting the legitimacy of modernity, while avoiding a Nietzschean fanaticism that wants to root out every possible continuity with Christianity.[142]

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[138] "…realization de cette impossibilité antique et de cette hérésie chrétienne."

[139] Löwith writes: "In Augustins Denken ist religiöse Volkommenheit an jedem Punkt des Geschichtsverlauf nach Christus gleich möglich; in Joachims Denken nur in einer bestimmten Periode bei einem bestimmten zusammentreffen von Geschehenissen. Nach Augustin wird die geschichtliche Wahrheit in einem einzigen Ereignis offenbart; nach Joachim in einer Aufeinanderfolge von Ordnungen." Karl Löwith, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen. Zur Kritik der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1969), 170.

[140] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 154.

[141] Blumenberg writes: "Die Epikureer mussten bloss ins Einvernehmen mit einer unbegründbaren und rücksichtslosen Welt kommen. Wir müssen über dies mit der Enttäuschung fertig werden, dass es mit der Fürsorgezusage und Sinnversprechen des Christentums nichts ist." Franz Josef Wetz, *Hans Blumenberg zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 1993), 155.

[142] Monod, *Querelle de la sécularisation*, 279.

2.3 SECULARIZATION IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

In the 20th century, secularization has been a central concern in the sociology of religion. A current definition of secularization from the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, is:

> . . . to indicate a variety of processes in which control of social space, time, facilities, resources and personnel was lost by religious authorities, and in which empirical procedures and worldly goals and purposes displaced ritual and symbolic patterns of action directed toward otherworldly or supernatural ends. . . . The process of structural differentiation in which social institutions (the economy the polity, morality, justice, education, recreation, health maintenance, and familial organization) become recognized as distinctive concerns operating with considerable autonomy.[143]

As a rule, sociological definitions of secularity diagnose a decreasing influence of religion and the emergence of other social spheres, which operate with a certain autonomy from religion or the Church. As a sociological account of religious decline in the West, the secularization thesis has been one of the longest-standing theses in the social sciences.

Wallis and Bruce understand secularization to indicate a 'diminishing social significance of religion'.[144] Extending their definition, Wallis and Bruce discern three positive components. First, social differentiation, secondly societalization, meaning a growth of translocal networks and, thirdly, rationalization. The meaning of social differentiation is an abiding and recurring aspect of almost every definition of secularization. It concerns the increasing multiplicity of spheres of life and loss of unity of life as experienced in premodern times. For example, the family as an integrating unit of social life now gives way to other social institutions. Wallis and Bruce call this the 'differentiation of lifeworlds'.[145]

The second aspect is the observation that life is increasingly organized on a societal basis. Modern *societies* repress premodern *communities*. Societies attempt to unite a diversity of local cultures and religions. Wallis and Bruce primarily associate religion with local communities at odds with the more universal societies. The consequence of the first two constituting processes of secularization is that religion as a universal system becomes less plausible. "Religion becomes privatized and is pushed to the margins and interstices of the social order."[146]

A third aspect of secularization is rationalization. According to sociologists like Weber and Berger, the process of rationalization was part of the Christian tradition itself. The Jewish and Christian traditions, allowed a great deal of autonomy to the world, made possible by the idea of a transcendent creator-God.

Writing on the exceptions of religious decline in the modern world, Wallis and Bruce take it that in cases of (1) cultural defense and (2) rapid social transitions, there is a remaining role for religion. The dominant line of secularization, however, is one of 'commitment to nonconformity'[147] and an acceptance of social disintegration. To Wallis

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[143] Wilson, 8214–8220.

[144] Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce, 'Secularization: The orthodox model', in: Steve Bruce, editor, *Religion and Modernization. Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 11.

[145] Wallis and Bruce, 12.

[146] Wallis and Bruce, 13.

[147] Wallis and Bruce, 19.

and Bruce, the social function of religion more and more replaces what is to their mind the primary meaning of religion; contact with the supernatural. As they summarize their view: "...social differentiation, societalization, and rationalization generate secularization except where religion finds or retains work to do other than relating people to the supernatural."[148] As modernization "disrupts communities and traditional employment patterns and status hierarchies", religion finds new opportunities in the offering of "compensators".[149] Wallis and Bruce see a remaining place for religion in modern society, precisely in its ability to compensate for the individualized and fragmented character of modernity. Secularization is therefore "self-limiting."[150]

Despite its success in recent decades, the secularization thesis has been challenged from many perspectives. An influential voice in this critique has been Peter Berger's. For a long time, Berger has defended a model of secularization as a process of decline of religion, as a necessary development in modern culture.[151] The secularization theory that dominated the academic thought on the position of religion in modern society turned out to be wrong, as Berger himself admitted.[152] His biggest mistake, he said, was that modernity necessarily leads to a decline of religion. His biggest insight was that '...pluralism undermines the taken for grantedness of beliefs and values'. In opposition to the secularization thesis, Berger has written of the desecularization of the world.[153] Within this model he spoke of 'the American exception.' Unlike other countries in the Western world, the influence of religion remained a constant factor in American society. Not only the fact that secularization did not really take hold of American society, but developments in other areas of the world, which indicated a general upsurge of religion, made Berger and others realize that Europe was the exception. Worldwide, religion has become an influential factor, except in parts of Europe, where secularization is the dominant development. This was, however, not the only counter indication. The expected 'internal secularization' of belief also held off. Orthodox religion was growing, not the enlightened and liberal churches.[154]

Today there is a wide variety of responses to the crisis of the secularization paradigm. I will mention only three, in order to give some indication from the perspective of the social sciences, what the remaining value of the secularization paradigm might be. In the first place I mention the adaptation of the secularization theory. Norris and Inglehart assert that, despite the return of religion and some failed prophesies, the secularization paradigm is still valuable and descriptively adequate. They summarize the still valid core of the secularization theory in two theses:

1. The public of virtually all advanced, industrial societies have been moving toward

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[148] Wallis and Bruce, 17.

[149] Wallis and Bruce, 18,26.

[150] Wallis and Bruce, 26.

[151] Peter Berger says: "Although the term secularization theory refers to works from the 1950s and 1960s, the key idea of the theory can indeed be traced to the Enlightenment. That idea is simple: Modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals." Peter Berger, 'Protestantism and the quest for certainty', *The Christian Century* 115 (1998), 2.

[152] Berger, 'Protestantism'.

[153] Peter Berger, 'The Desecularization of the world. A global Overview', in: Peter Berger, editor, *The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999).

[154] Staf Hellemans, *Het tijdperk van de wereldreligies. religie in agrarische civilisaties en in moderne samenlevingen* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2007).

more secular orientations during the past fifty years.

2. The world as a whole now has more people with traditional religious views than ever before – and they constitute a growing proportion of the world's population.[155]

Although the theses might look contradictory in first instance, Norris and Ingleheart explain it in terms of a relation between religion and a need for existential security. In countries, for instance, where people's living conditions are very secure, the need for religion declines. A growing sense of security, however, is often accompanied by a lessened need for procreation, whereas in less secure conditions people tend to have more children. The numeric majority of believers, in this scheme, is thus a symptom of an ongoing secularization.

In more recent research, the dynamics of religion and secularization are almost inverted. The secularization of culture is not only belied, it is also possible to think of modernity as itself producing religion. A good example of this can be found in the work of Stark and Bainbridge. In their view, the vitality of the American churches can be interpreted as a consequence of the separation of Church and state. Secularization and differentiation can also be a precondition for the flourishing of religion. Whereas the churches of Europe have always had the possibility of leaning on the state, in the United States, the churches had to make it on their own. This occasioned a 'religious economics.' In the context of a plural society, religious groups are forced to compete and, in doing so, promote religious devotion. Pluralism is, to their mind, not an indication of secularization, but has a positive effect on religious adherence and new forms of religious life.

The historical schema of gradual secularization has become less and less plausible. Historical evidence shows that there is not one, unilinear process of secularization. The Middle Ages may have been less religious than so far thought, and contemporary research into social history finds the nineteenth century surprisingly religious.[156] These examples – failed predictions, and more complex accounts of developments in religious adherence in the past – have proven that secularization cannot be understood as a unilinear and universal explanation. One cannot force such largely differing eras as the Middle Ages, modernity and postmodernism into one single scheme. Today, sociologists have become more cautious in their usage of the term. Has sociology of religion not been biased from the outset, that it is the decline of religion that needs to be explained? The growth of religious adherence was often too a counterintuitive development to theorists of secularization. It is precisely the counterintuitive development of an increase of religious adherence, that has been a central concern of recent developments in the anthropology of religion.

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[155] Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular. Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.

[156] See A. Bredero's discussion of the trend in medieval research toward a "secularization of the Middle Ages" in Adriaan H. Bredero, *De ontkerstening der Middeleeuwen. Een terugblik op de geschiedenis van twaalf eeuwen christendom* (Baarn: Agora Pelckmans, 2000), 391–437. For the religious character of the nineteenth century: Olaf Blaschke, 'Das 19. Jahrhundert. Ein zweites konfessionelles Zeitalter?', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 26 (2000), 38–75.

2.4 THE END OF THE SECULARIZATION PARADIGM?

Today a dominant trend in social history is to speak of religious change and reinterpretation in modernity, rather than religious decline.[157] This approach, which in a certain way leaves the secularization paradigm behind, is represented by authors such as Hugh McLeod, Callum Brown and in the Netherlands by Peter van Rooden and Peter van der Veer.[158] In general they argue that empirically there is no evidence that along with modernization a process of secularization emerged. As they point out, religion remained a dominant force in modern society at least until the 1950's. Their theoretical objections to theorists of secularization concern for instance the focus on institutional religion, discarding popular religiosity and the presence of religion in other areas of society. When we interpret secularization as a process of religious decline, which occurs with a certain necessity, many phenomena in the nineteenth and twentieth century are hard to explain.[159] Recent literature criticizes the secularization thesis and bids farewell to any form of unilinear secularization. Not only is the problematic nature of the secularization thesis demonstrated, their theorizing is focused on the secular production of religion. In the modern era, there seems to be emerging a whole new social dynamic, related to the emergence of a public sphere, the formation of nation states, and a relocation of religion. None of this however can be explained in terms of gradual processes. The evidence points more in the direction of a paradigm shift than in the direction of a long term process.

The emergence of a secular modern order has gigantic consequences for religion. The nation state makes the existence of the Church as a body problematic. It has to adapt itself to the new constellation of a society in which religion no longer has an outer structure, but is located in the realm of inner experience. As the modern nation state replaces the traditional confessional state, religious faith itself is redefined as a primarily inner affair, to which institutional religion is only secondary.[160] This, however, does not at all lead to a decrease in religious adherence. On the contrary, in the social dynamics of the emerging modern society, the churches are faring rather well. And in a changing focus of the churches from the state to the people, Church attendance and public manifestations of religion are increasing.

To give a few examples of data that disturb the secularization paradigm: If it were true that modernization leads to a decline in religion, it is hard to understand why European countries remained so religious until the nineteen-sixties. In Great Britain, declining Church attendance occured in the last decades of the nineteenth century, in The Netherlands, almost a century later. Moreover, received sociology of religion tends to overestimate the extent to which secularization is a necessary process. In the United States there is hardly any evidence for a decline in Church attendance.[161] A critical

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[157] Hugh McLeod, 'Introduction', in: Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf, editors, *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8.

[158] As a valuable introduction see: Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf, editors, *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[159] Vergote, for instance, stresses the continuity between Christianity and secularization and this implies for him that secularization is both irreversible and necessary. Vergote, 106–7.

[160] Think, for example, of Schleiermacher's notion of *Abhängigkeit*. See also Peter van Rooden, 'Secularization and the Trajectory of Religion in the West', in: Henri Krop, Arie Molendijk and Hent de Vries, editors, *Post-Theism: Reframing the Judeo-Christian Tradition* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 169–188.

[161] Peter van der Veer, 'The Secular Production of Religion', *Etnofoor* VIII (2) (1990), 5.

turning point in European developments in religious adherence seems to be the middle of the eighteenth century.[162] Around this time all over Europe there is a decrease in Church attendance, a changing attitude towards death etc. Mcleod, however, voices the question, whether these symptoms, are indications of decline, or rather of reinterpretation of religion. He follows Lucian Hoelscher in the idea that around this same time, there is a major breakthrough in religious piety and involvement of believers in social amelioration. He also asserts that there were secularizing developments, which maybe undermined Christendom, but not necessarily Christianity. McLeod's opinion is that this critical episode in many theories of secularization, was in fact a '…time of increased religious fervor, and one in which the social significance of the churches grew.'[163]

Another counterintuitive development Mcleod draws attention to, is that secularization as a separation of Church and state is, less than often assumed, a formal aspect of modern, Western societies. In matters of the Church-state separation, there was never a unilinear process from the Enlightenment to the present. In the Netherlands, it is not even formally laid down in the law, and in France for example, the initial Church and state separation was undone in the Restoration. In Sweden, there has been a formal Church and state separation only since 2000.

Callum Brown's revisionist view on secularization entails that there is reason to downplay '…the extent of damage to organised religion rendered by industrialisation and urbanisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.'[164] The crucial insight from this revision is that the secularization theories of the nineteen-sixties, did not describe a process that had been taking place for centuries and was now coming to an end, rather these theories described a cultural revolution that was first beginning at that time.

This leaves us with the question, what – if not Enlightenment philosophy – caused the sudden collapse of Christendom in the twentieth century. Mcleod tends to explain the recent crisis of Christianity in Europe with reference to rapidly changing social circumstances connected with the process of industrialization and urbanization. Mcleod's case is not to deny the reality of secularization in present societies, but that in many cases, such as in the Netherlands and Scotland, these changes first occurred in the nineteen-sixties. The secularization theories that were developed in these years reflected actual developments, but not long term, historical processes. This is something different than saying that secularization is some sort of necessary process developing from the presuppositions of Enlightenment philosophy.

Besides the necessity of revising certain data, there is a deeper skepticism with regard to the structuralist nature of the secularization theory. It works with entities, such as religion, spirituality, society and history which cannot be compared from one era to the other. In fact these concepts tend to be highly circular, as they interpret premod-

[162] Hugh McLeod, 'Introduction', in: Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf, editors, *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7.

[163] McLeod, 'Introduction', 8.

[164] Writing on the situation in Great Britain, he says: "…the data suggests that the focus of traditional social history on the 1880–1930 period as a turning point in Britain has only partial validity. Only Church-going decline seems significant then, and it is counterbalanced by much evidence of the vibrancy of religious culture in both plebeian and bourgeois life in the late Victorian, Edwardian and inter-war periods." Callum G. Brown, 'The secularisation decade: what the 1960s have done to the study of religious history', in: Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf, editors, *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 35.

ern European society as well as non-Western cultures in terms of an already secular arrangement.[165] A question like: Were people before 1600 more religious than they are now? is impossible to answer as the connotation of religion differs considerably from era to era.[166] Likewise, it is impossible to compare the place of religion in premodern and modern society, since the concept of the social is a definitory aspect of modernity itself, as is the idea that the social somehow precedes the religious.[167] As Talal Asad explains, the invention of a non-religious sphere in modernity at the same time produces a type of religion, which is incomprehensible to the older arrangement and can indeed only be a threat to secular order.[168] In order to make this point more concrete, I will discuss a case study concerning the 'secular production of religion'.

The weakness of an interpretation of secularization as a linear process of religious *decline*, is that it cannot do justice to genuine novelty and to modernity as an epoch that itself creates forms of religion and community. When the logical consequences of the secularization theory do not appear, this is easily explained by a certain delay or a slowness with which dispositions of thought and feeling change.[169] As Van der Veer remarks, however, it is more interesting to think of secularization as a *formative* process. When we look at secularization as a contingent, formative process, it becomes possible to see how secularization can also be thought of as itself producing religion.

For Van der Veer it is crucial to see that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there are indeed developments that tend to a separation of Church and state, but that there is a continued dynamics between the state and religion.[170] In a case study of the colonial politics of the British empire, he shows how in India, the implementations of modern, secular principles, resulted in a society that was more than ever organized around religious distinctions and principles. In response to British politics the practice of widow immolation and the functioning of the caste system did not disappear, but rather was given an impetus. Not only was the secular nature of British politics perceived by the peoples of British India as genuinely Christian, the effects of the secular based colonial politics was also the reason that modern developments in India took a distinctively religious turn. To a certain extent this was a result of the British census system, that strenghtended loosely shaped identities by classifying and counting them. A similar effect was reached by classifying castes in order to emancipate them. An unintended side effect was that the caste differences were articulated instead of eliminated.[171] Van der Veer's remarkable conclusion is that the secularist politics in British

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[165] See Van der Veer on the secular production of spirituality in: Peter van der Veer, *Spirituality in Modern Society*, Inaugural Lecture as University Professor at Utrecht University, 20 October 2005 (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2005), 8–10.

[166] "Identifying the nature of religion before and after the emergence of the modern nation-state, makes it very hard to get a good grasp on the role of religion in either the present or the past." Van Rooden, 'Religion in the West', 169–188.

[167] Wilson, 8214–8220.

[168] Asad, 193, 200.

[169] Vergote, 109.

[170] Van der Veer writes: "Liberal theories of the state clearly continued to recognize the need to restrict religious freedom in order to protect the social order. The separation of Church and state implied a depolitization of religion and a new definition of the body politic as the nation. This goes to say that a sharp analytical distinction between state and society misses the nature of that hyphenated phenomenon, the nation-state. The role of the state, though separated from the Church, continues to be crucial in defining the place of religion in modern society." Van der Veer, 'Secular Production of Religion', 7.

[171] Van der Veer, 'Secular Production of Religion', 11–12.

India in general produced a political and social reality that was more than ever before determined by religious factors.[172] This formative account of secularization opens up a perspective in which secularity is no longer the opposite of religion, but the name of a specifically modern dynamic between the socio-political and the religious. A dynamic which not only refuses certain orthodox forms of religion, but also produces forms of religion and religious identities. In Van der Veer's case study of the situation in British India, secularization is a dynamic process in which modern state formation merges with more articulate, religious identities.

2.5 POSTMODERN SECULARITY?

The examples from the anthropology of religion in the last section suggest that what, in the eyes of Western secularists, is the liberating potential of secularity, can be perceived by non-westerners as a dominant regime imposed on them.[173] The insistence on the local and historical contingency of secularization processes has a direct link with postmodern critiques of logos-centrism and Euro-centrism in modern philosophy. This makes it legitimate to ask how the concept of secularity changes, when paradigms of rationality change. The suggested transition from a modern to a postmodern approach presupposes, however, that developments in philosophy are relevant for the meaning and applicability of a concept like secularity. This connection needs some clarification, for it is important to see that the political-philosophical category has epistemological underpinnings and that its political impact changes with the philosophical purport. In contemporary philosophy, the shift in the meaning of secularity against the background of postmodernism is intensely debated. I will discuss some positions defended today on the epistemological underpinnings of secularity.

A common position in modern philosophy is that the religious beliefs a person holds are of a personal, existential nature and should play no role in typically secular enterprises like science and politics, where the arguments offered should be accessible to anyone. Nielsen, for instance, discusses such a connection between secularity and rationality. A secular view of the world is, for Nielsen, synonymous with a rational view of the world. For him, a secular outlook excludes religious belief. His argument is that, given the obvious inconsistency and irreducible plurality of religious beliefs, only a secular view of the world is intellectually acceptable.

Moreover, he denies that secularism is itself some kind of worldview, or framework, on a par with religion. For Nielsen the case against religion is cumulative. First, the incoherence of religion can be demonstrated. Second, the Enlightenment has provided an alternative *Weltbild* that is superior to religion. Historically, "...religion has become a more vulnerable and optional thing, and secular ways of looking at the world have gained a stronger footing."[174]

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[172] Van der Veer: "It created a separation of state and Church in colonial Christianity, but in doing so it failed to depoliticize the indigenous religions. Its modernizing policies transformed and strengthened the force of indigenous religious identities to the extent that they are now the most important political fact in the Indian subcontinent. Under colonial circumstances the secular state created its opposite, a society in which religion had more rather than less political consequences." Van der Veer, 'Secular Production of Religion', 13.

[173] See for an example of the Arab experience of Western secularism in the colonial era: Ramadan.

[174] Kai Nielsen, 'God and the crisis of modernity', in: Hendrik Hart, Ronald Kuipers and Kai Nielsen,

Valuing secularity as objectivity, however, need not commit one to atheism. In religious reasoning there is also a need for objectivity and perspicuity. Swinburne, for one, sees the tools of analytical philosophy as serving exactly this goal. He sees analytical philosophy of religion as a secular philosophy in that it attempts to philosophize according to an objective and commonly accessible, neutral rationality. According to Swinburne analytical philosophy provides a valuable instrument for secular society and this goes for religion too. He speaks of 'secular criteria to clarify and justify religious claims' and asserts that the Christian tradition is better defended in an analytical, scientific vocabulary.[175] He praises analytical philosophy for its 'high valuation of clarity and coherence' and sees as its goal 'to give a correct account of what are the ultimate constituents of the world and how they interact.'[176] The predicate 'secular' in this sense refers to a certain objectivity and neutrality of reasoning. This secularity, however, has no *partis pris* for either a theistic or an atheistic position.

Contemporary philosopher of science Van Fraassen addresses the question as to how science, secularity and religion relate in his book *The Empirical Stance*.[177]. He voices the question: "In what sense is the idea of secularity related to science?" Van Fraassen does not think that objective inquiry commits one to a secular worldview. He says that the defining characteristic of a scientific attitude is an objectifying attitude, but that this does not per se exclude, for example, religious convictions.[178] According to Van Fraassen the objectifying attitude of science does not commit one to secularism. "If science is an enterprise with clearly discernible criteria of success, it has no need of a secular or any other loyalty oath." Moreover, he is suspicious of a sharp demarcation between religion and the secular. "The line between the religious and the secular is blurred in aesthetic and moral thinking, in philosophies of life, and in nontheistic religions."[179]

These examples show that the relation of secularity and rationality is in the present context subject to intense debate. For an atheist like Nielsen, secularity excludes religion, while for Van Fraassen they are compatible. What the authors do share is that they make inferences from a certain account of rationality to a definition of secularity. The scope of the term secular is to a large extent determined by what one takes to be rational. And it is exactly the idea of a common, shared and universal rationality that is under fire in postmodern critique. So if I am right about the connection of rationality and secularity, postmodernism offers a challenging perspective from which to reconsider the idea of the secular.

This postmodern renegotiation of boundaries between the religious and the secular is related to an inherent theological concern that is unsatisfied with the rigid boundaries that are drawn in the modern world between the religious and the spheres of science, politics and social life. To these theologians, the religious cannot be defined in such terms as 'spirituality' and 'sensitivity to the transcendent.' Religion is a more compre-

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editors, *Walking the tightrope of faith. Philosophical Conversations About Reason and Religion* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 38–9.

[175] Richard Swinburne, 'The value and Christian roots of Analytical Philosophy of Religion', in: Harriet A. Harris and Christopher J. Insole, editors, *Faith and Philosophical Analysis. The Impact of Analytical Philosophy on the Philosophy of Religion* (Ashgate, 2005), 40.

[176] Swinburne, 35.

[177] Bas van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) Especially lecture 5; *What Is Science – And What Is It to Be secular?*

[178] Van Fraassen, 156.

[179] Van Fraassen, 174.

hensive experience that has to do with the totality of life, individual and public. For Vahanian, therefore, religion cannot be cut off from the secular. The concept of 'saeculum', he holds, can be defined as 'a shared world of human experience'.[180] This idea of a shared world of human experience is not by definition an a-religious sphere. On the contrary, to his mind the secular is closely intertwined with religious tradition: "...this saeculum is generated out of a fundamentally Jewish and Christian theological worldview, and underlies the secondary opposition between sacred and profane." For Vahanian, the *saeculum* is a theological notion which implies that we live in a world of immanence as the location of human and divine meaning and value."[181] When this is our definition of secularity, it becomes clear that secularity – as a shared immanent context – does not *as such* rule out religious belief. This suggests that secularity in our day can function, not only as an antidote to religious fanaticism. In postmodern culture it might also be necessary to reconsider religion to counter the trend toward meaning devaluation in postmodern experience itself. Whereas in modernity the religious was experienced as blocking access to the world and to an independent polity, in postmodernism the more original religious inspiration might be restored. This would mean a consideration of secularity as referring to an appreciation of immanence and temporality.

Against the absolute and monolithic conceptions of instrumental reason in modernity and against the manipulative and elusive language games of post-modernity, the postmodern condition might also be one in which secularity is restored as a historicized concept of rationality and as a recognition of locality, embodiment and historical contingency. The latter is no longer governed by an ideal of objectivity and the modern dualism of naturalism and supernaturalism, but is more pragmatic in nature. The emergence of a secular culture implies a change in the very concept of rationality, just as in Romanticism, religion returned because the Enlightenment overlooked essentials of human culture. Religion and Christianity pierced the rational and moral character of the Enlightenment.[182] A similar process is observable in postmodernity: it is a return to what has been repressed by Enlightenment and positivist rationality.

2.6 EVALUATION AND ORIENTATION

In this very limited overview we have seen diverse contexts in which the notion of secularization plays a role. We have seen a canonical use of the concept, as in the Middle Ages. In the modern era, the use of secularization initially had a dominantly judicial connotation. In the philosophy of Hegel, *Verweltlichung* referred to a continuity of Christianity and modern culture. In the work of Marx and Nietzsche, in various ways, the presence of Christianity in modern culture is contested. They attempt to interpret secularization as a liquidation of Christianity. When we look at the 'orthodox model' of secularization as defended by Wallis and Bruce we can seriously question its credibility, in the light of both more refined accounts of secularization and the postmodern condition. When we, for example, take a closer look at what Wallis and Bruce have to

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[180] Clayton Crocket, 'Introduction', in: Clayton Crocket, editor, *Secular Theology. American Radical Theological Thought* (London: Routledge, 2001), 1.

[181] Crocket, 1.

[182] Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Balans van het Christendom* (Amsterdam: Paris, 1947), 24.

say on societalization, we can ask: do they mean that the universal story provided by the Church is no longer valid, because no universal stories are any longer credible? Or do they take secularization to imply that the universal story is taken over by the society viz. the state? In the background lurks the distinction between the functional and substantial definition of religion. Wallis and Bruce work with a substantial definition of religion, but this can easily make us lose sight of secularization as a *transfer* of the religious function to the social domain.

For Carl Schmitt, secularization refers to such a transfer of religious concepts. In the work of Karl Löwith, we saw an analysis of secularization as the interwovenness of Christianity and modern philosophies of history. For Blumenberg, secularization becomes a legitimate step beyond the structures of medieval and feudal Europe. In place of a realization or transfer of religion, Blumenberg asserts that there might be a certain historical dependence of secularity on religion, but this should not lead us to the idea of an inescapable persistence of theological concepts in the political and social culture of modernity.

The revisionist theorists of secularity subscribe neither to Blumenberg's idea of a secularity independent of religion, nor to secularity as a continuation of religion by other means. Rather, they hold that the newly invented culture of secularity tends to engender new forms of religion. There is no longer a continuation of older forms of religion, but rather a paradigm switch, in which a new social and political reality emerges, and with them, new forms of religion.

With regard to the political meaning of secularity, my discussion of Charles Taylor showed that we at least have to discern – historically – between a common ground approach and a neutral account of secularity. Taylor does not discuss the theme of secularity explicitly in relation to some version of postmodernism, but it is clear that he sees postfoundationalism as a serious challenge to the traditional versions of secularity. The challenge of secularity today is that it has to be given shape in a context that is no longer identical with the sphere of Latin Christendom. Secularity as religious neutrality may have an intuitive plausibility, nevertheless Taylor is skeptical about its validity outside the context of 'Western unbelief'. The rational basis for the neutral approach will not be easily attained. Therefore Taylor proposes a third version of secularism, which may work outside the context of Western societies and may function in pluralistic societies as well. This is the model of John Rawls, based on the notion of the possibility of an overlapping consensus.[183] The strength of the model is that it does not presuppose a common religious background, as opposed to the common ground version and it avoids the problems of a strict neutrality. "We need a religiously neutral model", says Taylor, "The only thing we can hope to share is a purely political ethic, not its embedding in some religious view"[184] The weakness of the neutral version is that it presupposes an agreement on a foundation, supposedly independent of religion. The difference between the neutral version and the overlapping consensus version is that the latter does not claim a strict neutrality toward religious convictions and views of

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[183] The most detailed discussion Rawls gives of it is in John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), LectureIV.

[184] Taylor, 'Modes', 37. Taylor expresses the non-foundational character of his secularism as follows: "The property of the overlapping consensus view is just that it lifts the requirement of a commonly held foundation. It aims only at universal acceptance of certain political principles. …but it recognizes from the outset that there cannot be a universally agreed basis for these, independent or religious." Taylor, 'Modes', 38.

life, rather it states that belonging to a society is embedded in views of life, themselves not (religiously) neutral.[185]

My reading of Taylor has shown that the concept of secularity is not merely a term that functions in the relation between Church and state. Taylor shows convincingly that the meaning of secularity is part of an entire *Weltbild*. The separation of Church and state is but one application of the concept, but it is meaningless without a broader understanding of the transition from a Christian to a modern, moral order. Taylor believes that an overlapping consensus theory will cover the need for a middle road between Christian ethnocentrism and neutral secularism. I am not confident whether Taylor's location of religion in the public sphere is a convincing solution to the problem this constellation is facing. It seems to me that he falls back on a rather outdated model. The emergence of a public sphere had a nihilistic intent from the outset. Van Harskamp has pointed to this strange preference of philosophers sympathetic to religion, for civil society with its idea of *Öffentlichkeit*. Historically it was exactly the notion of *Öffentlichkeit* that has been a secularizing force.[186] And historically it is clear that the character of modern society as characterized by a public sphere and an idea of a public reason have been secularized societies. I suspect that Taylor's proposal for an 'overlapping consensus' approach, and his insistence on the public sphere as self-constituting, is already entirely framed by secular modernity. Moreover, Taylor's narrative gives great value to the emergence of a public sphere. This is of course necessary to understand the transformations in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Today, however, we witness the complete breakdown of the public sphere and, with it, of religion. Although some still see a promising role for religion as constituting a public identity, the trend is going in the direction of a crumbling down of the public sphere and an ongoing privatization of religion. The role of religion in this development – and again I entirely agree with Van Harskamp here – is much more one of adaptation than of resistance by religion to the privatizing and atomizing forces of modernity.[187]

With regard to the ontological meaning of secularity, this chapter outlined a development toward a rationalized understanding of an autonomous world. This process of rationalization is not at all a radical split with the worldview of Christianity. Rather, an understanding of the world as a partly autonomous domain that could be investigated in a rational manner was already present in Christian and Jewish understanding, as many theorists of secularization hold. Secularization, to them, marks not a break between irrational and rational accounts of the world. Rather, within the transition from an account of the world in relation to transcendence and an account of the world as an immanent reality only, there is a continuity in – what Nijk called – the 'definition of reality'.

What Taylor does recognize is the changed role of rationality in postmodernity. The modern idea of secularity goes hand in hand with a view of the world as a closed

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[185] "The overlapping consensus approach recognizes that this common political ethic will not suffice by itself; that everyone who adheres to it will have some broader and deeper understanding of the good in which it is embedded. It aims to respect the diversity of such understandings, while building consensus of the ethic."

[186] Anton van Harskamp, *Van fundi's, spirituelen en moralisten. Over civil society en religie* (Kampen: Kok, 2003), 75.

[187] I refer here to his very critical assessment of Evangelical and Pentecostal spirituality as very much a world fleeing New Age-like religion. Anton van Harskamp, 'Simply astounding. Ongoing secularization in the Netherlands?', in: Erik Sengers, editor, *The Dutch and Their Gods: Secularization and Transformation of Religion in The Netherlands Since 1950* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2005), 43–57.

structure. First of all, in its modern variant this closed character of the world is motivated scientifically. In postmodernism, secularity is motivated morally. In both its forms, modern and postmodern, the secular is described by Taylor in its deviation from the Christian view of secularity. Taylor shows that modern and postmodern secularity remain atheistic, but that secularity is motivated differently in the postmodern era. It is no longer backed up by a positivistic belief in science, but is a moral view. Being secular changes from an intellectual to a moral obligation.

This chapter outlined several models of secularization, that broaden our understanding of the concept of secularization. My definition, given in Chapter 1, can now be extended. A definition of modern secularity can serve as a point of departure for our chapters on postmodern developments. I understand secularity as entailing:

1. a socio-historical change in the location of religion in society. This change can be understood in different meanings. In the first place, as a realization of religion. Second, as s liquidation of religion and, third, as a transfer of the religious function to other domains of culture.

2. politically, a separation of Church and state. Closely related to this separation is a differentiation of diverse autonomous spheres of knowledge and action and the invention of new spheres such as a private sphere and a public space.

3. ontologically, a naturalistic immanentism as opposed to a dual structure of immanence and transcendence.

The subsequent chapters will discuss how the concept of secularity is regauged in the context of postmodern theory. In the following three chapters I will discuss three different paradigms and evaluate them in the light of this tentative definition. I will now turn to the first postmodern paradigm: the neo-pragmatism of Richard Rorty.

3

Postmodern Secularism

"... worlds are created by creating new symbol systems –
created out of other worlds which are themselves the creatures of old symbol systems.
There is no point in asking 'what about the world as unsymbolized?'"[1]

3.1 SECULARITY IN (NEO)PRAGMATISM

This chapter discusses neopragmatic philosophy as one of the contexts in which new definitions of secularity are being proposed. The neopragmatist perspective – especially Richard Rorty's (1931–2007) – is very promising in this respect. Some introductory remarks are needed with regard to the characterization of Rorty as both a postmodern philosopher and as a philosopher of secularization.

Secularization has been a theme in pragmatism at least since John Dewey wrote in his 1934 *A Common Faith* that secular humanism is "a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race." According to Dewey, secular humanism "...has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant."[2] Dewey saw it as his task to replace traditional Christianity with a quasi-religious, secular humanism.

Santayana is another representative of this pragmatic tradition that renegotiates the boundaries of the sacred and the secular. Henry Levinson has developed the work of Santayana for the contemporary challenges of religion in public life. He asserts that there is a sense in which Santayana's philosophy of religion, despite its naturalistic character, allows a certain otherworldliness. In a highly original study he has applied pragmatist insights on religion and secularity to an interpretation of Judaism. According to him, the relevance of religion today is that it allows a festive element to everyday life in order to live "triumphantly with finitude."[3] The religion friendly version of prag-

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[1] Richard Rorty, 'On Worldmaking', Review of *Ways of Worldmaking* by Nelson Goodman, *Yale Review* 69/2 (1980).

[2] John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, The Terry Lectures 1934 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 87.

[3] He writes: "If common sense language and social policy establish the realistic order in which people live, religion offers a way to embark from it. Religion provides a cultural space that is unrealistic or festive – space in which people can stretch their imaginations in various ways beyond the confines of their practical and socially regimented lives ... in order to engage in imaginative activities that discipline them to live

matism is also represented by Cornel West, who has developed a prophetic pragmatism, which rests on the practice of charismatic, Afro-American Christianity.[4]

Within pragmatism, however, this is not the only line of thought. There is also a secularist version of pragmatism. Dewey's student Sidney Hook has defended a secularist interpretation of pragmatism. Hook is downright hostile toward religion and emphasizes that a naturalist methodology and a secular polity are, as it were, two sides of the same coin. Hook's philosophy provides a good example for understanding the relatedness of secularity as epistemology and as politics. For Hook it is important to hold both the nonfoundationalist position that philosophy cannot offer 'first principles', and to insist on the thoroughly secular character of public life. He pleads for a sharp demarcation of the religious and the secular. Hook sees a postfoundational epistemology related to a common-sense account of secular politics. Despite the problems involved in articulating 'first principles', '...there are working truths on the level of practical living which are everywhere recognized and which everywhere determine the pattern of reasonable conduct in secular affairs.'[5] The epistemology proper to the secular is a naturalistic one. Naturalism is, for Hook, not a fundamentally justified theory as understood in foundationalism. He advocates naturalism in a pragmatic way, for "although the assumptions of naturalism are not necessarily true, they are more reasonable than their alternatives".[6] The truth of naturalism is the 'working truth' of everyday life. The rationality proper to the secular is thus an end-means rationality. Religion stands in a rather tensed relation to this (if not dowright hostile) and should be kept strictly out of the secular sphere in which the immanent rationality of technology reigns.[7] So although the naturalism Hook advocates is initially presented as only pragmatically justifiable, it works out devastating for religion and it is hard to tell the difference with reductive materialism.

Today, pragmatism is divided on the status of religion. In the line of Sidney Hook, Paul Kurtz develops a thoroughly secularistic approach. He holds at the same time the Kuhnian view that there are no absolute facts in science and politics and the view that a secular humanism – understood as a non-foundational *eupraxophy* – offers the best prospects for a human society.[8] Although Rorty has distanced himself on several

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triumphantly with finitude." Henry Samuel Levinson, *Santayana, Pragmatism, and the Spirtitual Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 156.

[4] See: Cornel West, 'The Historicist Turn in Philosophy of Religion', in: Cornel West, editor, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 360–371

[5] Sidney Hook, 'Naturalism and First Principles', in: Robert Talisse and Robert Tempio, editors, *Sidney Hook on Pragmatism, Democracy, and Freedom: The Essential Essays* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 47.

[6] Hook, 47.

[7] "Where religion or myth does not influence technology, the indefinite perfectability, so to speak, of the particular instrument is recognized ..." Hook, 52. After a discussion of religious phenomenologists Goldenweiser and Levi Bruhl, Hook concludes: "...that the religious or mystical elements in primitive experience, with their myths and religious rites, arise not in competition with the secular knowledge of technology or as a substitute for such knowledge but as a 'complement' in situations in which all the available technical means and know-how are not adequate to a desired end, or where events do not clearly or always prosper when the proper instrumentalities are employed. In a world full of danger and surprises, in a world of time, and contingency, it is not hard to understand the psychological place of religion. It is a safe generalization to say that the depth of the religious sense is inversely proportionate to the degree of reliable control man exercises over his environment and culture. In this sense religion is a form of faith, emotion, not knowledge: when it is something more than this and competes with science or technology it becomes superstition." Hook, 54.

[8] Vern L. Bullough, 'Foreword', in: Vern L. Bullough and Timothy J. Madigan, editors, *Toward a New*

occasions from the adjective 'postmodern',[9] I – and many others –[10] regard him as one of the most prominent postmodern philosophers. Rorty has rejected the term postmodern primarily for its political implications, as I will explain later in more detail. Rorty is a postmodern philosopher primarily in his attempt to overcome the epistemological tradition, but he is typically modern in his secularist and emancipatory concerns.

The terms 'secular' and 'secularization' will certainly not be the first that come to mind in relation to an author such as Rorty. Nevertheless, these terms have functioned in his writings from the publication of *The Linguistic Turn* in 1967[11] until his latest publications before his death in 2007.

Secularization is a concern to Rorty's postmodernism as he sees in science, positivism, and analytical philosophy successors to the theistic tradition dominant in the Middle Ages. These successors are today in need of secularization, just as religion was secularized in the Enlightenment. Although very few have seen secularization as a central theme in Rorty's thought, I will interpret Rorty as a philosopher for whom secularization is a central category for interpreting the postmodern condition. Bill Martin is absolutely right when he writes that a "…discussion of Rorty's project would show …that his aim is the complete secularization of philosophy, the severance of thought and politics from any hint of teleology, eschatology, or some big, all-encompassing, picture."[12] The object of secularization in this sense is not primarily a religious worldview – although it is that as well. Rorty is interested more in what he sees as counterfeit religions, the grand narratives of science and politics. Once these meta-narratives are secularized, "…we are left with the secular, fragmented, and contingent histories of segments of humanity."[13]

I see Rorty as a philosopher in whom we can see a crucial phase in the history of secularization reflected. After the cold war, Rorty's 1989 *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* was a blueprint for a postmodern, liberal and secular society. It was a powerful plea for a postideological, poeticized society in which religion had an idiosyncratic function, safely located in the private lives of its citizens, separated from both their political and philosophical concerns. Although the plea for a postmodern secularism had some plausibility in the tumultuous happenings surrounding the fall of the Berlin wall, much has happened since. History did not come to an end as Francis Fukuyama prophesied, but new walls were erected after the 9/11 attacks. Although Rorty's writings preserved an optimistic tone of voice, Rorty's idealism was not unaffected by the developments in the years preceding his death. In 2006 – as a retired Stanford literature professor – he wrote a review of Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*. Reflecting on the promises of the emergence of a secular society he writes:

> The tragedy of the modern West is that it exhausted its strength before being able to
> achieve its ideals. The spiritual life of secularist Westerners centered on hope for the

Enlightenment. The Philosophy of Paul Kurtz (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994), ix–xi.

[9] For example in Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and others. Philosophical Papers volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1–2. In this text he prefers to speak of hismelf as a post-Nietzschean philosopher.

[10] Such as Van Peursen in C.A. van Peursen, *Na het postmodernisme. Van metafysica tot filosofisch surrealisme* (Kampen: Kok Agora / Pelckmans, 1994), 60.

[11] Richard Rorty, editor, *The Linguistic Turn. Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[12] Bill Martin, *The radical project. Sartrean investigations* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 5–6.

[13] Martin, *The radical project*, 6.

realization of those ideals. As that hope diminishes, their life becomes smaller and meaner. Hope is restricted to little, private things – and is increasingly being replaced by fear.[14]

In this chapter I will set out to show that the paradoxical phrase "spiritual life of secularist westerners", indicates how deeply ambiguous Rorty was on religion.

Jean Claude Monod distinguishes three meanings of secularization. The first meaning is secularization as liquidation of Christianity, the second is secularization as realization of Christianity and the third model is the Schmittian model of secularization as tranfer of meaning from Christian metaphysics to modern politics. Rorty explicitly rejects the third model of transfer. In a review of Blumenberg's *The legitimacy of the modern age*, Rorty sees modern secularization as the inauguration of a genuinely new era and not as a – Schmittian – transposition of meaning from Christianity.[15] Secularization cannot, for Rorty, be used as a term that takes modernity as a mere transposition of older, metaphysical ways of thinking. As he sees it, modernity replaces traditional metaphysical questions and does not continue them by different means.

His agreement with Blumenberg's thesis should not be taken at face value. Rorty, indeed, sees a discontinuity between the Christian Middle Ages and Modernity. He rejects, however, what he calls 'Enlightenment secularism'. In his view, the Enlightenment replaced God with reason and rationality.[16] In this case, secularism is used in a prohibitive way.

In another publication Rorty underwrites secularism. He writes

> Starting in the seventeenth century, philosophy played an important role in clearing the way for the establishment of democratic institutions in the West. It did so by secularizing political thinking – substituting questions about how human beings could lead happier lives for questions about how God's will might be done.[17]

In this case, Rorty is amending secularization and sees it as the necessary course for Western culture. Within the context of postmodern philosophy, Rorty – against all rumors of a return of religion – pleads for a "secularist form of moral fervor" as the only route to follow for Western democracies.[18] Rorty applies this meaning of secularization

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[14] Richard Rorty, 'A Queasy Agnosticism', *Dissent* Fall (2005).

[15] He writes: "Blumenberg shows us how easy and misleading it is to pick a description sufficiently abstract to encompass ancient, medieval and modern beliefs, and then to say that they are all 'merely alternative forms' of the same superseded way of thinking. This facile use of abstraction ignores the struggle and the labour which were required to forge these 'alternative forms' and the fact that no one would have gone through such struggles for the sake of a 'transposition'." Richard Rorty, 'Against Belatedness', Review of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* by Hans Blumenberg, *The London Review of Books* 5(11) (1983), 3–4.

[16] He describes secularists as people for whom "...the only way to make sense of the idea that the universe demands description in a certain vocabulary is to turn to science. Enlightenment secularism suggested that the vocabulary of the natural sciences is nature's own – the divisions made by this vocabulary are the joints at which nature demands to be cut." Richard Rorty, 'Moral Universalism and Economic Triage', Paper read at UNESCO philosophy forum, URL: www.unesco.org, last accesed 02-24-08 (1996).

[17] Richard Rorty, 'Democracy and Philosophy', *Kritika & Kontext* 33 (2007), 1.

[18] He writes: "I share Habermas's vision of a social democratic utopia. In this utopia, many of the functions presently served by membership in a religious community would be taken over by what Habermas calls 'constitutional patriotism.' Some form of patriotism – of solidarity with fellow citizens, and of shared hopes for the country's future – is necessary if one is to take politics seriously. In a theocratic country, a leftist political opposition must be prepared to counter the clergy's claim that the nation's identity is defined by its religious tradition. So the left needs a specifically secularist form of moral fervor, one which centers around

repeatedly to the heritage of Christianity. In a lecture on human rights he speaks of Kant's ethics as a laudable attempt to secularize the Christian ethics of brotherly love.[19]

Secularization is also a useful term for understanding Rorty's place within postmodernism. Rorty distanced himself at times from the predicate 'postmodern'. This has to do in part with his idea of pragmatism as a progressive, practical and utopian rationality. The 'French' postmoderns with their discourse on 'difference' and 'deconstruction', have neglected their political responsibility. For Rorty the discourse on secularization is an alternative to this discourse.

It is possible to see a certain proxy in the use of the word secularization. Its negative use is directed against teleological philosophies of history and metaphysical systems. However, within the context of postmodern philosophy, it is the lack of utopian awareness that he criticizes. We do need in some sense a secularized story of progress: something that can take up the heritage of the past and formulate a hopeful story for the future. Secularization seems to play exactly this role for him. In an interview from 1994 he elaborates on Dewey's philosophy and says: "Just as Hegel's philosophy was a kind of secularized Christianity, so Dewey's was a kind of Christian social hope combined with a Darwinian way of looking at human beings."[20] In that same interview he continues to say that '…Dewey thought that liberating culture from theological considerations and from metaphysical dualisms was a good idea.' Rorty calls the accomplishment of this liberation "the final stage in the secularization of culture."[21]

Because the philosophy of Rorty is shot through with references to secularization, I will schematize his use of the concept somewhat. I will discuss Rorty's philosophy as consisting of three related definitions of secularization. He understands it, first, as a process that is going on in contemporary philosophy and entails the transition from a rigid understanding of philosophy rooted in the metaphysics of the Christian West and the scientific rigor of the Enlightenment, to an understanding of philosophy as a literary genre.[22] This process is described by Rorty as a threefold secularization, which is essentially a process of transition from modern scientific culture to a postmodern culture. Second, he uses secularity as the thesis that philosophy should be concerned with knowledge of the immanent world. He rejects any dualism that discerns between the natural world and a transcendent perspective upon that world. Third, he uses the term secularization for a mode of political reasoning that cuts religious language off from secular reasons. Secularity then refers to the independence of politics with regard to religion and the separation of individually held religious beliefs and collectively held scientific and political beliefs.

citizens' respect for one another rather than on the nation's relation to God." Richard Rorty and Danny Postel, 'Last Words from Richard Rorty', *The Progressive* June (2007), ⟨URL: http://www.progressive.org/mag_postel0607⟩.

[19] Rorty writes: "Kant's account of the respect due to rational agents tells you that you should extend the respect you feel for people like yourself to all featherless bipeds. This is an excellent suggestion, a good formula for secularizing the Christian doctrine of the brotherhood of man." Richard Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality', in: Richard Anderson Falk, editor, *Human rights: critical concepts in political science* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

[20] Giovanna Borradori and Richard Rorty, 'After Philosophy, Democracy', in: Giovanna Borradori, editor, *The American Philosopher. Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, Macintyre, and Kuhn* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 105–6.

[21] Borradori and Rorty, 106.

[22] Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism. (Essays 1972-1980)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xiv.

The rest of this chapter discusses these three meanings of secularity. First I will discuss the way Rorty describes the history of philosophy as a history of secularization (3.2), then I will disucss Rorty on ontological secularity (3.3) and in 3.4. I will discuss Rorty's political secularism.

3.2 THE SECULARIZATION OF PHILOSOPHY

Rorty's philosophy can be understood as an attempt to give a non-religious and non-transcendental defense of philosophy: a philosophy moreover that meets the needs of a liberal society that no longer relies on philosophical legitimacy. He tries to secure a space of reasoning in which reason exchange takes place, without either religious or philosophical, privileged standpoints. The absence of transcendent viewpoints and an affirmation of the contextual (historical and social) character of philosophical, moral and political reasoning is definitory of a truly secular reason. He proposes a transition from philosophy as a meta-discipline, which can decide on what counts as true knowledge, to a postmodern, hermeneutical philosophy that is entirely immanent. In 1967, as a philosopher trained in analytical philosophy, he already criticizes analytical philosophy for its metaphysical pretensions. Rorty laments traditional philosophy, and the linguistic philosophy of that day, for trying to transform philosophy into a science that can provide universally valid decision procedures and for pretending to be "presuppositionless".[23] Already then, Rorty shows a deep suspicion for the alleged objectivity of philosophy.[24] He advocates a type of philosophy that no longer describes reality adequately, but rather offers proposals of how to talk differently. The philosopher should drop his scientific pretensions and should be, once again, more of a sage than a scientist.[25]

His strategy for achieving this new role of philosophy is to criticize the traditional, privileged character of philosophy through a combination of naturalistic, pragmatic and historicist insights. Deconstructionism is a good term to characterize his philosophy, although it is a term Rorty uses only incidentally.[26] In his most explicit text on deconstruction, he argues that certain interpretations of Derrida give way to a view of deconstruction that is completely determined by traditional philosophy. In the attempt to deconstruct traditional, philosophical problems, these problems still determine the philosophical agenda. Instead, he argues, philosophical problems should be circumvented.[27] He is countering philosophy's transcendental ambitions by circumventing the western, epistemological tradition, which entirely relied on the possibility of skepticism

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[23] Richard Rorty, 'Introduction. Metaphysical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy', in: Richard Rorty, editor, *The Linguistic Turn. Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 1.

[24] "Uncovering the presuppositions of those who think they have none is one of the principal means by which philosophers find new issues to debate. If this is not progress, it is at least change, and to understand such changes is to understand why philosophy, though fated to fail in its quest for knowledge, is nevertheless not a 'matter of opinion'." Rorty, 'Metaphysical Difficulties', 2.

[25] He writes: "Philosophers would be, as they have traditionally been supposed to be, men who gave one a *Weltanschauung* – in Sellar's phrase – a way of understanding how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term." Rorty, 'Metaphysical Difficulties', 34. See also: Rorty, *Consequences*, xiv.

[26] See for example: Rorty, 'Against Belatedness', 3.

[27] Richard Rorty, 'Deconstruction and Circumvention', *Critical Inquiry* 11(1) (1984), 19–21.

with regard to the external world. But the possibility of global skepticism only functions in the context of transcendental philosophy. In order to escape the problem of skepticism, one should circumvent the traditional epistemological problems. Rorty's proposal is to 'de-trancendentalize' epistemology.[28] De-transcendentalization refers to an effort to redefine philosophy by historicist, sociological and naturalist insights. Rorty's philosophy, therefore, cannot be adequately described as deconstruction. Deconstruction as a merely negative enterprise runs counter to Rorty's pragmatic and utopian intent.[29]

3.2.1 Philosophy as Secularization

Rorty's discussion of the genesis of modern philosophy is written in order to find a detour around the familiar distinctions of traditional philosophy. The subject matter of traditional philosophy were transcendent entities or principles, like Kant's categories. Rorty sets out to show that, how deep such concepts and distinctions may be rooted in the self-understanding of philosophy, they can be circumvented. Philosophy is not really talking *about* these things. Philosophy is a literary genre that can be explained by the methods of intertextual analysis. Kant, for example, responded to the writings of David Hume, and Hume to still earlier writings, but we should not infer from this fact that the early modern philosophers were *really* talking about certain entities and faculties of the mind. Philosophy is a 'kind of writing', not some kind of report about an objective reality.

What philosophy was about, was secularization. The intention of early modern philosophy was to get rid of the tutelage of religion, not to start a scientific program. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* he writes:

> Looking backward we see Descartes and Hobbes as 'beginning modern philosophy,' but they thought of their own cultural role in terms of what Lecky was to call 'the warfare between science and theology' ... They did not think of themselves as offering 'philosophical systems', but as contributing to the efflorescence of research in mathematics and mechanics, as well as liberating intellectual life from ecclesiastical institutions.[30]

The contextual challenge of the early modern philosophers was completely legitimate. But their direct concern was a political one: "the secularization of moral thought."[31] Rorty's critique in his 1979 *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is characterized by a distinction between the initial, secularizing philosophy of early modernity – toward which Rorty is wholeheartedly committed – and a secondary development of philosophy, toward an autonomous, professional discipline, different from religion and

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[28] Richard Rorty, 'Transcendental Arguments, Self-Reference, and Pragmatism', in: Peter Bieri, Rolf-P. Horstmann and Lorenz Krüger, editors, *Transcendental Arguments and Science* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979), 299.

[29] Rorty says that his own view is "...that it is not much use pointing to the 'internal contradictions' of a social practice, or 'deconstructing' it, unless one can come up with an alternative practice – unless one can at least sketch a utopia in which the concept or distinction would be obsolete." Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, relativism, and truth*, Philosophical papers vol.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 16.

[30] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 131.

[31] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 132.

on the one hand and science on the other.[32] Initially philosophy as a genre is secularizing, which means that it secured a place for philosophical thought free from the tutelage of religious authorities. Although the concepts modern philosophy used, such as Descartes' notion of the mental, were misleading, the secularizing intention is not criticized by Rorty. When it concerns the idea of secularity and the naturalistic character of modern philosophy, Rorty remains committed to an ideal of the key values of modern philosophy, its claim to secular – non-religious – truth.

The development following the battle between religion and philosophy leads to an autonomous, scientific philosophy. As Rorty sees it, after having secured a space for free thought, philosophy is elevated to a status very similar to the one formerly held by religion. Rorty's critique now concerns this privileged status of philosophy. He explicitly sees the overcoming of religion and the end of philosophy as two consequences of the same acceptance of contingency. Philosophy as a discipline was a mistake as it took certain metaphors from the initial early modern secularizing philosophy. This transcendental philosophy is, for Rorty, just as undesirable as the religion of the scholastics.[33] Secularization thus was the initial intention of modern philosophy. Now that philosophy has become a privileged discipline itself, secularization needs to be applied to philosophy as well. Secularization for Rorty is needed in order to temper the transcendental or foundational ambitions of philosophy. Transcendental perspectives, also called, 'God's eye points of view', need to be discredited, by making reference to the historical contingency of the emergence of philosophy.

Rorty fleshes out his criticism of epistemological philosophy in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. There he presents modern philosophy, from Descartes to 20th century analytical philosophy – as subscribing to a dualistic scheme. Philosophy in the modern sense presupposes the possibility of taking a transcendent point of view and splitting the world up into parts. Rorty's intention is to tackle every possible kind of dualism that makes a distinction between contingent truths and necessary truths. At times it seems that representationalism is his chief target, in other writings foundationalism, essentialism or the correspondence theory of truth are under fire. Rorty sometimes brings them under the common denominator of 'traditional philosophy.' Traditional philosophy is a term Rorty uses to bring together philosophy as a type of reasoning that tries to escape, or transcend history. As he sees it, Plato's world of ideas, Kant's transcendentalism, and the foundationalism of 20th century philosophy are successive attempts "...to make a case for the idea that 'rational inquiry' takes place within a framework which can be isolated prior to the conclusion of inquiry – a set of presuppositions discoverable a priori."[34] Not only the modern subject-object split, but the possibility of

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[32] Rorty writes: "It was not until after Kant that our modern philosophy-science distinction took hold. Until the power of the churches over science and scholarship was broken, the energies of the men we now think of as 'philosophers' were directed toward demarcating their activities from religion. It was only after that battle had been won that the question of separation from the sciences could arise." Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 131–132. A similar account of the emergence of modern philosophy is given in the essay *Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism* in Rorty, *Consequences*.

[33] He writes: "It might be that we would end by answering the question 'Has Philosophy come to an end?' with a resounding 'Yes,' and that we would come to look upon a post-philosophical culture as just as possible, and just as desirable as a post-religious culture. We might come to see philosophy as a cultural disease which has been cured, just as many contemporary writers (notably Freudians) see religion as a cultural disease of which men are gradually being cured . . . our desire for a *Weltanschauung* would now be satisfied by the arts, the sciences, or both." Rorty, 'Metaphysical Difficulties', 34.

[34] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 8.

an epistemology as such is questioned. Rorty sets out to deconstruct such objective, indubitable knowledge; knowledge which would make philosophy a suitable foundational discipline for all the other areas of culture including science. For the dismantling of this idea, Rorty gives an extremely critical assessment of modern philosophy in which Descartes, Locke and Kant are his chief targets. His aim is to demonstrate that to think of knowledge of the world as problematic and as something about which one ought to have a theory is a product of viewing knowledge as "an assemblage of representations in a 'mirror of nature'."[35] The means by which Rorty deconstructs this view of philosophy is by placing philosophical doctrines historically. The image of the mind as a mirror, for instance, can easily be explained as the product of particular 17th century interests and circumstances. By *placing* the development of epistemology historically, by "telling the story of how philosophy as epistemology attained self-certainty,"[36] Rorty wants to show that *Erkenntnistheorie* is an optional thing.[37]

Rorty's dicrediting traditional philosophy part of a greater narrative on secularization. For Rorty, modernity is not the true era of secularization. With Heidegger and Nietzsche he stresses the continuity of Greek and Christian thought with modern philosophy.[38] The problem with modern philosophy-as-epistemology – as formulated by Descartes – is that it, to Rorty's mind, repeats the patronizing viewpoint formerly held by religious institutions. Philosophy assumes a rational essence in the world and in the human subject – a 'glassy essence' – which enables man to know this structure. Rorty's criticism of epistemology is directed against this essentially religious ontology. The mirror stands metaphorically for what the human mind is capable of: mirroring in order to get a clear view of reality and for its quasi-theological status.

The consequence of this miror image is that the world in which man lives, is never the real world. In the typically modern sense it is always the world as partly structured by the human subject. This type of philosophy is an armchair discipline. In fact the Kantian schema of the phenomenological and the noumenal world, evades the world. Transcendental philosophy claims to have certain knowledge of the world in order to answer the skeptic. In a way this is deeply ironic about the world, as it creates a gap between the noumenal and the phenomenal.[39]

Exemplary of such a privileged perspective in philosophy is Descartes's theory of knowledge. He invented a notion of the mental as incorrigibility and immateriality and introduced the concept of the mind as an inner space where the rational agent could find pure knowledge. Epistemology's attraction was, argues Rorty, that it gave philosophers new ground to stand on and it provided a field in which certainty was

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[35] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 126.
[36] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 136.
[37] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 137.
[38] See also Louis Dupré, 'Postmoderniteit of laatmoderniteit? Dubelzinnigheden in het denken van Richard Rorty', in: Gilbert Hottois, Marc van den Bossche and Maurice Weyembergh, editors, *Richard Rorty. Ironie, politiek en postmodernisme* (Antwerpen and Baarn: Hadewijch, 1994), 39–40.
[39] Rorty gives the following definition of this 'realism': 1. It works with a distinction between scheme and content, concepts and intuitions or words and world. 2. The internal coherence of the 'scheme' side is insufficient, a sort of correspondence is needed. 3. The legitimation of knowledge can be attained reflexively, without considering the details of the knowledge claim under discussion. 4. A distinction is made between 'that which is better known to us (our subjectivity roughly) and that which is less well known to us.' 5. The subject creates in some sense the content of our knowledge and therefore we can speak of necessary truth. Rorty, 'Transcendental Arguments', 79.

possible as opposed to mere opinion.[40] On the one hand this concept made it possible for philosophers to attain indubitable knowledge, on the other hand it created a great problem. How was the gap between the rational ego and the external world to be bridged? How can we know that the mind's concepts are to be trusted as depictions of an outer world? The affirmation of the world is thus a very dubious undertaking. It is intended to provide a reliable relation to the world, but in doing so it also – as Michael Williams says – radicalized classical skepticism, by creating the option that not so much 'the real nature' of the world could be doubted, but the very existence of the outer world.[41]

Rorty criticizes philosophy as it developed from Descartes onward as a series of dualisms, that all share essentially the same defect: they try to split reality up in a contingent and a necessary part. He criticizes Locke for his thought that the mere impressions of sensitive experience were some kind of rational justifications. According to Rorty this is a confusion of categories. All we can say is that sensual experiences *cause* us to have certain beliefs. By no means can impressions be justifications for beliefs. This is what Rorty calls Locke's confusion of the analysis of explanation and justification.[42] Locke managed – in a way – to describe the process of knowledge acquisition, but this cannot *justify* the results of the process. Knowledge cannot be justified by a detailed description of how a judgment came to be. The fact that Locke thought this was possible is, in Rorty's view, caused by the fact that he did not think of knowledge as a relation between a proposition and a person, but as a relation between a proposition and objects. In other words: Locke thought of knowledge as 'knowledge of' and not as 'knowledge that'. He saw the sensory impression of the world on the mind as all there was to knowing, while for Rorty the sensory impression is merely causally antecedent. Rorty speaks of a 'quasi mechanical account' of knowledge in Locke's writings. Locke sees knowledge acquisition and justification as one and the same thing, Rorty protests that such an account will not help us to know what we are 'entitled to believe'. The central problem Rorty observes in Locke's theory of knowledge is the assumption that knowledge is an awareness of certain representations. The Aristotelian alternative is preferable, says Rorty, since Aristotle thought of knowledge as the identity of the mind and the object known. Thus Aristotle had no need for a faculty that is *aware* of the representations.

After Locke, the philosophy of Kant works on this problematic link between perception and justification by invoking a transcendental constitution of the object by the mind. Rorty sees Kant's epistemology as a second confusion: the confusion of predication with synthesis. And it is this confusion, says Rorty, that is crucial for understanding the way epistemology entered the 20th century. Kant attempted to make up for the fundamental problem in Locke's theory of knowledge. Cognitive experience, is in Kant's theory, a co-operation of sensory experience and mental judgment. Kant is fully part of the Cartesian project as he is trying to *bridge* the gap between inner and outer space. He did this, as Rorty sharply puts it, "by putting outer space inside inner space ... and then claiming Cartesian certainty about the inner for the laws that had previously been

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[40] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 136.
[41] Michael Williams, 'Rorty on Knowledge and Truth', in: Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley, editors, *Richard Rorty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 62–3.
[42] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 140–141.

thought to be outer."[43] To Rorty's judgment, the fundamental idea of constitution is most problematic in Kant's philosophy. "Kant was never troubled by the question of how we could have apodictic knowledge of these 'constituting activities', for Cartesian privileged access was supposed to take care of that."[44] Kant saw himself as the synthesizer of rationalism and empiricism. Rorty says that Kant could have taken a pragmatic turn. Kant could have argued that the 'problem of knowledge' be stated in terms of the relations between propositions understood as predication, rather than in terms of synthesis. For Rorty, the idea of knowledge as constitution is too high an ambition for philosophy: "This distinctively philosophical approach to knowledge wants to do more than articulate the reasons for a justified true belief; it wants to explain how knowledge is possible."[45]

Fundamental to Kant's theory of knowledge is his distinction between raw intuitions and organizing concepts. Rorty's complaint is that this is a distinctively philosophical definition of experience and not at all given. His suggestion is that we might as well circumvent this definition of philosophy. Experience – in a philosophical sense – is the ability to master Kant's trick: to lay experience out in a intuitive, raw part and an organizing, conceptual part.[46] Only by doing what Kant did, can one talk of knowledge in a *philosophical* sense. But no one can know – unless he has read Locke and Hume – that the mind is originally confronted with a manifold, for the manifold as such – unsynthesized – cannot be represented. But then Kant's presupposition is as good as any other. It can neither be verified nor falsified and so it is the silent presupposition of Kant's epistemology. We simply cannot know whether or not concepts are synthesizers. Rorty concludes that intuitions and concepts in their Kantian senses are susceptible only of contextual definitions; they have sense only as elements in a theory, but the theory itself seems to be 'laden' by the prior intention to get to a theory that will enable us to have synthetic a-priori knowledge.[47] Once we realize that Kant was not able to introspect, that he did not acquire access to our 'constituting activities', the theory loses its attraction and any other theory can do the job as well. Rorty states: "…postulated theoretical entities in inner space are not, by being inner, any more useful than such entities in outer space for explaining how such knowledge can occur."[48]

The Kantian dualistic schema was challenged and became untenable at the end of the nineteenth century. As a result of the success of the empirical sciences, philosophy found itself in a crisis. Empirical psychology challenged epistemological philosophy by asking: "What do we need to know about knowledge, which psychology cannot tell

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[43] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 137.

[44] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 138. The crucial insight in Kant's first critique is for Rorty: "If intuition must conform to the constitution of the objects, then I do not see how we could know anything of them *a priori*; but if the object (as an object of the senses) conforms to the constitution of our faculty of intuition, then I can very well represent this possibility to myself." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Bxvii. The original reads: "Wenn die Anschauung sich nach der Beschaffenheit der Gegenstände richten müsste, so sehe ich nicht ein, wie man a priori von ihr etwas wissen könne; richtet sich aber der Gegenstand (als Objekt der Sinne) nach der Beschaffenheit unseres Anschauungsvermögens, so kann ich mir diese Möchlichkeit ganz wohl vorstellen." Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft. Band 1* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), 25, Bxvii

[45] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 151.

[46] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 150.

[47] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 154.

[48] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 155.

us?"[49] This development goes hand in hand with the demise of American and German idealism. 'Ironic-aesthetic thinkers' as Dewey and James proclaimed the non-realistic character of the epistemological problems and philosophers such as Nietzsche criticized the Kantian principles.[50] It would have been likely that the story of philosophical dualisms would stop here. With the victory of the empirical sciences over idealism and transcendentalism: philosophy would finally become monistic. According to Rorty though, this is not the case. Instead, the Kantian schema is reanimated on several occasions.

Kantian philosophy gave 20th century philosophy its dualistic character. Rorty reads 20th century analytical philosophy and philosophy of language as reinterpretations of the familiar scheme of 'traditional philosophy.' There is a reinterpretation of the Kantian dualism in the middle of the 20th century, when the scheme side of the dualism is identified by Alfred Ayer with 'meaningful use of language.' According to Ayer, there are certain immutable aspects of language.[51] Thus, the 'linguistic turn' merely replaced the problem of constitution by the mind with the problem of the structure of language. Knowledge of the world, for Rorty, has to be disjoined from any form of transcendental idealism. The question now is, whether Rorty achieves this and can really overcome dualism. Responding to Bubner, Rorty remarks that he disagrees with him that there is something of realism to be saved from transcendental philosophy.[52] Rorty says we not only eschew the idea of privileged representation, but with it any form of realism. One might expect that Rorty now starts to develop an alternative epistemology. But this is not the case: he develops an anti-representationalist theory. But, if not representationalist, what exactly is the relation to the external world? [53] He discredits any variant of the correspondence theory and instead of an alternative theory of man-in-the-world,[54] Rorty introduces a pragmatist theory, which does not restore the relation of man and world, but definitively separates the two. Distinguishing between pragmatism and naturalized epistemology, Rorty says: "The obvious line for a pragmatist to take in regard to the naturalization of epistemology is to say that the sciences of nature are concerned with causal processes, whereas epistemology is concerned with social practices of giving justifications."[55]On the one hand this argument is directed against analytical philosophers who hold some sort of dualism, on the other hand it is directed against the attempt to 'naturalize' epistemology. But this would still be an attempt to find 'connections between inquiry and the world.' This project, says Rorty, needs elimination rather than naturalization.[56] So the possible solution to the epistemological problematic – treating epistemological problems strictly empirical – is a dead end

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[49] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 165.

[50] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 165–6.

[51] Rorty, 'Transcendental Arguments', 80.

[52] He writes that: "…nothing in heaven or earth could set limits to what we can *in principle* conceive; the best we might do is show nobody has in fact conceived of an exception. So there can be no advance on a merely factual demonstration by introducing self-referentiality." Rorty, 'Transcendental Arguments', 83.

[53] Denouncing any theory of correspondence or representation, Rorty writes: "The general strategy which pragmatists use against realistic attempts to find some such special relation is to say that the attempt to step outside of our current theory of the world and evaluate it by reference to its ability to 'fit' or 'cope with' the world is inevitably as self-deceptive as was Hume's attempt to escape from the Kantian categories into a world of sense impressions." Rorty, 'Transcendental Arguments', 85

[54] Rorty, 'Transcendental Arguments', 88.

[55] Rorty, 'Transcendental Arguments', 91.

[56] Rorty, 'Transcendental Arguments', 91.

for Rorty: not because he has a different theory, but because he wants to eliminate the traditional problems and turn to the "social practices of giving justifications".

3.2.2 Reconsidering the Mirror of Nature

In order to relate the previous discussion more explicitly to the concept of secularization, I will focus on the mirror metaphor in the writings on Rorty. As Rorty sees it, the epistemological tradition is to be blamed for an obsession with mirror images. That tradition started with the ancient Greeks, was continued in the Middle Ages and runs through the modern era. This tradition thinks of certainty in terms of visual clarity. One way or the other, secure knowledge is expressed in visual and optical metaphors. Rorty says that this itself is a historical contingency that has shaped the Western philosophical tradition.

> It is fruitless to ask whether the Greek language, or Greek economic traditions, or the idle fancy of some nameless pre-Socratic, is responsible for viewing this sort of knowledge as *looking* at something (rather than, say, rubbing up against it, or crushing it underfoot, or having sexual intercourse with it).[57]

Rorty underscores the contingent character of this preference for optical metaphors. Against their taken for grantedness, he proposes taking seriously the possibility of alternative metaphors and alternative modes of knowing. The question here is whether Rorty really does so.

The answer must be threefold. First, Rorty defines his position as entirely sociological. Epistemology dissolves in the social practices of justification. This makes every theory concerning man-in-the-world trivial. He does not really consider an alternative theory. Ankersmit, for instance, voices such a critique, suggesting that Rorty could have benefited more from Aristotle's epistemology. He speaks of a "thoughtless dismissal of Aristotelianism". He questions why Rorty so often speaks laudably of Aristotelian theory of knowledge, about mind and world as not categorically different, but nevertheless does not really integrate Aristotle into his thinking.[58]

Second, Rorty does develop a theory of the way language and world relate, inspired by Donald Davidson. In this theory he does not so much deny a relationship between language and world, but the idea that language relates to the world as a conceptual scheme. I will discuss this model in the next section.

Third, Rorty takes notice of – but in the end neglects – other post-Enlightenment thinkers, who formulated comparable objections to the epistemological tradition, but worked out alternative solutions. In this case, I find the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas a convincing example. In an article on a philosophical definition of culture, he sees the culture of immanence as one of the central problems of modern philosophy with its logic of identity. Instead, Levinas considers alternative metaphors for dealing with the world, such as the metaphor of touching and feeling. His account of man's relation to the world has close similarities with an artistic experience, in which the spectator

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[57] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 39.
[58] Frank Ankersmit, 'Van taal naar ervaring', in: Sorin Alexandrescu, editor, *Richard Rorty* (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1995), 54–96. For an English translation of this article see Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

is never purely autonomous. And for Levinas the other is always transcendental in a relationship that is not cognitive, but primarily ethical.[59]

Equally questionable is Rorty's separation of religion and philosophy: Was religion not offering an alternative mode of knowledge, which would not be so preoccupied with visual metaphors? Already the Hebrew meaning of the root *ydh* sees knowledge as coming about in a sensual way, and thus to know can indeed mean "to have sexual intercourse."[60] The focus on seeing cannot do justice to the historical nature of the biblical narrative. Opposed to seeing, the Bible presupposes an attitude of hearing. Religion need not be identified with mirror imagery, rather religion can provide alternative modes of knowing and alternative descriptions of the relation of man to the world.[61] Rorty, however, shows only occasional interest in religious approaches to knowledge that could provide an alternative to an intellectual seeing of the immutable. As he sees it, mirror imagery governs both theology and philosophy.[62] Although Rorty is aware of the nondualistic account of biblical anthropology, he speaks of the non-Cartesian ways in which $\sigma\varpi\mu\alpha$, $\sigma\alpha\rho\xi$, $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$, and $\pi\nu\epsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha$ are used by Paul,[63] he does not take this to be a credible alternative to the philosophical notion of the *glassy essence*. The dominant development has been, so Rorty says, that the scholastics inherited a dualistic notion of the self, which goes back to Plato. And in this sense philosophy and Christianity share the same 'defect'. So here the essential anthropology Christianity and philosophy are supposed to share is presented: Christian theology and modern epistemology are both essentialist in their account of human agency. And even when the historical record would show that Paul or the Church Fathers would not subscribe to such a view, Rorty suggests that still, later Christianity promoted a view of the human person as defined essentially by a *glassy essence*:

> In the 'mirror' images of the Renaissance humanists, the differences between Homer and Augustine, Plotinus and Thomas, were flattened out to produce a vague but emphatic dualism ...which everyone knew philosophers were supposed to know about ...Recent philosophy of mind has tended to lump this vague conglomerate – man's Glassy Essence – together with the post Cartesian notions of 'consciousness' or 'awareness.'[64]

Rorty completely identifies the Greek conception of $\nu o \upsilon \varsigma$ with the Christian idea of an immortal soul and with the modern invention of the mind.[65] The identification of

[59] See the essay 'The Philosophical Determination of the Idea of Culture.' In: Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre nous: thinking-of-the-other* (London: Continuum, 1998).

[60] Wilhelm Schottroff, 'Lemma Erkennen', in: Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, editors, *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament. Vol.1* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1984), 691. The Hebrew yada ('to know') identifies a dynamic personal quality : knowing arises not by standing back from in order to look at, but by active and intentional engagement in lived experience." Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper, 1982).

[61] Frans Breukelman, "Geschiedenis' als theologisch begrip', in: *Bijbelse Theologie IV/2* (Kampen: Kok, 1999), 191–97.

[62] He writes: "The $\vartheta\upsilon\mu o\varsigma$ which quickened the Homeric heroes, St. Paul's $\pi\nu\epsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha$, and Aquinas's active intellect, are all quite different notions. But for the present purpose we can coalesce them ...in the phrase Glassy Essence." Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 44.

[63] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 44.

[64] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 45.

[65] "He paints religious adherence and metaphysical Platonism with the same brush." Ronald Kuipers, 'Introduction. Toward a peacable mosaic', in: Hendrik Hart, Ronald Kuipers and Kai Nielsen, editors, *Walking the tightrope of faith. Philosophical Conversations About Reason and Religion* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 20.

Greek, Enlightened and Christian ideas of a rational self, is central to Rorty's idea of the 'end of philosophy'. In the center of Rorty's philosophy we find the presupposition that epistemology is essentially religious and that, conversely, religion is bound up with a positivistic epistemology. Rorty pays some attention to the different character of theology in Paul and he also discusses Descartes as the one who invented the mental, distinguishable from inwardness as known by Augustine. Again, the fact that Augustine and Paul held such radically different positions does not make him reconsider his stance on religion. Rather, the identification of religion, philosophy and science – clearly inspired by Nietzsche and Heidegger – are presuppositions that cannot be challenged. Rorty's attack on Cartesian skepticism and the concept of the mental does not makes him reconsider alternatives present in the religious traditions and religiously motivated criticism of the Enlightenment, such as J.G. Hamann's. On the contrary, Rorty praises Descartes for liberating science from the tutelage of religious institutions. Philosophy as a theory of knowledge might be mistaken, it was right to resist religion.

After the criticisms on the dualisms of epistemological philosophy as offered by Austin and Wittgenstein, Rorty sees Sellars' behavioristic critique of the 'framework of givenness' and Quine's influential *Two dogmas of Empiricism* as an end to philosophy as epistemology. Rorty agrees with the holistic and behaviorist approach of Sellars and Quine. He shares with them the idea that "conversational justification . . . is naturally holistic, whereas the notion of justification embedded in the epistemological tradition is reductive and atomistic."[66] Rorty sees Sellars and Quine as intending to give a behaviorist-holistic account of knowledge: to explain rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what a society lets us say. This gives way to what Rorty calls 'epistemological behaviorism.' Through this epistemological behaviorism Rorty wants to let the question about the foundations of knowledge dissolve into intra-language game rules. An assertion is simply a report of what a speaker reports among his peers, rather than a report about a speaker's relation to a non-human world.

For Rorty, the implications of the whole epistemological quarrel is simply the question of whether or not we want to see truth as a social construct, the alternative being to see truth as some kind of correspondence to external reality. To Rorty's mind, we can do without the idea of a theory of knowledge as a theory that enables us to make distinctions between contingent and necessary truths. Certainty is the thing you get when nobody feels the need to attack your presuppositions and thus truth will be a matter of conversation rather than an interaction with non-human reality.

This makes it very questionable whether Rorty succeeds in his attempt to restore immediate contact with the world. The problem of the transcendental subject is solved by a radical *socialization* of the subject, that leaves any non-trivial relation to the world behind. Does Rorty succeed in overcoming the dualisms of traditional philosophy? The next section explores Rorty's alternative theory of knowledge. His version of pragmatism, which draws on Donald Davidson's critique of conceptual schemes, provides Rorty with a model of how man and world relate.

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[66] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 170.

3.3 POSTMODERN SECULARITY AND THE AUTONOMY OF THE WORLD

The previous section discussed Rorty's philosophy as an attempt to secularize philosophy. Traditional philosophy is, as it were, constantly haunted by the specter of a dualism of scheme and content: of something that precedes inquiry and makes that experience is always – by the faculty of the mind, by the structure of language – constituted by the subject. Knowledge of this constitutive activity guarantees the possibility of certainty and true knowledge. The possibility of this true knowledge was thus entirely dependent on a clear separation of the world and the subject. Rorty's secularization of philosophy attempts to do away with the transcendental and make human knowledge truly immanent. The criticism of the dualistic nature of traditional philosophy is characteristic of postmodern thought. Postmodern thinkers replace such dualism with an idea of holism. There is a unity of knowledge and action, a renewed focus on the human person as a unity of mind and body, and a renewed interest in the meaning of embodiment and place.[67]

Reading Rorty as a philosopher of secularization draws attention to another side of postmodernism. Postmodernism not only bids farewell to modernity and its philosophical doctrines. It is also in certain perspectives a renewed understanding of the world. To think of postmodernism in terms of what it installs and what constraints it places on legitimate knowledge, incisively changes the value it has for theology. Rorty's postmodernism can be adequately subsumed in the term secularization. Rorty wants to do to transcendental philosophy, what transcendental philosophy did to God and religion: dethrone it, make it immanent.

Some interpret postmodernism as a renewed possibility for 'God talk'. The idea of philosophy as a tribunal in front of which believers have to justify their beliefs no longer applies. In the theological reception of and contribution to postmodern theory, this negative definition of postmodernism has been generally overemphasized: Postmodernism as a theory about what we no longer have to reckon with: the rationalism, the scientism, the taken for grantedness of atheism in the framework of modernity. Postmodernism, in short, as a liberating theory that offers a new perspective for narrative theology and ecumenical dialogue.[68] For others, postmodern anti-representationalism coincides with a biblical iconoclasm.[69] The philosophy of Rorty has also been interpreted as offering such a refreshing start for theology.[70] Whereas some take the postmodern condition as a liberating perspective for theology and religion, Rorty interprets it as an intensified secularization.

Interpreting Rorty against the background of secularization theory makes things different. Postmodernism is then a hypermodernism. It thinks of the natural world as

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[67] Warren Frisina, *The Unity of Knowledge and Action: Toward a Nonrepresentational Theory of Knowledge* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002). Graham Ward writes: "...postmodernism's critique of body/soul, body/mind, form/contents, sign/signified divisions demands new understandings and imaginings of what it is to be embodied, incarnate." Graham Ward, 'Postmodern Theology', in: David F. Ford, editor, *The Modern Theologians* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 588.

[68] Wim A. De Pater, 'Het postmoderne nog eens uitgelegd', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* juli (1996), 200–201.

[69] Ruud Welten and Ilse Bulhof, 'Inleiding: Verloren presenties', in: *Verloreren presenties. Over de representatiecrisis in religie, kunst, media en politiek* (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1996), 10–33.

[70] G. Elijah Dann, *After Rorty. The Possibilities for Ethics and Religious Belief* (London: Continuum, 2006), 42–43. Grube reads him as a critic of empricism that clears the road for a postmodern theology and a renewed understanding of revelation. Grube, 'Empirisme', 300–34.

autonomous and as the only world we can meaningfully talk about. Rorty's naturalism limits philosophical and theological reasoning to the empirical.[71] Rorty does not resist a rationality that refused God talk, rather Rorty opposes a naturalism that claims to represent the world as it is in itself. His postmodern interpretation is non-reductionist. A postmodern, non-reductionist naturalism clearly rules out the possibility of God-talk (in this sense, it is in continuity with the empiricism of the sciences), while on the other hand it departs from modernity in leaving open the possibility that the natural world can be described in a variety of ways, and that not a single one is 'nature's own'. It is exactly in this notion of the world, as the ready-at-hand object of science, that Rorty sees the last remnants of metaphysics. Postmodernism is, however, not a criticism of science and a return to religion, but a radicalization of the scientific enterprise as to undo it of its last metaphysical intuition: The notion of the world as such. In the twentieth century, there were two dominant ways of ending philosophy. The logical-positivists tried to end all talk about realities that surpassed the immanent realm.[72] Continental philosophy held that exactly in this logical, mathematical and empiricist type of philosophizing, metaphysics was continued. Rorty takes the latter position. Postmodernism can save us from positivism – the last remnant of metaphysics.

Rorty's criticism of philosophy does not imply a renewed understanding of transcendence. For Rorty, the postmodern condition is one of pure immanence. The result of Rorty's secularization of philosophy is an account of man's being in the world as completely intelligible in Darwinian and behavioristic, non-intentional categories. Rorty's naturalism and secularism are monistic alternatives to philosophical and theological approaches that rely on a duality of the natural and the supernatural, the immant and the transcendent.[73] Rorty reconciles hermeneutic philosophy and naturalism and keeps it strictly separated from religion. Pragmatism, for Rorty, is first and foremost a naturalism. But the claim that naturalism somehow fits the postmodern condition and should determine the possibilities of a postmodern philosophy of religion is a dubious one.[74] The secularization of philosophy and the limitation of knowledge to the physical world do not lead Rorty to embrace positivism or empiricism. In positivism, we have no acces to the world, says Rorty. The world can have a certain causal effect on humans, but this does not lead to an awareness of the world. The world cannot be experienced. Only through language can we have an awareness of the world. Rorty distinguishes between causal relations in the physical world and logic relations, which apply only in language. Humans have beliefs only to the extent that they make inferential links with other beliefs. But these beliefs cannot be said in any straightforward way to be 'about the world.' But if the tradition of epistemological philosophy cuts man loose from the world, how can the secularized philosophy of postmodernism restore the bond? Rorty

[71] Barbara Forrest, 'A defense of naturalism as a defense of secularism', in: Matthew J. Cotter, editor, *Sidney Hook Reconsidered* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2004).

[72] Carnap criticizes metaphysical philosophers for "…striving for 'alleged knowledge of the essence of things which transcends the realm of empirically, inductive science." Rudolf Carnap, 'The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language', in: Alfred Ayer, editor, *Logical Positivism* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1959), 80. As cited in Mark Wrathall, 'Introduction: Metaphysics and Onto-theology', in: *Religion after Metaphysics* (Cambridge, 2003), 2.

[73] Konstantin Kolenda, 'Problems with Transcendence', in: Creighton Peden and Larry Axel, editors, *God, Values, and Empiricism. Issues in Philosophial Theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1989).

[74] As Clayton rightfully remarks with regard to the position of Wesley Robins. Philip Clayton, 'On the 'Use' of Neopragmatism', *Zygon* 28 (3) (1993), 364.

sees Donald Davidson's philosophy as a convincing, postmodern account of the man-world relationship.

3.3.1 In Touch with the World

The model of a purely immanent philosophy is provided by Donald Davidson. According to Rorty, he is the first to have made analytical philosophy really immanent. He is the first who really gives up on the great distinctions and makes philosophy of language truly behaviorist. In the tradition of philosophy-as-epistemology the cognizing subject was able to transcend a particular historic or cultural standpoint. Rorty's philosophy aims at a theory of man and world that is non-representationalist and does not presuppose such a transcendental subject.

Davidson's model does not merely function as an alternative for transcendental and foundational philosophy, it is also an alternative to the relativist implications of postmodern epistemology. To Rorty's mind, versions of postmodern epistemology, such as the conclusions Kuhn draws from the psychology of perception, are relativistic and nihilistic. Rorty does not see himself as a nihilist and he tries to rebut accusations of nihilism.[75] Rorty tries to evade nihilism and writes in favor of world affirmation. Postmodern theories of the relation of man to world are often determined by the idea of a conceptual scheme. The only difference postmodernism makes is that it suggests the possibility of a plurality of schemes and an infinite range of perspectives. This is the case for example in parts of Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in which perspectives on reality are explained as *Gestaltswitches* and as spectacles through which people see.[76] Without such spectacles, the world itself would be a – to use James's term – "a bloomin', buzzin' confusion". Rorty criticizes Kuhn's relativism, for it easily leads to a position that makes the world dependent on the subject's conceptual scheme. Against this picture of perspectivism, Rorty proposes that postmodernism can be seen as in line with pragmatism and that it does not make sense to draw such anti-empirical conclusions. Rorty wants to avoid the nihilistic implications of perspectivism. Perspectivism, without quasi-transcendental, conceptual schemes and frameworks is the most favorable option to Rorty. He tries to evade the extremes of the idea of a world-as-such on the one hand and the world as mere projection on the other. According to Rorty, this third way can avoid the risk of losing touch with the world. The model would evade both the risk of a transcendental constitution of the world, and its postmodern counterpart: an unrestrained perspectivism.

Rorty's interpretation of Davidson holds that the idea of a conceptual scheme is a remnant of philosophy-as-epistemology and that it enables a global skepticism. According to Davidson, the dual structure needs to be replaced by a triangular model of the

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[75] The predicate nihilist is used by some to characterize Rorty's position, for example by Carr who describes Rorty's philosophy as a "banalization of nihilism". Karen L. Carr, *The banalization of nihilism: twentieth-century responses to meaninglessness* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992). Rorty himself never defines his position as nihilistic, although he does not really object when his position is characterized as nihilistic. See for example his response to Pascal Engel in Richard Rorty, 'Truth', Review of P. Engel, *Truth*. Acumen Press 2002, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* 2003.03.13 (2003), ⟨URL: `availableonlineathttp://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=1222`⟩.

[76] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 111–112.

subject in relation to the world and to interlocutors. For Davidson, this model makes it possible to see man and world and other subjects as always interrelated. It ensures the possibility of man's relation to the world and the possibility of objective, shared and true beliefs, while excluding the possibility of global skepticism.

> In giving up dependence on the concept of an uninterpreted reality, something outside all schemes and science, we do not relinquish the notion of objective truth – quite the contrary. Given the dogma of a dualism of scheme and reality, we get conceptual relativity, and truth relative to a scheme. Without the dogma, this kind of relativity goes by the board. Of course truth of sentences remains relative to language, but that is as objective as can be. In giving up the dualism of scheme and world we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.[77]

For Rorty any theory that distinguishes between a conceptual scheme and the world risks the possibility of misapplication. If a conceptual scheme is something that can differ from people to people and from generation to generation, it becomes possible that future generations and native peoples live in a different world. A scheme-content dualism always risks the world to get lost, for "no matter how well entrenched a concept may be in our beliefs about the world, it remains always and constantly subject to total rejection."[78] Rorty counters such skepticism, since it keeps the possibility open that we do not relate to the world, we simply mold the world through our conceptual scheme. The possibility that our ancestors, in scientific theories for example, used radically different concepts and beliefs, does not mean that they had a different scheme and thus lived in a different world.

Davidson subsequently argues from the notion of translatability. Translatability proves the conceptual relativist wrong, for the very possibility of translation proves that "most of our beliefs are true".[79] The idea that a language or a scheme organized the world differently is refuted by the possibility of knwowing what such disagreements are about. As Rorty says: "Whatever pluralities we take experience to consist in . . . we will have to individuate according to familiar principles. A language that organizes *such* entities must be a language very like our own."[80] Truth is thus always already present in our ordinary language use and it does not first emerge in a relationship of correspondence. The possibility of translation demonstrates that there is a great deal of agreement, since we understand the stranger or native as language users. At the same time, the possibility of translation rules out the possibility that we have a completely different scheme than the native. This implies that we cannot decide one-sidedly on truth in a theory of meaning, but always have to turn to the concrete observation of human behavior. One cannot assign meanings to a speaker's utterances without knowing what the speaker believes, while one cannot identify beliefs without knowing what the speaker's utterances mean. We must provide both a theory of belief and a theory of meaning at one and the same time.[81]

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[77] Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 198. Rorty quotes it in: Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 310.

[78] Rorty, 'Transcendental Arguments', 95.

[79] "Most of the terms used in sentences expressing those beliefs referred. Translatability requires massive consensus and truth cannot outstrip translatability." Rorty, 'Transcendental Arguments', 77–103.

[80] Rorty, 'Transcendental Arguments', 97.

[81] Davidson has also called this the 'principle of charity' or the principle of 'rational accommodation'.

Rorty uses Davidson's theory of meaning in order to – on the one hand – completely historicize epistemology and on the other hand, to save epistemology from a radical relativism. Truth is not a matter of transcendental constitution by the mind, nor entirely dependent on an individual perspective. Truth is always a matter of a consensus that is embedded in a social and historical context of interaction with the world and fellow speakers. This does not cut language off from the world. Rather – in Rorty's opinion:

> . . . it is just a way of saying that our present views about nature are our only guide in talking about the relation between nature and our words. To say that we have to assign referents to terms and truth-values to sentences in the light of our best notions of what there is in the world is a platitude. To say that truth and reference are 'relative to a conceptual scheme' sounds as if it were saying something more than this, but it is not, as long as our 'conceptual scheme' is taken as simply a reference to what we believe now – the collection of views which make up our present-day culture.[82]

Thus, for Rorty, our language is about the world, although he does not see truth as correspondence to the world. At the same time, he rejects positions that entirely break free from the world; our knowledge is always knowledge of the natural world. According to Rorty, such a behaviorist theory of knowledge will evade skepticism and ". . . produce, trivially, a self-justifying theory about that relation."[83] The fact that the relation Rorty sees between language and the world is trivial and self justifying should make us suspicious with regard to the significance of the world to Rorty. We already saw how Rorty tends to make truth entirely dependent on conversation. When Rorty argues that "certainty is the thing you get when nobody feels the need to attack your presuppositions and thus truth will be a matter of conversation rather than an interaction with non-human reality", the relation of man and world is played off against the relation of man and his interlocutors. The next section makes this point of critique more explicit.

3.3.2 The Disappearance of the World in Rorty's Philosophy

The central problem in Rorty's anti-representationalism is intended to re-establish unmediated contact with the world. It is, however, very questionable whether Rorty succeeds in this, or does in fact break the tie between man and world in an even more radical way. In the first place, I want to draw attention to the ambiguity in Rorty's talk of the relation between words and world. This ambiguity comes to light best in Gutting's and Plantinga's interpretation of Rorty. In their criticism the issue is whether Rorty can do justice to some sense of an objective world. In the second place, I want to criticize Rorty's account of the world from two philosophical notions that problematize Rorty's relation of language and world. These two philosophical notions are Davidson's concept of interpretation and Dewey's notion of experience.

As Malpas explains: "It intends to optimize agreement between ourselves and those we interpret, it counsels us to interpret speakers as holding true beliefs (true by our lights at least) wherever it is plausible to do." Jeff Malpas, 'Donald Davidson', in: Edward N. Zalta, editor, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2005), ⟨URL: http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2005/entries/davidson/⟩.

[82] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 276.
[83] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 295.

In his discussion of Rorty's philosophy Alvin Plantinga draws attention to the idea defended by Gary Gutting, that Rorty does not so much deny a correspondence to the world, but only rejects a strictly representationalist account of it. Rorty would endorse "…all the baseline platitudes about truth."[84] Plantinga asserts that representation already is a platitudinous aspect of truth theory: our words have to represent in order to express baseline truths. In Gutting's reading Rorty would be merely rejecting a far-fetched idea of representation and defending a common sense realism? Plantinga strongly disagrees with Gutting's suggestion and criticizes Rorty for making truth entirely dependent on society.[85] Plantinga refers to what Rorty writes on a "Promethean desire not to live in a world we have not ourselves created".[86] For this desire to be fulfilled it is necesary to deny the objectivity of the world. If Rorty's philosophy is governed by this Nietzschean desire of world creation, experience of the world cannot be expected to play a significant role. Plantinga is right to assert that Rorty not merely dismisses a very specific representationalist theory of truth, according to which entities in the world correspond to isolated words and sentences. Plantinga holds that truth is relevant and is related to the way the world is, but he agrees with Rorty's critique of classical foundationalism.[87] He, however, does not conclude that truth and existence are *dependent* on human language.

John Dewey is one of Rorty's most admired pragmatist. It is exactly Dewey, however, who has a radically different take on the role of the world in belief formation. In an essay on Dewey, Rorty writes that for Dewey there is experience not entirely determined by language. Rorty holds that although Dewey used the word experience, it is possible that he intended it to mean 'culture.' The problem is that Dewey himself never took back his writing on experience. Moreover, it is precisely the word experience that keeps the Deweyan pragmatism from becoming a linguistic subjectivism, as Rorty propagates. Guen Hart is right when she sees a crucial difference between Deweyan 'experience' and Rortyan 'language' and that the respective terms indicate "differing approaches to things in the world. Rorty's (hypermodern) inclination is to see the world as merely a possibility for human 'engineering'. Dewey's pragmatism certainly blocks the road to such a submisson of the world to human language." I entirely agree with Hart when she writes:

> …the Deweyan context of experience, being more inclusive than language, means that such things are always more than permanent possibilities for use. Fundamentally they are, like ourselves, existents who partake of the mystery of individuality. Things may 'object' to being used in the ways we wish to use them, or they may respond in unexpected ways. They have their own existential limits and potentialities which, although they may not be defined permanently ahead of time, may still be determined experimentally. The inclusive context of experience means that, according to Dewey's romantic interest in nature as fellow-subject, things are our partners in the world before they are possibilities for use.[88]

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[84] Plantinga, 432.

[85] Van Peursen makes a similar point in Van Peursen, 141.

[86] Plantinga, 436. with reference to Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 109.

[87] Plantinga, 425.

[88] Carroll Guen Hart, *Grounding without Foundations. A conversation between Richard Rorty and John Dewey to ascertain their kinship* (Toronto: The Patmos Press, 1993), 145–6.

Dupré observes this inconsistency as well and says that Dewey found the relation of human language to the world to be of seminal importance. Several critics have pointed to the problematic character of experience in Rorty's pragmatism. To let the relation to the world be entirely dependent on "what society lets us say" was certainly not Dewey's intention. Rorty's response to this point of criticism has never been convincing. When Van Reijen calls attention to the relevance of Dewey's *Experience and Nature*, Rorty trivializes this and says that he wished that Dewey never had written this book. And – very illuminating in this respect – he says that he would prefer to speak of a theory of discourse, rather than of a theory of experience.[89]

The relation of language and world is, furthermore, a concern for Davidson himself. He attacked Rorty precisely on this point when he wrote: "We cannot explain how language works without invoking an ontology ... Rorty has misunderstood me if he believes I ever thought otherwise."[90] In order to make the ambiguity in Rorty's interpretation of Davidson more explicit, I will draw on Farrell's comments on Rorty.

There are two things of importance that Farrell has to say about Rorty's model in relation to Davidson's. The first is that Rorty tends to interpret Davidson's model wrong and especially that he reads Davidson wrong with regard to the notion of 'the world'. Second, Farrell argues that, against Rorty's intention, the world does get lost in Rorty's philosophy. Farrell sees a shift in emphasis between Davidson and Rorty. For Davidson, knowledge of the world is always social. Only communicators can have a sense of an objective world, and only communicators can have beliefs. In this relation between self, other interpreters and the world, the world is of remaining importance. Objectivity is impossible without other interpreters, but also without the world. Farrel writes: "Because there is that holistic portrayal of the world roughly as it is, we can understand large features of reality by studying our ways of talking about it."[91] Whereas Davidon's concern is very much to stay in touch with the world, Rorty is ambiguous in this respect, and even tends to play down the importance of the world. Reading Rorty with regard to the man-world relationship, Farrell concludes that this relation is absent in crucial passages, such as the ones we already cited from *The World Well Lost*. Farrell sees a shift in Rorty's philosophy when he starts to talk about intersubjectivity. For Rorty, the idea of human communication seems to leave the world useless. The world as the third angle of Davidson's triangle drops out. And, as Farrell says: "... its disappearance is characteristic of his philosophy."[92] Whereas for Davidson, interpretation enables us to know the world, for Rorty it is a means to get rid of the world. The conclusion Farrell draws from this is that "the only direction of fit at issue is between one's beliefs and and the unquestioned beliefs of one's time and place. ... If the world is defined so as to have its character given by what we believe about it, it will hardly be surprising that our beliefs must be generally true."[93] Summarizing his critique of Rorty's interpretation

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[89] Willem van Reijen and Richard Rorty, 'Het pragmatisme in topvorm. Een interview met Richard Rorty', in: Willem van Reijen, editor, *De onvoltooide rede. Modern en postmodern* (Kampen: Kok, 1989), 50.

[90] Donald Davidson, 'Reply to Stephen Neale', in: Lewis Edwin Hahn, editor, *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 668–9.

[91] As cited in Frank B. Farrell, *Subjectivity, Realism, and Postmodernism. The recovery of the world in recent philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 119. See also Frank B. Farrell, 'Rorty and Antirealism', in: Herman J. Saatkamp, editor, *Rorty & pragmatism: the philosopher responds to his critics* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995)

[92] Farrell, *Recovery of the world*, 118.

[93] Farrell, *Recovery of the world*, 119.

of Davidson, he writes: "For Rorty the world is just a shadow of our discourse while for Davidson language can be meaningful because of the shadow cast upon it by the 'antics' of what is real."[94] For Davidson, coherence as such is no criterion for truth, as it is for Rorty.[95]

Against Farrell's criticism of world loss, one could hold that Rorty always defended a position that criticized *privileged* representation of the world, or the idea of the world as it is 'in itself', but never denied the existence of the world. Nevertheless, Farrell argues that the world does disappear in Rorty's philosophy. And he sees in this a similarity with Fichte's idealism. For Rorty, the objectivity of the world is set forth in an "infinite self-positing activity of discourse."[96] Rorty suggests that his whole philosophy of language rests on the assumption that we are in immediate touch with the world. He sees language as an instrument that enables us to cope with the external world. The idea of the world itself is, however, 'coded' from the outset by human language. Every belief concerning the external world is formed *within* a certain language game.[97]

Farrell criticizes the general strategy of Rorty most of all for failing to clarify the relationship of man to the world: Rorty makes an overall decision that the world does not put constraints on language, rather that there are only conversational constraints. The only criterion for the truth or falsity of belief would be its pragmatic usefulness. This 'dedivinizing of the world', leads to a 'divinization of the subject'. Not – as in representationalism – a divinized subject that has absolute knowledge of the world, but a subject that brings forth the world by language. Farrell says: "Rorty is quintessentially and 'religiously' modern in holding that if we open ourselves to any constraint at all from the world, we are submitting ourselves to an unacceptable authority that limits the free, self-relating play of subjectivity."[98] As Farrell sees it, Rorty's position is typically modern, determined by the picture emerging from late medieval thought: "Rorty's understanding of language and world is entirely in line with the late medieval 'eroding of the world's own determinacy'".[99] Nominalism determines – in a more secularized form – the structure of much of modern philosophy and postmodern thought, including Rorty's.[100] The picture of an almighty God is merely replaced by a subject that knows that there are no constraints that the world puts on language, rather that the world in the end will always be what he has put there. To know the world is to "encounter our own present cultural artifacts."[101]

In short, Rorty's attempt was to save the world from becoming lost in the schema of transcendental philosophy (the constitution of the world by the subject). Subsequently, Rorty employs Davidson's scheme of triangulation, in which there is a relationship to

[94] Farrell, *Recovery of the world*, 120.

[95] Farrell underscores this crucial difference between Rorty and Davidson : "From the fact that there is no naked confrontation, that a sentence like entity such as belief can be compared only with information already in the form of sentences or beliefs, it does not follow that what makes a belief true is that coherence itself. …it is not that lining beliefs up with other beliefs is the end of the story, as it is for Rorty." Farrell, *Recovery of the world*, 121–122

[96] Farrell, *Recovery of the world*, 124.

[97] Henk Geertsema, 'Contingentie als uitgangspunt. Het denken van Richard Rorty', *Philosophia Reformata* 56 (1991), 46.

[98] Farrell, *Recovery of the world*, 134.

[99] Farrell, *Recovery of the world*, 135.

[100] Farrell, *Recovery of the world*, 137.

[101] Farrell, *Recovery of the world*, 139.

the world and the world plays a causal role in belief formation. I suspect, that this functions like a smokescreen to hide his more original intentions, namely to work with a model that floats free from the world and in which belief formation takes place between the subject and his interlocutors: the community, the tradition. In his more idiosyncratic pages, the concern with the world and the restoring of contact between man and world is lost. Therefore I think that D.Z. Phillips is right to remark that Rorty's hermeneutical turn loses not only the world of epistemology, it also robs us of much of the our ordinary world at the same time.[102] The autonomy of the world as a defining mark of secularization is not really defended by Rorty. Although he has given some systematic proposals, as to what such a postmodern affirmation of the world might look like, it is not an integral and functioning part of his larger project. An ambiguity in Rorty's philosophy is evident. He pays lip service to Donald Davidson's theory of the relation of language and world, which enables him to rebut accusations of skepticism and nihilism. In his more Nietzschean writings, however, the world does not play a significant role any longer. Rather, he holds that "the only constraints on language are conversational ones" and that "certainty will be a matter of conversation between persons, rather than a matter of interaction with nonhuman reality."[103] Rorty eschews not only the strong philosophical notion of a 'world as such', but the very possibility of a nonhuman world. Consequently, Rorty's thought is not constructed on the triangular model of Donald Davidson, but on a 'modern' subject-centered model.

3.4 SECULAR LIBERALISM AND RELIGION

Rorty's writings on religion are ambiguous. On the one hand, his anti-realism enables a more relaxed attitude toward religion and provides theology with new opportunities. On the other hand Rorty blames religion for being unable to live with contingency and for being intolerant in public discussion. He tries to hold a post-foundationalist openness to religion and a naturalist secularism in one vision. This section discusses what in Rorty's neo-pragmatism is the place of religion in modern society. Subsequently I will criticize Rorty's position from the perspective of meaning holism.

3.4.1 Religion and Cultural Politics

From the last section I take the centrality of conversation for our account of reality as a point of departure for Rorty's take on religion and secularity. For when it comes to the way Rorty situates religion in modern, liberal society, he no longer discusses the truth or falsity of religious language, but the possibility to attain consensus about religion in the context of a liberal society. Rorty's take on religion and secularity can best be explained from his notion of cultural politics. He uses this term in a discussion with Putnam on realism. In that text he proposes "…to move everything over from epistemology and metaphysics to cultural politics".[104] The term 'cultural politics' is taken

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[102] Phillips, 133.
[103] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 157.
[104] Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress. Philosophical Papers, volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 57.

from Robert Brandom who discerns three spheres into which society divides culture up. In the first sphere, the individual's authority is supreme; in the second sphere, the non-human world – scientific method – is supreme; in the third sphere, society does not delegate, but keeps the right to decide to itself. The third sphere Brandom calls 'cultural politics.' In this sphere, questions on the ends and means of society are settled. An authority like God, Truth or Reality is inappropriate here. What Brandom calls the ontological primacy of the social, implies that no community-transcending authorities can be allowed here. When one sees that all human deliberating is finite and contingent, one can no longer make recourse to "the divine will", "the intrinsic nature of reality," or "the immediately given character of experience".[105] Rorty asserts that questions concerning, for example, the existence of God are out of place here.

In his dealing with religion, Rorty proposes a pragmatic theory of cultural politics. Rorty considers coherence as a sufficient test of truth. Religion, as long as formulated coherently, is epistemologically legitimate. We can drop the whole reference problem and thereby the question of the existence of God. Our intellectual obligation is merely to strive for coherence within language games, and to let language games exist without reducing them to one single language. But Rorty does not take this to imply that everything we can coherently talk about is equally desirable. According to Rorty we should let the question of God talk be a question of cultural politics, a question of "whether it makes sense to keep that logical space open."[106] The ontological priority of the social should lead to replacing the familiar distinction between the cognitive and the noncognitive with a distinction between the public and the private.[107] The classical objection to religion, as inspired by the Enlightenment philosophy of Kant was exactly the distinction between the cognitive and the non-cognitive.[108] Rorty proposes, on the basis of his critique of representational knowledge, to replace this distinction with a more pragmatic distinction between public and private projects. This means that from the idea of justification as a social practice, does not follow that everything we can coherently talk about, is equally desirable. Cultural politics is the arbiter in order to decide, on what side of the public private distinction social imaginations belong.

In Brandom's theory, the social practice of justification (giving and asking for reasons) is primary. The ontological is secondary. We cannot first decide on what there is and then adapt our social practices to that ontology. It is rather the other way around:

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[105] Richard Rorty, 'Cultural Politics and the question of the existence of God', in: Nancy Frankenberry, editor, *Radical Interpretation in Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 58.

[106] Rorty, 'Cultural Politics and God', 74–75.

[107] Rorty summarizes his philosophy of religion in the following theses: 1. Beliefs, seen as habits of action, do not need to cohere in one single vision; 2. There is no sharp distinction between the cognitive and the non-cognitive; 3. Instead we should draw a distinction between public and private projects. 3. Religion as opposed to science and law is best understood as a private project; 4. It is never an objection to a religious belief that there is no evidence for it. The only objection can be that it turns into a social and co-operative project, blocking others' private projects; 5. The idea of truth as objective and absolute and as commensurating and ranking human needs, is a secular version of the religious hope that allegiance to something big, powerful and nonhuman will take your side. The only objection to religious fundamentalists is not that fundamentalists are intellectually irresponsible . . . rather it is that they are morally irresponsible in attempting to circumvent the process of achieving democratic consensus about how to maximize happiness." Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism', in: Morris Dickstein, editor, *The Revival of Pragmatism: New essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 27–29.

[108] As Kant said:"Ich musste also das Wissen aufheben, um zum Glauben Platz zu bekommen". Kant, *KRV*, 33, BXXX

first we decide on the desirability of certain social practices and we derive an ontology from that. Applied to religion this means that we do not first encounter an objective reality and then accommodate our practices to that. Rather, given a certain religious form of life, some experiences and claims about reality become plausible, others are excluded.[109] In the light of what Brandom says about language, the idea of God, existing objectively and independent of human language becomes an uninteresting case. Instead, Rorty proposes to talk about cultural politics; about the desirability of religion in the public sphere. There is no way we can get past the community and decide upon such matters as the existence of entities, neither black holes, nor protons or God. So the role of cultural politics is to decide upon the desirability of certain language games. The question of an existing entity, God, makes no sense to us apart from the question "whether it is a good idea for us to continue talking about Him."[110] Rorty's idea of a 'cultural politics' is an attempt to regulate modern secular politics, without making use of foundational principles. Starting from the finite nature of our justification, cultural politics makes a pragmatic case for what should be regarded as public and what as private. Rorty proposes to close the chapter of religion as far as it is concerned with public affairs, without denying the individual his own 'right to believe'.

The insistence of religion as a private and non-intellectual affair is remarkable, not only because the sharp public-private distinction is typically modern, but also because Rorty's philosophy largely draws on a Davidsonian insistence on coherence. The meaning of belief is dependent on other beliefs and these are structured as a web. Nevertheless, Rorty wants to relieve religious believers of an obligation to give and ask for reasons and to argue for the coherence of their beliefs. Religion, to Rorty's mind, is primarily a matter of intentional states such as faith, hope, and love. These intentional states can be safely cut loose from other justification practices. The religious believer should not try to justify his beliefs intellectually.[111]

Rorty employs the distinction between 'faith', and 'belief' to flesh out the non cognitive character of religious beliefs.[112] The non-cognitive, pragmatic religion Rorty favors emphasizes the relevance of love as opposed to cognitive truths as articulated in creeds. But doesn't this treatment of religious beliefs, as 'paradigmatically unjustifiable', run counter his pragmatism, that says that beliefs are only justified through their inferential relations? Rorty's circuitous task is now to do justice both to coherence as a sufficient test of truth and his intention to exclude religion form public concern.

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[109] Rorty, 'Cultural Politics and God', 60–61.

[110] Rorty, 'Cultural Politics and God', 66. He writes: "When a culture wants to erect a logical space that includes, say, the gods and goddesses of the Olympian pantheon, nothing stands in its way … If one is going to challenge an ongoing cultural practice, one must both explain what practice might be put in its place, and how this substitute will tie in with surrounding practices. That is why to turn over to cultural politics is not to turn it over to 'unreason'. Arguments within cultural politics are usually just as rational, though typically not as conclusive, as those within natural science. To give good reasons for raising skeptical questions about a set of entities, one will have to at least sketch reasons for thinking that the culture would be in a better shape if the sort of thing in question were no longer discussed." Rorty, 'Cultural Politics and God', 70.

[111] "Our intellectual responsibilities are responsibilities to cooperate with others on common projects designed to promote the general welfare … and not to interfere with their private projects." Richard Rorty, 'Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance', in: Charley D. Hardwick and Donald A. Crosby, editors, *Pragmatism, Neo-pragmatism, and Religion. Conversations with Richard Rorty* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 8.

[112] "A pragmatist philosophy of religion must follow Tillich and others in distinguishing quite sharply between faith and belief." Rorty, 'Intellectual Responsibility', 11.

Rorty reasons in the following way: The attribution of a belief helps us to explain the behavior of persons, even when we find the belief intellectually unjustifiable. To deny that religious belief is epistemologically relevant does not imply that it is meaningless in an explanatory sense. Rorty subsequently proposes a strategy to do justice to both religion and meaning ascription. He suggests that we distinguish between the normal inferential links, by which beliefs are justified by other beliefs, and thus the content of another person's belief. Religious beliefs are not justified by their place in the network of justification of beliefs by other beliefs, but by the role they play in the explanation of human action by attributing certain beliefs and desires to the actor.[113] This strategy tries to do justice to the fact that a speaker holds religious beliefs, but it does not justify the content of the beliefs. It uses the attribution of such beliefs 'to explain what's going on'. Rorty thinks that religious beliefs are not beliefs in an epistemologically relevant sense and therefore it would be better to speak of religious *faith*. The sort of utterances, that express faith, or love have a different intention. Rorty himself voices the question, whether we can legitimately disengage religious belief from inferential links with other beliefs.[114] He thinks this is the case, but only in an explanatory sense.

> We can give content to an utterance like 'I love him' or 'I have faith in Him' by corre-
> lating such utterances with patterns of behavior, even when we cannot do so by fixing
> the place of such utterances in a network of inferential relations. For such utterances
> do help us figure out what the utterers are likely to do in various situations, and thus
> help us to coordinate our owns actions with theirs. ... We thereby give an explanation
> of action which is not capable of being broken down into beliefs and desires – into in-
> dividual sentential attitudes connected with other such attitudes by familiar inferential
> links – but which is nonetheless genuinely explanatory.[115]

Although Rorty does not exclude religion on naturalistic grounds, he does have a problem with the unjustifiable character of religion. Whereas objects in the physical world and practical, political purposes can be debated in a 'commonsensical verifica-tionist' mode, debates concerning a transcendent God are undecidable. He proposes cutting off religion from inferential links with cognitively more meaningful practices. Contrary to his pragmatic distrust of dualisms, Rorty is reintroducing a dualism, namely a dualism of 'faith' and 'belief'. The dualism of faith and belief does not stand on itself. We also saw how the dualism of public and private plays an important role, a dualism of cognitively meaningful and less meaningful practices etc. Rorty's argumentations are designed to reconcile an attachment to a hard-nosed Enlightenment secularism with a postmodern epistemology. Therefore the question rises whether Rorty has any use at all for the holistic approach he claims to share with Davidson. I detect an ambiguity here. On the one hand he agrees with Davidson's holism, on the other hand he installs new dualisms the moment meaning holism means giving too much room to positions that are not to his taste.

The weakness of Rorty's argument is that he sees it as a unique defect of religion, that it cannot "be broken down into beliefs and desires – into individual, sentential attitudes connected with other such attitudes by familiar inferential links", while he finds this completely understandable for other linguistic practices such as science and

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[113] Rorty, 'Cultural Politics and God', 78.
[114] Rorty, 'Intellectual Responsibility', 12.
[115] Rorty, 'Intellectual Responsibility', 13–4.

politics and insists that they can only be understood in larger vocabularies and not as isolated sentences.[116] The identification of faith with emotions, moreover, suggest a direct founding of religion in a passionate, human nature, that stands rather isolated from a discursive context. Rorty's way of treating religion does just that what meaning holism can avoid. It can explain how sentences make sense only in larger vocabularies and rarely correspond directly to the world. It does not help us to understand and interpret religious (linguistic) behaviour, rather it invents a non-discursive religion which neither can be understood nor interpreted.[117]

3.4.2 Critique of Rorty's Cultural Politics

The possibility of a secularization of the public realm is entirely dependent on the sharp distinction Rorty draws between secular reason and religious belief. This section discusses in some more detail why Rorty's strategy frustrates understanding both secularity and religion. The primary objection with Rorty's proposed solution is that Rorty's dealing with religion runs counter to a fundamental intuition behind the model of radical interpretation, as defended by Davidson. Rorty's suggestion to discern between attribution and justification, finds no support in the idea of meaning holism.

Wayne Proudfoot has given a thorough critique of the way Rorty employs Davidson's model. In Davidson's theory of interpretation, the justification of belief and the attribution of belief are related. The holism that Davidson is suggesting, he asserts, "cannot be restricted to either the attribution of beliefs or their justification. Both are involved in trying to understand another person or culture."[118] The severing of inferential connections by which religious beliefs are justified might easily lead to an immunization of religious belief.

> It is important that any attempt to remove religious beliefs from the web of justification not immunize them from increasing attempts to come to understand the origins of our beliefs and dispositions as well as our ideals. The web of relations by which beliefs are justified by reference to one another, the ways in which we ascribe beliefs and practices to explain human action, and the historical and social explanations we give of why certain beliefs and practices are available for ascription are all connected.[119]

Religious beliefs, if they have a significant place in some agent's web of belief, cannot be put aside with the simple observation that the agent apparently has this belief. The holism that Rorty claims to share with Davidson should therefore be applied to religion as well. Instead of isolating religious experience as existential and non-intellectual, a holistic approach can help us to understand that religious beliefs are – as a rule – integrated in the web of belief.[120] The holism that replaces the dualism of traditional

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[116] Rorty, 'Intellectual Responsibility', 135.

[117] See also Gregory L. Reece, *Irony and Religious Belief* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 88–9.

[118] Wayne Proudfoot, 'Religious belief and naturalism', in: Nancy Frankenberry, editor, *Radical Interpretation in Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 87.

[119] Proudfoot, 89.

[120] As one interpreter of Davidson has it: "…the content of our propositional attitudes is constituted not by some particular, subjective experience but by interconnected patterns of belief. It follows from this view that to identify one religious belief, requires one to connect it intelligibly to a large set of other beliefs most of which the interpreters must believe themselves." Kevin Schilbrack, 'Review of Language Truth and Religious Belief', *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 49 (2001), 63–68.

epistemology states exactly that the meaning of a word or sentence is to be determined by seeing how it relates to other words and sentences. Beliefs are justified, not by means of correspondence to an extra-linguistic reality, but by their relation to other beliefs. Nancy Frankenberry says that the principle of holism:

> ...states that the value or significance of an element, unit or object in a system stems not from some intrinsic value that it possesses in itself but from its relations with other elements. Thus our propositional attitudes – that is to say, our beliefs, desires, intentions, hopes, fears and memories are logically related to perception, learning and language. They are constituted by their simultaneous interdependence, forming a network. Given the principle of holism, there is no hierarchical priority. The principle also tells us that we cannot ascribe beliefs, for example, to others independently of additional beliefs and attitudes. It follows, then, that no single belief is in itself rational or irrational. From a holistic point of view, rationality is not an intrinsic property of an object or a propositional attitude. Thus, no holistic theoretician would ever want to deny that language or religion is an element in a very complex web of relations which we call 'social'.[121]

Thus Frankenberry subscribes to naturalism in religion and opposes it to approaches that see religion as a 'sui generis phenomenon'. According to her, there is no categorical difference between religious language and non-religious language: "Whatever explains how language and mind works generally, explains how religious language and religious minds work."[122] Semantic holism should not lead us to isolate religious beliefs, but rather to give a more broadened and enriched account of belief.

In order to challenge Rorty's dealing with religious belief – and thereby his version of secularity – I will discuss Terry Godlove's version of semantic holism. Godlove challenges the idea of religion as a conceptual scheme. In applying Davidson's critique of conceptual schemes, he develops a theory of religion that may very well provide an alternative to Rorty's philosophy of religion (while maintaining his basic pragmatist insights).

Radical interpretation challenges the idea of meaning as a transcendent component in knowledge of the world, something 'added by the mind', as Rorty would say. Thus radical interpretation has in common with materialism that both take the material context of language seriously. In agreement with Rorty and Davidson, Godlove seeks to lay bare the causal link between environment and belief. In Godlove's reception of Davidson, meaning is not an extra-linguistic entity by which we can check our words and concepts, rather "...it is constituted partly out of the logical and evidential relationships that interpreters take speakers to appreciate, and partly out of the causal regularities they observe between occasions of use and the world ..."[123] In this account of meaning and rationality, the interpreter has no choice but to accept the rationality of the speaker. It is rational to see speakers "...as appreciating the basic logical and evidential relationships between their sentences and concepts. And we must see them as

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[121] Nancy Frankenberry, 'There needs no ghost come from the grave to tell us this': a response to Ivan Strenski', *Religion* 31(1) (2004), 65–74.

[122] Nancy Frankenberry, 'Preface', in: Nancy Frankenberry, editor, *Radical interpretation in religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xiv.

[123] With reference to Davidson, *Interpretation; Hard in Theory Easy in Practice.* Terry Godlove, 'Saving belief. On the new materialism in religious studies', in: Nancy Frankenberry, editor, *Radical interpretation in religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14.

accurately cognizing the basic features of their environment."[124] Rational understanding is thus a two-way street that goes back and forth between "observation of action" and our "hypotheses concerning a person's beliefs and values."[125] Godlove agrees with Rorty that there are no transcendental schemes that influence, mould, or distort the way persons experience the world. "Religions,", says Godlove, "have often been held to supply this coherency and structure, serving as 'conceptual frameworks' or 'schemes' upon which a wide variety of intellectual, emotional and moral experience finds systematic arrangement."[126] Adherents of different religions are seen as people living in different worlds, as people who like scientists in Kuhn's theories, operate in different paradigms. Against this position, Godlove argues that religious belief is not a transcendental scheme at all, but very much like other beliefs persons have about the world. There is no reason to argue for religious beliefs as categorically other than beliefs about the world. Religious believers are not gifted with a conceptual scheme that would make their perception richer, or more naïve, or distorted. The relativism Godlove wants to refute is the idea that there is a world that we can only encounter through the perspective of (religious) conceptual schemes. The rationality of religious discourse would thus be a matter of consistency among statements, functioning within a certain conceptual scheme or paradigm. This, on its turn, invites the objection that there may be many coherent belief systems, which are all internally coherent, but not consistent with one another. Speaking of different worlds, cut loose from nature, gives us reason to limit the study of the world and society to study of languages and social practices.[127] This would cut our linguistic practices off from the world, and this is exactly what a naturalistic approach seeks to avoid. It is possible that Rorty defends such a position, but it is clearly not Davidson's.[128]

Godlove turns to Davidson for a more satisfactory theory of holism in religion. Meaning holism rules out the possibility of global, conceptual disparity. The strategy Davidson follows is to ask: "What could count as evidence for an alternative conceptual framework?"[129] The very fact that we recognize the other speaker as speaking within another framework already indicates that we have understood him as a fellow language user. Subsequently we can dismiss the possibility of massive disagreement. "The reason for this is that a belief is identified by its location in a pattern of beliefs: it is this pattern that determines the subject matter of belief. This does not mean that there can be no disagreement, but rather that disagreement presupposes a more wide-ranging agreement. The transcendentalist on the other hand . . . must show how we could recognize something to be a language without at the same time knowing a lot about how to translate it."[130]

Godlove applies (Davidsonian) holism differently from Rorty. Godlove says that we should not treat religious belief as categorically different from other beliefs. Religious

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[124] Godlove, 'Saving Belief'.

[125] Godlove, 'Saving Belief', 15.

[126] Terry Godlove, 'In what sense are religions conceptual frameworks?', in: Nancy Frankenberry and Hans Penner, editors, *Language, truth, and religious belief: studies in twentieth-century theory and method in religion* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 450.

[127] Godlove, 'Frameworks', 456.

[128] Donald Davidson, 'Afterthoughts 1987', in: Alan Malachowski, editor, *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature and Beyond* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 137.

[129] Godlove, 'Frameworks', 457.

[130] Godlove, 'Frameworks', 456.

beliefs are gradually different however. Religious beliefs are, according to Godlove, highly theoretical and are overall less stated in observational terms. But this does not justify the idea that truth and falsity do not apply to religious beliefs, nor that religious believers 'inhabit a different world.' For Godlove, the highly theoretical (non observational) character of religious language is not a mark of a conceptual scheme, rather it demonstrates that religious language supplies conceptions of a general order of existence. This makes religious language relatively independent from observation. Godlove gives three aspects of religious discourse that can account for this: 1) Religious discourse makes no or very little use of ostension; the divine as such cannot be pointed out. 2) Religious doctrine, dogma, and belief typically attain a high degree of abstractness and complexity. 3) Religious discourse is not about how things appear.[131] Contrary to Rorty's picture of religious discourse as rather speculative and isolated sentences, Godlove explains how religious language on the one hand escapes straight-forward verification, while on the other hand is fully integrated in the agent's web of beliefs. Religious discourse can be correlated to a limited extent.[132] But in a Davidsonian scheme the divergence over many topics betrays a large agreement on a host of other, more concrete, observational topics. This would prove the believer 'normal' in confrontation with the non-believer. Disagreement is only possible because religious discourse is on a theoretical level, but that is so due to the very nature of religious discourse and this does not prove it false. Religious discourse, in Godlove's naturalism, is dependent on the prior intelligibility of more concrete, shared, extra-religious beliefs and subject matters. Religious belief must depend on a world of public objects and events and because it must depend on a massive fund of already accepted truths, religious belief cannot hold the epistemic priority that is ascribed to it by the framework model.[133] When we have in mind Rorty's isolation of religious belief, as emotional or existential belief, Godlove shows how the model of meaning holism can be applied more fruitfully to religion. At the same time this model can do justice to the fact that religious believers share the same world as non-believers and connect their beliefs with all kinds of acts and events in the world.

The strength of Godlove's position is that it can do justice to both the holistic nature of belief and to the distinctive character of religious belief. The holistic model should not lead us to conclude that religious beliefs are like any belief about the world. As Godlove says, religious concepts, "supply conceptions of a general order of existence". In that sense the distinction between religion and secularity can be maintained without (like Rorty) separating the two. Religious beliefs often have a certain priority and have consequences for the way believers experience the world.[134] Godlove explains this by distinguishing between interpretive priority and epistemic priority. Religious beliefs can have an interpretive priority. This is the function commonly associated with

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[131] Godlove writes: "We will be unable, or at least will find it hard, to correlate utterances with environmental change." Godlove, 'Frameworks', 466.

[132] Godlove, 'Frameworks', 466.

[133] Godlove, 'Frameworks', 468.

[134] Häring writes: "Daarom is er in het ervaringsproces zelf geen onderscheid tussen religieus en nietreligieus. Maar andersom is het zaak van de religie, om zonder beperkingen de omvattende werkelijkheid op te nemen. Het komt niet aan op een expliciete transcendentie, maar op het totaliteitsaspect van de werkelijkheid." Hermann Häring, 'Kan religie waar zijn? Religieus spreken tussen imaginatie en realiteit', in: Chris A. M. Hermans, editor, *Participerend leren in debat. Kritische reflectie op grondslagen van religieuze vorming* (Nijmegen: Damon, 2002), 150.

the framework model, affirming the idea that religious beliefs can to a great extent influence experience, without allowing the possibility of radical skepticism. Religious beliefs may have 'interpretative priority' for believers. Religious beliefs can bear on the interpretation of all (or most) of the objects and events in the lives of believers. "But religious beliefs should not be thought of as having an epistemic priority, in the sense that they limn the structure of objectivity for their adherents or provide a conceptual scheme through which a believer's 'world' or 'experience' is organized."[135]

If we want to do justice to Rorty's postmodern critique of realism and evade a newly introduced dualism of non-cognitive faith and cognitive belief, this model provides a credible alternative. It benefits from Rorty's postmodernism in leaving behind all hard-nosed realist pretensions and benefits from Davidson's philosophy in evading the mere relativity of religion. Religious claims are not categorically different from other statements and as such not in principle inaccessible. Moreover it can do justice to the role of the world in belief formation. According to Davidson "we will be in touch with the world in any area in a comparable manner." To deny the relevance of the world would be to give up on the value of secularity.

3.5 THE RETURN OF THE SECULAR IN POSTMODERNISM

For Rorty, the concept of secularity becomes once again a central concern. He employs the notion of secularity, not only to criticize the autonomy of reason,[136] but also to secure the continuity between the modern and the postmodern. Rorty defends a position according to which there is no reason to consider religious beliefs as in principle irrational and refutable by scientific rationality. According to his version of pragmatism, there are only different vocabularies, serving different purposes. In the context of contemporary, relativist approaches in epistemology, Rorty reflects on the work of Plantinga and Woltertorff. He comments on Plantinga's *God and Other Minds* and Wolterstorff's *Reason within the bounds of mere reason*: "I admire them both as remarkable philosophers. ...who show that we atheists should stop praising ourselves for being more 'rational' than theists."[137] To Rorty's mind, religious beliefs are no less rational, warranted, or epistemically reliable than basic non-religious beliefs. This mild tone on the epistemic status of religious discourse should not make us lose sight of the fact that Rorty operates within the larger context of a philosophical application of the concept of secularization. Rorty narrates how the emergence of pragmatism introduces a new 'antireligious dispensation' in Western culture.[138] There is an intrinsic connection between Rorty's critique of philosophy and his account of secularization. On the one hand he is criticizing modernity, on the other hand he remains committed to modernity's central

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[135] Nancy Frankenberry, 'Introduction', in: Nancy Frankenberry, editor, *Radical interpretation in religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3–4.

[136] The French title of a volume both Rorty and Vattimo contributed to expresses this as the 'secularization of thought' Giannu Carchia and Gianni Vattimo, editors, *La sécularisation de la pensée. Recherches réunies sous la direction de Gianni Vattimo* (Paris: Seuil, 1988).

[137] As cited in Christian Smith, *The secular revolution: power, interests, and conflict in the secularization of American public life* (Berkeley: Press, 2003).

[138] Gilles Gun, 'Religion and the Recent Revival of Pragmatism', in: Morris Dickstein, editor, *The Revival of Pragmatism: New essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 404–405.

secularizing intention. He criticizes the philosophical absolutism that is characteristic of the Marxist tradition, yet he is committed to an explicitly utopian social philosophy. Unlike other postmodern thinkers, Rorty does not apply his critique of modernity to its secular and utopian character.[139]

Rorty's case for a secular culture is from the outset problematic. He has distanced himself from foundationalism and thereby endangers the legitimacy of liberal society and liberal institutions. Rorty stresses the holistic nature of justification. If we want to defend our cultural practices, he asserts, we can do so only from within that culture. Every attempt to transcend a particular culture and give an objective justification for its practices, is condemned to fail. Justification presupposes a larger context in which it can take place.[140] So instead of a dualism, according to which the philosopher can take a transcendent standpoint from which to judge a cultural practice, the hermeneutics Rorty has in mind acknowledges that philosophy is always already part of a certain culture. Philosophy cannot escape the hermeneutical circle and therefore it can better be thought of as $\phi\varphi o\nu\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ rather than the cognitive harder $\epsilon\pi\iota\sigma\tau\eta\mu\eta$.[141] This critique of 'philosophy as epistemology' has direct and far-reaching consequences for the credentials of secularity as a guiding concept for liberal society. If his criticism of the rationalism inherent to liberalism makes any sense, the whole ideal of a liberal society as a secular society and the idea of liberal politics as religiously neutral politics becomes extremely problematic. Those committed to classical liberalism will ask whether its "philosophical foundations are sufficiently robust to support its political ambitions and whether political liberalism can provide citizens with reasons for acting in certain ways."[142]

The contours of a non-foundational secular culture take shape within a larger narrative of secularization. This is clear in Rorty's review of Carter's influential *The culture of disbelief*.[143] In this review, Rorty gives a quite detailed description of what he believes secularization to be. Rorty speaks in first instance of a 20th century 'secularization of the mind'. As he sees it, the implications of this secularization of the mind were a certain this-worldliness, which, around 1910, made people realize "…that human beings had only bodies, and no souls and that one's sexual behavior did not have much to do with one's moral worth."[144] Secularization is thus a changing intellectual approach to morals and religious beliefs. Religious beliefs lose their grip on peoples' lives, and are no longer experienced as either real, or relevant. The only reality we can meaningfully talk and think about is physical reality. Consequently, religion changes to "…at its best, Whitehead's 'what we do with our solitude', rather than what people do together in churches."[145] This secularization of the mind, or 'this-worldliness', results in political secularism, which Rorty sees pre-figured in the American constitution and its intellectual father: Thomas Jefferson. He speaks of 'the happy Jeffersonian compromise that

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[139] Peter V. Zima, *Moderne / Postmoderne* (Tübingen: Francke, 1999), xii.

[140] "We will not be able to isolate basic elements except on the basis of a prior knowledge of the whole fabric within which these elements occur …our choice of elements will be dictated by our understanding of the practice, rather than the practice being legitimized." Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 319.

[141] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 319.

[142] Kelly, 112.

[143] Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* (New York: Anchor, 1994). The review is titled *Religion as a conversation-stopper* and is published in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 2002).

[144] Rorty, *Social Hope*, 168–9.

[145] Rorty, *Social Hope*, 169.

the Enlightenment reached with the religious.'[146]

Carter raises some critical questions about the philosophical integrity of this political secularism. Doesn't this secularism depend on a typically modern anthropology, according to which people live together on the basis of a shared rationality?[147] Rorty agrees with Carter's diagnosis that the philosophical account of secular culture would require us to leave out all cultural and religious differences and that we would, according to the liberal theorist, nevertheless have certain moral principles in common. Rorty agrees with Carter that "all these efforts to limit the conversation to premises held in common would exclude religion from the mix and that this would presuppose an essentialist and rationalist anthropology."[148] In his defense of it, Rorty has to defend his account of secular culture, without making recourse to such essentialist reasons. Rorty, however, sees no way to give religion a role in public affairs. The idea of Carter, to create 'a public sphere that does not restrict its access to citizens willing to speak in a purely secular language, but is instead equally open to religious and nonreligious argument' is not likely to lead us anywhere.[149] Instead we should try to debate on the basis of 'shared premises'. But doesn't this make Rorty committed to a rather rigid ideal of 'secularity as neutrality' and would this not contradict his claim that such neutrality is impossible? In this respect, he has considerable sympathy for Carter's criticism: namely, that the idea of neutrality is a liberal dogma – itself not neutral. Liberal theory and religion are equally neutral and equally intolerant. He even speaks of a "…hypocrisy involved in saying that believers somehow have no right to base their political views on their religious faith, whereas we atheists have every right to base ours on Enlightenment philosophy."[150] Rorty admits that it is impossible to give sufficient *philosophical* reasons to keep the public sphere free from religious convictions.[151] Philosophically, there is no greater priority or objectivity in secular arguments than there is in religious arguments. The task of philosophy in a liberal society would be "…to show that moral decisions …are best made by public discussion in which voices claiming to be God's, or reason's, or science's, are put on a par with everybody else's."[152]

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[146] Rorty, *Social Hope*, 169. Rorty deals with Thomas Jefferson and the genesis of the American constitution in very much a secularist mode. The constitution proposed simply a separation of religion and politics. In Charles Taylor's view, new civil structures were influenced by religious congregations. Taylor underscores that the constitution emerged out of a much more traditional understanding of natural law, or at least an interplay between "traditional practice and new ideas". Taylor, *Social Imaginaries*, 109–13.

[147] He says, as quoted by Rorty: "…the effort by contemporary liberal philosophers to create a conversational space in which individuals of very different viewpoints can join dialogic battle, in accord with a set of dialogic conventions that all can accept. The philosophical idea is that even though all of us have differing personal backgrounds and biases, we nevertheless share certain moral premises in common." Rorty, *Social Hope*, 170.

[148] Rorty, *Social Hope*, 170.

[149] Rorty, *Social Hope*, 171.

[150] Rorty, *Social Hope*, 172.

[151] "…the fact that one of us gets his premises in Church and the other in the library is, and should be of no interest to our audience in the public square. …political arguments, are best thought of as neither religious, nor nonreligious." Rorty, *Social Hope*, 172.

[152] Rorty, *Social Hope*, 172.

3.5.1 *The Emergence of a Secular Culture*

The self-referential inconsistency of postmodern secularism is not the only point Rorty wants to make. He continues to argue for secularism in a pragmatic way. He ascribes to Rawls, Habermas and Dewey a non-foundational epistemology of liberalism.[153] The secular principle of liberal democracies is best understood as its "...ability to gain assent from people who retain radically diverse ideas about the point and meaning in human life, about the path to private perfection."[154] Thus Rorty outlines a postmodern version of secular culture that gives priority to democracy over philosophy and thinks of an epistemology proper to such a society in terms of consensus, rather than in terms of objective truth. In this postmodern version of secularity, it is not so much the epistemological legitimacy of religious beliefs that is debated, but the right use of religious arguments. Rorty speaks of a restructuring of arguments "in purely secular terms". An argument is properly secular when the source of the premise is not mentioned in order to secure its authority.[155]

Rorty's review of Carter's book makes two things clear with regard to his concept of secularization. First, his is a naturalism that tries to prevent people from taking privileged standpoints, either religious or non-religious. Second it tries to achieve this in a non-absolutist way, that is, without taking this naturalism or secularism as itself a privileged standpoint or as the only possible worldview. In this vision of postmodern secularity, Rorty's critique of absoluteness has an intrinsic connection with his larger project of criticism of analytical philosophy. The quest for foundations and the providing of reasons were typical for the early stage of liberalism. This need for foundations and reasons has become – to Rorty's mind – superfluous. Liberalism is the type of politics that has proven itself. All it needs is to be redescribed, in a non-foundational way. As Rorty sees it, "Enlightenment rationalism, although it was essential to the beginnings of liberal democracy, has become an impediment to the preservation and progress of democratic societies."[156] Rorty wants to combine a postmodern relativism with the secularism of the Enlightenment. Rorty sees the relation liberalism has to the Enlightenment, but in spite of his criticism of rationalism, he wants to hold on to some form of political liberalism.[157] Rorty is convinced that there is no possibility of justifying liberalism in a non-circular way. Although rationalism made liberalism possible, Rorty proposes redescribing liberalism pragmatically. To Rorty's mind, a non-foundational, conversational culture would be most in line with the political Enlightenment. Non-foundational liberalism would be a secularism redescribed. There can be progress in a moral sense, as society seeks to reduce suffering. But this progress would not be accompanied by intellectual or philosophical progress. An expectation of intellectual growth

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[153] I doubt whether they will agree with him. To my mind Rawls's 'veil of ignorance' plays an a-historical, quasi-foundational role in his political philosophy. On various occasions Rorty has suggested that Rawls is a non-foundationalist thinker

[154] Rorty, *Social Hope*, 173.

[155] Rorty proposes restructuring the religious arguments in purely secular terms. Restructuring means " dropping reference to the source of the premises of the arguments. The omission of religious language seems a reasonable price to pay for religious liberty." The transcendent premises Rorty denounces can be both religious and non-religious. The religious-nonreligious distinction is secondary here. A properly secular argument is a non-absolute one.

[156] Rorty, *Contingency*, 82.

[157] "...while dropping Enlightenment rationalism". Rorty, *Contingency*, 57.

toward truth, is seen by Rorty as a remnant of a religious desire.[158] This is, at the same time, a continuation of the Enlightenment in its political ambitions and a breaking up with the Enlightenment, for it would be a culture without a desire for *philosophical* legitimacy. Pragmatism is the philosophy of a mature (de-scientized, de-philosophized) Enlightenment liberalism.

Rorty's secularism is intertwined with his postmodernism in a problematic way. As a postmodern philosopher he intends to criticize the tradition of the Enlightenment. When, as a result of this, religion – now no longer under critique of rationalism – returns, he once again appeals to secularism. Rorty affirms and welcomes philosophy as secularization. He defines modern philosophy from Descartes onward as an attempt to liberate science from the dominance and the power of the Church. When secularization inaugurates a positivist culture, which essentially has the same structure as the religious culture it wanted to replace, Rorty contests modernity. Modernity and the tradition of positivism, replaced God with Science or Rationality and "erected Science as an idol to fill the place once held by God".[159] Therefore, Rorty argues for another secularization: this time not a secularization of God and religion, but a secularization of the truth claims of the sciences and rationalistic philosophy.

If Rorty is so determined to unmask the pseudo-religious character of modernity, why does he not propose to leave behind the concept of secularization for good? Especially since the German debate surrounding Schmitt, Löwith and Blumenberg has made it so abundantly clear that secularization is time and again defined as a secularization of Christianity. In the criticism of secularization as a hermeneutical category, Heidegger, Löwith, and Blumenberg all abandoned historicism, in favor of respectively the Presocratics (Heidegger), Stoa (Löwith) and Epicur (Blumenberg[160]). Rorty sees this postsecular turn as the fatal course of continental philosophy and postmodernism. However, his interpretation in the end leads him to embrace another 'Hellenistic' position: polytheism, thereby answering Odo Marquard's question – is there something like a secularized polytheism? – affirmatively.[161] Rorty explicitly rejects post-secularism and insists on the necessity of a utopian, historicist philosophy.[162] The hermeneutical function of secularization is an integral part of this utopian vocabulary and Rorty is well aware of the fact that this links him up in some way with the ethics of Christianity. When Rorty defines his idea of a social/democratic Utopia, he sees it as '…die Weltliche Lesart der Christlichen Hoffnung auf ein Brüderliches Leben aller Menschen'.[163] So when Stacey

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[158] "He speaks of an 'eschatological account', according to which 'worldviews will keep changing until we finally reach Truth." Richard Rorty, 'The Continuity between the Enlightenment and 'Postmodernism'', in: Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hanns Reill, editors, *What's left of Enlightenment?: a postmodern question* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 25.

[159] Rorty, *Consequences*, xliii.

[160] Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983), 3–122.

[161] "Gibt es – falls Säkularisierung ein primär Europäisches Phänomen wäre – nur säkularisierten Monotheismus? Oder gibt es auch säkularisierten Polytheismus? Oder, falls das Wort Säkularisierung anstössig ist: gibt es auch entzauberten, aufgeklärten Polytheismus?"Odo Marquard, 'Aufgeklärter Polytheismus - auch eine politische Theologie?', in: *Der Fürst dieser Welt. Carl Schmitt und die Folgen* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1983), 77.

[162] Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 38. See also Richard Rorty, 'The Overphilosophication of Politics', *Constellations* 7(1) (2008). Rorty traces the anti-utopian political philosophy of postmodernism to Horkheimer and Adorno. Van Reijen and Rorty, 40–62.

[163] Richard Rorty, 'Keine Zukunft ohne Träume', in: *Die Gegenwart der Zukunft* (Berlin: Klaus Wagenbach, 2000), 184. He explains this secular-Christian hope as the hope that "unsere moralische Gemein-

Meeker addresses the question: "Why does Rorty steadfastly privilege the utopia of the liberal ironist over a heterotopic vision and not directly address the question of differences of utopia when he clearly advocates the dynamics of democratic conversation and compromise?", she is incorrect in answering that the reason "lies in his regular, reflexive return to binary distinctions, constituents of what Marion would call his 'simulacrum of synthesis'."[164] As I see it, it is the insistence on a progressive vision, in continuity with Christian love and Enlightenment equality, that threatens to get lost in the discourse of difference.

What his 'secularization of secularization' looks like can best be demonstrated from Rorty's philosophy of culture. The aspect of modernity that Rorty appreciates most is the emergence of a public sphere. He sees the 'man of letters' as the paradigmatic figure of a literary culture, who is inventing new ways of being human, without relying on preceding religious traditions or a metaphysical account of objectivity. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty is tracing a broader cultural tradition, which has been affirmed in several periods of Western cultural and political history. Rorty mentions the utopian politics of the French revolution and romantic expressivism in literature and poetry. The French revolution had shown that an age-old political system could be changed overnight. Romanticism showed what can happen when one no longer sees art as copying nature. These developments have in common a breaking up with culture as determined by a pre-existent order. The idea is that the theologian and the metaphysician believe in 'an order beyond time and change which both determines the point of human existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities', whereas the Romanticist has the courage to live with the inevitable contingency of life and lives out its creative potential to its fullest.

In Romanticism, human creativity is seen as the source of art and of social institutions. Rorty stresses that in the literate culture of the 18th century, human creativity, rather than scientific accuracy, dominate the intellectual scene. The theory of culture Rorty develops is not only a criticism of foundationalism and representationalism. That would make his philosophy a mere rejection of 'positive' philosophy and theology and result in a merely negative account of secularity. The positive pathos in his philosophy is connected with what he called the 'emergence of a culture of literacy' and the appearance of the 'man of letters'.[165] In the 19th century Rorty sees a shift from a scientific, philosophical culture toward a culture of the 'man of letters'. [166] In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* he mentions 'the intellectual who wrote poems and novels

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schaft – also diejenigen, um derentwillen wir Opfer zu bringen bereit sind – umfangsgleich wird mit unserer gesammten biologischen Spezies." From the necessity of utopian politics he rejects the postmodern condition as a post-secular condition, namely the conviction that 20th century catastrophes (dystopia's) call for a fundamental revision of progressive emancipatory views of history. Rorty, 'Keine Zukunft', 187.

[164] Stacey Meeker, 'Utopia Limited. An Anthropological Response to Richard Rorty', *Anthropoetics* 4(2) (1999), ⟨URL: http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0402/utopia.htm⟩.

[165] This is a secularization in the sense that '…philosophy became for the intellectuals a substitute for religion. It was the area of culture where one touched bottom, where one found the vocabulary and the convictions which permitted one to explain and justify one's activity *as* an intellectual, and thus to discover the significance of one's life.' Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 4.

[166] …by the early 20th century the scientists had become as remote from the most intellectuals as had the theologians. Poets and novelists had taken the place as the moral teachers of the youth. The result was that the more 'scientific' and 'rigorous' philosophy became, the less it had to do with the rest of culture and the more absurd its traditional pretensions seemed. Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 5.

and treatises'.[167] In *Consequences of Pragmatism* Rorty opposes a 'highbrow culture' to a 'professionalized culture'.[168] Let us take these diverse descriptions together as the emergence of a literary culture. Rorty describes it as follows:

> Beginning in the days of Goethe and Macaulay and Carlyle and Emerson, a kind of writing has developed which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor epistemology, nor social prophecy, but all these things mingled together into a new genre. This genre is often still called 'literary criticism', however, for an excellent reason. The reason is that in the course of the nineteenth century imaginative literature took the place of both religion and philosophy in forming and solacing the agonized conscience of the young. ...We live in a culture in which putting one's moral sensitivity into words is not clearly distinguishable from exhibiting one's literary sensibilities. Episodes from the history of religion and from the history of philosophy are seen as instantiating literary paradigms, rather than serving as sources of literary inspiration.[169]

In Rorty's preferred, Romantic philosophy, language is seen as creative, rather than as referring to reality.[170] He mentions Nietzsche's ideal of self-creation. The picture that Rorty paints of a postfoundational, secular culture is inspired by a Nietzschean account of creativity. No longer do humans obey predescribed codes, rather they invent the type of society they want to belong to and they invent the kind of person they want to be. Rorty speaks about an '...era in which we gradually came to appreciate the historical role of linguistic innovation'. In this sense the secular is autonomous. There are no laws to be obeyed, rather life is an experiment; social life is an experiment.[171]

Once this idea of culture, as made rather than found, becomes dominant, the fear of relativism does not make much sense: how could one fear that a certain language

[167] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 5.

[168] "A 'highbrow culture' is as distinctively a nineteenth cenury phenomenon as the New Science and the philosophical problematic which is created were seventeenth-century phenomena." Rorty, *Consequences*, 66.

[169] Rorty, *Consequences*, 66 Rorty's appeal to Macaulay is interesting here since he criticized the French revolution as a 'destroying' revolution, while he praised the English revolution as 'preserving'. Albert Jan Rasker, *De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk vanaf 1795. Haar geschiedenis en theologie in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw* (Kampen: Kok, 1974), 91. Rorty though does not distinguish between the American revolution, the English and the French. In a 2002 interview with Gianni Vattimo, Rorty stresses the relevance of the romantic age for his thinking, contrasting it with Christianity: "On the question of a decisive event in history, the big difference between Gianni and me is that I am not really impressed by the BC AD distinction. For me the decisive events occurred in the late eighteenth century AD, when the French revolution coincided with the romantic movement. The intellectuals began talking about the power of the human imagination, as Schiller and Shelley did, at the same time that Christian charity changed into liberté, egalité, fraternité. That constellation of events captured my imagination." Richard Rorty, 'Anticlericanism and Atheism', in: Richard Rorty, Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, editors, *The Future of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[170] Rorty, *Contingency*, 53.

[171] Of course one could argue endlessly over the historical details of such a development. Früchtl discusses Rorty's diagnosis of an 'aesthetic culture' as follows: "...die Welt wird als eine Bühne augefast, als die spätestens seit den Zeiten der Renaissance und des Barocks aufgerufen worden ist. Die Bühnenbilder wechseln, die 'nackte Wahrheit' erweist sich als Phantom; Alles ist Schein oder vielmehr Menschenwerk. Nimmt man das Prädikat 'aesthetisch' in diesem weiten und begriffsgeschichtlich durchaus legitimen Sinn, so kann man die demokratische auch eine aesthetische Kultur nennen." Früchtl gives several other characterizations of the aformentioned cultural development, such as Stephen Greenblatts 'Renaissance self-fashioning' and Alwyn's 'grosse Welttheater' Joseph Früchtl, 'Demokratische und aestethische Kultur', in: Udo Tietz and Rudiger Ziel, editors, *Hinter den Spiegeln. Beitrage zur Philosophie Richard Rortys* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), 280.

game does not represent the way the world is, or that a work of art does not meet the standard of objectivity? The very idea of this culture is to invent new practices. Rorty's critique of absoluteness thus has an intrinsic connection with his larger project of criticism of foundationalism. The quest for foundations and the providing of reasons were typical for the beginning of modernity. The need for foundations has become superfluous. Rorty sees the original relation liberalism has with the Enlightenment, nevertheless he wants to hold on to modernity's restructuring of the political and the Church-state separation. The division of the Enlightenment into a political, secularizing part and a philosophical, rationalizing part is crucial in coming to terms with Rorty's account of secularity. He speaks of a development of the idea that 'truth was made rather than found.'[172] Rorty defines postmodernism as a successor to this Romantic movement of self-invention. Literature, hermeneutics and poetry are paradigmatic for a postmodern idea of secularity: an account of secularity that seeks to experience the world as meaningful, not in the possibility of knowing the Absolute, but in the unlimited possibilities of an endless process of interpretation and redescription. A secularized culture in Rorty's sense would be a culture that has accepted this contingency and is completely 'dedivinized'. Rorty gives the following definition of a postmodern secular culture.

> For in its ideal form, the culture of liberalism would be one which was enlightened, secular, through and through. It would be one in which no trace of divinity remained, either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self. Such a culture would have no room for the notion that there are nonhuman forces to which human beings should be responsible. It would drop, or drastically reinterpret, not only the idea of holiness but those of 'devotion to truth' and of 'fulfillment of the deepest needs of the spirit'. The process of de-divinization which I described … would, ideally, culminate in our no longer being able to see any use for the notion that finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive the meanings of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings.[173]

Rorty's secularization of culture is, in one way, a critique of modernity. But in another way it is less so. Rorty's philosophy of secularization clears the road for a downright modern project of political secularization. Rorty advocates only a partial rejection of the Enlightenment project. He proposes rejecting the epistemological part of the Enlightenment, but subsequently urges us to hold on to the central, political message of modernity: secularization. When we replace the epistemological underpinnings of secularization with a hermeneutical awareness of historical contingency, the project of political secularization can be continued in the context of a postmodern, literary culture. This leads Rorty to distinguish between two Enlightenment projects:

> … there are two Enlightenment projects – one political and one philosophical. One was to create heaven on earth: a world without caste, class, or cruelty. The other was to find a new comprehensive worldview which would replace God with Nature

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[172] He writes: "About two hundred years ago, the idea that truth was made rather than found began to take hold of the imagination of Europe … the French revolution and the Romantic movement inaugurated an era in which we gradually came to appreciate the historical role of linguistic innovation. This appreciation is summed up in the vague, misleading, but pregnant and inspiring thought that truth is made rather than found." Rorty, *Contingency*, 52–3.

[173] Rorty, *Contingency*, 45.

and Reason. The political project has not failed, even though it is proceeding very slowly, and only by fits and starts. Now that various apparent short-cuts to utopia, such as fascism and Marxism, have turned out to be dead ends, we have had to become more patient. It now seems clear that reformist, gradualist, social democratic changes in laws and institutions provide the only way in which the Enlightenment's goal of maximal freedom and minimal humiliation will ever be reached. Despite the need for patience, however, this goal is as desirable as ever.[174]

The promise the Enlightenment still holds is a secularized, humanist culture, which hopes for a progressive increase of happiness and a decrease of suffering, by means of gradual social-democratic reforms. The other aspect of the Enlightenment is a philosophical ideal, that Rorty opposes, because it was not secularized enough, but was a continuation of religion by other means. A non-foundational, conversational culture would thus be the true fulfillment of the Enlightenment. It would be entirely devoted to an increasing variety in human culture. In that sense there can be progress. But this progress would not be accompanied by intellectual or philosophical progress. Secularization, for Rorty, is a continuation of the Enlightenment only to the extent that it pursues its political ambitions and breaks with its desire for philosophical legitimacy.

The practical consequences of Rorty's cultural politics are an insistence on religion as a private concern. The postmodern affirmation of contingency and his insistence on secularization of society, lead Rorty to an account of religion without any institutional form. In a response to Nicholas Wolterstorff he argues for a "chastened and more cautious" version of his position.[175] Instead of a "one sided demonstration of aversion toward dogmatic religion", Rorty now finds only religion above parish level harmful.[176] The response to Wolterstorff's article shows that Rorty, in an attempt to explain his position more carefully, comes to terms more clearly with his own secularism, as the hope that "ecclesiastical organizations will eventually wither away."[177] In some respect he agrees with Wolterstorff that a secularism can be just as intolerant as religion.[178] He maintains, however, that religion in an institutional form will do more harm than good. Rorty agrees with Wolterstorff that there are no objective criteria that could distinguish between convictions that are politically acceptable. Nevertheless, Rorty calls for a practice of humility on the side of the churches. Rorty's plea is for a liberal Christianity, for humble Church institutions '. . . that were more concerned with social justice and less with sustaining their own authority. '[179] The growing influence of of traditionalism (Macintyre) and (radical) orthodoxy makes Rorty fear that this threatens a democratic society. "I fear for the republic", says Rorty, referring to theologians such as Hauerwas and Milbank.[180]

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[174] Rorty, 'Enlightenment and Postmodernism', 19.

[175] Richard Rorty, 'Religion and the Public Square. A reconsideration', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31/1 (2003), 141–149.

[176] "For ecclesial organizations typically maintain their existence by deliberately creating ill-will toward people who belong to other such organizations, and toward people whose behavior they presume to call immoral. They thereby create unnecessary misery." Rorty, 'Religion in Public', 142.

[177] Rorty, 'Religion in Public', 142.

[178] He writes: "We share Dewey's feeling that militant atheism is as unattractive as militant religious proselytizing, but we want to distinguish between atheism and anti-clericalism. We recognize that the disappearance of ecclesiastical institutions would leave a gap in the lives of religious believers, for they will no longer have a sense of being part of a great and powerful worldly institution." Rorty, 'Religion in Public', 142.

[179] Rorty, 'Religion in Public', 148.

[180] Rorty, 'Religion in Public', 148.

3.5.2 Religious Ambiguity in Postmodernism.

Rorty has written in a very negative way on religion as a 'conversation stopper' and even a sickness to be cured. He has two principal problems with religion. First, he sees it as a threat to free and open conversation in the public sphere. He defines religion as always presupposing claims to absolute certainty, and contrasts it with his idea of liberalism as an open-ended conversation.

Second, he sees it as a moral shortcoming to give in to the traditional religious need that "some non-human power will take your side." In religion, instead of confidently living with the uncertainties of human life, one gives expression to "an infantile need for security". Nevertheless he has proposed a postmodern philosophy of religion, compatible with his idea of a conversational culture and radical contingency. Such a religion would exert no influence on public life and politics and would not try to compensate for the finite nature of human existence. Religion is a possibility for individual comfort and redemption. This religion would share with literature the rather limited importance of cognitive claims. Literature offers redemption by making possible a great variety of human identities. In a literary culture Rorty sees the end of religion, as well as of philosophy.

> For members of such a literary culture, redemption is to be achieved by getting in touch with the present limits of human imagination. That is why a literary culture is always in search of novelty, always hoping to spot what Shelley called 'the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present', rather than trying to escape from the temporal to the eternal. It is a premise of this culture, though the imagination has present limits, these limits are capable of being extended forever.[181]

Rorty's choice of words is interesting here. Redemption is obviously a concept from the sphere of religion. Rorty thus introduces literature and the literary culture as an alternative for religious redemption. Redemption, in this sense, takes place not by being saved by a non-human power, but by imagination. The role of imagination as a possible way to salvation deserves some emphasis here. The affirmation of human finitude gives way to a new form of eternity: the infinity of the imagination and of the endless process of extending limits. Apparently, a form of inner worldly transcendence is needed to experience life as meaningful and to overcome the modern obsession with the one true description of the world. The infinite nature of this creativity is emphasized too often to go unnoticed. Rorty explains the function of creativity for experiencing life as meaningful as follows:

> For the religious idea that a certain idea, book or tradition might connect you up with a supremely powerful or a supremely lovable nonhuman person, the literary intellectual substitutes the Bloomian thought that the more books you read, the more ways of being human you have considered, the more human joy become – the less tempted by dreams of an escape from time and chance, the more convinced that we humans have nothing to rely on save one another. The great virtue of the literary culture that is gradually coming into being is that it tells young intellectuals that the only source of

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[181] Richard Rorty, 'Anti-clericalism and atheism', in: Mark Wrathall, editor, *Religion after Metaphysics* (Cambridge, 2003), 10.

redemption is the human imagination and that this fact should occasion pride rather than despair.[182]

This may not be an explicit return of religion, but it is in a way a form of inverted religion. Salvation is reached, not in a *visio dei beata*, but in the infinite difference made possible by human creativity. Rorty shows us a sort of implosion of the sacred in the infinity of contingent imaginations. The religion Rorty is talking about might be considered a mere metaphor for human creativity, but Rorty's religion is more than that. Explaining his philosophy of religion in more detail he writes:

> The substitution of poetry for religion as a source of ideals, a movement that began with the romantics, seems to me usefully described as a return to polytheism. For if, with the utilitarians, you reject the idea that a nonhuman authority can rank human needs, and thus dictate moral choices to human beings, you will favor what Arnold called "Hellenism" over what he called "Hebraism." You will reject the idea, characteristic of the Evangelical Christians, whom Arnold thought of as "Hebraist", that it suffices to love God and keep his commandments.[183]

For Rorty, the return to religion can only be a return to polytheism. Polytheism undoubtedly comes to Rorty through his two preferred philosophers, on the one hand the pragmatist William James (in particular the postscript in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*) and on the other hand Friedrich Nietzsche. Polytheism is not a mere metaphor for pluralism, as Max Weber and Isaiah Berlin used the term. Rorty seriously insists that Christians did the wrong thing in distancing themselves from Roman polytheism. Whereas Nietzsche discusses polytheism as an anti-egalitarian will to power, Rorty backs away from the agonistic consequences that Nietzsche connected with polytheism and takes great pains to iron out the preference of Nietzsche for a will to power and a dominance of the strong over the weak. Rorty speaks of Nietzsche's contempt for democracy as 'an adventitious extra'.[184] It is not entirely clear why Rorty thinks polytheism is a religion of love compatible with Christianity, whereas neither Roman polytheism, nor the modern reinventor of polytheism, Friedrich Nietzsche, thought this was the case.[185]

Rorty's preference for polytheism has more fundamental problems. His polytheistic theology and the primacy of love are very specific credal claims. How can Rorty disqualify religions for being mediated by creeds, as he himself qualifies as legitimate only certain religious experiences, for example a relation to the infinite as an ecstatic relation, or a relation of love. Rorty more or less invents a proto-secularity and a religion of love in Hellenism and paganism, which rests on no historical data. Is it possible that, like the Romantics have idealized the Middle Ages in the past, as a reaction to a too

[182] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers volume 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 95.

[183] Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 27.

[184] Richard Rorty, 'Heideggerianism and Leftist Politics', in: Santiago Zabala, editor, *Weakening Philosophy. Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 31.

[185] Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean world from the second century AD to the conversion of Constantine* (London: Penguin, 1986), 122. Even modern, metaphoric uses of polytheism as in Weber and Berlin's idea of a "polytheism of values", the point of comparison is its incommensurability, not its harmonious character. Theo de Wit, 'The Return to Religion. Vattimo's Reconciliation of Christian Faith and Post-Modern Philosophy', *Bijdragen. Tijdschrift voor filosofie en theologie* 61 (2000), 393.

narrow Enlightenment rationalism, today postmoderns are idealizing polytheism? Trivializing the historical intertwinedness of Christianity and secularity is certainly part of Rorty's strategy. Rorty himself seems to be well aware of the fact that utopianism and polytheism make strange bedfellows. When asked whether his utopian account of time, does not make him indebted to "the Judaeo-Christian promise of a divine justice that is worked out historically", he responds that he does not care whether it is a secularization: "It's certainly true that Christianity softened Europe up for the idea of egalitarian democracy. But I suspect the idea would have emerged eventually even if we had all worshiped Baal."[186]

There is a return of religion in Rorty that pretends to be a non-dogmatic religion of love, but at the same time makes all sorts of quasi-dogmatic claims that seek to replace more traditional accounts of religion. I now want to relate this account of religion once again to secularity: Does this privatized, existential religion fit the secular society Rorty has in mind? Initially it does indeed seem so. Religion is now an aspect of a literary culture, that can be of value for the full maturation of its citizens. When we read Rorty critically, however, it becomes obvious that this approach to religion cannot be really apolitical. Rorty thinks that all we should worry about is to prevent religion to play a public role in a liberal society. Initially he stresses the secularist line of thought. Religious convictions are withdrawn from the public realm. However, it is precisely the privatized, fragmentary character of Rorty's postmodern religion that makes it increasingly difficult to demarcate religion from other areas of culture. With regard to the role and function religion can play in a secular society, Rorty writes:

> The kind of religious faith which seems to me to lie behind the attractions of both utilitarianism and pragmatism is, instead, a faith in the future possibilities of mortal humans, a faith which is hard to distinguish from love for, and hope for, the human community. I shall call this fuzzy overlap of faith, hope and love 'romance.' Romance, in this sense, may crystallize around a labor union as easily as around a congregation, around a novel as easily as around a sacrament, around a God as easily as around a child.[187]

The point of importance here is that Rorty refers to his preferred version of religion as romance: as a fluid form of religion (the 'fuzzy overlap'). The mark of this returned religion is thus not only that it flourishes in private life, but also its capacity to blur with other domains of culture (Labor unions, the democratic state). This is a counterintuitive development as the intention of secularization was to distinguish between the domains of religion, society and the state. The theological preference for polytheism is thus far from politically neutral. This becomes obvious when Rorty asserts that only the polytheist can be wholeheartedly committed to democracy.[188]

The secularization process was sketched in the former section as a twofold dedivinization. Rorty's philosophy of religion makes it possible to add a third secularization.

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[186] Richard Rorty and Eduardo Mendieta, 'On September 11, 2001', in: Eduardo Mendieta, editor, *Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself. Interviews with Richard Rorty* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 118–9.

[187] Rorty, 'Intellectual Responsibility', 14.

[188] "Your devotion to democracy is unlikely to be wholehearted if you believe, as monotheists typically do, that we can have knowledge of an 'objective' ranking of human needs that can overrule the result of democratic consensus. But if your devotion is wholehearted, then you will welcome the utilitarian and pragmatist claim that we have no will to truth distinct from the will to happiness." Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 34.

In order to make this clear it is important to see that Rorty distinguishes three stages of religious consciousness. Drawing on William, he writes that after the literal stage of religion, there comes a second stage of religious consciousness. This stage is, as William James wrote, the realization that aligning ourselves with "a power that is not ourselves will do unimaginably vast good." Rorty suggests a 'third stage' of religious consciousness. In this romantic stage, humans put their "faith in the future possibilities of moral humans, a faith which is hard to distinguish from love for, and hope for, the human community." Here religion becomes equivalent to 'social hope', 'solidarity', and 'a religion of democracy.' Rorty's philosophy here is in considerable tension with the separation of religion and politics, for religion, defined as romance, becomes once again connected with politics. A certain form of democracy requires a wholehearted devotion and installs itself as a judge on what forms of religion would be compatible with this particular form of democracy. This public role of religion, this civil religion, is articulated in his essay *Achieving our Country* as itself a 'thoroughgoing secularism'.[189] It sets aside devotion to God and replaces it with the political ideals of social democratic societies. This view of religion and secularity is shot through with a sense of historical necessity by which religion will eventually wither away. Rorty sees this as essential to the modern democratic experiment. As predecessors of this sort of religion, Rorty mentions John Dewey and Walt Whitman. As Rorty reads them, these men hoped to replace knowledge of the will of God with hope for a casteless and classless America. They wanted this utopian America to replace God, as unconditional object of desire. Secularity means to Rorty that we refrain from appeals to anything transcending the concrete historical situation. The sense of contingency that is fundamental to this liberal culture consists of "...forgetting eternity and replacing the knowledge of a prior reality with a human hope for a contingent future."[190]

Rorty is committed to a rather reductionist approach to religion. It gives people the sense of belonging to "a great and powerful worldly institution" and it has a function as a "device for diminishing social unrest", giving believers a "pie in the sky".[191] Rorty thinks that in the end the religious does not have a content of its own, and that the function of religion can be fulfilled by a secular vocabulary as well. The gap that is left when Christian institutions do no longer exist "...will be filled ...by an increased sense of participation in the advance of humanity – theists and atheists together, shoulder to shoulder – toward the fulfillment of social ideals."[192] He speaks of religion as a passing stage in the history of mankind. Even though in the 20th century religious reforms have had a leading role in social reform, Rorty thinks that secularization will put an end to the phrasing of social ideals in religious terms.[193] Ultimately this leads to the progressive, secularist belief, "that the best society would be one in which political action conducted in the name of religious belief is treated as a ladder up which our ancestors climbed, but

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[189] Rorty, *Achieving*, 15. For Rorty on a Deweyan civil religion see: Rorty, *Achieving*, 38.

[190] Rorty, *Achieving*, 22. Secularism is motivated by a general acknowledgment of temporality: "Dewey's philosophy is a systematical attempt to temporalize everything. According to him, one should no longer seek for theoretical frame of reference within which visions of the future could be evaluated. It was Dewey's romantic hope that future events would exceed every imaginable framework. What he feared was stasis: a time in which everybody thought the goal of history is reached." Rorty, *Achieving*, 23.

[191] Rorty, 'Religion in Public', 142.

[192] Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy-envy', *Daedalus* 133/4 (2004), 142.

[193] "The social ideals we humanists champion are often cast in religious terms. But we hope that they will eventually cease to be so stated." Rorty, 'Anti-clericalism', 142.

one that now should be thrown away."

This gives way to the idea that Rorty defines a secular culture as a culture in which human experience is understood as temporal, as a historical contingency. Democracy is about 'forgetting eternity.'[194] This can be attained in a society that sees pluralism as the greatest goal of a free society. A truly secular society is not a society in which people are no longer religious, rather a society in which "governments and social institutions exist only for the purpose of enabling a greater variety of individuals".

Rorty's secularism, thus, no longer insists on a clear separation between religion and politics, rather the religious is scattered over other areas of culture, not in the least the political. Even though he denies that Dewey "blended the worshiping of an eternal being with the hope for a temporal realization", he does not really succeed in avoiding a political theology of sorts. Rorty understands the democratic nation state and the culture of literary self creation essentially in religious terms. Drawing on Walt Whitman he writes:

> Whitman thought that we Americans have the most poetical nature because we are the first thoroughgoing experiment in national self-creation: the first nation-state with nobody but itself to please – not even God. We are the greatest poem because we put ourselves in the place of God: our essence is our existence, and our existence is in the future. Other nations thought of themselves as hymns to the glory of God. We redefine God as our future selves.[195]

Religion as devotion to plurality and democracy, undoes the initial understanding of secularization as a separation of religion and politics. The religious is no longer a private affair, nor an institution discernible from state and society. Rather religion becomes politically important and the experience of democratic society is itself a religious experience. Rorty initially insists on a strictly private religion. Reading more critically what he has to say on the subject, it appears that he defends a theology of polytheism, which is to replace the more traditional accounts of religion. This theology then turns out to be tailor made for a specific political constellation; religion as a celebration of the human community. Polytheism tends in the direction of worship and adoring the culture of democracy and idiosyncrasy.

3.6 EVALUATION

In Rorty's writings, the concept of secularity plays a role on different levels. The crucial sense, however, is his idea of secularization of reason and philosophy. Secularization in the context of absolute historicism means that theologians, as well as scientists, were not only misled in their attempt to escape from 'time and change', but were also run out by an emerging culture of letters, one that is narrative in character rather than scientific. Secularization is not only an exit from religion, rather an exit from every effort, scientifically, or philosophically, to build culture, ethics, religion, science, on immutable, eternal, principles and the emergence of a post-philosophical, secular culture.

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[194] Rorty, *Achieving*, 21.
[195] Rorty, *Achieving*, 22.

Secularity in this sense means that it does not allow any history-transcending principles or arguments.[196] In the light of this historicism, Rorty sees traditional philosophy, be it in an atheist or an empiricist guise, as a quasi-religious enterprise; as attempts to eternalize the temporal. Rorty states that "anybody who thinks that there are well-grounded theoretical answers to this sort of questions is still in his heart a theologian or a metaphysician."[197] I demonstrated that Rorty proposes a shift from a rationalistic, to a pragmatic or poeticized account of secularity. Rorty sees modern philosophy as initially a secularization and emancipation from religion. When this leads to philosophy as epistemology, he diagnoses this as a continuation of religion by different means. Therefore, he proposes a furthergoing secularization of philosophy, leading to a hermeneutic philosophy. This philosophy is no longer a strictly scientific discipline, but an edifying, intellectual activity. Rorty characterizes the essence of his philosophy as a thinking together of secularity and historicity: "…I am telling the old Nietzschean story about how Truth took the place of God in a secular culture and why we should get rid of this God surrogate in order to become more self-reliant."[198]

Rorty discusses the ontological meaning of secularity in terms of immanentization. The secular stance does away with transcendental arguments and sees the physical world as all there is. As we have seen, Rorty's way of dealing with immanence is not entirely convincing. At times he writes in favor of some version of positivism and the possibility of an experience of the world, but the dominant line in his thought is a free-floating aesthetization or poetization of philosophy, in which the world plays hardly any role. In Rorty's theory, therefore, knowledge of the world is highly problematic, since once again language is cut off from the world. He entirely jettisons the role of the world in interpretation. On the one hand he affirms the autonomy of the world by pointing out that knowledge of the world is possible only in relation to other persons. This approach can be characterized as an anti-reductionist version of naturalism. There is a second approach to the world at work in Rorty's philosophy, that relates quite problematically to the first one. According to this approach, the only constraints on language are conversational ones. This conversational nihilism, holds that the way the world is has no impact at all on language, truth and justification.

The political meaning of secularity is explained in terms of a secularization of society. Rorty describes himself explicitly as a secularist thinker. Religious convictions may be rationally acceptable, but should have their place in private life. Not because religion is irrational, but because it is hard to get agreement on and agreement on religion is no necesary condition for a just society. It is in the context of public religion that Rorty considers himself to be an atheist, or anti-clericalist, insisting on a further privatization of religion and a trivialization of religion to public matters.

Subsequently, Rorty proposes interpreting religion as existential, or romantic faith, without relevant inferences with other beliefs. To my mind, there are alternatives to this philosophy of religion, that are also loyal to fundamental pragmatic and materialist

[196] This is how Rorty remembers his discovery of historicity when he read Hegel and Proust: "It was the cheerful commitment to irreducible temporality which Hegel and Proust shared – the specifically anti-Platonic element in their work – that seemed so wonderful. They both seemed able to weave everything they encountered into a narrative without asking that that narrative have a moral, and without asking how that narrative would appear under the aspect of eternity." Rorty, *Social Hope*, 11.

[197] Rorty, *Contingency*, xv.

[198] Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy as a transitional genre', in: Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser, editors, *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment. Essays for Richard J. Bernstein* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

intuitions. Semantic holism, need not cut language off from the world, and is used improperly when it leads to treating religious belief as categorically different from other beliefs. The model of radical interpretation proves that one can interpret religion in an entirely different way than Rorty has suggested. It is possible to include religious beliefs instead of treating them as categorically different. This enables us to talk of religious belief in terms of communication and sociality and – albeit in a more indirect way – as linked to the external world. The particular importance of the latter point is that it avoids the problem of a nihilistic loss of the world, implied in Rorty's interpretation. As concepts about a 'general order of existence', religious beliefs have a certain interpretive priority. Thus, we have developed an alternative to Rorty's proposal to see religion as merely idiosyncratic and strictly private. Religious language is always social and linked in a significant sense to other beliefs and the external world.

For Rorty, the idea of privatization is the most vital part of the heritage of the Enlightenment. He speaks of secularization as "the Enlightenment's central achievement". Rorty hopes that the secularism of the Enlightenment will not lose its strength and he encourages such a secularism as . . . "getting our fellow citizens to rely less on tradition, and to be more willing to experiment with new customs and institutions."[199]

In the light of my reconstruction of Rorty's understanding of political secularity, I can summarize his position as follows: Rorty tries to be loyal to the politics of the French Enlightenment as a politics of secularization. At the same time the concept functions to play down the rationalism of the Enlightenment. In this sense secularization is present throughout Rorty's philosophy. In the wake of the secularization of the religious, the idea of a common rationality is also eroding. This gives way to a softer definition of secularity as a 'culture of conversation.' In this culture, repressed voices, such as the religious, return. Rorty's secularism is an answer to the problem his own critique has created.

Rorty sees the secularization of philosophy as essentially a continuation of the Enlightenment. Explaining his strategy, he writes: "I have pressed the analogies between theological and philosophical belief because I see the Western Rationalistic Tradition as a secularized version of the Western Monotheist Tradition.[200] In agreement with Nietzsche he sees the modern, rationalist tradition as a continuation of the metaphysical tradition of Christianity. Rorty's critique of the Enlightenment does not give us a perspective on a return of the premodern religion of the Church. Rorty sees that something religious is needed to overturn the supremacy of science and its obsession with truth as correspondence. Romantic polytheism is the paradigm for religion that Rorty suggests. Liberal democracy offers the best context for such a polytheism to flourish. He speaks of neo-Nietzscheanism as devoted to the conviction 'that it is the best form of political life yet invented."[201] The mere rejection of religion is not enough for Rorty. A society that truly leaves Christianity behind invents new gods for itself. This is what Rorty's acceptance of the temporal and the contingent in the end leads to: a refusal to let reality

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[199] Rorty, *Social Hope*, 168. This secularism is criticized by Cornel West, when he says "The liberalism of influential philosopher John Rawls and the secularism of philosopher Richard Rorty – the major influences prevailing today in our courts and law schools – are so fearful of Christian tainting that they call for only secular public discourse on democracy matters." Cornel West, *Democracy Matters* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004). According to Cornel West, Rorty is a "fully fledged secularist who sees little or no common good or public interest in the role of religion."

[200] Rorty, *Truth and Progress*.

[201] Rorty, 'Intellectual Responsibility', 49.

set limits on human creativity. Rorty's postmodernism is thus on the one hand a more modest affair than metaphysics, as it does not claim absolute truths, on the other hand it is more pretentious, as it makes everything, the world, religion and the future entirely dependent on human imagination.

Rorty's attack on institutional religion has one more implication. The pluralism Rorty celebrates makes for a shattered society of idiosyncratic individuals. Defining religion in terms of romanticism and individualism frustrates the possibility of criticizing the state and society. Instead of celebrating and worshiping the idea of the republic and human solidarity, religion could also function as a prophetic instance, that – at some critical distance – is capable of protesting against the direction of liberal politics and against the will of the people, which is not infallible.

Secondly, to identify the distinction between religion and politics with the distinction between the private and the public, is not self-evident. Historically, the laïcist interpretation of secularity is but one option out of others. In the United States, there is a tradition that understands secularity and the separation of Church and state not as designed to marginalize religion, but merely to prevent one confession being privileged over others.[202] The Church-state separation can also be defended as a constellation that thwarts the monopoly of the state. Theologically, every political system is but provisionally and can be criticized.[203]

Thirdly, Rorty's insistence on the public-private distinction can be criticized from Rorty's own historicism. The distinction between public and private is itself a modern invention. And it is surprising to note that after all the modern dualisms Rorty has debunked, this dualism has survived and even plays a central role in his political philosophy. As for example Jay Rosenberg has remarked, the strong emphasis on idiosyncrasy runs counter to the social nature of reasoning, so central to his philosophy of language.[204]

Is it possible to hold on to the modern distinction of public and private in the discourse of postmodernity? It is surprising, as Charles Taylor has remarked, that Rorty criticizes virtually every dualism of modernity, except the dualism of public and private. Is not the dualism of public and private the mark of modern rationality that creates a gap between the bureaucratic organization of society and the polytheism of the private realm? Rorty is in this respect merely affirming the diagnosis of Max Weber.[205] This is

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[202] Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 197.

[203] Pannenberg sees the relation of Church and state as follows: "Sie dürften vielmehr für die ganze Geschichte des Christentums charakterischen Differenz von Kirche und Staat stehen, einer Differenz aber, die nicht Trennung oder religiöse Neutralität des Staates bedeutet, sondern Ausdruck eines christlichen Verständnisses der politischen Ordnung als einer vorläufigen Ordnung dieser Welt ist." Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropologie in theologischer Persepktive* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 470–1.

[204] He expresses his surprise "that this dichotomy (of all things!) has survived the 'solvent rationality' that Rorty postmodernly takes to have disposed of all those others. Having been reminded by Quine that 'language is a social art', by Wittgenstein that one cannot pry rules and norms loose from consilient communal practices, and by yet another of his henchmen that even 'Cartesian' apperceptive self-ascriptions already presuppose a capacity to position oneself among other selves in a 'social space' of epistemic justificatory responsibilities..." Jay F. Rosenberg, 'Raiders of the Lost Distinction: Richard Rorty and the Search for the Last Dichotomy', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53(1) (1993), 195–214.

[205] "...the distance between a procedural rationality which regulates public life and material convictions about the good life that – as a widespread liberalism stresses – ought to be confined to the private sphere. This is a consequence of the modern separation of ethics and anthropology which ...has led to both a minimal ethic and a minimal anthropology." De Wit, 'Return to Religion', 393.

all the more surprising since one of the central themes of postmodern philosophy and social theory is the blurring of exactly this distinction.[206] What exactly is so private about identities that are shaped decisively by mass media and popular culture? What makes a character private when it is shaped by works of art and newspapers that are by their nature public? Does it still make sense to speak of private identities in an age of virtual communities? As Hardt and Negri have argued, the 'traditional' duality of private and public is insufficient to uphold the complex relation of individuals, the common good, and state control.[207]

The idea of self-creation and plurality as a free society's only goal are in turn related to Rorty's account of religion. The thesis of secularization culminates in a political-theological affirmation of modern democracy, that risks repeating the idolatries and totalitarian aberrations of the French Enlightenment. Rorty, rather than distinguishing religion from politics, lets nationalism and democracy be drenched in religious devotion. To give this idea of human democracy the status of a divine and final goal of history leads to a whole new set of political and ethical problems. What if this notion of progress is not shared and is rejected in the name of strong religious or cultural identities? What if traditional religion will not wither away? Are such people resisting the goal of history? Many questions are unanswered and I think Rorty's writings on religion reflect more his utopian desires, than a profound understanding of actual religion.[208]

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[206] Wim van de Donk and A.P. Jonkers, 'Geloven in het publieke domein. Een introductie van deze verkenning', in: Wim van de Donk, A.P. Jonkers and G.J. Kronjee, editors, *Geloven in het publieke domein. Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 15.

[207] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 204–5.

[208] See for these questions the criticism of Jeffrey Stout in: Jeffrey Stout, '2007 Presidential Address: The Folly of Secularism', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76/3 (2008), 536.

4

Religion and Secularization as Counter Narratives

"Maar als zoodanig, als Gods geheim, wordt de wereld juist door deze theocratische ordening bewáárd ...God gééft alleen nu en dan, broksgewijze, deze theocratische verhouding van kerk en wereld. Maar dan is zij ook illustratief en van duurzame betekenis voor het bevroeden van de zin der wereld."

A.A. van Ruler.[1]

This chapter discusses a second paradigm for understanding secularity in postmodernism. This paradigm is related to the theological school known as Radical Orthodoxy and its prime spokesman, John Milbank.Radical Orthodoxy incorporates elements from postmodernism, but takes a fundamentally different stand on secularity and postmodernism than Rorty. This chapter discusses the thought of John Milbank in the following way: We will first discuss how Milbank defines the postmodern condition. To his mind there is no real disruption between modernity and postmodernity. Rather he defines postmodernism as an intensified modernity. Subsequently, I will retell the story of the secularization of philosophy from Milbank's perspective and suggest an inverted secularization theory. Thirdly, I will discuss secularity as a doctrine concerning the autonomy of the world. We will see how Milbank regards as inconsistent, an account of secularity as a closed, immanent realm. In this section I will problematize Milbank's position from the criticism of theologian Gavin Hyman, who contests Milbank's prioritizing of Christian theology over secular discourse. Then I will show how Milbank argues that the Christian faith is a narrative that provides an alternative configuration of religion and secularity. He argues for a Christian, postmodern secularity and I will discuss the criticism of ethicist Jeffrey Stout, who has offered an extensive critique of Milbank's dealing with secularity. I will argue that Stout overrates Milbank's 'resentment', and misses the fact that Milbank's concern is to a great extent to save secularity from postmodernism.

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[1] Arnold van Ruler, *Religie en Politiek* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1945), 50.

4.1 MILBANK AND THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason* was the starting point of a series of publications of authors that form an influential theological and philosophical school. According to ethicist Jeffrey Stout, the Radical Orthodoxy school in theology is at the moment the hottest topic being discussed in seminaries and theological schools in the United States.[2] This may serve as an indication of the relevance and increasing influence of this school in theology. Radical Orthodoxy manages to be heard in the broader context of society and politics.[3] What makes Milbank an interesting author of great value to this project is that he shares with Vattimo and Rorty the postmodern, historicist critique of modern philosophy, but draws opposite conclusions with regard to the consequences of this postmodern critique for the valuation of secularity. Milbank gives a very critical assessment of what he regards as the heart of modern, liberal culture namely its claim to be secular. According to Milbank, secularism has no moral reservoirs to face the economic, ecological and moral crises that challenge neo-liberal society.[4] Although critics argue that Milbank's negative judgment of modern culture makes his theology irrelevant to politics, Milbank himself has argued for a new Christian politics. According to Milbank, the great ideologies originating in the Enlightenment have lost their credibility. Liberalism, may be the ideology of progress, but not of justice and socialism may have been the ideology of justice, it did not bring progress. In the context of postmodernism, John Milbank proposes Christianity, as the social theory that can overcome the present, ideological standoff.

4.1.1 Rorty and Milbank: Two Sorts of Pragmatism

Milbank's theology is on the one hand in agreement with what postmodernists bring to the fore.There is considerable agreement between Radical Orthodoxy and postmodernism, in terms of a general critique of modern rationalism. There are common concerns and methodological preferences in Radical Orthodoxy and postmodern philosophy. Comparing Radical Orthodoxy and postmodernism I see several overlapping concerns in the work of Richard Rorty and John Milbank.

1. First, there is the emphasis on historicity of thought. Both argue against a modern dualism of necessity and contingency. For Rorty a detailed historical genealogy of vocabularies and concepts etc. makes the notion of truth superfluous. Milbank does not draw this conclusion. As he sees it, historical contingency and truth do not exclude one another. In a regauging of Platonic, Augustinian and Thomistic theories of knowledge, he does not see human creativity as an indication of the mere arbitrariness of all human knowledge, rather, human creativity shares in the

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[2] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 92.

[3] Milbank is also associated with theologian Phillip Blond, whose Ph.D thesis director he was. Blond is an adviser of the British prime minister David Cameron. They both criticize the economic policies of Tony Blair. See: Jan Tromp, 'Terug naar de romantische politiek. Interview Theoloog Phillip Blond', *De Volkskrant* 5 juni (2010), 6–7. Milbank's academic work takes place in the context of the Nottingham based *Centre for Theology and Philosophy*, see: http://www.theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk

[4] See also John Milbank, 'Liberality versus Liberalism', in: *Evangelicals and Empire. Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 93–103.

source of creativity: God. Their epistemological concerns are related. Milbank also rejects the mirror imagery of modern philosophy.[5]

2. There is an emphasis on the work of Nietzsche for social theory. Whereas both ascribe great worth to a Nietzschean criticism of modern rationality, both authors draw opposite conclusions from it. For Rorty, Nietzsche is primarily useful for an ethics of ironic self-fashioning. This makes him sympathetic to a secular society as religiously neutral. John Milbank, on the other hand, emphasizes the inherently religious nature of human associations. This makes Milbank highly suspicious of the religious neutrality of modern societies. Milbank may have had Rorty in mind when he wrote that, "for us . . . the problem is . . . how to overcome the emptiness of souls divided between an empty market-state universalism on the one hand and purely private arbitrary allegiances on the other. To do so we need to discover a difference that yet has a universal claim and that harmonizes but does not cancel out all other differences."[6]

3. Both reject supernaturalism as an obstacle to human flourishing. For Rorty this is a reason to reject religion as such, for Milbank a reason to reject certain kinds of theology. Precisely in order to do justice to notions such as human freedom and creativity, he develops theological themes such as participation that enable him to give an adequate account of human freedom and some form of transcendence: "Participation . . . refuses any reserve of created territory, while allowing finite things their own integrity".[7] Moreover, for Milbank, supernaturalism is not characteristic of Christianity, for as he argues, Christianity is most of all a social theory, not a theory of supernatural entities.

4. Milbank agrees with Rorty that philosophy needs to pass beyond the dualisms of modernity such as that of understanding and explanation. Following Rorty's and to some extent Thomas Kuhn's ideas on the natural sciences, he criticizes the idea of some fundamental difference between the humanities and the natural sciences. After foundationalism we should think of science in a single mode of 'narrative knowledge'.[8] Hyman remarks that Milbank, indeed, "embraces the emphasis of Lyotard and others on the primacy of the narrative mode, but he rejects Lyotard's narration of the 'end' of metanarratives and the subsequent free play of little narratives (petit récits)." Narrative thus also functions at a metaphysical level. ". . . the crux of Milbank's argument lies in his assertion of the *necessity* of a metanarrative."[9]

5. Common to Milbank and Rorty is a historicizing approach and both define their projects as attempts to retrieve Hegel. Rorty's attempt is to naturalize Hegel, Mil-

[5] John Milbank, Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock, 'Introduction. Suspending the material: The turn of radical orthodoxy', in: John Milbank, Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock, editors, *Radical Orthodoxy. A new Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 10.

[6] John Milbank, 'Foreword', in: James K. A. Smith, editor, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy. Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic and Paternoster Press, 2004), 18.

[7] Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 68.

[8] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 263. He also speaks of narrative as a "more basic category than either explanation or understanding" Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 267.

[9] Hyman, 67.

bank's is to show how Hegel offered a historicizing and theological critique of secular reason.[10]

Milbank has as his primary target in the postmodern camp the theorizing of Derrida and Deleuze. This may be so because he specifically objects to central notions in Deleuze (pure immanence) and Derrida (*différance*). With Rorty however he shares a preference for a pragmatic theory of truth. Rorty, it seems, is for Milbank the most acceptable postmodern theorist. He speaks of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as a "wonderful and epoch making book."[11] Milbank has repeatedly expressed sympathy for Rorty's pragmatism. Pragmatism is a central feature of Milbank's thought as such, especially as a way to distance himself from a static, communitarian outlook such as Macintyre's.[12] Milbank endorses pragmatism as "the strategy of substituting talk of actions and practices for talk of 'meanings.'" Milbank differs from Rorty's interpretation of pragmatism, when he insists that pragmatism cannot work without an "unambiguous standard of comprehension."[13]

Milbank develops his version of pragmatism in opposition to Davidson's and Rorty's pragmatism, phrased in terms of principal commensurability. The principle of charity means that we cannot really imagine an incommensurability, as the very possibility of translation demonstrates that we largely understand the meaning of our interlocutor's position. Milbank opposes this principle of charity and the related idea of a preponderance of agreement. More specifically, he objects to the Davidsonian idea of an individual 'united mental subject', getting to know a single, holistic world. For Milbank, the possibility of understanding a vocabulary and the possibility of translation does not imply assent to its truth. As Milbank sees it,

> ...it is at the most 'materialist' level that radical differences arise; in the same physical space one can build a cathedral or a nuclear power station, but there is no commensurability between the desire to build the one or the other, and the difference in the organization of their structures, their configurations, and symbolic evocations, is as great as that between the jargon of nuclear technology and the language of prayer. Both these languages have to be mastered on their own terms; there can be no question of an even partially adequate 'translation', but the same truth applies to the logic of the cathedral and the logic of the nuclear power station. Both structures work. ... Within our culture there are cathedrals and nuclear power stations, theologies and technologies, arts, sciences and so forth. In consequence, incommensurability is always already present. Besides endless overlaps, like the ground and the building materials common to both structures, there are also endless disjunctures, endless things not truly comparable, though often in competition ...[14]

Milbank's critique remains loyal to the idea of holism. He demonstrates a particular weakness of the model of Davidson's theory in relation to truth. The model of radical interpretation we discussed in Chapter Two presupposes a domestic and an alien culture (the native). The translation problem is entirely focused on the supposed gap

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[10] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 4.

[11] John Milbank, 'The Soul of Reciprocity Part One: Reciprocity Refused', *Modern Theology* 17/3 (2001), 389.

[12] He writes: "I reject MacIntyre's philosophical realism in favour of 'linguistic idealism' and a variant of pragmatism." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 5.

[13] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 342.

[14] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 342.

between the observer viz. translator and the native. The domestic culture is thought of as perspicuous. Milbank's argument is that difference does not only arise between the translator and the native, but that the relation of the translator to his own culture remains one of difference, and is never one of complete identity. The conclusion we reached in the previous chapter, that there are (religious) beliefs, which have 'interpretive priority', is in agreement with Milbank's thesis that there is a remaining problem of incommensurability, within every culture and between cultures. Milbank defends a certain form of incommensurability – for pragmatist and 'linguistic-idealist' reasons – which can explain that the possibility of translation does not rule out differences in "establishing orders of priorities."[15]

The direction pragmatism must take – according to Milbank – is one of a reconciliation of difference and pragmatism. From time to time Milbank speaks of a "supernatural pragmatism",[16] "…which makes practice fundamental in the sense that thought and action are inseparably fused in the development of a tradition."[17] For Milbank this supernatural pragmatism is a reconciliation of the postmodern philosophy of difference and a more positivist and materialist interpretation of pragmatism. Milbank's pragmatism is thus an alternative to postmodern philosophies of difference (Derrida) and to postmodern accounts of semantic holism and commensurability. Rorty's textualism in fact loses the world in an effort to save it from transcendentalism. As Milbank sees it, postmodern criticism of scheme-content dualism may never lead to a textual nihilism that entirely floats free from the material world. Writing on Michael Buckley's *At the origins of modern atheism*, Milbank says approvingly that "theology is well advised to try to come to terms with the most radical yet non-reductive forms of materialism rather than to resist them."[18] As I read Milbank, he is after a pragmatism that remains holistic and does not invoke new dualisms. He speaks of such a holism as "supernaturalizing the natural".[19]

The proximity of Rorty's method to Milbank's is evident in their shared historicism. Methodologically Milbank argues for a historical deconstruction of absolute starting points for thinking. He agrees with Rorty and other postmodern authors that knowledge is structured horizontally and can be compared with a web.[20] Milbank's epistemology, like Rorty's, is a historical placing of vocabularies in context. The idea of a historical and narrative mode of knowledge is the crucial issue between the two.

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[15] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 343.

[16] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 209, 252.

[17] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 209.

[18] John Milbank, 'Review of 'At the Origins of Modern Atheism", *Modern Theology* (1989).

[19] "…is therefore the more historicist in character, because it does not identify the supernatural as any permanent 'area' in human life. But neither does it locate 'nature', although it recognizes the always finitely mediated character of participation in the supernatural." Writing on Maritain, Milbank sees a similar supernatural pragmatism emerge from his interpretation of Aquinas: John Milbank, 'Scholasticism, modernism and modernity', *Modern Theology* 22/4 (2006), 665.

[20] "The complex multiple network of existing synchronic structures is also the interweaving of multiple currents of narrative, constituted through recollection backward and projection forward. …whenever someone asserts a position, her account of the presuppositions behind the position will always appeal in some sense to her own or to collective history. What we already accept refers not only to logic, but also to prior experience, if there are no absolute foundations or starting-points …We can pretend that our presuppositions are absolute and uninflected by past events, but this obscures not only genesis, but also theory, since it means that we must take for granted what should not be taken for granted." John Milbank, 'The invocation of Clio. A response', *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 33:1 (2005), 8.

For Milbank the web-like structure of knowledge does not preclude the possibility of theology. Milbank claims that his theory can do justice to both a genuine historicity and orthodox theology. It is crucial for him that theology is not a matter of making references to transcendent entities, rather theology is a social theory. Theology is an explication of the developing and rationally "unfounded Christian cultural code". All ahistoric principles, modern or postmodern, theological creeds and political watchwords are rejected. For Milbank, theology's fundamental principles of critique are to be found "...within the Christian 'text', and not in some universal and so foundationalist, principle of 'suspicion'."[21]

For Rorty the historicizing method is used to attack religious traditions and the tradition of metaphysical philosophy, but it leaves the secular untouched. Milbank proposes applying the historicizing method to the secular as well. He problematizes the notion of the secular in a way that is comparable with Rorty's critique of the transcendental presuppositions of modern philosophy.[22] For Milbank, the secular can only be understood as the outcome of a contingent, historical process. He thus emphasizes the contingency and questionability of this process.[23] For Milbank the pragmatic-historicist criterion of truth applies to secular discourse as well: we cannot found culture on a secular principle as "...it is intertwined with the genesis of a new practice."[24] This strategy of historical placing can be seen as the recognition of historical contingency and to result only in a better understanding of why and how certain ideas attained credibility. Milbank, though, does not only aim at a historical reconstruction. The invented character as such is no reason, in a postmodern context, to either endorse or to reject secularity. What Milbank objects to is rather that secularity unrightfully claims a neutral stance toward religion. The invention of the secular is intertwined with a very normative idea of the nature of religion. The invention of the secular implies a vision of the full meaning of human existence, political association and social life.[25] Milbank says on the emergence of the new science of politics and political economy:

> They 'apply', although they are in themselves mere descriptions of formal systems, simply because society has been made in their image, just as society, by inventing capitalism, helped at the same time to invent liberal politics and political economy.[26]

Milbank thus sees no possibility for a secularized Christianity, as secularization is already a definition of religion as a private matter.

I see the thought of Milbank and Rorty as two intersecting lines. There are two lines of thought that both develop and are converging; yet, at the moment the lines cross, they continue to diverge. The first is the epistemological line. Both thinkers meet in their criticism of foundationalism. For Rorty this is a reason to reject Christianity as it presupposes a notion of absolute truth. Rorty identifies Christianity with the foundational thought of modernity. Both Christianity and modernity presuppose an account

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[21] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 389.

[22] John Milbank, 'An essay against secular order', *Modern Theology* 15/2 (1987), 200.

[23] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 11.

[24] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 274.

[25] As Van Rooden explains the popularity of the secularization thesis: "...this model of modernity emerged in the course of a particular nineteenth-century European trajectory of religion and rested upon a misinterpretation of the nature of religion in the past. Identifying the nature of religion before and after the emergence of the nation state, makes it very hard to get a good grasp on the role of religion in either the present or the past." Van Rooden, 'Religion in the West', 169–188.

[26] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 274.

of truth that is independent of human interpretation. Rorty criticized this account of truth and for Rorty the fate of religious truth was inescapably bound up with the modern ideal of objectivity. Rorty and Milbank meet at the point of their critique of modern rationality and autonomy.

The lines start to diverge when Rorty opts for a radical immanentism, whereas Milbank argues for a theological epistemology. In Milbank we find a basic affirmation of the epistemological critique, but a fundamentally different valuation of theology. For Milbank it is only theology that can truly account for the finite and contingent character of human knowledge. Not only is postmodernism a possibility to reconsider premodern modes of rationality, it also can give us a clearer sight of the nature of Christian doctrine.[27]

Second, both thinkers demonstrate the contingency of modern secularity. As they tell genealogical stories about the emergence of modern secularity, both Rorty and Milbank demonstrate the sheer contingency of modern secular culture. The acknowledgment of contingency leads Rorty to affirm secularity in a pragmatic way and to argue for a removal of religion from the public sphere. According to him we should recognize the historical contingency of the emergence of liberal society and acknowledge that there are no binding, philosophical reasons to embark on the project of liberalism. In his liberal Utopia, a secular humanism would be the only credible and acceptable moral theory.

Milbank's pragmatic philosophy thinks of the emergence of modern secularity, not merely as a decreasing of religion, rather it is a new definition of religion as inner experience. Milbank wholeheartedly agrees with the story Rorty tells on the emergence of a liberal, secular society, but also sees the need to be more articulate on the nature of this transition from Christianity to modernity as a changing paradigm. To his mind we have to give a more substantial account of this transition and not leave it at a mere negative account of secularization as desacralization. Modern culture is assembled out of a variety of cultural and religious components and produces a new sort of religion itself. This is easily overlooked in what Milbank calls the 'subtraction' theory.

4.1.2 Milbank on Secularity

Milbank interprets secularity as the shared presupposition of both modern and postmodern culture. In his dealing with postmodernism, he casts doubts on the integrity of postmodern philosophy: Is postmodernism really beyond modernity? Or is it, in clinging to secularity, still very modern? In this sense, the concept of secularity can be seen as the central disagreement between Rorty and Milbank. Whereas Rorty sees secularity as a political thesis that can be upheld apart from a philosophical position, Milbank sees secularity as the presupposition that undergirds both modern philosophy and politics. A critique of modern philosophy would not leave modern secularity untouched.

[27] As Bauerschmidt summarizes Milbank's position: "…postmodernism is correct in seeing reality as fundamentally linguistic, but that this is something that had already been realized, at least incipiently, in the Christian doctrine of the Triunity of God and the equiprimordality of Word and Spirit with the Father." Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, 'The Word Made Speculative: John Milbank's Christological Poetics', Review Essay of John Milbank's 'The Word Made Strange', *Modern Theology* 15(4) (1999), 418.

Radical Orthodoxy is widely seen as opposing secularity.[28] Does Radical Orthodoxy offer more than a mere rejection of secularity? And what could it contribute to a discussion of postmodernism? Is Radical Orthodoxy not the direct opposite of both postmodernism and secularity, by advocating orthodox theology? I think Milbank can make a significant and positive contribution to the debate on postmodernism and secularity. Milbank's concern is not to get rid of the idea of secularity as such, rather to save the secular from becoming lost in a postmodern nihilism. This requires a different reading of the secularization process, and will lead to a reconsideration of the idea of the secular as an autonomous domain both in an ontological and a political sense.

Milbank agrees with theorists of secularization that there is an intrinsic connection between premodern Christendom and modernity. The problem is much more that we do not realize enough how deeply modernity is interwoven with Christianity. This becomes very clear in his essay *The End of Dialogue*, where he challenges the idea of secularity as a neutral perspective from which a plurality of religions can be observed. He unmasks this as in fact a Western tradition: as a "...practical (ethical or political) reason," which enables '...a common starting-point for interreligious dialogue.' In fact this dialogue rests on a contingent Western tradition, which claims universal validity. Milbank writes: "...the characteristic liberal values of the modern West are in specific yet complex ways related to its Hellenic-Roman-Christian-Jewish inheritance."[29] Moreover, this tradition cannot be said to be neutral with regard to religion, as it is also "...related to certain pragmatic necessities and reconfigurations of power, which ensued upon the disintegration of Christendom."[30] Milbank sees modern secularity as a heretical version of Christianity, as itself a quasi-religion. Milbank does not define modernity and postmodernity as fruits of Christianity, but as distortions and aberrations of a Christianity that could *truly* account for secularity. We can thus also read Milbank's critique as an attempt to correct and redirect modernity.[31] Milbank's most sharp criticism goes out to positions that hold that secularity and religion are mutually exclusive. As I read him, secularity is very much at stake for Milbank. He rejects modern and postmodern accounts of secularity for failing to *truly* account for secularity. Milbank sees theology as a theory of society, embodiment and history, and it is in this sense that his writing is very much in defense of the secular and against a one-sided picture of religion as detached from the secular, as in existentialism and in supranaturalism. Postmodernism, on the other hand, risks betraying the idea of secularity in a philosophy that allows revived pagan impulses.[32] This positive understanding of secularity is present throughout his writings. In the first edition of *Theology and Social Theory* he speaks in praise of a pre-

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[28] See for instance Hans Joas' review: Hans Joas, 'Social Theory and the Sacred: A Response to John Milbank', *Ethical Perspectives* 7 (2000), 235–36. See also Stout's onesided characterization of Milbank's theology as 'resentment' in Stout, *Democracy*, 92.

[29] John Milbank, *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene: Cascade books, 2009), 280.

[30] Milbank, *Future of Love*, 280.

[31] He speaks of a counter-modernity, John Milbank, 'On Baseless Suspicion: Christianity and the Crisis of Socialism', *New Blackfriars. A Monthly Review* January (1988), 16 a shadow modernity and an alternative modernity. John Milbank, 'Against Human Rights' (2010), ⟨URL: `http://theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk`⟩, 44.

[32] This is in accordance with what Milbank writes in the foreword to the second edition of *Theology and Social Theory*: "...throughout the book the attitude towards 'secular reason' is never as negative as it appears to be on the surface. For it is viewed not as what it primarily proclaims itself to be, namely the secular, but rather as disguised heterodoxy of various stripes, as a revived paganism and as a religious nihilism." John Milbank, 'Preface to the second edition: Between Liberalism and Positivism' (2006), xiv.

modern understanding of secularity. What Milbank rejects is the modern re-invention of the secular and the idea that Christianity can be reinterpreted in secular terms.[33] The idea of secularity (as the neutral remainder) is often legitimized theologically. For, the Judaeo-Christian 'removes secular allure from the cosmos and then, inevitably, from the political, the social, the economic, the artistic, – the human 'itself'.'[34] What sociology and secularization theology miss, argues Milbank, is the positive institution of secularity. In Rorty's words, sociology lacks the understanding that the secular was made, rather than found.[35] Thus, it is a one-sided, modern interpretation of secularity that Milbank criticizes. It does not follow that religion and secularity, or religion and modernity, cannot cohere. Rather Milbank argues for essential continuity between Christianity and secularity. Milbank's writing against secular reason concerns the one-sided, atheistic interpretation of the secular, whereas he still sees the possibility of a positive definition of secularity.

4.1.3 Milbank and Postmodernism

Milbank discusses secularity in the context of a transition from a modern to a postmodern understanding of truth and rationality. Milbank benefits from the postmodern critique of representationalism and develops his critique in such a way as to enable a debate between Christianity and secularism. In Milbank's opinion, Christianity and secularism can be competitive discourses in the non-foundational context of postmodernity. But whereas Rorty argues that modernity and Christianity share a metaphysics that is finally overcome in postmodernism, Milbank asserts quite the opposite. His alternative triangulation of modernity, Christianity and postmodernism entails that in its secularity, postmodernism is essentially in agreement with modernity and that the repressed narrative of Christianity is truly beyond the grand narratives of modernity. Secularity is the grand narrative that unites postmodernism and modernity. Secular discourse is no longer thought of as a neutral and objective mode of thought, but is treated as itself a substantial, comprehensive worldview and as such it is on the same epistemological footing as religion.[36] Both are possible narratives that make explicit certain values, tell us something about what makes life worth living, about what ultimately constitutes human associations etc. In this way, Milbank occasions a debate in communitarian and pragmatic terms about how the two narratives relate. The general appreciation of narrative rationality is a significant aspect of Milbank's understanding of the postmodern condition, but it is accompanied by an awareness of a tension between postmodernism and Christianity. He speaks of an "…unavoidable, albeit cautious, affinity that exists

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[33] He writes: "It belongs to the received wisdom of sociology to interpret Christianity as itself an agent of secularization; yet, this thesis is totally bound up with the one-sided negativity of the notion of desacralizing; a metaphor of the removal of the superfluous and additional to leave a residue of the human, the natural and the self sufficient." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 9.

[34] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 8.

[35] Rorty, *Contingency*, 3.

[36] This essentially accords with Jeffrey Stout's thesis, that "democracy is a tradition". Stout, *Democracy*. Secularization is a contingent construction and "by no means an automatic teleological goal of history." John Milbank, 'Geopolitical Theology Economy, Religion and Empire after 9/11' (2006), ⟨URL: `http://www.theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk/papers`⟩, 67.

between postmodernity and Christianity."[37] He especially agrees with some central elements of postmodern critique such as the rejection of the subject-object divide and representationalism. Milbank sees the value of postmodernism especially with regard to religion. He writes:

> In the older, modern mode of suspicion, the problem was, 'Isn't religion really x?' An x which is more basic, though concealed; isn't it really a function of social control, really a means of discipline for production, really an aspect of the psyche's suppression of the unacceptable? But the new, postmodern mode of suspicion claims no ground upon which to decode the hidden truth underlying religion's spurious truth-claims. It cannot demythologize, nor question the content of belief over against a standard of truth. It can, however, relativize and question claims to universality.[38]

He sees postmodernity as a temporary ally. A Christian philosophy can benefit from some postmodern insights, but will have to formulate its own ontology in a criticism of both modernity and postmodernity. The relation Milbank has with postmodernism is, thus, ambiguous. He is sympathetic to its non-foundationalism.[39] Nevertheless, Radical Orthodoxy rejects several other traits of postmodernism. To Milbank's mind, postmodern philosophy is right to reject the 'masternarrative' of modernity, but it neglects the fact that Christianity was already a critique of the modern project.

Modern philosophy, in its attempt to mirror, to represent, takes a disengaged stance toward the world and is therefore in an incisive way 'detached'. As far as modern philosophy speaks of God, it departs from the subject and the subjective construction of reality and reduces God to a mere guarantee of this subjectivity. So from this perspective Milbank can only appreciate the criticism of postmoderns that target the subject-centered and transcendentalist character of human knowing. As Milbank sees it, postmodernism cannot be truly postmodern, without reconsidering the modern rejection of religion seriously. Postmodernity – incorrectly informed about Christianity by Nietzsche and Heidegger – is destined to oscillate between the absoluteness of modern metaphysics and the arbitrariness of postmodern nihilism, and miss the 'suspended middle' orthodox Christianity can provide.[40] A position is possible between absolute immanentism and supranaturalism. Radical orthodoxy holds that postmodern criticism of modernity is destined to arrive at the opposite of modern absolutism, namely a postmodern arbitrariness. Secularity thus oscillates between the experience, on the one hand, of an absolutely closed immanence and, on the other hand, an experience of ironically living in a world of innumerable possible descriptions of the world.[41]

37 John Milbank, 'The Gospel of Affinity', in: Miroslav Volf and William Katerberg, editors, *Future of Hope: Christian Tradition amid Modernity and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 149.

38 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 261.

39 He writes "…before we can reason, we must receive a tradition and can never quite comprehend this foundation." John Milbank, *Being Reconciled. Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 183.

40 See also Phillip Blond, 'The Absolute and the Arbitrary', A review of Gianni Vattimo's *Belief*, *Modern Theology* 18/2 (2002), 277–285.

41 Jonkers sees this violent oscillation as a mark of postmodern thought that seeks a radical break with representational knowing. "In de marge van de eenzinnigheid van het representerende kennen kan men wel de ultieme onbeslisbaarheid, het uitstel en de meerzinnigheid van alle betekenis en zin schrijven, maar ik vrees dat deze 'geste' uiteindelijk alleen maar leidt tot een bevestiging van het eenzinnige kennen. Eenzinnigheid en meerzinnigheid staan polair tegenover elkaar, en als er tussen beide geen verhouding van bepaalde negatie bestaat, lopen ze voortdurend in elkaar over." P.H.A.I. Jonkers, 'Het ideaal van de volmaakte weergave. Hegel en Heidegger', in: *Verloreren presenties. Over de representatiecrisis in religie, kunst, media en politiek* (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1996), 73.

Milbank has, as it were, accomplished a cross-fertilization of orthodox Christianity and postmodern critique. To his mind, postmodern criticism cannot merely reject the grand narratives of modernity, but has to ask more critical questions concerning the emergence of modernity, especially in relation to the Christian culture it replaced. When postmodernism does not re-evaluate modern secularity, it is in essential continuity with it. In this more radical critique of modernity, Milbank's thought can be characterized as a "postmodernism that is also the recovery of a premodernism".[42] Milbank claims that the recovery of premodern Christianity enables a post-postmodern perspective. Postmodernism can be regarded as an intensified modernity, for it affirms the basic value of modernity: secularity. As Milbank puts it sharply: "Postmodernism is the final, most perfect form of secular reason."[43] Milbank thus sees both modernity and postmodernism as defined by its claim to be secular. A postmodern theory that holds on to secularism is to Milbank's mind not truly postmodern. Milbank's criticism of postmodern philosophy thus concerns the halfhearted character of postmodernism. Initially postmodernism rightfully criticizes modernity for its claim to universal rationality. Subsequently though, postmodernism introduces a new universality, namely the linguisticality of truth and dependence of truth on the social. Milbank presents orthodoxy as a critique of philosophical efforts to seek foundations before linguistic mediation, as in phenomenology and the Kantian tradition. The postmodern and pragmatic character of his theory is clearly detectable in his suggestion that secularity and Christianity relate as counter-narratives. Milbank is optimistic about the possibility that a Christian philosophy can 'outnarrate' the secular, nihilistic discourse. In this way a metaphysical notion such as truth still functions in his otherwise postmetaphysical theory. According to Milbank, truth is not relativized or left behind altogether, but is – pragmatically – to be found in the better narrative.

4.2 THE NARRATIVE OF SECULARIZATION

Milbank not only evaluates the secular as a contingent construction. He places secularity as a narrative that in many ways intends to replace Christianity. This quasi-soteriological function of the secular comes out for example in the early modern metaphor of the secular state as a body. Secularity is therefore not a purely rational alternative to the earlier religious worldview, it is itself a myth. And precisely for reasons of its mythical character, he questions the integrity of the secular discourse. In this section we will discuss how Milbank traces the construction of the secular to its mythical (partly theological and partly pagan) roots. The characterization of both Christianity and modern secularity as competing myths makes it possible to challenge the rational credentials of secularity.

Secularity as a Modern Imagination

This section discusses how Milbank applies his historicist method to the emergence of secular modernity. Secularization has traditionally been seen as the dedivinization of philosophy and politics. In Milbank's theory, secularization is ultimately a deification

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[42] Robertson, 81.

[43] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 263.

of the world and an absolutization of politics. Therefore we can refer to it as an inverted secularization.[44]

The central idea of any use of the secularization concept is that there is a conceptual or structural link between modernity and Christianity. A classic example of this idea of secularization is the thesis of Max Weber, who saw the work ethic of modern capitalism as a secularization of protestantism. How exactly does John Milbank see the continuity and discontinuity that exists between Christianity and modernity? Milbank is critical of Blumenberg's idea of 'the legitimacy of the modern age' and argues that modernity is not only indebted to Christianity, but is also a counterfeit Christendom and is in that sense far from 'secular'. Modernity relates to Christianity not in a merely negative way as a farewell to religion, but is itself constructed out of diverse cultural influences that were themselves, at least partly, religious.

As a historical thinker, Milbank shares with Rorty a 'suspicion for the natural.'[45] For Milbank, this does not only apply to the 'starting points' of thinking in transcendental philosophy, but also to the claims of modern, secular culture. A great part of *Theology and Social Theory* is devoted to demonstrating how modern secular culture was contingently constructed. Milbank applies the genealogical method to liberalism as well. He does not deny that modern social theory 'works', he asserts that it works precisely because it first redefines social life in terms of an immanent, closed reality. The secular as an autonomous sphere becomes possible only once the world has been redefined as a closed space in which power has to be managed. Modern social theory does not start from scratch, but develops itself as a science that presupposes this – allegedly original – management of power. It thereby is 'just as fictional as all other human topographies.'[46] Emphasizing secularity's historical contingency, Milbank writes:

> Once there was no secular and the secular was not latent, waiting to fill more space with the steam of the 'purely human', when the pressure of the sacred was relaxed. Instead there was a single community of Christendom with its dual aspects of sacerdotium and regnum. The saeculum, in the medieval era was not a space, a domain, but a time – the interval between fall and eschaton where coercive justice, private property and impaired natural reason must take shift to cope with the unredeemed effects of sinful humanity. The secular as a domain had to be imagined, both in theory and in practice.[47]

Thus Milbank states that we cannot understand the secular as natural, as simply given. It is an idea that has been invented and that can also be contested.

For Milbank the contingency of modern secularity is only one part of the story. The other part is that the emergence of modern secular social science is a theological project in its own right. According to Milbank, the modern idea of secularity comes

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[44] Stout too notices the likeness of the secularization theory and the emergence of the secular. He writes: "The irony here is that radical orthodoxy appears to be taking over the basic elements of what was originally a secularist theory of secularization. According to this theory, modernity is a progressively secularizing force in the sense that it tends to produce increasing levels of disbelief and disenchantment." Milbank, 'Foreword', 101.

[45] "The postmodern condition is one of incredulity toward 'the natural', for the 'natural' is but a historical narrative whose origins in narrative have been forgotten." Vanhoozer, 'Theology and postmodernity', 15.

[46] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 15.

[47] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 9.

into existence as itself a theological construction. Secularity is constructed out of three elements: First, modern, political science (Grotius and Hobbes), second, the voluntarism of late medieval scholasticism, and third, a neo-pagan source, related to the thought of Machiavelli.

Medieval Nominalism

Milbank reconstructs the continuity between Christianity and modernity from the late medieval theology of Duns Scotus and Ockham. The crucial shift in the nominalism of Duns and Ockham was that they let the notion of God's will and power dominate the doctrine of God. Once the will – as absolute and ordained – became dominant in the doctrine of God, a radical separation of God and world became possible. A doctrine of God phrased in terms of free will and absolute power repressed the older, Augustinian and Thomistic notion of God and the relation of God and world in terms of analogy. In the voluntaristic system, the notion of divine participation is lost and the world becomes understandable in itself. According to John Milbank, "the later medieval theologians . . . managed to construct the theological preconditions for the modern autonomy of philosophy and secular practice."[48] The central question thus circles around the shift from a terminology of analogy and participation, to univocity.

> . . . Duns Scotus, who for the first time established a radical separation of philosophy from theology by declaring that it was possible to consider being in abstraction from the question of whether one is considering created or creating being. Eventually this generated the notion of an ontology and an epistemology unconstrained by, and transcendentally prior to, theology itself.[49]

This emphasis on power worked through into anthropology: the distinct trait of man – as the image of God – is his power, his sovereignty. It is against this background, argues Milbank, that a new anthropology and a new politics began to take shape.[50] More specifically, theology determined the shape of modern politics: First: it claimed that man comes closest to the image of God in his exercising of rights and power. Second: by abandoning the idea of participation in being and unity in favor of notions such as covenant, it gave way to a definition of human relations as contractual ones. At the brink of modernity, theology defines a series of concepts that shape modern secularity as a space of human autonomy.[51]

[48] Milbank et al., 6. This interpretation of John Duns Scotus is subject to intense debate. Milbank has received some criticism with respect to his interpretation of Scotus. In a verbatim report of a congress on which Milbank had a debate on this issue he says: that ". . . to really understand the shift in Descartes and Kant, you have to see that it's not a matter of switching from metaphysics to representation or epistemology, but rather that the metaphysics they assume is already the child of a univocalist metaphysics, where you can deal with being entirely prior to something else." Robert Sweetman and John Milbank, 'Univocity, Analogy and the Mystery of Being According to John Duns Scotus' (2003), ⟨URL: http://disseminary.org/seminar/radox/archives/000756.html⟩. In the preface to the second edition of *Theology and Social Theory* Milbank has repeated, albeit in a more nuanced tone, his judgement on nominalism. Milbank, 'Preface to the second edition', xxv–xxvi.

[49] John Milbank, 'Knowledge. The theological critique of philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi', in: *Radical Orthodoxy. A new Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 23.

[50] "Dominium, as power, could only become the human essence, because it was seen as reflecting the divine essence, a radical divine simplicity without real or formal differentiation." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 14.

[51] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 15.

Political Science

The heretical element of the secular is represented most of all by Grotius and Hobbes. For, as Milbank sees it, they developed a theory that supposes that law or force is needed to set limits upon the competition of individuals as they seek to dominate each other. This view is latent in late scholastic nominalism and voluntarism, as I have outlined above. In the political science of the seventeenth century, secularity is actually invented. This modern invention of secularity had to deal with the already existing notion of *saeculum*. The idea of a secular sphere, distinct from the ecclesial, was already known. Milbank speaks of the duality of sacerdotium and regnum and *saeculum* as the time between fall and eschaton.[52] The biggest change with regard to the experience of what it means to be secular, in Milbank's account of it, has to do with the experience of time. Whereas the secular in the premodern experience was an experience of temporality as the "interval between constitutive events." There is, according to Milbank, a significant link between Christianity and Modernity, but this is not a mere progressive emancipation of world and man, that began in the Judeo-Christian tradition and finds its fulfillment in modernity, as if the idea of human autonomy were the true fulfillment of Christianity.[53] According to Milbank this understanding of secularization is utterly mistaken. The secularization of social reality was not just the separation of religion and the social, but the very construction of the *saeculum* as a space. Secularization "...instituted an entirely different economy of power and knowledge and had to invent 'the political' and 'the state' just as much as it had to invent 'private religion'."[54] The implications for the objectivity of domains of science such as political science and sociology are far-reaching. "Secular scientific understanding of society was from the outset, only the self-knowledge of the self-construction of the secular as power."[55] The secularization of the new science of politics by no means introduced a greater objectivity by removing religion from the public realm, rather it introduced a whole new sense of reality. Knowledge of reality was not so much a knowledge of a 'found', natural reality, simply waiting to be described. Rather it was knowledge of a construed reality. In the analysis of Milbank, modern science first created the secular as an autonomous realm of human construction, and then claimed objective knowledge about it. The sphere of the artificial, of *factum*, marks out the space of secularity.[56] Milbank's complaint is not that human construction could not play a role in knowledge. On the contrary, he contests the idea that human construction would necessary imply the realm of human creativity to be secular, cut off from transcendence. He asserts that the new science of politics was a reaction against early modern thinkers such as Vico and Cusa who demonstrated that the idea of human creativity and construction do not rule out transcendence and thus do not imply an idea of the secular as an autonomous realm. In a more Platonic fashion, they understood creativity as partaking in the divine. Human creativity, in a

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[52] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 9.

[53] Milbank explicitly rejects this version of the secularization theory, for "...it interprets the theological transformation at the inception of modernity as a genuine 'reformation' which fulfills the destiny of Christianity to let the spiritual be the spiritual, without public interference, and the public be the secular, without private prejudice." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 10.

[54] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 10.

[55] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 10.

[56] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 11.

Christian-humanist fashion, is understood as a 'gateway to transcendence'.[57] Milbank sees this tradition as continuous with Christianity and as a more pragmatist theory. The upshot of Milbank's account of secularization is that the invention of the secular was a theological project in its own right.

Milbank shows not only that secularity was a space, made rather than found. He also shows how secularity was projected on the Christian scriptures itself. Political science required a whole new exegesis of the biblical record of the genesis of mankind. Thus it traces the nature of modern autonomy back to the creation of the first man. One of the reasons why the modern notion of sovereignty took hold in Europe was that it was based on theological conceptions. The primacy of will and power in the doctrine of God, as in nominalism, enabled and legitimized a political theory which saw power as absolute sovereignty.[58] The theological character of this project comes out best in the way biblical exegesis was a concern, not only to Renaissance thinkers and the theologians of the protestant Reformation, but also to the new science of politics. Whereas in premodern times the exegesis of the Bible was an affair of the Church, modernity inaugurates a reading of Scripture, as we see in John Calvin, for example, that is scientific in nature and emerges from a humanistic ideal. The new hermeneutics plays a central role in the emergence of modern politics and according to Milbank, secular hermeneutics was developed to neutralize the authority of the Church and the legitimacy of the history of salvation the Church spoke of. He illustrates this by a discussion of the changes in the interpretation of the Bible. In modern, political theology, the changes from premodern to modern politics were accompanied by an elimination of traditional biblical reading as *lectio*. The biblical text is thought of as understandable in an immediate fashion and according to publicly accessible criteria. Authors such as Spinoza and Hobbes needed a different hermeneutics of the Bible, proper to the modern definition of secularity. No small part of Leviathan is devoted to this renewed understanding of scripture. According to Milbank, the intention was to eliminate the idea of traditional *lectio*.[59]

In Spinoza, Milbank sees two constitutive elements of the new scientific hermeneutics. First, the free scientific inquiry into the Bible banished the other freedom of tradition '. . . with its metaphors, idiosyncrasies and unclarities'.[60]

Second, it defined what could rationally be contained in the scriptures, namely liberal freedom and absolute power. The agenda behind the new hermeneutics, which replaced the tradition, was that by turning scriptural reading into a science, it left the

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[57] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 12. The idea of an early modern alternative to modern instrumentalist reason can not be discussed here in detail. Milbank's position bears considerable similarity to the work of Louis Dupré, especially his *Passage to Modernity*. Louis Dupré, *Passage to modernity. An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

[58] Milbank mentions Sir Robert Filmer as an example. In Filmer's theory Adam was the first king and Charles I ruled in England as Adam's eldest heir. Milbank, 'Preface to the second edition', 14.

[59] ". . . each free individual confronts the Biblical text without traditional mediation, this confrontation paradoxically *irons out* all idiosyncrasy, because the Bible is a self interpreting totality, a world articulated by its own widest and most unambiguous meanings, as is nature by its most general motions." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 18.

[60] The agenda Milbank suspects behind the new hermeneutics is that: ". . . it was necessary for the new 'single' power to lay claim to the 'right' to interpret the Bible in all publicly significant respects and to neutralize all other acts of interpretation. This could only be done by promoting a positivistic concept of revelation, according to which revelation is a 'present' and 'direct' occurrence interrupting the normal selfsufficiency of reason. In consequence, revelation is usually 'private' and its authority is entirely incommunicable unless mediated through the contractual artifice of human power." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 19.

Church bereft of authority and the believer as an autonomous, private agent, who could do well without the Church. This is the decisive change in the meaning of secularity. In the premodern constellation, it meant to be in an interval of time, linked to a past and a future by a tradition of faith. And it meant to live in different worlds, under the *regnum* and the *sacerdotium*, neither of which could lay full claim on man. In modern times it means that the experience of historicity is replaced by an experience of immediacy and living under political authority only.

Machiavelli

The theological nominalism, with its emphasis on power and will, on the one hand and the emergence of a new science of politics and a new scriptural exegesis, on the other, contributed to the emergence of the secular. The third source of modern secularity that Milbank discusses is the work of Machiavelli. His political ideas, expressed most of all in *The Prince*, concern political rule as morally indifferent. This is in continuity with Greek and Roman thought, that centered upon heroic strength. The relevance of this third root of modern secularism is that it really breaks with Christianity. It conceives of politics, science and philosophy as autonomous domains with its own integrity, goals and values, which can contradict faith. The tradition of Machiavellian politics is intertwined with a classical idea of history as a cyclical process. It conceives of political peace as a fortunate, though always temporary moment, against the background of an original, perpetual violence. Milbank sees Machiavelli as a 'forebear of a modern and non-christian politics'.[61]

> This is not to say that Machavellian politics is religiously neutral, rather it only came to exist as the discovery of a new sort of *virtú* which could not be reconciled with the Christian virtues. If the Hobbesian field of power seems to be constructed by a perverse theology, then the Machiavellian field of power is constructed by a partial rejection of Christianity and appeal to an alternative mythos.[62]

The appeal to myth returns in contemporary political thought, as the religious is seen as a means to provide social stability and cohesion. According to Milbank, religious neutrality has always been a myth, as the roots of modern secularism in Christianity on the one hand and in Machiavellian politics on the other show. Modern secularity is often ambiguous with regard to religion:

> On the one hand it often supports a 'civil religion' – Christian or otherwise – which will 'functionally' promote civic solidarity. On the other hand, it attempts to revive, against Christianity, an antique sacrality, producing a new mythos of heroes without gods.[63]

Milbank's views on the sources of modern secularity, thus, provide us with a more complex relation between religion and secularity. Modern secularity cannot be adequately explained as a desacralazation. At the origins of modern secularity, there are several religious and mythical elements that constitute the new notion of secularity. The secular denial of religion, thus hides a more original presence of religion in the political.

[61] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 22.
[62] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 21.
[63] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 23.

Milbank's attempt is to make this more explicit and to contrast it with a Christian idea of secularity.

An Inverted Theory of Secularization

Milbank's account of secularization suggests that – far from mediating the universal and granting the contingent – secularization destroys the duality of the particular and the universal and installs an absolutization of the world. Milbank holds that religious transcendence need not threaten the (relative) autonomy of man and protects us from absolutization of the world. In Milbank's theorizing, Christianity and the axial religions played a significant part in the emergence of a secular sphere. The axial age occasioned the rise of the monotheist tradition as a counter-force against the "untrammeled sway of the state."[64] According to John Milbank, religion from the axial age always has the function of a counterforce. It marks out a sphere that in a way limits the power of the state. To Milbank's mind, the axial age starts a process of secularization in the sense that it conceives of the state and religion as two distinct spheres, none of which is to reign supreme or can be subordinated to the other. The Platonic and Christian idea of transcendence can provide a theory that is less intolerant than the duality of absolute presence and absence of modernity. For Milbank, transcendence is still a live option and necessary to counter the problematic consequences of the modern standoff of immanentism-transcendentalism. He sees transcendence as a third option between primitive religion and modern atheism.[65] Modern secularity conceives of culture as a monolithic totality. Religion secures a sphere parallel to the state. The emergence of monotheistic religion can be understood as a growing awareness that the secular powers, with absolutist ambitions, need to be trammeled. Religion shows itself here as a secularizing power.

There is a sense in which the secular was prefigured in Scripture, but this was not despite its assumption of transcendence, which later was secularized. But transcendence very much guaranteed a secular sphere. In the Hebrew Bible, Milbank sees this transcendence as a necessary precondition for a non-theocratic (Babylonian) politics.[66] The implications of this rather positive valuation of transcendence are sensational. Instead of a progressive line of secularization, Milbank sees the development in a schema of a rise of transcendence from the primitive and a gradual decline in modernity. For him, the emerging immanentism of modernity is not a gradual process of weakening, to use Vattimo's term, but a return to the monistic scheme of primitive religions and the absolutism of divine kingship. In the axial religions and Christian orthodoxy he sees a precarious balance between the sacred and the profane that allows embodiment and

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[64] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 174.

[65] He writes: "…the 'primitive' ensures a perfectly rational and proto-formal self-enclosure which foretells pure reason, while the modern erects a yet more perfect spatial stasis based upon the most extreme 'tabooing' ever known – namely of all semi-ineffable attachments as dangerous. Given such a converging of apparent opposites, the invocation of transcendence can appear, by contrast, as the real alternative: ariving not at the end of history but in the middle." Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 174.

[66] He writes: "And indeed, without such secularization, theocracy is inconceivable, since a theory which limits rule only to a sacral class with a monopoly on divine mediation, *requires* there to be a distinct secular sphere over which to exercise this authority. By contrast, where access to the divine is mediated throughout by an elusive participation (as in Athens and Israel) the secular is less distinct, and theocracy finds no scope for its peculiar logic." Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 175.

historical contingency. Therefore, the progressive theory of secularization as an inter-
pretation of modernity is contested. Milbank's scheme is essentially an inverted theory
of secularization. He writes:

> ...we can reappropriate our Western legacy, not as the history of an evolutionary
> progress away from religion and towards human freedom and control, but rather as the
> history of a tremendous revolt against *either* particularism *or* the cult of universalizable
> power, in the name of the transcendent Good....If the creeds of transcendence in the
> West (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) are expressions of this revolt, then it is clearly
> absurd to regard them as local, cultic preferences in contrast to universalizing reason.
> On the contrary, their entire point is that they represent a mode of universalizing other
> than that of Enlightenment, and one that, since it is more respectful of the particular
> and the ineffable, holds more promise of a distributive justice enacted through consent,
> rather than through terror and forced purchase.[67]

4.3 SECULARITY AS THE AUTONOMY OF THE WORLD

Given the necessity of a notion of transcendence, the question becomes urgent what
shape this will take – in terms of a philosophy of religion – and to what extent it can
do justice to the postmodern condition of historicity and contingency. In the Eucharist,
according to Milbank, we can find a paradigm for religion that is at the same time a
historical contingency and enables man to participate in the eternal. The Christian
Eucharist is a unique paradigm for existence that is at the same time social and partic-
ipating in God. Eucharist here does not stand for an exclusively Catholic theology of
the sacrament, but refers to a more general, participatory bent in religious thought. The
Eucharist is not a *Fremdkörper* in Western political thought. It has been formative for
European identity. As Milbank writes:

> ...the first source of European, collective identity was the sense of being literally part
> of the body of Christ, an extension of divine humanity. Such a sense has left a unique
> legacy, a conviction of the possibility of limitless human exaltation, absolutely quali-
> fied by an equal conviction that such exaltation is an attentive reception of an invisible
> *Imago* that utterly exceeds the human, even though it can be perfectly blended with it
> according to an ineffable affinity.[68]

Milbank defends the uniqueness of the Eucharistic paradigm against the alleged
superiority of modern pluralism. The Eucharistic paradigm is on the one hand a very
contingent imagery, free of transcencental absolutism, on the other hand it enables a
universal community. In that sense it inspires a historically unique sense of collective
identity.[69]

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[67] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 175–6.
[68] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 176.
[69] He writes: "...what is so striking about European collectivity is that it is imagined as ceaselessly
reconstituted entirely from without: the body of Christ, which we are, is nonetheless what we must first of all
receive and then receive again. And this has the consequence that ultimate authority resides not in a person,
nor in an institution, nor in a legal norm over against the community and judging it. ...community on this
model, is not self-governing, and yet the government of the transcendent other is mediated by the gradual
emergence of a complex consensus attained not just in contemporary space, but across all the successive
generations." Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 177.

For Milbank, secularity as a radically immanent space fails to grant contingent identities, whereas the Eucharistic paradigm enables the celebration of contingency. On the one hand, he sees a modern, secular approach that thinks of politics and culture as immanent, referred to by Milbank as a metaphysics of spatialization and temporalization. Every entity in this world is describable in terms of a space-time continuum and thus appeals to a transcendental reality are out of place. Christian theology articulates an alternative 'politics of time' which does not limit the reality of things and persons to their merely physical and temporal manifestation in time and space. He argues that things can be understood as always communicating with and participating in something external.[70]

The first aspect of this politics of time is an acceptance of finitude. Liberal secularism denies just that, for it believes in 'endless acquisition' and 'deferred enjoyment in expectation of an absolute future.' Milbank blames modern and postmodern philosophy for a sacrifice of reality in a constant deferral of what is real. Milbank does not seek a reality beyond the transient but seeks for how a natural process can, nevertheless, be experienced as significant.[71] Only in relation to the eternal is it possible to assume that interpretations and redescriptions have any meaning. The account of transcendence Milbank offers has little to do with versions of supernaturalism that are rightfully rejected by critics of religion. For Milbank, to define the secular in terms of the isolated time and space of this world does not get us closer to the reality of things and persons. Rather, where we can put things in a perspective of participation with the transcendent, we can truly experience them, as a gift. The pure humanism Milbank tries to counter is a humanism that thinks of man as autonomous. To Milbank's mind a politics of time, as grounded in liturgy makes it possible to "inscribe heteronomy in the heart of autonomy itself".[72] The eucharistic paradigm evades both the Scylla of absolute autonomy and the Charybdis of heteronomy. It does not make absolute some aspect of human existence. The eucharistic paradigm evades just that which Sloterdijk calls the secular as the 'monstrous': the absolutization of the self and the annihilation on the self in the face of some absolute transcendence. The transcendent in the sense of the Eucharist allows variety and contingency. Human flourishing and creative expression are not blocked by the transcendent good, rather "it is precisely as a new disclosure of the self that the rule of the transcendentally heteronomous can be registered."[73] In the thought of Milbank, contingency can only be meaningful *sub specie aeternitate*. Secularity thus for Milbank refers to a certain experience of time and place. In modernity and postmodernity this experience is radically immanent. Christian orthodoxy sees transcendence as the best guarantee for secularity. Milbank counters secular ontology with a eucharistic or participatory ontology. He rejects the argument that the assumption of transcendence would come down to an escape of finitude and contingency in an imaginary future or a fantastic supra-natural reality. On the contrary: in a purely immanent worldview, things are reduced to a contingent flux and become meaningless. The picture Milbank offers does not ignore contingency but by defining finitude in relation to transcendence, it

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[70] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 176.

[71] "Instead of the sacrificial cult of instrumentalization which encourages us to think of most processes – education, journeys to work, technology, administration, communications, as things to be endured if we are to reach the really valued." Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 177.

[72] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 179.

[73] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 179.

becomes possible to experience it as real. This is in a nutshell Milbank's criticism of secular ontology. It is exactly at the point as to how things can be experienced both real and significant that the naturalist approach breaks down and fails to account for what it claims: namely to free the world of all its transcendent masters and to describe and explain the world as it is. The world, in the postmodern condition, is extremely vulnerable as it is exposed to the postmodern revolt against representationalism. Milbank's critique of postmodernism, thus, centers on the theme of violence. For Milbank, postmodernism has much more in common with modernity than its defenders would have it. Milbank therefore also questions postmodernism's claim to have overcome the violence of metaphysics. Postmodernity itself presupposes a violent ontology, Milbank claims. The story Milbank is telling is quite the opposite of what is put forward by postmodern theorists such as Vattimo and Rorty. They assert that orthodox Christianity is violent, whereas postmodernism, as the contestation of truth claims, is peaceable. Milbank argues that precisely in its rejection of truth, postmodernism is violent.

4.3.1 Problematizing Immanence

The configuration of modernity, postmodernity and Christianity is in Milbank's schema as follows: On the one hand Christian orthodoxy assumes an ontology of peaceableness, whereas "modernity and postmodernity assume an original violence as the transcendental condition for the possibility of (an always elusive) meaning."[74] Far from being a neutral space, entirely free of violence, for Milbank, the secular is a space that can only be secured by violence. As Milbank sees it, the essential structure of modern philosophy is not changed in postmodernism. On the contrary, for Milbank postmodernism is '...the best, the least self deluded, self description of the secular, which fails only at the point where it will not admit that it has shown the secular to be but another religion.'[75] And far from being an end to metaphysics, postmodernity is a new metaphysics committed to certain substantial beliefs concerning the nature of the ultimately real. In Milbank's view, postmodernism, as rooted in Nietzschean perspectivism, is even more violent than the great systems of modernity, as it denies the possibility of a "constant human subject".[76]

In my discussion of Rorty I discussed secularity as an ontological category, namely a doctrine concerning the autonomy of the world, and second as a political doctrine concerning the autonomy of politics with regard to religion. In Milbank's writings, secularity also has this connotation. The crucial assumption of modern secularity is an immanentism as a rejection of transcendence and a monism as a rejection of the duality of Church and state. Milbank demonstrates that secularity, both in its political and ontological meaning, is what modern and postmodern philosophy essentially share. He writes: "We are still secular and therefore we are still modern. Were there a postmodern, it would be the post secular." But is Milbank's criticism of postmodernity as vehemently secular appropriate? Is there not a return of religion in postmodernism?[77]

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[74] Stephen Long, 'Radical Orthodoxy', in: Kevin Vanhoozer, editor, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 130.

[75] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 280.

[76] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 280.

[77] According to David Ray Griffin, for example, "The emergent postmodern worldview allows for the re-

Milbank notices that, indeed, there is in postmodern philosophy a return of religious notions. Milbank gives two reasons for this recurrence of religion in postmodern philosophy.

First, he argues, there is in postmodernism a general sympathy for the obscure and the irrational. Religion sits perfectly with this sympathy. The anti-foundationalism dominant in postmodernism regards all cultural phenomena as more-or-less random artifacts. The religious is welcomed as but one more arbitrary cultural phenomenon.[78]

The second reason explains why this is so. The explicitly religious phenomena are granted a place in postmodernism as local discourses only. Milbank holds that this is the case because the logic of the variety of discourses – including the religious – is itself the real religion of postmodernism. In Heidegger's idea of Being, in Deleuze's idea of deterritorialization, he sees a religious tenure that is more than accidental. Postmodernism here recaptures a quasi-religious vigor in opposing christian theology. In Milbank's view, the postmodern way of dealing with religion is more radical than modernity's. Milbank sees modern philosophy – with the Nietzscheans Rorty and Deleuze – as secularizations of Christianity.[79]

Modernity was in Milbank's eyes a "reaction against the skeptical implications of Renaissance thought."[80] Against this self-forming and creative mode of thought of the Renaissance, Cartesian and Kantian philosophy affirmed immanence. The crucial commonality between postmodernism and modernity is this insistence on immanence.[81] The general line of thought among defenders of secularization, is that the postmodern denial of the Cartesian and Kantian subject leads to an even less religious philosophy, leaving behind even the God-substitute of the human subject. This is misleading, argues Milbank. As he sees it, the immanentism of postmodernism tends to deify the immanent world:

> In a philosophy which decomposes the 'human' in favor of some larger ontological process beyond human control, there will be a tendency to 'deify' this process.[82]

So, as opposed to a Rortyan dedivinization, Milbank discerns in postmodernism a deification of an ultimately ungraspable world.

> . . . the relativizing perspective upon particulars, and, more especially, a moral indifference in relation to 'modes' or to 'beings', can only be ontologically upheld by a claim to grasp the manner of transition from mode to mode, being to being, as a manifestation of an *ultimate* indifference. Such that, in regarding *this* particular differentiation,

covery of belief in God while eliminating the fatal problem inherent in the traditional idea of God." David Ray Griffin, *God and religion in the postmodern world: essays in postmodern theology* (New York: Suny Press, 1989), 51.

[78] John Milbank, 'Problematizing the secular: the post-postmodern agenda', in: Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick, editors, *Shadow of Spririt. Postmodernism and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992), 31.

[79] Milbank writes: ". . . it merely mirrors, in the subjective depths, the attempt to secure, in the transcendent heights, some 'underlying' point of fixity beneath the flux and aimlessness of patterns of relating and affecting which alone constitute 'reality.'" Milbank, 'Problematizing the secular', 33.

[80] ". . . which had abandoned essentialism and hylomorphism, and so made dynamic interrelationship, and self-forming and creating matter, the ultimate, ontological principles." Milbank, 'Problematizing the secular', 33.

[81] "Postmodern thought is the legatee of a version of critique founded on an assumption of immanence, . . . which is at least as constitutive of modernity as the Kantian outlook." Milbank, 'Problematizing the secular', 34.

[82] Milbank, 'Problematizing the secular', 34.

here one grasps, literally and univocally, a part of God, a real advent of Being, and at the same time one is aware of its utterly non-hierarchical, non-teleological relation to everything else.[83]

The return of religion in postmodern philosophy, as Milbank sees it, is a symptom of the transgressive character of postmodern philosophy itself. It claims to know that the ultimate transcendent truth is difference. Postmodernism does not overcome modernity, but repeats "in an anarchic mode, the rationalist claim that truth coincides, not with essence, but with the always differentiating occurrence of being." To Milbank there is therefore no reason to "celebrate the religiosity of postmodern thought"[84] Postmodernity does not legitimize religious language, it is itself a religious construction and that explains the return of the sacred in contemporary philosophy. Being the legatee of modernity, postmodernity cannot be regarded as being truly beyond modernity. Therefore Milbank argues for a post-postmodern perspective. The legitimation for such a perspective is phrased as follows.

> One can ask whether the claim to adjudicate transitions sceptically in an indifferent fashion, and in this manner to grasp or mediate the ontological difference, whether as arbitrary assertion, or as unavoidably violent self-concealment, is not itself uncritical and questionable. It is precisely at this juncture that a project of 'problematizing the secular' might want to part company with postmodernism, and claim that it attains to perspectives which the latter is unable to arrive at.[85]

What can we make of the claim to secularity in postmodern philosophy? From Milbank's claim that only theology overcomes metaphysics follows as well that only theology can be truly secular. In a way, the realization that there is no secular is present in postmodern critique.

> We have recently grown accustomed to the realization that there is no 'purely human' space which stands disclosed once we are free of the burden of religious illusion. However, a more important consideration may be that there is no purely *secular* space, outside the constitutive opposition of this term to that of 'the sacred'. The 'real' secular is no more disclosed in the immanentist discourses of naturalism, (post)structuralism, fundamental ontology, and so forth, than in the language of humanism. On the contrary, the secular as a self-regulating, immanent space – what Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet call 'the world' – is something sustained only by a conventional symbolic coding, and only (to use Lacanian terminology) by 'imaginary' identification do we take this space for the real 'itself'.[86]

For Milbank, a secular experience is possible within the Christian scheme of transcendence. Transcendence does not preclude the experience of temporality and embodiment. To Milbank's mind, Christian transcendence is even more modest because "faith in a creative transcendence forbids us the metaphysical luxury of claiming to unveil a transcendent indifference."[87] Christian transcendence remains in the tension of a duality of transcendence and immanence. This presupposes the unique doctrine of *creatio*

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[83] John Milbank, 'The End of Enlightenment: Post-Modern or Post-Secular?', *Concilium* 6 (1992), 35.
[84] Milbank, 'Problematizing the secular', 34.
[85] Milbank, 'Problematizing the secular', 36.
[86] Milbank, 'Problematizing the secular', 36.
[87] Milbank, 'Problematizing the secular', 42.

ex nihilo. The immanent has no ground in itself, but is given existence by a transcendent reality. To go beyond postmodernism means for Milbank that we do not accept the version of secularity postmodernism presents: namely that it offers a neutral space with regard to religion. Instead, postmodernism – which unveils ultimate reality as indifference – is a religion itself, with universal aspirations in line with modern immanentism. This seriously undermines the idea of secularity as a religiously neutral space:

> This does indeed tend to put postmodernism on a level with the great religious discourses of the world, which are not … anything like local discourses, but already imperial attempts to construct, albeit not necessarily on any 'foundations', grand narratives and universal ontologies which construe precisely the transitions from one historical or geographical locality to the next.[88]

Postmodernism is "…a new but concealed symbolic order, a new version of transcendence at variance with Christianity."[89] The postmodern condition, for Milbank, invites a war of ideas: "Beyond postmodernism – but always with and before it – lies the *immanently* non-adjudicable battle of human creeds."[90]

Secularity is for Milbank in the first place the doctrine of the autonomy of the immanent world. For him, different from Rorty, political and ontological secularity are closely intertwined. The history of Western thought has given way to the subject and the state. The subject and the state are the most typical 'figures of immanence' and have a common ground in the secular.[91] Milbank defines the secular as a purely immanent flux: "The whole of nature in its spatio temporal extension."[92] In postmodernism, immanence has no essence or inherent value. It is – in Milbank's definition – "a temporal and always shifting process, upon which we have no right to graft inherent purposes, essences or substances, but which apparently includes every possible variety, every possible order, disordering and reordering." Postmodern secularity is – very much like in Rorty's analysis – the outcome of a double secularization:

> Such naturalistic immanentism is the more perfect form of modernity, atheism and the secular. For it is twice removed from metaphysical theism: once from the transcendent God, then from a semi-transcendent humanity, which tries to hold fast in the depths what was previously suspended from the heights: namely substance, identity, purpose and a hierarchy of valuation.[93]

Milbank thus sees modern philosophy as already a secularization, leading to a quasi-religious philosophy. Postmodernism is not the rejection of this modern philosophy, rather it is a continued and intensified secularization. This point is emphasized by Milbank because, as he sees it, postmodern philosophy is often regarded as an end to modernity and consequently as an end to modern atheism. In Milbank's opinion, this positive valuation is mistaken. Postmodern immanentism may be less explicitly atheist than modernity. But in another way postmodern atheism is more vehemently atheist, for it is not limited to a denial of God, but reinstates immanence as a quasi-God. In this

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[88] Milbank, 'Problematizing the secular', 43.
[89] Milbank, 'Problematizing the secular', 42.
[90] Milbank, 'Problematizing the secular', 43.
[91] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 40.
[92] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 40.
[93] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 40.

sense postmodernism is inconsistent and not truly beyond the religion it claims to have forsworn:

> Immanentism effectively invokes another divinity which is that entire temporal-spatial process which grants us our identity from before ourselves, and thereby also undoes it. If, in fact, immanentism represents the most perfect form of 'secular closure', this closure also involves a paradoxical re-invocation of the sacred.[94]

For Milbank, then, immanentism in postmodernism marks its secular character and its loyalty to the central premises of modernity. How precisely does Milbank see this great agreement between metaphysics and postmodern philosophy? Postmodernism repeats the way in which the subject related to the world in the metaphysical worldview of Christianity. The failed attempts in modern philosophy since Descartes lead us back to a premodern structure of thought, but this time without the specifically Christian content. The argument goes as follows: The failed attempt of modern philosophy to find a foundation for our knowledge in the human subject, leads us back to an ontological view of the world. The collapse of foundationalism means an end to the philosophy of the subject. The subject can no longer provide certainty. The question philosophy is facing in postmodernism is the following: "What happens when Cartesian foundations in the knowing subject are refused? When it is realized that the 'self' is merely the trace of something which precedes it, something infinitely receding and therefore elusive?" Premodern, Christian philosophy was abandoned for its unrightful claim to knowledge of the transcendent. After modernity, the subjective approach has to be abandoned as well. The postmodern condition is one of an almost impossible loss, first of the Christian metaphysics and then of the modern, foundational project:

> One must then abandon the modernist critical hope which refused as transgressive any claims to know the far-off, and sought to circumscribe a sphere of clear and certain knowledge 'close at hand'. Instead, to be critical now means (for the postmodern) always to re-invoke 'our' implication in the remote, and thereby to expose every claim to specifiable, close at hand knowledge as arbitrary suppression of this implication.[95]

According to Milbank, in postmodernism the 'far off' is reinvoked, as a domain that is always influenced by the subject. Milbank says that this constellation is essentially metaphysical, for "...the priority of the remote returns for immanentism, but now it no longer refers to a distant transcendent 'object', but rather a process we did not initiate and cannot hope to command."[96] Postmodernism did not lead us to a peaceful postmetaphysics, but, on the contary, led us back to a metaphysics in self-denial. A metaphysics that, bereft of the Christian content, can be described as the relation of an elusive subject and a monstrous immanence (Sloterdijk). The metaphysical structure, as an aporetic hesitation between the near and the far off, is not really left behind. The critical thought of postmodernity must make reference to what it sees as ultimate reality. The postmodern pretension that you can always evade the question of truth is mistaken, according to Milbank.[97] Even though the thesis of relativity of truth may have a certain epistemological plausibility, ontologically nothing follows from this:

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[94] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 40.
[95] Milbank, 'Problematizing the secular', 45.
[96] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 41.
[97] "For it is simply *not* self-evident that every game of truth is but a local ritual within some more ultimate and totally random distribution. This conception can can itself have only the status of one more entertained possibility." Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 42.

It does have a certain epistemological priority – for we can all at least agree, that anything is possible, that the rules are infinitely variable. But this does not manifestly translate into ontological assertion: *no* actual governance is demonstrable, not even an anarchic one.

To Milbank's mind this transgression is inherent to philosophical thinking. One always "must make impossible decisions concerning the relation of the absolutely distant to the temporarily present."[98] Postmodern philosophy – Milbank takes it – can best be seen as the refusal of transcendence and the claim to the self-sufficiency of immanence.[99] The postmodern insistence on immanence is regarded by Milbank as an "elective affinity" and as "just one more 'religious' preference."[100] From Milbank's reconstruction of postmodern secularity, the neutrality of secularity can be systematically criticized. Milbank shows that there is a quasi-religious tainting in the structure of postmodern perspectivism, that represents the world as a chaotic immanence. The argument as outlined so far suggests that the metaphysics underlying postmodernism is a monstrous return of religion, essentially sharing the structure of modern epistemology. Monstrous, because in postmodern immanentism, the world is represented as an anarchaic totality: the world is still out there, but we have only random (re)descriptions of it. The crucial implication of Milbank's argument is thus that postmodernity is not beyond religion and is not beyond metaphysics, but is a disguised reintroduction of the religious.

> The strand in modernity that *most* rebuts transcendence (within as well as beyond the world) turns out, then, not to be unequivocally 'secular'. On the contrary, by refusing the finite self-enclosure of humanism it has to trespass once again, for critical reasons, upon what should be critically out of bounds – the sacred.[101]

The central critique of postmodernism and the principle reason for its absolute historicism has been Heidegger's claim that Christian thought as onto-theology was essentially part and parcel of the metaphysics of modernity. Milbank denies that this identification is correct. In Christian theology there is a primordial awareness that the relation between the created being and God is not so self evident as the critics of onto-theology would have it. In Christian theology – Milbank refers to Augustine, Pascal and Kierkegaard – there is an intensification of the aporia of the near and the remote:[102] "...it hovers (as much as post structuralism) in a middle ground that gives rise to both 'God' and the human subject, only through a dispossession of both." But what then is the difference between the postmodern theory of difference and the Christian aporia? Milbank says that whereas postmodern theory describes the relation between man and world in terms of an unknowable totality, theology provides a more modest alternative. It does not attempt to know this relation in the manner of representationalism, but

> ...remains with the impossible necessity to determine the indeterminable ratio between the near and the remote, yet does not claim to 'know' this ratio through the

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[98] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 42.

[99] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 42. He criticizes the false claim to immanence in the work of Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze has written explicitly in favour of a radical immanenc. See his Deleuze and his writing on a 'plane of immanence' in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

[100] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 42.

[101] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 57–68.

[102] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 43.

power of unassisted representational understanding alone. Instead, it construes it according to its *own logos* of love as the priority of unsettling, but self-abandoning desire. Confirmation here arises not from 'looking', but from surrender and enactment.[103]

In a way, Rorty's suggestion in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* – that the choice for optical metaphors in the theory of knowledge is optional – is affirmed by John Milbank when he writes that true knowledge does not come about "by looking but by surrender and enactment." The decisive difference is that Rorty did not really consider alternative modes of knowing, but took an extremely relativist position within the representationalist model. Milbank benefits fully from other modes of knowing in Augustine and Aquinas and gives – equally contingent – priority to the metaphor of love. Milbank mentions the dominance of visual metaphors and the implicit critique of it in Augustine's *Confessions*. Ironically, Milbank gives an adequate response to Rorty's suggestion of other metaphors for knowledge.[104] Milbank's analysis of postmodern philosophy, as compared to Christian theology, is that both the postmodern and the Christian try to go beyond onto-theology; yet, the Christian discourse has an equal right to stake a claim to a postmodern discourse and may even be more truly postmodern, precisely because it refuses to decide to describe the relation to the world in terms of a downright perspectivism. Instead, theology offers a mode of describing the man-world relationship in terms that are neither rationalistic, nor nihilistic. Milbank therefore considers his theological position 'supra-critical'.[105] But how can we decide between theologies, what would make the Christian theology be preferred over the narrative of nihilism? How could one argue in a rational manner for the Christian narrative as to be preferred over other – (pseudo) religious – narratives? Milbank offers three criteria according to which we can decide between competing narratives.

In the first place, Milbank says, postmodern philosophy is not less dualistic than the transcendent theology it says to replace. Unlike postmodernism, Christianity knows no violent oscillation between the absolute and the arbitrary, rather allows contingency. Postmodernism as an immanentism is "fated to reascribe to duality."[106]

Secondly, immanent postmodernism does not delete the subject more than the theologies of transcendence it says to replace. The critique of representationalism in poststructuralist thought ushers in a "highly subjectivized universe,"[107] The constellation as presented by postmodern philosophy is not at all self evident but is the outcome of a philosophical preference of one scheme of things over another. The presence of an unknowable absolute and an ironically withdrawing subject are strong philosophical statements. Whereas the postmodern construction of elusive subject and 'aleatory absolute' cannot live up to its claim to be beyond representationalism, Christian ortho-

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[103] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 43.

[104] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 39.

[105] "So we enter, beyond philosophy, beyond even 'critical theory', yet for still more hyper-critical reasons, into the supra-critical domain of theology, or rather competing theologies." Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 44.

[106] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 44.

[107] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 45 "…one in which every *ens* is defined by its unique configuration in relation to other *ens* and its capacity for spontaneous and creative reconfiguration. (A capacity which allows and requires 'representation', but ensures that it can never represent *except* as 'otherwise'). There is an infinite chain of acting/acted-upon subject-bodies, whose most complex entanglement we name 'humanity'." Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 45.

doxy can truly overcome this standoff by developing an alternative model.[108] Milbank suggest a less cognitive and more affective model inspired by the Christian centrality of love. In this model human subjectivity and freedom are not in opposition to solidarity and to God, rather are made possible through the presence of the other and God.

Thirdly, argues Milbank, is immanentism not more peaceful than a transcendent schema. Whereas there is the possibility of a peaceful metaphysics, postmodern immanentism is dependent on an ontological agonism.[109] The merely formal category of difference is indifferent when it comes to peace or violence.[110] The nihilism characteristic of postmodernism is formal and empty and affirms the schema of modernity. Therefore, Milbank denies the formalism of modernity and postmodernity and argues that in order to prevent the indifference inherent to secular formalism, we must make ontological claims: "To will the good, to will responsibility for the neighbour, is empty, unless it be possible that there can *be* the good, that it can be incarnate (thereby *alone* real) in bodily life."[111] The twofold secularization Rorty sees in the history of Western thought – in Milbank's perspective – unrightfully claims to have overcome a violent metaphysics. Christian theology can do justice to an experience of the world, history and the bodily that is beyond violence.

4.3.2 Postmodernity and Transcendence

Does postmodernity open new perspectives for transcendence, or is the postmodern condition more radically immanent? In his critique of postmodernism, Milbank distances himself from the postmodern culture as sketched by authors such as Vattimo and Baudrillard. He agrees with them in the descriptive aspect of their work, but he is radically opposed to their normative approach. He is in some way close to Rorty's philosophy of culture as he too sees his work as contributing to a restored contact with the world that was lost in transcendentalism. Milbank evaluates postmodern culture as characterized by a dissolution of 'natural' boundaries and distinctions.[112] Milbank observes a dissolution of the distinction between nature and culture. In postmodernity, nature is thought of more and more as a human projection, whereas – the other way around – the mental is thought of as the result of physical impulses. Drawing on Baudrillard and Negri and Hardt, Milbank argues that in postmodern culture the boundaries between nature and culture, the real and the virtual etc. are blurring. To Milbank's mind, in the age of globalization and informatization, the world itself threatens to get lost in an endless exchange of symbolic forms. The supposed openness and free dissemination of information is said to contribute to truthfulness, but Milbank considers this highly misleading. In infinite differentiation, there are no longer any criteria

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[108] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 44.

[109] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 46.

[110] Reflecting on Derrida, Milbank writes: "A determination of the trace as love rather than rupture cannot be *critically* accomplished. Objectively 'the call' is indeed anonymous, and betokens anything we like. Identifying the caller (and how could one not always have already done this?) as immanent Being, or alternatively as the other in the trace of the transcendent God, is rather a matter of 'religious decision'." Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 46–7.

[111] Milbank, 'End of Enlightenment', 57–68.

[112] He mentions the following aspects of dissolution: 1.The blurring of the nature/culture divide; 2. The merging of public and private; 3. The mode of the information economy (informatization); 4. Economic and political globalization; Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 194.

to judge the value of information. Nihilism produces the result that – precisely in the age of information technology – the world becomes a place of complete estrangement. The progressive erasing of boundaries in postmodern culture has its presupposition in a fundamental immanence.[113]

For Milbank, the history of modernity and postmodernity is a history of spatialization. Whereas in pre-modern times immanence was thought of as receiving meaning in relation to the transcendent, in modernity the transcendent was increasingly denied and abandoned. The transcendent was no longer thought of in theological terms, but was replaced by such notions as fixed natures and essences. Echoing Rorty's critique of modernity, Milbank writes that "…although height had been lost, depth displaced height and there still persisted fixed natures, especially human nature."[114] The postmodern is a radicalization and completion of this immanentization, for "in postmodernity neither height nor depth remains, but only a shifting surface flux."[115]

Both modernity and postmodernity are relentlessly secular. This entails for Milbank at least three points: First, that explanation and evaluation is without reference to transcendence. Second, that finite reality is self-explanatory and self governing, and third, that finite reality – the *saeculum* – is all there is. So despite its critique of modernity, postmodernity is not more open to transcendence than modernity. According to Milbank, postmodernism is 'more emphatically immanent.'[116]

This is not to say that postmodernism rules out religion, rather that postmodernism produces religions which are tailor made for the loss of transcendence and are completely experienced in the immanent realm. Milbank mentions New Age and Marxist views of life as typical postmodern, religious phenomena. He regards the thinking of, for example, Deleuze as representative of an immanentist, postmodern religion with a 'Spinozistic twist'. He characterizes this type of religion as "a joyful reception and active contemplation of the immanent totality."[117] New Age is an expression of immanentism in a different way. In the first instance, New Age appears transcendental. Salvation is to be located in a higher self, above the social, temporal, remembered self. This higher self can, however, put one in harmony with everything, with the whole cosmos.[118] In Milbank's evaluation of the new immanence and the way religions adapt to that, the idea of radical immanence does not restore the relation of man and world, but makes it utterly problematic. In order to participate, some notion of transcendence is needed and some sense of the boundaries that exist between the spheres of life and between immanence and transcendence. Postmodernism, in denying a meaningful relation to the transcendent, installs a new quasi-religious relation of a self and the flux. The ultimate goal in human life now becomes to transgress boundaries and to create a world of infinite difference.

At the beginning of this chapter we noted that there exists a certain affinity between postmodernism and Radical Orthodoxy. When postmodernity is more emphati-

[113] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 194.
[114] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 194.
[115] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 194.
[116] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 195.
[117] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 195.
[118] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 195. Postmodern culture thus implies a religious sensitivity. Milbank writes that "…in postmodernity, alongside the stress of fluid and permeable boundaries, we have a new affirmation of the sanctity of an empty, mystical self able to transcend, identify with, and promote or else refuse the totality of process in the name of a truer 'life' which is invisible." Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 195.

cally immanent, as Milbank holds, how can we interpret the great deal of commonality between Radical Orthodoxy and postmodernity? Milbank sees a certain continuity between Christianity on the one hand and the culture of modernity and postmodernity on the other hand. He writes: "I want in general to suggest that we regard postmodernity, like modernity, as a kind of distorted outcome of energies first unleashed by the Church itself."[119] The response from Christian theology to postmodernity should therefore be neither a downright refusal, nor a wholehearted acceptance. His exposition on the continuity between Christianity and postmodernism, with regard to the experience of the world, centers on the concepts of 'spatialization' and 'deterritoralization'. Postmodernism has been defined as a movement of transgression: of a suspicion of the natural in the name of a constant dissolution of boundaries. Milbank argues that this idea of deterritorialization is in essence not at odds with orthodox Christianity. As Milbank writes: "Postmodernism is the obliteration of boundaries, Christianity is the religion of the obliteration of boundaries."[120] In the incarnation, says Milbank, the arch taboo, the boundary between God and man, has indeed been dissolved. To a great extent, orthodox Christianity is in agreement with the human capacity to transcend boundaries. The central doctrines of Christianity – creation and incarnation – imply that even the most fundamental distinction, the one between God and man, is not so absolute. The secularization thesis is at this point basically affirmed by Milbank. Secularization is always secularization of Christianity and the secular West rests upon presuppositions that are basically Christian.[121] Milbank also underscores the contingent character of this development and of the institution of the secular and in that sense he agrees with the Rortyian reading of the secularization thesis. Christianity is to Milbank's mind a carrier of secularization and the very precondition of deterritorialization as celebrated in postmodernism.[122]

Elaborating on the point of departure between postmodern secularism and Christian thought, Milbank writes that postmodern philosophy assumes, "…in all too modern and essential a fashion, that there is some sort of 'natural' human desire which demands deterritorilization without end."[123] For Milbank this cannot be the case. He argues that Judaism and Christianity are not only characterized by their dissolution of boundaries, but that they also reassert boundaries. Uncritical writing on *kenosis* does sometimes suggest that Christianity knows no boundaries anymore and absorbs everything that does not contradict the rule of love.[124] In the face of the postmodern fusion of nature and culture and the dissolution of boundaries, it is the task of the Church to

[119] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 196.

[120] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 196.

[121] Milbank writes: "Christianity itself invented a discourse and tradition of living beyond the Law, and that the West is still thinking and living through this idea." Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 196.

[122] Milbank writes: "For Christianity did, indeed, implode all limits: between nations, between races, between the sexes, between the household and the city, between ritual purity and impurity, between work and leisure, between days of the week, between sign and reality (in the Sacraments), between the end of time and living in time, and even between culture and nature, since Jesus advised us to follow the mute example of the lilies of the field. Indeed the category 'creature' enfolds and transcends both the natural and the cultural; culture for the gospels …is only a higher and more intense 'life'; while, inversely, all of the Incarnation, Christianity violates the boundary between creator and created, immanence and transcendence, humanity and God. In this way, the arch taboo grounding all the others is broken." Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 196–197.

[123] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 196.

[124] For some clear examples see Martha Frederiks, 'Kenosis as a Model for Interreligious Dialogue', *Missiology* 33 (2005), 211–222.

proclaim 'the gospel of affinity.' Affinity means for Milbank, politically, a more than formal solidarity and, ontologically, a mode of being in the world that is really beyond representation. Beyond the representational subject, there is a possibility of solidarity that is not entirely characterized by the subjective disposition toward the other, but by a more than subjective co-belonging.[125] Milbank defines affinity as something that cannot be attained by a merely formal principle, but has to be given a more substantial definition. "...not merely a *given* impersonal bond of attraction; it is rather the arriving *gift* of something that we must partially discover in patient quest, active shaping and faithful pursuing." Solidarity is aesthetic, rather than formal and indifferent.[126] The irony Milbank sees in secularization, is that in claiming finally to do justice to the world, to the secular, it is in fact no longer aware of what it is to experience the bodily. For Milbank this is a direct consequence of the loss of transcendence and more precisely, participation. Whereas secularization has proven to be unable to participate, the Church has to reassert the possibility of participation, reconciliation and affinity. "An over-abstracting world has lost its bodies and truth", Milbank writes, "...we need to reclaim both those realities."[127] Therefore, according to Milbank, it is possible to hold on to the central claim of postmodernism, namely of historical contingency, without falling back into nihilism.

4.3.3 A Critique of Milbank's Theological Perspective on Secularity

Milbank clearly prioritizes the Christian narrative over secular postmodernism. Defenders of secularism will argue that Milbank is intolerant and that his proposal simply rests on the assumption that Christianity is a superior faith. Gavin Hyman, for example, has argued that Milbank unrightfully claims that a theological perspective can overcome metaphysics. Acccording to Hyman, Milbank's position rests on the metaphysical idea of Christian theology as an absolute metanarrative, which cannot itself be questioned. As he sees it, Milbank unrightfully posits Christianity as a master discourse, able to overcome the violence of metaphysics. Hyman sets out to prove that Milbank does not really offer an alternative to the violence of metaphysics, but rather repeats this violence at a higher level.[128] Hyman argues that Milbank does not overcome the dualisms of modern philosophy, but only reinstates other dualisms, such as the priority of theology over philosophy and the priority of the religious over the secular. He asks

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[125] Milbank writes: "...there can only be more than egotism, there can only be love, if there is ecstatic reciprocity and interplay of characters who naturally 'belong together'. In this way, the chain of affinity, beyond nature, discovers a higher nature (the supernatural, the gift of grace). It is for this reason that loving God, in the Bible, involves not just our being well-disposed towards God, but being 'like' God, akin to God, made in his image. This image does not fundamentally consist in any single human property – our reason alone, for example, abstracted from all other aspects – but rather in the whole person (even if this be specifically a whole rational person)." Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 203.

[126] "...a kind of aesthetic of co-belonging of some with some, and so ultimately of all with all, not formally and indifferently ...but via the mediation of degrees of preference." Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 204.

[127] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 210.

[128] I think this criticism has already been formulated by Stanley Hauerwas, when he puts forward that Milbank "reproduces exactly the violence of liberalism by trying to write such a grand narrative of how we have gotten in our peculiar straits today". Hauerwas suggests that something like a metanarrative is inevitable in order to counter another metanarrative. As a consequence of this, he fears that "in the process the Gospel cannot help but appear as just another 'system' or 'theory'." Hauerwas, 197.

whether theology's positioning of secular reason is not itself a violent mechanism. The idea of a masternarrative itself, as mastering and explaining all temporary discourses, is not fundamentally different from a metaphysical metanarrative.[129] So to what extent does Milbank escape the difficulties of a downright metaphysical position?

Furthermore, Hyman calls into question the integrity of Milbank's historicism. Is it true that the logic of his narrative does not rest on transcendental presuppositions. According to Hyman, Milbank's idea of Christianity as a metanarrative cannot stand on its own, but is supplemented by a 'meta-metanarrative'. Milbank obscures the diversity of theological interpretations of Christianity and writes as if there is but one theologically legitimate, 'orthodox' interpretation of Christianity. The truth is, Hyman asserts, that Milbank does not at all express the Christian narrative, but a particular Platonic interpretation Christianity that takes up certain elements from that tradition and elevates them to an allegoric, universal level. As he sees it, there is no real allowance of particularity in Milbank's theology. "Authority shifts out of the particularity of word and sacrament into a supervening theory or concept."[130] Commenting on Milbank's claim that only theology is the "discourse of non-mastery", he writes: "The narrator speaks with a manifest omniscience here, for the obverse of the claim that theology alone is the discourse of non mastery is the claim that *every other* discourse must be a discourse of mastery." As Hyman sees it, there is no reason to privilege the Christian narrative in any way. In his opinion there is a preponderance of difference that constitutes every narrative. Every metanarrative is always already positioned. The idea of a Christian master discourse is, according to Hyman, inconsistent and converges in the end with nihilism. The criteria by which Milbank can judge the Christian narrative superior over others are, according to Hyman, highly subjective and in judging competing metanarratives, Milbank himself applies a discourse of power. To his mind there remains at a metalevel an endless "conflict between mutually exclusive discourses." Hyman concludes that "it appears that Milbank ultimately remains captive with the nihilist narrative it seeks to overcome."[131]

Another criticism of Hyman's concerns the way Milbank deals with nihilism. Hyman argues that Milbank rightfully criticizes a form of postmodernism that presents itself as a strong defender of nihilism. This metaphysical nihilism is to be distinguished from what Hyman calls a 'fictional nihilism'. To Hyman's mind there is this softer version of nihilism that is left untouched by Milbank's criticism. Hyman believes that this more fictional interpretation is the best interpretation of the work of Nietzsche.[132] Hyman argues that it is possible to interpret nihilism in a fashion that refuses the ontology of violence that Milbank ascribes to it. Milbank sees especially the postmodernism of Vattimo as such a narrativist form of nihilism. For Hyman this means that we cannot derive from nihilism the ontological claim that the world is in the end a chaotic totality. In the first case we see nihilism as one possible description of the world, in the second case nihilism claims the truth about the world. In the interpretation of nihilism – as understood by Vattimo – the end of philosophy is never a static thing, rather it is a 'movement of departure'. The realization that a pure nihilism cannot be attained, makes

[129] Hyman, 78.
[130] Hyman, 88.
[131] Hyman, 93.
[132] He also speaks of a metaphysical and a narrative account of nihilism and of a substantive nihilism and a nihilism as narrative. Hyman, 95,104.

Hyman prefer 'fictionalized' nihilism. This fictionalized nihilism truly overcomes metaphysics. Nihilism is a narrative like any other. As Hyman sees it, "...the nihilism that once relativized everything else has now relativized itself."[133] Nevertheless, nihilism remains a regulative idea. "Fictional nihilism can never come to rest in a single narrative, but keeps moving from one narrative to another, prompted to do so by the pure nihilism that transcends them all." Hyman thus contests Milbank's identification of postmodernism and nihilism. He argues that Milbank too much assumes that postmodernism is a metaphysical nihilism, as Heidegger saw Nietzsche's nihilism. According to Hyman, Milbank interprets Nietzsche wrongly in ascribing to him a positive philosophy of the will to power. Hyman contests that the story Nietzsche tells in the *Genealogy of Morals* cannot be understood as a positive philosophy, but unsettles itself constantly.[134] In a similar way, Hyman attacks Milbank's assumption that a radical, genealogical method presupposes an ontological difference. Milbank here assumes that postmodernism offers a substantive theory on how reality is, but Hyman asserts that postmodernism just moves from one story to another. It remains within the narrative mode of knowledge, without giving an account of how things are. The fictional nihilism Hyman defends does not radically reject nihilism in favour of theology, but is a game in which God and the nihil compete for privilege. Thus Hyman works out a playful account of nihilism and denies that nihilism as such is violent, as Milbank has it.

Hyman argues that Milbank's emphasis on narrative and pragmatism and the possibility of pragmatically outnarrating secular discourse, comes down to simply adding one more narrative on a par with the discourses of secularity and other religions. The more Milbank stresses the ontological correctness of the Christian narrative, the more it becomes unclear in what way his Christian philosophy is something more than simply a return to a premodern mode of thought. Hyman denies that Milbank's reading of Christianity as a social theory, as a praxis of peace, is tenable. As he sees it, one can never know. Hyman says there is always an infinite number of vocabularies and parts of vocabularies and ways to link them. He interprets historicism as entailing an *ad infinitum* reasoning. Put shortly: one can never know, because one is always already preceded by an infinite number of traditions.

As I see it, this is exactly the type of reasoning Milbank tries to evade. To my mind, Milbank proposes thinking of Christianity as one narrative, amidst a number of others, such as modernity, postmodernism, liberalism, salafism etc. One can reason historically about differences and commonalities. When Hyman is saying that Milbank has never made a complete comparison that would prove the Christian narrative unique he is only partially right. In the first place, there are several such comparisons implicit or explicit in Milbank's works. Augustine's dealing with Roman civilization, René Girard's literary research into violence in antique religion. As I read Milbank, he rejects the rhetoric of infinite regress Hyman applies, and opts for a competition between real, historical alternatives. There is no absoluteness in the sense that one knows a priori that Christianity is right. But seen from the perspective we are in right now, there has to be the possibility of a non-violent 'outnarration'. Commenting on Hyman, Milbank writes:

[133] Hyman, 105.
[134] Hyman reads Nietzsche's genealogy as a "story told with a bias to induce unsettlement." Hyman, 110,111.

…the Augustinian and the Nietzschean metanarratives are *not* entirely distinct. Their mirroring disagreement implies agreement on many, even most, of the facts even if a disagreement of interpretation certainly involves some factual dispute also. …and that my own version of Augustianian metanarrative, while being a seamless weave of fact and interpretation, is still presented as a debatable account of actual real history – in relation to which one could urge facts, reasons, probabilities and persuasions both for and against. It is only a 'fiction' in the sense that it is a reflexive doubling of the 'lived fiction' (human makings, makings of humanity) which composes enacted history itself.[135]

In this perspective, Hyman is biased toward an ad-infinitum reasoning, according to which every narrative can be a-priori relativized. Milbank thinks this is not the case. There is the possibility of prioritizing one narrative over another, of a hierarchy of values etc. Only in this way can we do justice to actual, real history.

A related point is that Hyman tends to present Milbank as a theologian who argues for the sheer uniqueness of Christianity over against any other religious or secular discourse. But this hardly reflects the way Milbank reasons. He tends to prove the uniqueness of the Christian narrative in confrontation with nihilism, but the flipside of this is an ecumenical openness to forms of religion and philosophy that share some notion of transcendence. The rhetoric of 'difference ad infinitum' tends to frustrate both the first point, the real historical competition of narratives, and the latter point of ecumenical openness, preferred over a detached and abstract logic of difference.

Hyman misses the crucial point that Milbank's principal problem with modernity is that it in fact knows no duality but is the invention of a monism. The good thing about the Christian order is that it is – as Charles Taylor also sees it – a dual model. In modernity Milbank sees a lapsing back into a pagan monism. Postmodern pluralism initially presents itself as an anti-totalitarian mode of thought, but in the notion of 'infinite difference' there lurks a violent element, which the light-minded postmodernism of Vattimo that Hyman prefers, cannot evade. The rigid monism of modern philosophy and postmodern polytheism are two sides of the same coin. What Hyman fails to account for is how there might be a concrete, historical decision between competing (meta) narratives. Hyman fails to make clear that a nihilist position (be it metaphysical or narrative) always keeps the decision at bay and refers to still other narratives that precede the narratives under discussion.

I do find Hyman convincing at one point. He argues that a participatory ontology tends to violate the contingent, historical character of the Christian tradition.[136] A test case is the way Milbank speaks of Israel. On the whole, Milbank speaks rather negatively, if at all, about Israel. "Why should God cling to one place and one land, instead of moving from the one to the next?" – Milbank asks.[137] Here, a modern, universalizing

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[135] Milbank, 'Preface to the second edition', xxi.

[136] Hyman, 85–91.

[137] He writes: "…a terrible symbiosis arising between Zionism and the American Protestant and un-Christian literalistic reading of the Old Testament in the Puritan tradition, which equates Anglo-Saxondom with Israel. Both ascribe to an idolatrously nontypological and noneschatological reading of God's 'free election of Israel,' as if really and truly God's 'oneness' meant that he arbitrarily prefers one lot of people to another (as opposed to working providentially for a time through one people's advanced insight – as Maimonides rightly understood Jewish election); and as if he really and truly appoints to them, not just for a period, but for all time, one piece of land to the exclusion of others." John Milbank, 'Sovereignty, Empire, Capital, and Terror', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101-2 (2002), 305–323.

reasoning is clearly preferred over the locality and temporality of the Hebrew Bible. Milbank's philosophy is not immune to universalizing, modern tendencies, as Hyman rightly argues. One can ask whether the orthodoxy Milbank presents us, is in a way a constructed, idealized version of Christianity, that runs the risk of suppressing the historical and social variety of religious experience.

4.4 POSTMODERN SOCIETY AS A HALL OF MIRRORS

Far from abstract, contractual relations, human creatures are called to love. This is a possibility given in the Church. The thesis of an ontological and ethical affinity incisively changes the notion of a Church-state divide as dominant in postmodernism. This section discusses how Milbank draws the distinction between Church and state.

4.4.1 Church and State

Politics cannot be neutral with regard to views of life. This is not to say, for Milbank, that the government should be concerned directly with questions of religion and confession. But in an indirect way, the government needs to be concerned with the nature of human relations. In a Christian view of social reality, "values of nurture and reconciliation need to constitute our interweavings", writes Milbank.[138] This is not limited to the private realm, but extends to the political as well. With regard to the relation of Church and state, this leads Milbank to a position that asserts a duality of Church and state but rejects an all-too-rigid dualism. In the notion of affinity, the ontological and the political meaning of secularization come together. The traditional understandig of the duality of sacred and profane, may not be used to theologically legitimize a dualism of Church and state. According to Milbank, theology

> ...must have done forever with Luther's two kingdoms, and the notion that a state that does not implicitly concern itself with the soul's salvation can be in any way legitimate. Therefore reconciliation needs to be added to affinity. In the face, thirdly, of the information age, the Church needs to be wary of the secular tendency to promote the abstract, and should come to realize that only Christianity fully celebrates the concrete and bodily. For if the immanent world is all there is, then it tends to reduce to our abstract grasp of it, and we come to believe that it consists in these re-arrangeable abstractions. For this outlook, there is neither being, nor knowledge, and the affinity between them.[139]

Christianity professes the relation of state and religion as one of reconciliation and affinity. The Church inherited this from Judaism, which developed against the background of primitive religion. When the great empires emerge, religions become incorporated into state formations. Milbank sees the Israelite religion emerge against this development of suppressing religion and religious taboos. Israelite religion seeks to prevent the "augmentation of human and natural power". So contrary to the general impression that the Old Testament presupposes a theocratic position, Milbank holds that the Old

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[138] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 209.
[139] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 209.

Testament inspires a tradition of countering the power of the state and the augmentation of religion and state power. So on the one hand the Torah turns back to a more primitive tabooing, on the other hand it does so in order to restrict the absolutization of the state and religiously sanctioned power.[140]

The New Testament is in this respect not fundamentally different from the Old Testament. The New Testament clings to the vertical difference between God and man and the horizontal difference between the law and the gospel. The ultimate value of the concept of secularity – its duality of God and man and sacred and profane – lies, according to Milbank, in its anti-totalitarian intent. Secularization, on the other hand, leads us toward a new monism. Against this monism, Milbank pleads for a dual discipline. The duality of God and man, sacred and profane, can prevent us from seeing the world as a new god. Secularization theology, which traces the roots of secularization back to a de-sacralization within the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, denies the fact that the New Testament cannot be read as a mere rejection of the sacred and a dissolution of taboos. As Milbank sees it, Christianity is not only weakens boundaries, but maintains a dual discipline. In fact, postmodernism overstresses the dissolution of boundaries in Christianity. Postmodernism misinterprets what Christianity essentially has contributed in bringing about a secular sphere. Milbank sees in postmodernism a crucial phase in the history of the west that implies a fundamental political-theological decision:

> So in considering the equally dual discipline of Law and Gospel, are we here presented with some sort of clue to the tally of our times? Some thread through the postmodern labyrinth? Is postmodernity the misreading of the Gospel's surpassing of Law? Does it overstress the passing beyond boundaries at the expense of the virtue of boundaries? And does the cure for our postmodern condition lie in a healing of the rift between the seemingly opposed Christian and Jewish principles? Or rather does it lie in rediscovering that the Christian going beyond the law nonetheless preserves and elevates the Law? This would mean nothing less than discovering a hidden mean between process and limit, between movement and stasis: in theological terms, the co-belonging of grace with Law, and not a dialectical duality of Law and Gospel.[141]

Milbank's highly original contribution to the postmodernism debate, concerns the notion of law as an unmissable element of social theory. He does not only reject a modern dualism of Church and state, as for example Luther's doctrine of the two regiments, but as well a postmodern surpassing of this duality. In the postmodern culture of dissolution of the real, the possibility to experience is problematic. In Milbank's words, what the experience of pure immanence lacks is affinity. The postmodern experience of overcoming the duality of sacred and profane, and with it all boundaries that are now unmasked as as many contingent human constructions, can never have any substantial meaning. This experience comes down to one imperative, says Milbank: "Postmodernity inscribes, tyrannically, only one law: produce, alter, or make different, such that yesterday's transgressive innovation is today's crime of stasis."[142]

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[140] "The provisions of the *Torah*, by contrast, although often strange-seeming, exhibit a more cosmic scope and a more unrestricted interest in limiting the shedding of blood and the confusion of categories, which could lead to instability and struggle. It is as if the Jewish people took up, in a more universal mode, the instinctive sense of all primitive peoples that barriers must be erected against future danger and the augmentation of human and natural power." Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 197.

[141] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 198.

[142] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 202.

Without the 'analogical imagination' (Tracy), human experience and creativity become arbitratry.[143] Whereas Milbank agrees with the postmodern critique of a purely rational ordering of society, he disagrees with postmodernism, when it fails to give a 'symbolic ordering' of society, which makes possibile a more than ironic sense of co-beloning. Whereas Rorty tries to reconcile irony and solidarity, Milbank thinks this is impossible. Solidarity is neither natural, nor a random configuration, rather '...a community of differences in identity, but an identity diffused through the non-identical repetition of character, or of affinity.'[144] Postmodernism, a-priori accepting any difference without reserve, is trapped in formalism and dogmatism. As Milbank sees it, postmodernists are '...fond of speaking of the extension of the bonds of love and solidarity on the basis of compatible emotions and understandings.' He contests the possibility of such solidarity, first of all because a notion of solidarity completely refraining from truth will not do. Such attempts – and Rorty's is clearly one of them – cannot be maintained, as '...there can only be affinity between things that can be in some fashion *characterized*, even if such characterization is provisional.'[145]

According to Milbank, then, the essence of a secular culture is that by separating religion so radically from the rest of culture, it creates a culture in which human agents and the culture as a whole, are, as it were, soulless. Whereas Rorty's criticism was directed against a metaphysical culture, that allows but one true description of the world, Milbank fears a culture in which the social life is completely fragmented. In postmodern culture man has not left the infinite behind, rather is confronted with a horizontalized, social transcendence, which leaves every particular choice or identity a completely random distribution. The mirror of nature is replaced by a social reality which infinitely mirrors identities like always shifting phantoms. Politics needs to be about something and cannot be merely formal. A community must be real and cannot be but an imagined 'web-based' community. Milbank contests the secular as a neutral space that provides formal rules of coexistence, but keeps judgement concerning the content of views of life always at bay. Milbank thus traces an intrinsic link between metaphysics and postmodernism. The structure of postmodern thought does not leave the totalizing intent of modernity behind, rather it is the purest and least self deluded form of immanentism and secularism.

Milbank calls into question the idea of a secular sphere, operating independently from the Church. This is a picture, not only defended by liberal political theory, but also defended theologically in for example the Thomist tradition. John Milbank argues that a strict separation of Church and state is possible in the theory of Thomas Aquinas, but he denies that a theory of Church and state as a theory of two naturally discerned

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[143] Sloterdijk writes on the collapse of metaphysics as leading us in the direction that thinks of freedom only in terms of neglect, formlesness and irresponsibility. He sympathizes with attempts to redefine culture as a symbolic ordering: "...een decadente vrijheid die louter nog als verwaarlozing begrepen wordt, als vormloosheid, als onverantwoordelijkheid en onverschilligheid, hoe men tegenover deze degeneratie van de vrijheid de cultuur kan stellen, als een symbolische ordening." Peter Sloterdijk, 'Interview', *NRC Handelsblad* 28 november (2003).

[144] "Not a community of nature (not a family) nor a coerced association (a State) nor yet a postmodern market proliferation of differences in identity. Rather a community of differences in identity, but an identity diffused through the non-identical repetition of character, or of affinity." Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 203. Another definition Milbank gives says; "Affinity or ontological kinship is a kind of aesthetic of co belonging of some with some, and so ultimately of all with all, not formally and indifferently ...but via the mediation of preference." Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 202.

[145] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 202.

spheres can be defended with an appeal to Augustine.[146] Milbank argues that for Augustine an autonomous, political sphere, operating independently from the Church and "concerned with positive goals of finite well being, and clearly distinguished as a 'natural' institution, from the Church as a 'supernatural one'."[147] Milbank opposes a position that sees the Church-state relation as the relation of two natural spheres that both have their own autonomy and operate independently of each other.[148] He argues that for Augustine, the realm of politics is – like slavery – a consequence of the fall. Augustine, in Milbank's view, does not develop a philosophical ontology, nor a dialectical philosophy of history, rather something radically more historicist. He confronts Roman religion with its own injustice and puts over against it the Christian message of peace. Whereas he sees the Roman religion and culture as founded on violence, he promotes Christian monotheism as a social practice based on the free gift of God. Theology, thus, becomes something like contrasting two different, cultural practices.[149] From this perspective, the truth of religion can never be objectively demonstrated, only pragmatically.

In Aquinas's theology, there emerges a more dualistic model in which the state is a natural and the Church a supernatural institution. This gives way to a growing dualism of Church and state.[150] The consequences of a modern separation of a secular and a profane sphere, are a Church that becomes more and more specialized in 'private salvation', and a state that rules over an increasing number of spheres of life. Instead, Milbank argues for "more hazy bounds between Church and state."[151] Milbank rejects such a radical separation between temporal and eternal matters. Though he does not reject the distinction as such. Rather, the two are best understood in their reciprocal relation. The political order is not natural. For Milbank a critique of the natural character of the secular and a pragmatic justification of Augustinian Christianity coincide. From there, Milbank argues for an Augustinian social ontology. This ontology is characterized as an ontology which allows separate spheres such as of Church and state, but does not see them as watertight compartments. On the contrary, the sacred and the secular, the natural and the supernatural, the public and the private are meaningful in their capacity to cross boundaries.[152]

[146] With regard to Aquinas he says: "It is true that Aquinas, like Augustine does not recognize any real justice that is not informed by charity, and that he has, in consequence, moved not very far down the road which allows a sphere of secular autonomy; nevertheless, he has moved a little, and he has moved too far." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 407.

[147] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 407.

[148] "The civitas terena is not regarded by him as a 'state' in the modern sense of a sphere of sovereignty preoccupied with the business of government. . . . there is no set of positive objectives that are his own peculiar business and the 'city of God' makes a *usus* of exactly the same range of finite goods, although for different ends." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 406.

[149] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 395.

[150] "It is true that Aquinas, like Augustine does not recognize any real justice that is not informed by charity, and that he has, in consequence moved not very far down the road which allows a sphere of secular autonomy; nevertheless he has moved a little, and he has moved too far. By beginning to see social, economic and administrative life as essentially natural, and part of a political sphere separate from the Church, Aquinas opens the way to regarding the Church as an organization specializing in what goes on inside men's souls; his affirmation, for example (possibly inconsistent with his own affirmations of the 'consequences of charity') that the new law of the gospel adds no new 'external precepts', seems to tend dangerously in this direction. Once the political is seen as a permanent natural sphere, pursuing positive finite ends, then, inevitably firm lines of division arise between what is 'secular' and what is 'spiritual'" Milbank, 'Foreword', 12.

[151] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 408.

[152] The Christian ontology Milbank bases on his interpretation of Augustine knows dualities, but no dualisms in the liberal sense. He mentions: "1. micro/macro cosmic isomorphism; 2. the non-subordination

The social ontology of Christianity contrasts with the social ontology of antiquity with regard to the reality of peace and forgiveness. In Augustine, social life in peace and forgiveness is possible, whereas for his contemporaries, violence was inescapable and fundamental. In Milbank's sketch of the difference between antique virtue and Christian *charitas*, he sees the dualistic character of antique philosophy as the source of violence. This dualistic nature of antique philosophy becomes explicit in the idea of sovereignty and power and in the idea of the supremacy of the mind over the body. A Christian ontology is holistic in character. The duality of body and mind is overcome at the level of the soul and vertical relations of power, are replaced by an order of charity.[153] The Christian narrative of peace imagines an order that is non-violent and makes it possible to act peacefully in a violent world. Christianity is a social practice of charity: as such it allows difference and is by principle open to contingency. Milbank says: "Christianity is therefore ... something like the 'peaceful transmission of difference', or 'difference in a continuous harmony'."[154]

In Milbank's view, secularity as an openness to cultural difference cannot be understood from religious neutrality. Rather, it is a legacy of the Christian tradition. The secularity of culture can only be understood from its roots in Christendom. From the perspective of Christian theology, an isolation of religious belief from other areas of culture is undesirable. Central notions in Christian theology presuppose a wider application in society. Notions such as incarnation and the eucharist define and inspire a sense of community and materiality that is broader than the purely spiritual. Christian notions as incarnation and Eucharist are therefore not merely isolated loci of an existential and ungraspable truth, but have great, political import. The political thought of Milbank develops in a direction that is in essence theocratic. In the first place, as we have seen, because Milbank thinks neutrality with regard to views of life is impossible. Gouvernment is inescapably concerned with the nature of human associations. A second, related reason for Milbank is that gouvernment is inescapably theocratic, thereby answering Remi Brague's question – are non-theocratic regimes possible? – negatively.[155] In a way every culture has a sense of collective devotion:

> ...beyond the liberal formalities of respect for persons and property must be some kind of collective and supranatural devotion. Indeed, all societies retain some such devotion, but where it is marginalized it tends to become debased and fanaticized, so that should it ever erupt once more into the centre (at once protesting against and yet reinforcing the lack of true liturgy), the consequence are likely to be (and were in the last century diabolical) For this reason alone the matter of collective devotion must be one of general political concern.[156]

To Milbank's mind some form of theocracy is necessary to retain the meaningfulness of these other cultural activities. Secularity then means that politics and religion are distinguished, but not strictly separated.[157] Secularity should not lead us considering

of either part to whole or whole to part; 3. The presence of the whole in every part; 4. Positioning within an indefinite shifting sequence rather than a fixed totality." Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 409.

[153] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 410.

[154] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 416–417.

[155] Rémi Brague, 'Un régime autre que la théocratie est-il possible?', *Revue d'éthique et de théologie* 243 (2007), 103–123.

[156] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 176.

[157] In a 2006 interview he affirms the separation of Church and state in some sense: "I think the crucial point is that the power that is running the law and the system of punishments, these must not be things

religion as strictly private and of no significance for other areas of culture.[158]

The kernel of Milbank's postmodern theocracy is that a secular sphere is not upheld by religious neutrality, but by Christianity's discourse of non-violence. Whereas for Rorty liberal institutions are the best guarantee against religion, superstition and violence, Milbank targets the liberal democratic institutions and keeps open the possibility that they are carrying within themselves violent elements. Milbank does acknowledge that in the contemporary world there is a problem with religious violence, but he denies that the primary cause of violence is religion as such and that secular neutrality can effectively deal with this problem. He explains this violence as the specific form that religion must take in the context of secularism. Liberal secularism engenders a specific form of religion: it is the result of a particular constellation of religion and secularity as it emerged in modernity.

Milbank's argument might sound plausible, when he compares Christianity to ancient, Roman society. But is it plausible to regard the modern West as a latently violent society? Milbank thinks this is the case and in order to prove this point he deconstructs the emergence of modern, secular liberalism.[159] In being secular, we are not responsive to the way human affairs simply are; rather in liberal secularism human relations are first defined in a certain way and liberal institutions are answerable to that. Milbank emphasizes the unnatural character of liberalism by showing how unlikely and artificial liberalism is. It is a worldview entirely constructed, not on the basis of real, historic people and communities, but on the basis of an invented, abstract individual, who is essentially a possessor of free will and endowed with rights. "The pure nature of this individual", says Milbank, "is his capacity to break with any given nature, even to will against himself." Beginning from the invented, willing individual, liberalism has structured society as a system of competing wills. In this view, the secular is not so much the solution to religious intolerance, but the actual structuring of society as competition. Whereas the Christian, metaphysical view could refer to a transcendent idea of the good, and of good acts as partaking in the eternal, which was substantially good, liberalism could only think of the good as the formal regulation of ever shifting power formations, without inherent purpose. Secular neutrality, then, implies a neutrality toward good and evil. Social life is no longer governed by a direction toward the good, by virtue, rather social life is the tempering of the latent violence of competing wills.

In order to come to terms with the liberal view of secularity, Milbank discusses the views of Manent, who sees secular liberalism as an answer to what he calls "the

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that are directly in the name of God, and there mustn't be certainly a quasi-sacral caste that is performing these actions in any sense at all, for all of the Augustinian reasons that this is the city of this world and it's a secondary good and the whole system of law and punishment is necessary because of sin and so on, and so it's quite important that that area is distinguished from the Church." Ben Suriano, 'An interview with John Milbank', *The other journal. An intersection of theology and culture* 5 (2006), ⟨URL: http://www.theotherjournal.com/article.php?id=76⟩.

[158] Milbank says: "…When it comes to special bodies that are to do with education or the economy and so on, it's not so clear that these are not units of the Church. I mean a monastery was an economic community, it was a farming community but it was fully part of the Church and the guild organizations in the Middle Ages, they were also fraternal bodies that were part of the Church; so yes in a sense I do sort of see the permeation of Church into all these functions but they're not strictly political functions or socio-economic. So if you were to say, 'Well this is in a way a kind of democratized theocracy, a democratized, anarchic theocracy,' I suppose I couldn't really deny that." Suriano. See also John Milbank, 'The Gift of Ruling: Secularization and Political Authority', *New Blackfriars* 85 (2004), 212–238.

[159] Milbank, 'Geopolitical Theology', 215,217.

theologico-political crisis" of medieval Christendom. As Manent sees it, liberalism offered a solution to the following problems: First of all, Christianity, as preoccupied with supernatural salvation, was relatively indifferent to secular rule. Second, this supernatural character of Christianity could easily lead to unrightful interventions in the domain of the secular. Third, Christendom was inherently divided between magnanimity and humility. Matters of secular concern were seen as mere 'glittering vices.'

Manent explains the emergence of the secular from the shortcomings of Christianity. Religion does not sit easily with secular concerns, because it either feels disinterested in secular affairs, resulting from its preoccupation with transcendence, or it unrightfully interferes in secular affairs with an appeal to transcendence. Milbank objects to the way Manent suggests that premodern Christianity simply resisted the secular, or had a halfhearted relationship to it. He rejoins that medieval Christianity did not recognize the natural and the supernatural as separate domains with their own distinctive teleology, nor did medieval Christianity identify the sacred and the secular as two sharply distinct spheres. Therefore the interference of Church in political affairs is never unrightful. The Church was always to some extent secular and the state to some extent liturgical. The sharp distinctions Manent supposes, are anachronistic.[160] The distinction between sacred and secular is, in Milbank's understanding, granted, but not in its bare, unreligious meaning. The Christian secularity he proposes is never meaningless or religiously neutral, but functions within a duality. The secular as understood in the premodern constellation could not exist by itself, and Milbank denies that it can today.[161] Milbank's point is that the development of secularity, thought of as the independence of politics, was not a consequence of a tension implicit in Christendom. Rather, liberalism goes hand in hand with the invention of an order that no longer ascribed to such a duality. The secular as a sharp division between politics and religion is an impossibility for a Christian worldview, says John Milbank. As he sees it, St. Paul already refused to let the political be the political and interfered in the domain of the state. And the earliest Church community, started to take over domains of the polis from the outset; namely the *paideia*, the political training in virtues.[162] To Milbank then, Christianity is not an agent of secularization in that it is indifferent to secular concerns. Christianity does not leave the secular as a concern for liberal, political rule.[163] The Church transgresses the liberal dividing line.[164]

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[160] As Milbank explains this anachromism: "So to speak of the secular in the Middle Ages can be problematic. For this period the *Saeculum* was not a space but the time before the eschaton: certainly some concerns that were more worldly belonged more to this time, but this did not imply quite our sense of sheer 'indifference' and 'neutrality' as concerns religious matters when we speak of 'the secular'. Indeed one can go further: 'temporal' concerns existed in ontological contrast to eternal ones, but both were 'religious' as falling under divine judgement." Milbank, 'Gift of Ruling', 216

[161] For a notion of a Christian secularity see also Roger Scruton, 'Joods-Christelijke cultuur', *Opinio* 20-26 juli (2007), 7–10.

[162] Milbank, 'Gift of Ruling', 216.

[163] "While indeed it is true that Christianity, unlike Judaism and Islam, enforces no detailed religious law, and even instils a 'law of charity' beyond legality as command and restriction, this did not so clearly open up the space of the secular as is often thought." Milbank, 'Gift of Ruling', 217.

[164] Milbank writes: "Christianity …positioned what it regarded as the regrettably necessary use of coercion outside the redemptive sphere, yet even this was relative and qualified by degrees – the Church also directly exercised some coercion, while the theological warrant for its just exercise even in secular instances was finally assistance to redemptive processes. Moreover, if the *sacerdotium* could also be coercive, the *regnum* could also exercise a positive pastoral concern in the material sphere, for the *regnum* fell at least half within the *ecclesia*." Milbank, 'Gift of Ruling', 217.

The secular and the religious mutually presuppose one another and because theology did not recognize an autonomous, political sphere with an independent teleology, the secular as an autonomous sphere had to be invented. So even though there was no inherent tension between the natural and the supernatural and the religious and the political, an autonomous secular sphere started to emerge. Partly, Christianity was itself to blame, Milbank asserts.[165] The central problem Milbank sees in the Catholic Church was the duality between the laity and the clerics. Milbank maintains a reciprocity of the sacred and the secular, but sees a practical dualism emerge in the Middle Ages. As he sees it, Christianity "was not inherently prone to duality; rather its contingent modes of clerical development encouraged such duality."[166]

So the premodern, Christian model is not without problems. Nevertheless Milbank does not see secular liberalism as a genuine solution to these problems. His fundamental problem with the way secular liberalism structures Church and state, is that it assumes a priority of violence over peace, as is most obvious in Thomas Hobbes' theory of sovereignty. This violence is the direct consequence of the formal character of liberalism, lacking an extra-human or extra-natural norm. This brings Milbank to criticize the representationalism of liberalism as a purely formal system. Where modern epistemology was characterized with the image of miror-like clarity, Milbank characterized secular politics with the image of a hall of mirrors:

> . . . representing and [being] represented compose an empty hall of mirrors: in the middle, the soul of humanity is no longer there where we suppose it to be. And since there are no more souls with intrinsic destinies and purposes, no projects can be allowed: opinions cannot be permitted to have any influence. In theory the Church can offer to people its rule of charity and reconciliation; in practice its scope for doing so is limited by the sovereign State.[167]

The latent violence Milbank sees in modern liberalism is located in the alleged open-mindedness toward an endless diversity of opinions and choices. To Milbank's mind this "apparent dynamism, conceals an extraordinary stasis". The state in this picture of liberalism functions merely as a formal power. It "formally and disinterestedly mediates".[168] The emptiness of liberalism is not the remedy to contemporary religious unrest and emerging religious fundamentalism. Rather, secular liberalism, by refraining from any substantial value and purpose evokes new forms of religious experience. The Enlightenment thus brought not only a new view on religion, it also introduced a specific sort of violence. As Milbank's story of the French Enlightenment goes: Soon after Rousseau had defined man as pure will, liberal theorists became aware of the pure randomness of this definition, as expressed in the image of the hall of mirrors. What is the will in "willing nothing or willing in futile circularity?" Milbank argues that in the 19th century one realized that the will as such could not sustain liberal politics.

> Suddenly what Rousseau's 'general will' willed became the nation, history, society, or culture. Because there was a certain new realisation . . . that politics could not be

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[165] "Christianity did not adequately incarnate Christianity in the lay and material orders. Lay paths to salvation were seen as more perilous than clerical ones; increasingly the laity were removed (often understandably in the name of anti-corruption, yet still with exclusive effect) from influence over specifically clerical and sacramental matters." Milbank, 'Gift of Ruling', 219.

[166] Milbank, 'Gift of Ruling', 220.

[167] Milbank, 'Gift of Ruling', 223.

[168] Milbank, 'Geopolitical Theology'.

about anything without the recognition of superhuman norms, the nation, history, etc. started to be imbued with quasi-religious values.[169]

The function of religion is taken over by the secular (state, society or history). The medieval model, in Milbank's opinion, made it possible for the state to be truly secular, because it directed man's ultimate desire to the eternal. Ultimate devotion in things secular risks the confinements of nationalism and fascism. The Church, so to speak, lets the state be relatively autonomous. At the same time the secular can be experienced as meaningful, as it is not defined in terms of negative freedom, but is open to transcendent sanctification.

To allow religious motives in the domain of politics, one might reply, exactly invites violence and is surely not its antidote. Milbank reasons exactly the other way around. When in liberal societies, religion is kept out of public life and politics, it is a repressed religion that returns. He writes: "So if today, there is a problem of the recrudescence of intolerant religion, this is not a problem that liberalism can resolve, but rather a problem that liberalism tends to engender." As he sees it, the empty heart of liberalism itself produces a mutation of religion. A form of religion that has its roots partially in religious voluntarism. Fundamentalism is thus not a survival of premodern times, but is the typical modern, univocal (one might even say 'secularist') expression of religion. The contractual vocabulary of the Enlightenment is incorporated in forms of supposedly orthodox theology.[170] So precisely because fundamentalism is a reaction to liberalism, liberalism cannot be the solution to the problem of religious fundamentalism. The point to be made here is that for Milbank in a liberal society the formal rules of political economy and democracy, are nothing but regulations of force. Rorty's postmodern liberalism, for instance, merely replaces the values of a metaphysical culture with the image of a hall of mirrors, that cannot really establish a connection between man and world, nor between citizen or between citizens and the state. The human consciousness is constantly being directed and redirected by as many contingent desires, endlessly mirrored in desires of still others. The function of politics as directing desire toward the good can only be experienced as but one more prejudice. It is clear that Rorty and Milbank take radically opposite positions in their valuation of liberalism. Whereas according to Rorty, in a creative literary culture, modes of living can be imagined that are truly beyond the stasis of modernity, for Milbank the principle violence of modernity is hiding exactly in its refusal to be more specific as to what is worthy of our desire. In refraining from more substantial modes of social interchange, liberalism leaves the secular empty. What we need, to counter the soullessnes and formalism of liberalism, is not to isolate religion in the private realm, rather to find in relative autonomy modes of interchange between the secular and the religious.

Milbank's Christian s would be a form of Christian socialism or Christian democracy. To Milbank's mind the Christian model of participation succeeds in avoiding the violence on which the secular model rests. In the contemporary world, a dual model of Church and state would entail an interchange of the religious and the secular, in a way that endows the secular with meaning and that would enable religion to incorporate in social and political life.[171] Opposing solutions to violence in terms of neutrality

[169] Milbank, 'Gift of Ruling', 227.
[170] Milbank, 'Geopolitical Theology', 235.
[171] ...this christian democracy has a hierarchic dimension: the transmission of the gift of truth across time, and the reservation of a non-democratic educative sphere concerned with finding the truth, not ascer-

and endless contestation, Milbank asserts that "only a liturgical polity can save us from literal violence."[172]

4.4.2 A Christian Secularity

Against the logic of liberalism and capitalism, Milbank sees a close proximity between socialism and Christianity: both give priority to community. According to him the Christian emphasis on community and loving interchange between persons, can be mediated in the context of modern culture. To his mind the Church as a social practice shares in the fate of socialism and it is as socialism that it should be revived in the predicament of the current crisis of ideologies. But isn't socialism a fruit of the secular Enlightenment itself? Then how can it be understood as in opposition to it? As Milbank sees it, we can revive a version of socialism without the embedding of socialism in a rationalist legacy of the Enlightenment.[173] He contests the embedding of socialims in the philosophical discourse of the Enlightenment and he holds that socialism developed in the context of counter-Enlightenment. Socialism, in its original form, was a religiously inspired movement, which contested the atomizing and depersonalizing effects of capitalism. According to Milbank, there is a version of socialism that is independent of the anti-metaphysical rationalism of the Enlightenment. Postmodernism, in retaining the immanentism of the Enlightenment, fulfills the univerzalizing ambitions of the Enlightenment in a secular Utopia. To Milbank's mind, however, postmodern immanentism cannot account for the social and for community. Analogue to his critique of immanentism, Milbank argues that a community too needs an exchange with the transcendent. Milbank speaks of the relative selfsufficiency of community. He parts company here with communitarianism, because communitarianism easily absolutizes the community (family, language etc.) in a foundationlist manner. According to Milbank, community can only be meaningful in an interchange with something external to that community.

Milbank argues that a Christian socialism can be a credible alternative to secular politics. He rejects any version of secularity that thinks of culture as an autonomous domain. But how then does he think of the relation of religion and culture and can he give a positive meaning of the concept of secularity? The secularity of culture is not really safeguarded in a postmodern context. He fears that in postmodernity we are left with something even "more secular than politics": a "future of infinite utilitarian calculations"[174] Milbank suspects that the universal pretensions of the Enlightenment are being realized in the present day global market of neo-liberal capitalism. Milbank doubts whether postmodern criticism of modern progressive ideology can adequately criticize neo-liberalism. As he sees it, the vacuous character of postmodern culture will have to be replaced by the counter-narrative of Christianity; a narrative according to which the claim to the autonomy of culture is corrected by a theory of relative autonomy. True community can be experienced only in encounter with a reality external to that community.[175]

taining majority opinion. Milbank, 'Gift of Ruling', 231.
[172] Milbank, 'Gift of Ruling', 238.
[173] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 162.
[174] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 162.
[175] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 168.

Having argued against the possibility of secularity as closed space-time, Milbank throws up the question as to how credible such a theological notion of transcendence would be. For Milbank the argument for a religious transcendence is no more speculative than the quasi-theology that is presupposed by secular, political theory. He writes: "The secular sustains a certain equally 'irrational' and yet nihilistic variant of the theological."[176] The monistic picture of secularity is in need of correction, argues Milbank. The idea that the secular is spreading and will in the end be universal, needs to be replaced by an alternative, universal concept of time and space. A progressive rationalization of culture will in the end lead to a complete detachment: "For the problem about pure reason is that it brutally abstracts from all specificity and ineffable attachment."[177] For Milbank, the formalism of both capitalism and socialism assumes a transcendental standpoint that thwarts human sociality and is completely indifferent toward the way people have experienced their world and their lives as meaningful. Therefore, Milbank argues, Christian social theory should provide an alternative to the global market in the form of a rival universality, which is not destructive. Secular humanisms ". . . inevitably land up destroying every attachment as too tinged with the arbitrary, in the name of the black sun of nihilism itself: that absolute transcendental arbitrariness, which, within an arbitrary economy, is alone 'non-arbitrary'."[178]

The secular logic of postmodernism is a logic of arbitrariness and detachment. It cannot live up to its promises, namely the affirmation of time and space, the bodily, the particular. Postmodernism overstates its case and ends up, by universalizing contingency, in a denial of particularity. In order to escape these nihilistic consequences, Milbank argues that we should go back behind postmodernism and modernity and retrieve Christianity. But to prevent Christianity from being just another local disourse, it cannot be formulated under the premises of secular discourse. This would presuppose a supposedly contentless universal reason. Therefore, Christianity needs to universalize her claims. Milbank reaffirms the universality of Christian truth and affirms transcendence as a necessary aspect of this universal truth. This does not imply, for Milbank, that transcendence rules out the contingency and locality of human truth claims. The historical and social contingency of religious belief, does not demonstrate their futility, and still less does it prove them false. What it does demonstrate is that if truth is transcendent and universal, it can only be mediated through "local pathways".[179] For Milbank the religious is very much about an appreciation of particularity, without falling back into relativism. The religious contingency and pluralism Milbank defends are not nihilistic, but are "disclosive of transcendence." Conversely, the transcendent in Christian theology does not overrule contingency, but allows a participation in the eternal.[180]

[176] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 171.

[177] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 172.

[178] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 173.

[179] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 173.

[180] Milbank writes: "Instead if one is to say that an open pathway, or many open pathways, are disclosive of transcendence in some degree, this implies that constantly, and dynamically, one is on pilgrimage from sacred site to sacred site, weaving them together along a coherent line or spiral, and thereby out of smaller sites constantly tracing the margins of greater sites, and then returning to locate within the greater realm each specific place once again." Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 174.

4.4.3 *The Secularization of Public Discourse*

In Milbank's opinion, secular liberalism is a genuine threat to human freedom as it is morally indifferent. Be this as it may, the theological approach of John Milbank hardly seems applicable in highly secularized, western societies. Ethicist Jeffrey Stout has, for this pragmatic reason, criticized Milbank severely. Stout holds that a pragmatic liberalism, which understands itself in terms of this expressive rationality, can do justice to both secular liberals and adherents of religious traditions. His aim is to overcome a duality of a static ethnocentric or communitarian view on the one hand and a narrow and formalistic account of democracy on the other. In his opinion "pragmatism can transcend the current standoff between secular liberals and the new traditionalists". He therefore tries to integrate liberalism and tradition: "Democracy is a culture, a tradition in its own right …Pragmatism is best viewed as an attempt to bring the notions of democratic deliberation and tradition together in a single unifying vision."[181] According to Stout, the rationality proper to democracy in general and public debate in particular is a kind of 'expressive rationality'. Pragmatism can best be understood as an expressive rationality: "…a matter of making explicit in the form of a claim a kind of commitment that would otherwise remain implicit and obscure."[182]

Compared to Rorty, Stout is much less inclined to push religion back into the private realm. He appreciates religious voices in the public realm and the role religion has played in the emergence of modern democracy. The strength of the model of expressive rationalism is that it can do justice to both religious and secular reasons and that it does away with the foundationalist pretension of 'neutral ground'.[183]

An interesting case-study is provided by Stout's comment on a development at Princeton University in the 1960's, which typically shows a shift from a Christian scholarship to a more-or-less religiously neutral (*secular*) approach. In that article he speaks approvingly of reforms of Christian teaching at Princeton that lead to a teaching that "…did not presuppose Christian theological commitments."[184] Purely academic study need not be neutral, or value-free.[185] Moral reasoning is an open-ended process of inquiry in which the inquirer is "adopting, ascribing, expressing, and reflecting all along". Not from a disengaged perspective, but by bringing one's own commitments into play.[186]

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[181] Stout, *Democracy*, 13. His account "…focuses on activities held in common as constitutive of the political community. But the activities in question are not to be understood in merely procedural terms." Stout, *Democracy*, 5.

[182] Stout, *Democracy*, 12.

[183] "We cannot attend to normative commitments reflectively without relying on normative commitments all the while." Jeffrey Stout, 'Commitments and Traditions in the Study of Religious Ethics', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25(3) (1998), 25.

[184] Stout, 'Commitments and Traditions', 26.

[185] He denies that conceptual analysis can guarantee neutrality: "…even the activity of analyzing concepts implicitly involves coming to terms with the historically specific discursive practices in which concepts are embedded, and one cannot come to terms with those practices without bringing one's own normative commitments into play." Stout, 'Commitments and Traditions', 29.

[186] Secular reasoning applied to religious ethics concerns: "The discussion in a humanities classroom at a secular university is officially open to all students who show a genuine interest in the subject, regardless of their reasons for being interested. As a result of this openness, every variety of religious, antireligious, and nonreligious reason for being interested in our subject matter is likely to make its presence felt in the religious ethics classroom sooner or later. Such openness, when construed properly, creates no presumption against the religious reasons as such; it merely means that they are not accorded privileged status within the discussion." Stout, 'Commitments and Traditions', 30.

Stout's terminology for scholarly practice – far from abstraction, neutral observation or reduction – is a richly informed, hermeneutic approach that entails explicating what was already implicit in a certain social or religious practice. Scholarly research is a matter of making explicit what is implicit in religious and moral practices. Stout applies this model to the idea of a secular culture as well. The secular is a sphere that is neutral – not in the sense that speakers keep their moral commitments and their values to themselves – but rather that secular reasoning is universal and open to dialogue. Stout's understanding of the secularity of culture is that in a pluralistic context of modern democracy, there is a shared rationality, and a shared presupposition, which is indifferent to the contents of particular beliefs. It is this openness, asserts Stout, that threatens to be lost in philosophies and theologies that reject secularity.

This does not imply that Stout is defending a liberal position. He rejects for example the liberalism of John Rawls. Stout sketches this liberal position as endorsing a theory of the nation state as neutral with regard to comprehensive conceptions of the good and an idea of a public reason, independent of religion and tradition.[187] He advocates a position that accepts the idea – pushed forward by communitarians – that such neutrality is neither possible nor wanted, without giving up liberalism altogether. His strategy is to redescribe liberalism in a way that it can do justice to its own historical tradition and historical contingency (and so taking the sting out of historicist and communitarian critique), yet at the same time remains loyal to what he thinks is the central theme of liberalism. Essentially this is an attempt to reformulate liberal democracy as a tradition. Stout is not giving a theoretical defense of liberalism: Liberal democracy cannot be legitimized in an noncircular way. Nor does he attempt to give an account of liberalism that is entirely independent of particular conceptions of the good life.

> Democracy . . . is a tradition. It inculcates certain habits of reasoning, certain attitudes toward deference and authority in political discussion, and love for certain goods and virtues, as well as a disposition to respond to certain types of actions, events or persons with admiration, pity or horror. This tradition is anything but empty. Its ethical substance, however, is more a matter of enduring attitudes, concerns, dispositions and patterns of conduct than it is a matter of agreement on a conception of justice in Rawls's sense. The notion of state neutrality and the reason-tradition dichotomy should not be seen as its defining marks. Rawlsian liberalism should not be seen as its official mouthpiece.[188]

Stout tries to formulate a liberal politics by historical, hermeneutical means.[189] The distinction between his and Rawlsian forms of liberalism is that the latter conceives of liberalism primarily in terms of procedures, while Stout reasons as a communitarian in the sense that he sees liberalism as consisting of a series of substantive claims and habits that have developed in a certain tradition. In a good theory of democratic liberalism, we need the category of tradition. Stout does not think of tradition as a fixed entity. He sees tradition – and democratic tradition in particular – as an open-ended process, in which

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[187] Stout, *Democracy*, 2.
[188] Stout, *Democracy*, 3.
[189] "My topic, stated in Rawlsian terms, is the role of free public reason in a political culture that includes conflicting religious conceptions of the good. But I am not trying to construct a theory of the social contract, so I cannot mean by public reason what Rawls does. And the object of 'overlapping consensus' I will identify in democratic culture is not what Rawls calls a 'free standing' political conception of justice." Stout, *Democracy*, 2.

the commitments of citizens are always open to discussion. The traditionalist element in Stout's approach is that we cannot start off from some imaginary blanco state, rather one always finds oneself in a tradition.[190]

For Stout, postfoundationalism is no reason to give up on the ideal of a liberal, secular society. But he does defend a thicker concept of secularity against the version of liberalism as formulated by Rorty. To his mind justification of moral practices and political constellations such as liberal democracy, are themselves part of the praxis. With other words, they cannot be defended without circularity. What foundationalism tried was exactly this: to defend a certain ethical discourse on grounds not themselves a part of this discourse. To use Sellars' words, democracy is a discursive practice, "…it is rational, not because it has foundations, but because it is a self correcting enterprise which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not all at once."[191]

From here we can succinctly present Stout's complaints with John Milbank. In the first place Stout sees secularization as accompanied by a loss of an unequivocal, literal understanding of the Bible, serving as an authority for the whole of culture. Milbank would argue for a return of the authority of the Bible.

Secondly, Stout opposes a secular society to a religious society, in which there are 'taken for granted' theological truths. Milbank, is Stout's suspicion, would entirely be dependent on a single theological truth and would oppose pluralism.

Thirdly, Radical Orthodoxy would give an inaccurate description of the emergence of the secular. Milbank confuses the emergence of the secular – as a regime of tolerance following the religious wars – on the one hand and a secularist ideology, that can be legitimately be said to be a pseudo-religion. As far as secularization entails an ideology or a predetermined process, it has collapsed in recent (postmodern) decades. Stout contests the way Milbank presents the history of social thought in the West as an invention of the secular as an anti-religious sphere. His historical argument is that the way Milbank divides authors up into a tradition of modernity and counter-modernity, cannot pass the test of historical accuracy. Was not someone like Samuel Taylor Coleridge at the same time religious and an inheritant of a secularized political culture? Is the way Milbank sketches secular modernity not a too rigid division?

Lastly, I mention his arguments from systematic theology. Stout criticizes "radical orthodoxy's refusal of the secular". Aren't there enough possibilities within Christian discourse to appreciate secular political culture?[192] Stout refers to Christian notions that

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[190] For the term 'traditionalism' see also Joseph Margolis, *The Flux of History and the Flux of Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 58. Stout depicts the classical form of liberalism as endorsing "a theory of the modern nation-state as ideally neutral with respect to comprehensive conceptions of the good" or as proposing "to establish political deliberation on a common basis of free public reason independent of reliance on tradition." Stout, *Democracy*, 2. He tries to give an account of the role of free, public reason that incorporates conflicting views of the good. Stout's criticism consists of a rejection of the reason-tradition dichotomy. There is no reasonable "way around the particular way in which people behave."

[191] Stout, *Democracy*, 213.

[192] Stout lists three questions with regard to John Milbank. His first question concerns the role of the Holy Spirit in his theology. He suggests that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit makes possible a more positive expectation of God's presence in secular culture. Secondly Stout opposes the sharp division Milbank makes between the secular and the religious and suggests that there are many good things in modern secular culture, "that a loving God would bless". For instance in struggles for justice that include both Christians and non-Christians. Thirdly, Stout voices the question whether the doctrine of the trinity and the communication of the persons of the trinity do not enable a much more positive approach to democratic community? Stout, *Democracy*, 103.

may well be summarized as "general or common grace", and proposes that Christians might accept the sovereignty of God without falling into resentment toward secularity or being absorbed by the secular. The issue is, according to Stout, "whether Christians, for their own theological reasons, may join hands with others in the struggle for justice. If Milbank says they may, then he is implicitly granting the legitimacy of what I am calling a secularized political sphere."[193] Stout asserts that although Milbank takes great pains to explain that theology should refuse the secular, his own version of socialism rests on the assumption that the natural sphere is principally open to grace. So what would be the difference in practice? Referring to Karl Barth, he speaks of parables of the kingdom outside the Church. According to Stout, it is of the utmost importance for Barth, not to refuse the secular, rather to see it as a realm in which the truth can be heard.[194] For Stout, then, the public sphere need not be a neutral sphere and even when public discourse is secularized, the religious believer can still experience it as falling under God's authority.

The secular, in Stout's view, does not necessarily entail an ideology or an anti-religious stance.[195] Stout believes strongly in the possibility of privatizing religious belief and has a certain trust in the neutrality of the secular. It is at this point, the 'neutrality of the secular', that Stout is involved in a discussion with John Milbank. In Milbank's work, the assessment of the secular, understood as a neutral sphere, is rather negative. Radical Orthodoxy sees the secular character of modern society and its secular reason not as merely a relativistic attitude in the public sphere, in service of the nonviolent exchange of reasons. Rather, the secular is seen as a substantial ideology, presenting itself as a formal context, but being essentially an alternative soteriology. Therefore, Christian theology cannot accept the presuppositions and epistemological context as offered by a secular theory of knowledge and society. Christian theology should make explicit the ontology implicit in its own tradition and thus contest the secular ideology.

Stout's complaint is that this departure from the secular context is fatal for a democratic society. For once the theologians no longer operate in the public sphere, they are forced to withdraw themselves from the public sphere and become an inwardly-facing group of spiritualists.[196] He tries both to contest the historical arguments Milbank offers, and, above all, to explain his position from an underlying resentment against secular culture. On Stout's account of the secular, it is true that modern democratic discourse tends not to be framed by a theological perspective, but this does not prevent any of the individuals participating in it from taking a theological perspective.[197] The religious is simply not a common presupposition. This means merely that the "…participants in a given discursive practice are not in a position to take for granted that their interlocutors are making the same religious assumptions they are."[198] It does not mean, for Stout, that the public sphere legitimates its exchange of reasons a priori, by an appeal to secular

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[193] Stout, *Democracy*, 105.
[194] Stout, *Democracy*, 111.
[195] "…secularization…does not reflect a commitment to secularism, secular liberalism, or any other ideology." Stout, *Democracy*, 97.
[196] For comparable critique, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture, a new Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 97–101.
[197] Stout, *Democracy*, 97.
[198] Stout, *Democracy*, 97.

reason, "nor does it involve endorsement of the 'secular state' as a realm entirely insulated from the effects of religious convictions."[199] Precisely because many of the citizens participating in public discourse have religious presuppositions, the public sphere needs to be neutral. As a private citizen one is completely entitled to these presuppositions, but they cannot qualify as publicly shared presuppositions. Secularity does not take for granted "a set of agreed upon assumptions about the nature and existence of God."[200] In Stout's opinion, this notion of secularity is a sufficient and necessary condition for a pluralist society. Every attempt to ask public recognition for private religious assumption is out of place and endangers the framework in which the conversation takes place.[201] Secularity is not to be identified with an aggressive, atheistic polity or a fixed fund of objective beliefs. Rather it says something about the way reason exchange takes place; how authority functions and what can be presupposed in exchanges with others. In Stout's opinion, it is true that culture as such has become much less religious, but this does not in itself put constraints on what can and can not be said in the public sphere, or political arena. Stout appreciates the "democratic vitality of the modern period' and contests putting the secular on a par with secularism as an ideology that is inherently anti-religious."[202]

Stout says to prefer a kind of historicism over a foundational liberalism. His preferred version of liberalism would let tradition and secularity melt together in "a form of pragmatic expressivism". The contextual, inferentialist approach Stout favors puts no a priori constraints on what is to count as democratic or as morally good. The secular is the place and time in which man is to define himself. Democratic praxis does not proceed from antecedent agreement on how values should be ranked, but invites citizens to express their reasons for their commitments on important public questions. A rejection of this account of secularity is deemed sectarian, to Stout's mind. The plurality of society and the secularity of society are closely intertwined. The ideal situation in a pluralist context is when "moral diversity occurs within a single framework globally shared, and the differences in how people think and talk about matters can be explained in terms of deeper similarities."[203]

Arguing against a too one-sided picture of secularity, Stout tries to give a more 'down to earth' account of secularity, that is sufficient to uphold the secularity of political culture in a peaceful way. According to Stout, secularization was not primarily brought about by the triumph of a secularist ideology, but rather by "the increasing need to cope with religious plurality discursively on a daily basis". The argument against Radical Orthodoxy does not take away that the ideology of secularized political discourse is, largely, descriptively inadequate. It should be, according to Stout, to a great extent be disentangled from an antireligious animus.[204] Secularity should not be understood as implying that the public sphere should be safeguarded from religious convictions. On the contrary, it enables people to come to the fore with their convictions.[205] Stout's complaint with Milbank's views on the secular is that society turns into an enclave so-

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[199] Stout, *Democracy*, 97.
[200] Stout, *Democracy*, 99.
[201] Stout, *Democracy*, 100.
[202] Stout, *Democracy*, 107.
[203] Stout, *Democracy*, 227.
[204] Stout, *Democracy*, 103.
[205] "In a religiously plural society . . . it is even more important than in other circumstances to bring into reflective expression commitments that would otherwise remain implicit in the lives of the religious commu-

ciety. He even speaks of a resentment toward the secular. Stout writes: "Theologies designed to articulate, defend, and reinforce resentment of the secular are symptoms of the disease they are meant to cure. They are the ideological expression of the enclave society."[206] His complaint is that Radical Orthodoxy can hardly contribute to the complexities of modern western societies. And the emergence of secular culture cannot be adequately explained as an anti-religious conspiracy. Against John Milbank he argues that democracy is not well served by sweeping pronouncements either for or against liberal society, but rather by balanced and detailed commentary on its various features and prudent counsel on how one or another of them should be changed. Secularity does not resist religion, rather it enables a fruitful dialogue between adherents of diverse religions and non-religious views of life. Christians, in his opinion, can very well participate in a secular culture and even believe (for themselves) that politics in the end stands under Gods authority.

Stout asserts that Milbank's theological view on secularity is a threat to a plural, democratic society. He does not see that Milbank, in a way, is after a middle position as well. Milbank's criticism of Macintyre's communitarianism is telling in this respect.[207] Milbank too fears the all-too-static truths of ethnocentrism. Stout, however, does treat Milbank's position as a sectarian one. A Christian ontology as a response to the crisis of secular culture is inconceivable to Stout. He interprets Milbank's position as resentment against secularization. Secularization to Stout means that "the age of theocracy is over, not that the anti-Christ has taken control of the political sphere."[208] But what Stout sees as a solution to the breakdown of liberal democracies is to Milbank's mind part of the problem. He sets out to demonstrate that the relation between secularity and religion is not one of public and private, rather between two competing doctrines on every aspect of life; political, aesthetic, public and private. What Stout has called "the ontological priority of the social" is as good a prejudice as Milbank's priority of the theological. Despite his much more open mind toward religion, Stout's position does not fundamentally differ from Rorty's pragmatic liberalism. He has a picture of society as consisting of diverse religious and non-religious groups, arguing for a vocabulary that is the end not justifiable without becoming circular.[209] These groups have to accept and relate to a secular society, in Stout's opinion. Stout depicts this relation in terms of a public/private distinction and in this perspective his position is downright liberal.[210] It leaves believers free to view – as individuals – the state and democratic political culture as domains standing ultimately under divine judgment and authority. That believers view the political sphere in this way may, however, not lead them to ontological claims, for Stout is absolutely sure about the ontological priority of the social. Milbank and Stout follow a similar mode of reasoning in meeting the challenges of modern democracy. Milbank defines theology as a social theory and departs from the reality of the community. He makes explicit the ontological claims implicit in the Christian narrative. He adds to this that the radical pluralism defended by Stout can only be upheld by

nities. Members of a religious communion can benefit from such expression by learning about themselves and putting themselves in a position to reflect critically on their commitments." Stout, *Democracy*, 112.

[206] Stout, *Democracy*, 114–5.
[207] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 327.
[208] Stout, *Democracy*, 93.
[209] Stout, *Democracy*, 116.
[210] Stout, *Democracy*, 99.

the stronger ontological claim of an agonistic reality. As far as Stout is not prepared to give more clarity to what the substantial values are that are shared in the tradition of liberalism, it is hard to see how his position differs from more relativistic positions.

4.5 EVALUATION

This chapter has discussed the concept of secularity in the perspective of Radical Orthodoxy. This evaluation summarizes the three aspects of secularity we distinguished earlier: the socio-historical category of secularization, ontological secularity and political secularity

Milbank can be regarded as a secularization theologian in a certain sense. He is tracing the origins of modern secularity in theological discourse. In that sense modern secularity is a secularization of Christianity. The problem for Milbank is that modern secularity is a secularization of the wrong kind of Christianity, namely the late medieval nominalism of Scotus and Ockham. The consequence of this nominalism is that in the wake of a theology that regards God as characterized first and foremost by his will and power (and not primarily by his love) becomes increasingly separated from the world. This line of thought has been a powerful influence in the Enlightenment idea of a world that is autonomous and the space of human agency as autonomous. This is, in Milbank's genealogy, the secularizing effect of nominalism. Milbank demonstrates also that this metaphysics of will and power determines the idea of what it is to be in the world. Man no longer participates in the world but stands over against it in a relation of power. Secularization in this sense prevents man from participating in the world and encourages a disengaged stance to the world. Secularization cannot be adequately described in terms of desacralization. For Radical Orthodoxy secularization is the invention of an absolute presence. As Phillip Blond writes:

> Secularisation marks not a break from authoritarian positivism but the creation of its very foundation. Whereas both Antiquity and the Middle Ages knew that human knowledge was a result of attaining some sort of mediation or *ratio* between the transcendent and the immanent it is exactly this negotiation that the modern epoch loses. Secularisation begins by separating primary transcendent from secondary immanent causes; and yet, at the same time, secularisation ensures that both are independently and immediately available to human cognition.[211]

According to Milbank, the Christian narrative can help us to really get beyond metaphysics without falling back into nihilism. Accepting contingency and historicity we can fully appreciate the Christian narrative as a possible description of the world, which helps us to relate to the world instead of turning our back on it in a metaphysical or nihilist fashion. Contingent history is the carrier of Christian truth, not an abstract, supratemporal idea. Christian truth consists of temporal events rather than of any 'given fact'. In that sense Christianity is fully secular.

With regard to the ontological meaning of secularity, Milbank distinguishes between modern and premodern secularity. The difference can be characterized as a shift from mediation to immediacy. Milbank writes that: "...the banishing of traditional

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[211] Blond, 'Absolute and Arbitrary', 282.

ecclesial time served to reinforce a commitment to the illusion of spatial immediacy and to the exorcism of the metaphorically ambiguous."[212] Whereas in premodernity the Church and the state were understood as bodies and traditions and as living communities that enabled man to bear the temporality of existence, modern man is cut loose from this embeddedness in tradition and is placed in an immediate relation to God (in the Reformation), the external world (Descartes) and the state (Hobbes and later liberalism). For Milbank, the modern way of placing man over against the world makes him in the end unable to experience that world. This is quite the opposite of what defenders of secularity intend. Defenders of secularity typically claim that the turn to the subject in modernity makes it possible to experience the world for the first time, by giving up on premodern otherworldliness. Modern secularity in their view "…is a return to nature and bodily existence from out of the medieval elevation above these."[213] The perspective of John Milbank makes the Rortyian identification of Christianity and Modern absolutism a dubious claim. For Milbank understands secularity not primarily as desacralization, but rather as deification of the world. When in postmodernity the ideal of knowing the world objectively collapses, the relation to the world becomes even more problematic. Postmodern philosophy invokes an ontology of the world as an impersonal, distributive process that tends to be deified. The secular in an ontological sense is, for Milbank, an extremely problematic notion that can only be countered with an appeal to transcendence. Milbank's recapturing of the idea of participation sheds a particular light on his concept of secularity. In modernity, the idea of secularity was first and foremost a theoretical, epistemic relation to the world. Postmodernity pushed this to its extremes and found the 'world well lost.' Rorty defines this relationship in terms of irony and endless redescription. Milbank on the one hand shares the postmodern critique, as he argues for an appreciation of the world as a contingent creation, and our picture of the world as a narrative construction. Yet for him, this is a relation that – through the notion of participation – is an embodied relation, that makes man participate in the world in a manner not strictly epistemic. Benefitting from the postmodern critique of positivism, Milbank suggests reconsidering the religious narrative. When we acknowlegde the inescapebly narrative character of our experience of the world, the Christian narrative offers the possibility of engaging with the external world in a meaningful manner.

In Radical Orthodoxy the political meaning of secularity is problematic as well. Milbank criticizes the modern and postmodern notion of secularity. What is the reason for Milbank to be so suspicious toward the secular? Isn't the secular the most rational and peaceful guideline for modern science and politics? Wouldn't a criticism of modern secularity unnecessarily expose our culture to religious and superstitious influences? Milbank's criticism is directed against the widespread assumption of secular neutrality, mainly for two reasons. First: the secular is assembled out of various cultural sources, some of which are not at all religiously neutral. Second: the secular is not a neutral view of the world, rather it constructs the world in a particular coding that is by no means more unbiased than the religious view of the world it attempts to replace. In short, a particular secular ontology regarding the structure of the world and the nature of social relations, underlies the postmodern, secular worldview. The secular ontology

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[212] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 20.
[213] Robertson, 95.

is so dominant in guiding our moral and political intuitions that merely to mention the names of its originators, such as Hobbes and Spinoza, is seen as a sufficient defense of it. Yet Milbank sets out to discredit the peaceful and neutral credentials of this secular ontology. The not so peaceful and rational nature of secular reason was present from the outset in the theories of Hobbes and Spinoza. Postmodernism is the era in which "the logic of secularity is imploding."[214] Against the popular picture of a secular society as rational and perspicuous and of religion as irrational and latently violent, Milbank poses the counter-question: is violence really banished with religion, or does postmodernism first invent a social ontology in terms of an irreducible plurality?

The second problematic aspect of political secularity in postmodernism is the abstract conception of human freedom. Far from being evidently peaceful, there is in the secular an anti-humanist thrust. Milbank means by this that modernity and postmodernity have an abstract conception of freedom, whereas freedom is always a historical and social phenomenon. The idea of an equality of freedom on the other hand gives no preference to any substantial, historical view of life and thereby risks discrediting traditions that serve freedom and humanity better than others.

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[214] Milbank writes: "For several centuries now, secularism has been defining and constructing the world. It is a world in which theology is either discredited or turned into a harmless leisure-time activity of private commitment. And yet in its early manifestations secular modernity exhibited anxiety concerning its own lack of ultimate ground – the scepticism of Descartes, the cynicism of Hobbes, the circularities of Spinoza all testify to this. And today the logic of secularism is imploding." Milbank et al., 1.

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Secularization as *Kenosis*

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Want dit is wat men meesterschap noemt:
Een vermogen zonder paniek te leven
Om het niet-zijn als een vorm te zien
Van je afwezigheid, naar de natuur weergegeven.
Joseph Brodsky, *Op een expositie van Carel Willink.*[1]

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This chapter discusses a third, postmodern intepretation of secularity. It is the paradigm *Weak Thought* and more specific of its prime spokesman: Gianni Vattimo. After a short introduction to Vattimo's philosophy (1) we will see how Vattimo sees the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger as paradigmatic for the transition from modern to postmodern philosophy. Then we will see how he interprets this transition in terms of a gradual process of secularization and how the concept of secularization is related to an interpretation of Christian faith as the religion of *kenosis* (2). Section 3 discusses how Vattimo's philosophy of secularization bears on his understanding of the world. The penultimate section (4) deals with the relation of religion to secular culture. Section 5 evaluates Vattimo's position.

5.1 SECULARIZATION AND WEAK THOUGHT

5.1.1 Exploring Vattimo

The program of Weak Thinking was first laid out in the 1983 volume *Il Pensiero Debole*.[2] Among the contributors to this volume were Umberto Eco and Gianni Vattimo. Their concerns with secularization became more explicit in the 1988 volume *Filosofia '86* In his 1985 *The end of modernity*[3] he offers a perspective on the development of philosophy in the twentieth century; a development he describes as a weakening of Being. He became a well known philosopher particularly after the publication of his autobiographical essay *Belief*.[4] in which he describes his relation to religion and the Catholic Church in

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[1] Joseph Brodsky, *De herfstkreet van de havik* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2000).
[2] Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, editors, *Il Pensiero debole* (Milano: Idee Feltrinelli, 1983).
[3] Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985).
[4] Gianni Vattimo, *Belief* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). *Belief* is the English translation of *Credere di Credere* In this chapter I will primarily quote from English translations of Vattimo's work

particular. As a young man Vattimo had a close bond with institutional religion. He describes himself as a militant Catholic. In his student years Vattimo turned his back on the Church, its ethics and metaphysics. Under the influence of his promotor, the Italian philosopher Pareyson, he started to read the great anti-modern philosophers Nietzsche and Heidegger. Nietzsche and Heidegger would remain the two most important philosophers for Vattimo. Only Gadamer, whose assistant he was for some time, approaches them in importance. Like many of his generation he felt attracted to socialism and the activism of the left. In his books of that time, however, he distanced himself from a purely economic revolution in a Maoist and Marxist sense. He suggested that the Maoist revolution should form an alliance with the bourgeois avant-garde: so that the revolution would not end up in a proletarian regime. He emphasized the need for liberation from the values of a Christian-bourgeois society in terms of a psycho-analytic theory.[5] The suggestion of a broadening of the revolution made him suspect in radical, left circles. His attitude to the socialist agenda became more critical and Vattimo began to see more and more that the ideology of the left is potentially violent.[6] Moving away from the violence of leftist ideology, he became devoted to studying the intrinsic connection between violence and ideology. Vattimo became increasingly disappointed with mainstream left parties and he realized that they did not have a real alternative to the expansion of the neo-liberal economic system. This made him rediscover the meaning of communism. As a member of the communist party, he worked as a member of the European Parliament for four years.[7] After that, he returned to the University of Turin, where he teaches as a professor of philosophy.

In order to make clearer the relation Vattimo has to the preceding discussions, I will give a general impression of Vattimo's relationship to the philosophy of Richard Rorty. So far, we have demonstrated, through a reading of Rorty, that there is an intrinsic link between postmodern philosophy and the concept of secularity. Rorty establishes this link by speaking of secularization as temporalization. By giving this broader definition of the concept he can use it to refer both to the transition from a metaphysical-Christian to a modern-scientific culture and to the transition from a modern-scientific culture to a postmodern-literary culture. Our reading of Rorty also made clear that this is not the end for religion. In order to get rid of positivism's obsession with 'truth as correspondence' – for Rorty nothing but a secularization of monotheism – he argues that a polytheistic philosophy of religion fits the postmodern condition best. So there is a postmodern turn to religion in the philosophy of Rorty, but this is not a return to the metaphysics of premodern religion, but rather an overcoming of metaphysics, through polytheistic religion.

A significant overlapping concern is given here with Vattimo's research program. As Nancy Frankenberry remarks, 'it is the secularization thesis that undergirds both their narratives.'[8] For Vattimo, however, the insistence on secularization is not a means to overcome Christianity, but rather a legitimate continuation of Christianity in the

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[5] Erik Meganck, *Nihilistische caritas?: secularisatie bij Gianni Vattimo* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 5.

[6] Meganck, 4.

[7] Vattimo was a member of the Party of Italian Communists. Between 1999 and 2004 he was a member of the European Parliament, for the Party of European Socialists. For an overview of his op-eds see his website `http://www.giannivattimo.it`.

[8] Nancy Frankenberry, 'Weakening Religious Belief: Vattimo, Rorty, and the Holism of the Mental', in: Santiago Zabala, editor, *Weakening Philosophy. Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 282.

form of hermeneutic philosophy. Vattimo sees a continuity between Christianity and the modern philosophies of history. For Vattimo this is no reason to turn his back on both, but rather to see the transition from Christianity to secular philosophies of history as a legitimate continuation of the central message of Christianity.

Vattimo shares with Rorty the intuition that Nietzsche and Heidegger are the guiding figures for a genuinely postmodern philosophy. For Vattimo, Nietzsche's critique of Christianity and the emergence of a hermeneutic kind of philosophy enables the return of a more authentic religion.[9] Postmodern critique makes it possible for Vattimo to leave the quest for indubitable foundations behind and to engage in a post-foundationalist hermeneutics, that takes off from the particular tradition of Christianity.[10] In Vattimo we thus find a more complex relation to religion and to Christianity. Whereas Rorty works with a one-sided picture of the God of Christianity in a deistic sense (Such a God would have no real relationships, no need or ability to act, a God as a 'mere machine').[11] Vattimo also voices a critique of the metaphysical nature of Christian theology, but he underscores the nature of Christianity as a narrative on the *kenotic* God, whose strength is in his weakness and who becomes man in Jesus Christ. This is not to say that Rorty and Vattimo merely defend opposite positions. They both work out a theory of a secular culture within a postmodern framework. This has made religion a central concern for both of them.[12] The two differ mainly on the consequences of a post-modern epistemology for religion. They both emphasize the importance of the historic nature of rationality and explicitly reject foundationalism. For Rorty, a genuine historicist outlook is all we need for understanding the history of philosophy, like we understand in cultural anthropology. For Vattimo, on the other hand, we meet in the history of philosophy, including all its errors, the history of Being. His originality lies in his insistence on an ontological questioning as the key to understanding the postmodern condition.[13] This tradition should therefore not be met with an attitude of irony, rather with one of piety.[14] This implies a methodological difference. The main part of Rorty's work is concerned with epistemology as to evade ontological and metaphysical subjects. Vattimo's primary interest is in metaphysics and the attempt to understand postmodernism as an heir of the metaphysical tradition.

What exactly should be understood under the idea of historicity is a point of discussion between Rorty and Vattimo. Despite all their shared philosophical intuitions, Rorty and Vattimo travel diverging roads when it comes to the legitimacy of religion and the shape secularity must take in a postmodern era. Whereas Rorty sees the postmodern condition as a condition of absolute temporalization and sees therefore no need for an ontological questioning, Vattimo develops an historicist ontology. Only against this

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[9] D'Isanto writes: "The pervasive return of religion in contemporary culture increasingly calls for an interpretation of the present that is no longer grounded in the Enlightenment prejudice against religion, and consequently in the theories of secularization which maintained that religion would be wiped out by the modern process of rationalization." Luca D'Isanto, 'Introduction', in: *Belief* (London: Polity Press, 1995), 10.

[10] "Tradition is not foundation" in Gianni Vattimo and Ger Groot, 'Traditie is geen fundament- gesprek met Gianni Vattimo', in: Gianni Vattimo and Ger Groot, editors, *Een zwak geloof. Christendom voorbij de metafysica* (Kampen: Agora, 2000), 31–38.

[11] Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 376.

[12] See their co-publication Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[13] John R. Snyder, 'Translator's Introduction', in: *The end of Modernity. Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern perspective* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), liv.

[14] Snyder, xlviii, li.

background can the postmodern identification of philosophy with sociology be meaningful.[15]

5.1.2 Weakening Philosophy

Vattimo's philosophy is an effort to get beyond metaphysical philosophy. For him, metaphysics is inherently violent. He writes:

> All the categories of metaphysics are violent categories: being and its attributes, the 'first' cause, man as 'responsible', and even the will to power. These categories must be 'weakened' or relieved of their excess of power.[16]

Weakening cannot be achieved by simply falsifying metaphysics. Any falsification of metaphysical philosophy in the name of a truer, non-metaphysical or atheist philosophy can easily lead to an ideology which is merely another 'strong' metaphysical system. Vattimo experienced this in 1968 when violence became apparent in the left revolutionaries.[17] The violence of the left was not accidental, but was implied in the metaphysical views that underpinned it. It is not primarily physical, visible violence that is the subject of Vattimo's inquiries, but the way violence resides in ideology and philosophical claims to truth.[18] Vattimo refers to his program of non-violent thinking as *pensiero debole*: weak thinking. As he opposes both metaphysical philosophy and its rejection in the name of a greater truth, the aim of weak thinking is to resist metaphysics through weakening. What does Vattimo mean when he says that metaphysics is violent and in what way can metaphysics be overcome? For Vattimo, metaphysics is essentially violent. It is a sign of human *hybris*, to comprehend the ultimate ground of reality, the *arche*. This leads to concrete violence as it makes man master of his own existence and can justify violence done to others.[19] In modernity, human *hybris* – and thereby violence – reaches its summit, as man is now, through technology, the master of his world. Vattimo sees a human desire for mastery not only in modern philosophy, but also in Christianity which adopted the metaphysical attitude as it began to understand theology as knowledge of first principles in the sense of Platonic philosophy.[20] Putting of a par Being and the particular God of the Christian tradition lead Heidegger to the thesis that Christianity is a form of onto-theology.

Heidegger and Nietzsche are the two philosophers for Vattimo, that have most radically called into question this metaphysical tradition. In line with them, Vattimo defines the postmodern condition as breaking with traditional philosophy in a very specific sense. Their critique did not only concern the traditional metaphysics of a *Hinterwelt*. In a way the historicism of the nineteenth century had said the same thing. The metaphysical philosophy Vattimo sees as his primary target is the historicism of

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[15] Giacomo Marramao, 'Which Ontology after Metaphysics? Conversations with Gianni Vattimo and Richard Rorty', in: Santiago Zabala, editor, *Weakening Philosophy. Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 78. See also the essay *Hermeneutics and Anthropology* in Vattimo, *End of Modernity*.

[16] Gianni Vattimo, *The adventure of difference* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1980), 5–6.

[17] Meganck, 3–6.

[18] Meganck, 7.

[19] Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 120.

[20] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 124.

the nineteenth century. In the historicist system of, for example, G.W.F. Hegel, meta-physics no longer means the knowledge of a static and unchangeable Being; but Being itself is thought of in historical terms.[21] Vattimo criticizes historicism for thinking about history 'in terms of recognizable and necessary rhythms, which maintain a certain stability.'[22] The postmodern condition means for Vattimo that we cannot think of Being as such a necessary process. This does not imply for Vattimo that Being is just a chaotic confusion. Being is an event and its stages are more than random. Modernity can be understood as a step beyond the cyclical thought of antiquity. But this 'beyond' can-not be thought of as linear progress, or an overcoming. The postmodern condition is rather an awareness that history itself is coming to an end. Vattimo thus sees himself standing, with Heidegger and Nietzsche, in a tradition of non- or post-historicism.[23] The end of metaphysics is not only a negative observation regarding the impossibil-ity of foundational knowledge and the cognitive representation of reality's structures. The way we are going from there is not entirely open to negotiation. For Vattimo it is essential to see that Being has a history. We cannot return to a pre-metaphysical mode of thought, nor can we simply forget about the metaphysical past. In the wake of the end of metaphysics, philosophical thought can no longer rely on the rigidity of the metaphysical tradition.[24] Vattimo describes the postmodern condition as a post-historic condition in which 'historicity has become problematic for theory'.[25] In modernity, his-tory is methodically relevant, often to articulate a *caesura* with the past and to think of the future in terms of a project that needs to be realized.[26] For Vattimo the post-modern consciousness of our culture is characterized by an awareness that history has come to an end. This is not meant in a catastrophic sense, as if there was an awareness that the end of history is near, but in the sense of Arnold Gehlen's *post-histoire*. Gehlen speaks of an experience of history that is no longer progressive or teleologic. In modern society, progress has become routine. Vattimo translates this routine to an experience in postmodernity in which man no longer anticipates decisive, salvific events, but has made progress a part of everyday routine.[27] Progress has turned into an experience of simultaneity that produces a de-historization of experience.'[28] Vattimo explains this development in terms of secularization, when he writes:

> For Christianity, history appears as the history of salvation; it then becomes the search
> for a worldly condition of perfection, before turning, little by little, into the history of
> progress.…By depriving progress of a final destination, secularization dissolves the
> very notion of progress itself, as happens in nineteenth and twentieth century cul-

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[21] Dupré mentions Hegel as 'the first to abandon the static idea of philosophy.' Louis Dupré, *Metaphysics and Culture*, The Aquinas lecture 1994 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1994), 26.

[22] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 3.

[23] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 6.

[24] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 13.

[25] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 6.

[26] This modern use of history has been scrutinized by Koselleck in *Die Vergangene Zukunft*. See Machiel Karskens, 'Tijdsplitsingen. Hemelrijk en aardrijk als model van historische tijd', in: Maria Grever and Harry Jansen, editors, *De ongrijpbare tijd. Temporaliteit en de constructie van het verleden* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2001), 66.

[27] Vattimo writes: "In a consumer society continual renewal(of clothes, tools, buildings) is already required physiologically for the system simply to survive. What is new is not in the least 'revolutionary' or subversive; it is what allows us to stay the same." Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 7.

[28] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 10.

ture.[29]

From this understanding of secularization as a dissolution, it follows that we should not think of the end of history as simply a stop, but as the breakdown of its unity. When we realize that the the unilinear and supposedly rational account of progress was but one story among many others, the unilinear account of history is but one possible perspective. When we take this narrative approach, history is a much more confusing conglomerate of narratives that show no logical or chronological unity. Moreover, even if one would want to bring all the possible stories together in one single narrative, this becomes increasingly difficult in our postmodern condition. Modern media and information technology enlarge the amount of data, stories and histories to an extent that unity becomes more and more implausible.

At this point it is fruitful to give one more comparison with Rorty's philosophy, who is also an interpreter of Heidegger. Rorty sees the end of metaphysics as opening an even more radical historicism. Vattimo quotes Rorty as saying that "Heidegger's serious limit was to call the 'History of Being' an event which unfolds in no more than a hundred books or so of the Western tradition that constitutes the philosophical canon in which Heidegger grew up, and whose limits and contingency Heidegger should have acknowledged."[30] Reducing philosophy to nothing but a contingent series of writings is unacceptable for Vattimo.[31] The nihilism Vattimo is defining tries to do justice to both the postmodern criticism of any realist metaphysics, at the same time trying to avoid a textualist nihilism as formulated by Rorty, according to which there is no history or reality apart from the texts.[32]

Vattimo sees metaphysical philosophy as mistaken; nevertheless the way we are going from there is never completely loose from that tradition. New experiences make sense only as dialogues with that tradition.[33] Vattimo does not see the postmodern scattering of metaphysics as a reason to give up on the idea of Being. Rather it is an indication of the idea that Being is dynamic and makes history. Postmodern philosophy

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[29] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 8.

[30] Vattimo, *Belief*, 40.

[31] Vattimo, *Belief*, 40.

[32] Elsewhere he asserts that even if there were not a history of being, we would still be obliged to profess our continuity with the tradition that shaped us. This can never be a matter of irony. Also: "If someone (I am thinking of Rorty) were to say to me that there is no need to speak of the history of Being to explain my preference for a world where solidarity and respect for others prevail, rather than war of all against all, I would object that even from the perspective of solidarity and respect it is important to become aware of the roots of our preferences. Indeed, an ethics of respect and solidarity can become reasonable, precise in what it says and capable of holding its own in conversation with others precisely by relating itself explicitly to its provenance." Vattimo, *Belief*, 45.

[33] Gianni Vattimo, *Jenseits vom Subjekt: Nietzsche, Heidegger und die Hermeneutik* (Böhlau: Passagen Verlag, 1986), 19. "Vattimo … sees the heterogeneity and diversity in our experience of the world as a hermeneutical problem to be solved by developing a sense of continuity between the present and the past. This continuity is to be a unity of meaning rather than the repetition of a functional structure, and the meaning is ontological. In this respect, Vattimo's project is an extension of Heidegger's inquiries into the meaning of being. However, where Heidegger situates Nietzsche within the limits of metaphysics, Vattimo joins Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics with Nietzsche's effort to think beyond nihilism and historicism with his concept of eternal return. The result, says Vattimo, is a certain distortion of Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche, allowing Heidegger and Nietzsche to be interpreted through one another." Gary Aylesworth, 'Postmodernism', in: Edward N.Zalta, editor, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2005), ⟨URL: http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2005/entries/postmodernism/⟩.

can articulate this eventual character of Being by taking Heidegger's critique of human-ism and Nietzsche's announcement of an accomplished nihilism as 'positive' moments for a philosophical reconstruction, and not merely as negative rejections of philoso-phy.[34] Although Vattimo speaks of a destruction of ontology, Being is still what matters to Vattimo. What he rejects, though, is a conception of Being as a 'stable structure'.[35] The weakening of being is therefore a normative development.[36]

Nihilism

The specific position that Vattimo carves out, is on the one hand a philosophy of differ-ence, in line with Heidegger and on the other hand a nihilism. I will now briefly discuss these two central notions of Vattimo's philosophy. Nihilism comes to Vattimo from the work of Nietzsche. Nihilism is not to be taken as a mere tragic experience, as a loss of transcendent meaning. Rather Vattimo interprets Nietzsche's philosophy as a positive nihilism.[37] Nietzsche's nihilism centers around his criticism of religion and his thesis of the death of God. As Vattimo reads him, Nietzsche urges us to radically break with a God who is nothing but a sublimation. When we agree with Nietzsche's theory, the God of metaphysics dies with the morality of sublimation. For Vattimo the death of God is an act of piety: God has been slain by religious men out of piety and devotion. This allows Vattimo to see both the end of metaphysics and the death of God as concurring with *true* religion. The death of God is the death of the God that man himself brought forth. For the God of sublimation is rooted in the human need for control.[38] Nihilism, thus, is not only a deconstruction of metaphysics. It also entails a positive account of man's place in the world. For this positive nihilism, Vattimo refers to Nietzsche's philosophy of the morning, as a philosophy of 'good temperament'. This entails a contemplative way of being in the world, which is not primarily theoretical.

A second theme from Nietzsche that influences Vattimo's nihilism is idea of eternal recurrence, as an 'unconditional endorsement of life.'[39] Vattimo takes great interest in a philosophy of the morning and Nietzsche's teaching of eternal recurrence, for these teachings express the *positive* element in the deconstruction of metaphysics. The end of metaphysics has ontological implications. Nihilism is thus not a merely negative phe-nomenon, but has a certain normativity for postmodern theory. Postmodernism cannot be understood as a mere conflict of interpretations. There is a certain normativity with

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[34] As he reads Nietzsche and Heidegger: "Being is not understood by them to 'be' but rather to become, yet this occurs according to necessary and recognizable rhythms which nevertheless maintain a certain ideal stability. Instead, Nietzsche and Heidegger radically conceive of Being as an *event*; for both of them it is vitally important, in order to be able to speak of Being, to understand at 'what point' we are, and at 'what point' Being itself is." Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 3,20.

[35] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 11–12.

[36] See also: Guido Vanheeswijck, 'The religious philosophy of Gianni Vattimo. An introduction', *Bijdragen* 61,4 (2000), 365–369.

[37] For the term positive nihilism see Jean Grondin, 'Vattimo's Latinization of Hermeneutics: Why Did Gadamer Resist Postmodernism?', in: Santiago Zabala, editor, *Weakening Philosophy. Essays in honour of Gianni Vattimo* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007). Nietzsche discerns three forms of nihilism; reactive, active and affirming nihilism. Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 98.

[38] Vattimo writes: "…the origin of belief in God, in a substance, or in free will, or indeed in the imperative of truth, generally depends closely on violence and insecurity – this belief is rooted in the need to protect oneself in the struggle for life against the deceptions and self deceptions emanating from the passions." Gianni Vattimo, *Nietzsche. An introduction* (London: Continuum Press, 2002), 77.

[39] Vattimo, *Nietzsche*, 85.

regard to the validity of interpretations. Interpretations have to accord with weakening, as a realization of what Nietzsche called 'the accomplishment of nihilism'. A postmodern culture, in which the need for Truth in an objective sense is no longer felt, is for Vattimo the accomplishment of this positive nihilism.[40] This nihilism is not a downright refusal to be ontological. Rather it is the specific ontology that emerges when we, as Nietzsche described it, 'roll from the center toward X.' The ontology proper to postmodernism is no longer related to a central human subject, rather the experience is one of a decentering of the human subject.

The crucial problem of this nihilism is that the philosophy of Heidegger was designed to describe an authentic way of being human in a nihilistic culture and in that sense Heidegger cannot be interpreted as a nihilist. Vattimo is aware of his unfamiliar interpretation of Heidegger.[41] His focus is, however, much more on the later works of Heidegger, in which no longer the 'gap' between beings and Being is central, but the presence of Being in beings in history.[42] Nihilism in this sense is a positive experience of the world, but it is no longer anthropocentric or humanistic.[43]

Another way to articulate this nihilism is to speak of a reduction of being to value. This is not to say, a reduction to the subject that ascribes value, but a reduction to exchange value.[44] Vattimo finds this version of nihilism coherent with the idea of the death of God in Nietzsche's philosophy. Nietzsche did not give up the idea of value as such, only the idea of the highest values. The resulting nihilist account of value is the reduction of being to exchange value. Values are, so to speak, ordered horizontally and can be endlessly reinterpreted (exchanged). This replaces the metaphysical, vertical ordering of values. In a postmodern sense, there is no "terminal or interrupting instance of the highest value (God) to block the process". In a postmodern, Nietzschean sense, values can be displayed "...in their true nature, namely as possessing the capacity for convertibility and an indefinite transformability or processuality."[45]

With this understanding of nihilism in mind, as entailing (a) a positive nihilism and (b) an account of value as exchange value, we can see the original position of Vattimo in the philosophy of the second half of the twentieth century. In the course of the post-war period, there have been various movements that have tried to counter the advent of nihilism. In the wake of Heidegger, this has for example been expressed in a discourse of authenticity, as in existentialism. Nihilism is understood as a loss of transcendent meaning, which leaves us more and more subject to bureaucracy, technology and an increasingly impersonal society. When Vattimo defines nihilism as 'universal

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[40] "Today we begin to be, or are able to be, accomplished nihilists." Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 19.

[41] He states : "Nevertheless, it would appear that Heidegger's mode of thought is the opposite of nihilism, at least in the sense in which nihilism signifies that process which not only eliminates Being as foundation but forgets about being altogether. Nihilism, according to a passage from Heidegger's Nietzsche, is that process in which in the end 'there is nothing left of Being' as such." Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 118.

[42] Van Reijen writes: "Diese Wahrheit des Seyns ist gar nichts vom Seyn Verschiedenes, sondern sein eigenstes Wesen, und deshalb liegt es an der Geschichte des Seyns, ob es diese Wahrheit und sich selbst verschenkt oder verweigert und so erst eigentlich in seine Geschichte das Abgründige bringt." Willem van Reijen, 'Heideggers ontologische Differenz. Der fremde Unterschied in uns und die Instandigkeit im Nichts', *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 52/4 (2004), 519–540.

[43] Vattimo writes: "Nihilism concerns first of all Being itself, even if this point should not to be taken to mean that nihilism is a matter of considerably more and different things than 'simply' humanity." Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 20.

[44] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 21.

[45] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 21.

equivalence', it is obvious that he sees the loss of transcendent meaning as a liberation. As he sees it, every attempt to isolate an experience that escapes this equivalence or exchange value is suspect as 'an effort to isolate and defend an ideal zone of use-value, namely a place where the dissolution of Being into value does not occur.[46] (As examples he mentions Wittgenstein's mystic remarks on 'what cannot be said' and the discourse of authenticity.) For Vattimo such attempts do not prove nihilism wrong, rather they are as it were rearguard skirmishes that indicate the accomplishment of nihilism. The moral of this is that the longing for a sphere of use value instead of exchange value, of theological or theoretical truth, is always violent. In nihilism, Vattimo asserts, the '…conditions of existence are by now less violent and, at the same time, less prone to pathos.'[47] So for Vattimo the loss of transcendent meaning in nihilism and the emerging mass culture of the twentieth century is not to be resisted. Against critics of culture that call for a more authentic existence, Vattimo holds that mass culture and communication society are not solely '… the apocalyptic moments of a *Menschheitsdämmerung* or dehumanization, but instead gesture toward a possible new human experience.'[48] In a culture of 'universal equivalence' and generalized communication, Vattimo sees a realization of what he calls the 'weakening of the cogent force of reality' and a manifestation of being as narration. This leads to a society that understands itself as a 'permanent transcription, in terms of the imaginary, of the new possibilities of the symbolic that have been opened up by technology, by secularization and by the 'weakening' of reality that are typical of late-modern society.'[49]

We cannot go into details with regard to the legitimacy of Vattimo's interpretation of Nietzsche and Heidegger. What does matter to our concern is that Vattimo regards nihilism as an antidote to the violence implicit in metaphysics and the idea of objective truth. The emphasis on nihilism does not only distinguish Vattimo from metaphysical philosophy, it also distances him from a dominant school in contemporary postmodernism, which interprets Heidegger's idea of 'ontological difference' in theological terms. According to Vattimo this ignores the weakening of being and returns to a dualistic scheme of transcendence and immanence. To Vattimo's mind the nihilistic interpretation of Heidegger offers a more promising perspective for a postmodern culture and a more authentic interpretation of Christianity.

Difference

The second component of Vattimo's postmodernism is *difference*. The notion of difference is used in opposition to the idea of presence in modernity, according to which truth is located in the pure presence of things to the mind. As to the secular nature of postmodernism, quite a lot depends on how one interprets the concept of difference. In French postmodernism, there is a general tendency to interpret the philosophy of Heidegger as enabling a 'more divine God.'[50] Heidegger's problem of *Seinsvergessenheit* is taken by them as a plea for a more pious understanding of Being, which is no longer

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[46] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 23.
[47] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 24.
[48] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 26.
[49] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 28.
[50] The Dutch original reads 'goddelijker God.' P.H.A.I. Jonkers, 'God in France. Heidegger's Legacy', in: P.H.A.I. Jonkers and Ruud Welten, editors, *God In France: Eight Contemporary French Thinkers On God* (Leuven, 2005), 3.

seen as univocal with being, as in the tradition of ontotheology. French postmodernists such as Derrida and phenomenologists like Henry and Marion tend to interpret Heidegger's critique of metaphysics as an opening to a more authentic understanding of God in terms of difference: an understanding of the divine, not as a supreme Being, but in the margins of – or even outside of – metaphysics. For them God is more a 'radical mystery' or a 'radical alterity' that we loose sight of in rationalizing, metaphysical thought.[51]

Vattimo resists the general usage of the concept of difference, as enabling a return of God. In many postmodern interpreters of Heidegger, the ontological difference becomes once again an objective structure. One can think of the themes in Heidegger of an ineffable reality beyond appearances as *Lichtung* and *Sprache*.[52] and of what Rorty has called 'Heidegger's nostalgia.'[53] It is fair to say that both Vattimo and Rorty try to move away from the 'theological' Heidegger and Derrida and rephrase the ineffable in historicist terms. By historicizing the ontological difference, Vattimo keeps the quasi-transcendental reading of Heidegger at bay, and enables a more dynamic understanding of Being. More specific, Vattimo proposes reading Heidegger's idea of difference in a nihilistic, Nietzschean way. This latter point, the understanding of difference as a phase in the history of Being, is renounced by Rorty. His effort is to think of this plurality as a merely historical contingency. Rorty's line of thought is that the whole idea of a 'history of being' in Heidegger is mistaken. As Rorty sees it, we can materialize this history of being as nothing but the contingent collection of books that make up the canon of Western philosophy. Vattimo says that "if the history of the West is interpreted in terms of nihilism, then Heidegger would not be merely the author of an autobiographical novel. And the history of the Christian religion would not be a part of Western history, but a guiding thread within it."[54] So within postmodernism, both Rorty and Vattimo offer a non-transcendental reading of Heidegger, but Vattimo retains a metaphysical program, according to which Being is weakening. For Rorty, in a more materialist way, all talk of Being is superfluous, as the history of philosophy is a contingent artifact, comparable with the development of literature, architecture, natural science and so on. We can give anthologies of them, but these anthologies do not reflect Being.

Vattimo's reflections on Heidegger have far-reaching consequences for his theorizing on religion and secularity. Vattimo denies that postmodernism and its discourse of difference should lead to a renewed understanding of Being as transcendent. And he rejects the conclusions of a return of religion in the wake of Heidegger. Vattimo asserts: "It is out of the question to talk about the possibility of a 'religious' reading of Heidegger."[55] For Vattimo, the secularist consequences of modernity are irreversible. In the wake of Heidegger many have believed that there is a renewed possibility for religious language. But Vattimo sees in this a return to the idea of a transcendent realm and thereby the possibility of a return of violence.[56] This runs counter to the idea of

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[51] Jonkers, 'God in France', 7.

[52] Taylor phrases this reading of Heidegger as entailing 'that something beyond the human makes demands on us, or calls us" Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, 100–1.

[53] Rorty, *Contingency*, 122. See also: John D. Caputo, 'The Thought of Being and the Conversation of Mankind: the Case of Heidegger and Rorty', *Review of Metaphysics* 36 (1983), 661–686.

[54] Vattimo, *Belief*, 40.

[55] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 43.

[56] Meganck, 11.

an end of metaphysics after which we can no longer rely on abstract principles. According to Vattimo, difference can easily be used as, again, a principle. Difference as the principle of an endless deferral of meaning opposes the interpretation of the end of metaphysics. Therefore, Vattimo criticizes the principle of difference in Derrida's philosophy. Vattimo thinks a truly postmodern and post-metaphysical philosophy should be historicist, and combine ethics, hermeneutics and nihilism. In Derrida's *différance* Vattimo suspects a principle that is not itself historic, but transcendent. He proposes thinking of difference, not in the quasi-transcendental sense of the French postmodernists and phenomenologists such as Henry and Marion. The religious experience that lies beyond metaphysics is understood by Vattimo as an experience that takes place in the world. The experience of difference is not an experience of difference with a Being beyond being, in an ungraspable realm of alterity, rather it is the experience of events in history. In a genuinely non-transcendental account of human agency, man is always already in the world he is trying to interpret. [57] Thus, for Vattimo, an ontology that is proper to the postmodern condition does not return to a duality of immanence and transcendence, but respects the postmodern condition as thoroughly immanent. He sets out to develop a position that avoids the 'nostalgic' interpretation of Heidegger, which centers around the notion of difference. In the interpretation of Derrida and others the essential promise of Heidegger's philosophy is lost. Heidegger effectively criticized the modern schema of subject and object and tried to think of man as part of the world. He criticized a conception of man as an external spectator in favor of a conception of man as being part of the world.[58] The centrality of the ontological difference between the world, man and Being, frustrates the possibility of a truly historical philosophy.

A Nihilistic Culture

Vattimo's contribution to contemporary philosophy consists in a historicist interpretation of difference. Rejecting the conservative interpretations of Heidegger that often insist on the loss of authenticity in modern culture and the threat of technology, as an alienating force, Vattimo reads him in a Nietzschean way, as a phase in the advent of nihilism. Being, in the Nietzschean reading of Heidegger, is not the quasi-mystical Being beyond being, rather it is what shows itself in historical events. The accomplishment of nihilism will open a new horizon that will be a truly new experience, that no longer feels the loss of transcendence as a tragic fate. Technology is not so much an alienating force, rather in essence it is the entrance gate to this new mode of experience.[59] Far from a defensive attitude towards the emergence of a technological and nihilistic culture, Vattimo refuses to define a realm of authentic human existence and rejects the dualism of science and humanities, according to which there is a genuine human realm

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[57] Vattimo is after a hermeneutic ontology as '…that peculiar link …between thought focused on existence in its concreteness and historicity on the one hand – and the renewed attempt to tackle the problems of Truth and Being on the other hand.' Vattimo, *Nietzsche*, 6–7.

[58] Ger Groot, 'Gianni Vattimo en het geloof in de filosofie', Thomas More lezing 2000, in: Gianni Vattimo and Ger Groot, editors, *Een zwak geloof. Christendom voorbij de metafysica* (Kampen: Agora, 2000), 10.

[59] He asserts that for Heidegger, the essence of technology is not something technological, but belongs to the *Überlieferung*, that started with Parmenides and that it is the accomplishment of metaphysics. Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 29.

centering around such notions as 'freedom, choice, and unpredictability of behaviour'.[60]

The emergence of nihilism, and the historizing of difference, lead to a culture in which the human subject is no longer in the center. Vattimo thus agrees with Heidegger's critique of humanism. For Heidegger, humanism lies at the root of the reification, technologization, and secularization characteristic of the modern world.[61] Instead of trying to save the core of humanism, Vattimo suggest seeing the crisis of humanism as a part of the crisis of metaphysics. The centrality of the subject is at the root of both metaphysics and its 'most advanced development': technology. We can neither reappropriate humanism, nor leave it behind. Instead we relate to it in the mode of *Verwindung*. For Heidegger, *Verwindung* means healing. We have to recover from humanism and metaphysics. What we cannot do is simply 'amputate' it. Vattimo sees the emergence of a mass culture, made possible by technology, as the postmodern mode of humanism.[62] Thus secularization, in the meaning Vattimo ascribes to it, not only concerns the relation of Church and state, but is also characterized by a post-human perspective. The human self is now considered as composed of 'many mortal souls'.[63]

In Vattimo's reading of Heidegger, there is one more element that is significant for Vattimo's understanding of secularity. In the wake of Heidegger, there is also a philosophical reflection on the idea of *Lebenswelt*. Vattimo describes this as a philosophy centering around the idea of a world that 'stands prior to any possible fixing of categories.' A turn to the world would, for Vattimo, imply staying within the scheme of subjectivity and objectivity. His rejection of Gadamer's interpretation of the notion of *Erde* in the work of Heidegger is instrcutive here. For Gadamer, the idea of *Erde* functions as a critique of the centrality of subjective consciousness. For Vattimo, however, Heidegger is after a perspective that leaves the duality of subject and object behind. As Vattimo sees it, the 'recovery' of the *irdisch* or earthly character of Dasein, cannot be understood in terms of a reappropriation.[64] Being, for Vattimo, is an immanent experience of *Ereignis*, but this immanent experience may not be understood in a material sense. The immanentism Vattimo has in mind is characterized by a differential logic, according to which Being shows itself in the experience of the continuously changing.

Vattimo's position in contemporary philosophy can thus be located more precisely. As a postmodern thinker, he confronts the reappropriative intention. Instead of saving from nihilism a core of human subjectivity and humanism, Vattimo's effort is to get

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[60] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 34.

[61] Gail Soffer, 'Heidegger, humanism, and the destruction of history', *The Review of Metaphysics* 1 (1996), 1.

[62] "Technology does not represent the crisis of humanism because the triumph of rationalization subverts rationalistic values, as superficial analyses have led us to believe; rather, it does so because – in representing the fulfillment of metaphysics – it calls humanism to an act of overcoming or *Verwindung*." He sketches the perspective of an overcoming of metaphysics, which is also an overcoming of humanism, as follows: "…humanity can take leave of its own subjectivity, which is defined in terms of the immortality of the soul, and can instead recognize that the self is a bundle of 'many mortal souls', precisely because existence in a technologically advanced society is no longer characterized by continual danger and consequent acts of violence. Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 41.

[63] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 41.

[64] "The intensity with which Heidegger explores in his late works the notion of *Ereignis* and the related concepts of *Vereignen, Ent-eignen*, and *Über-eignen*, can be explained as more than just a concern for the nature of Being as an event which is not simply present; rather, it is an effort to free his original concept of *Eigentlichkeit*, or authenticity, from any suggestion of potential reappropriation which would still be metaphysical and humanistic." Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 44.

beyond subjectivity and humanism. Nihilism should be regarded as an entrance gate to a new post-human experience, which is now dawning upon us. This new post-human condition cannot be exhaustively explained in terms of social history; rather Vattimo sees it as a new event of Being. In this sense we can speak of a postmodern metaphysics in the work of Gianni Vattimo.

Within postmodernism, Vattimo rejects the most common interpretations of Nietzsche and Heidegger. For Vattimo, a theological reading of Heidegger fails to benefit from the possibilities of a truly postmetaphysical philosophy. Such a postmetaphysical philosophy entails a positive nihilism, which enables a general aesthetization of culture, understood as the pluralization of lifestyles typical for our postmodern culture. In postmodern, mediatized culture, the difference between art and reality progressively breaks down.[65] The resulting pluralism is on the one hand a very open culture, which is ready to accept every possible experience of being as an *Ereignis*, as an advent of Being. On the other hand it is less so. Vattimo vehemently rejects everything that does not measure with this pluralism. Every attempt to articulate a sense of a sphere 'beyond', or a realm of authenticity, is seen by Vattimo as a denial of the weakening of Being. In terms of secularity, this would mean that the secular for Vattimo is no longer accepted as a multiplicity of spheres, rather as the possibility of endless difference within the only possible sphere, the immanent sphere of pluralism. For Vattimo this nihilistic culture is a continuation of Europe's religious past, in the sense that there is a 'return of religion' in Vattimo's philosophy. But this returned religion has to follow the protocols of the weakening of Being. Vattimo works out the consequences of the weakening of being by means of the concept of secularization. This will be the subject of the next section.

5.2 SECULARIZATION

The end of metaphysics in the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger forms the background against which Vattimo makes his postmodern interpretation of secularization plausible.[66] Vattimo stands at the end of a tradition that can be characterized as dualistic.[67] He shares with Rorty a strong discontent with the subject-object divide as has been accomplished by modern philosophy. For Rorty, the Christian religion, with its idea of a transcendent God, was itself part of this tradition. For Vattimo, however, the overcoming of philosophical dualisms enables a return to religion. Vattimo's postmodernism is in many respects close to Rorty's version of it, especially with regard to the identification of modern philosophy and foundationalism. Whereas Rorty sees religion as of a piece with the meta-narrative of modernity and positivism, Vattimo takes religion as a paradigm for a more open, narrative rationality proper to postmodern man. He defines the postmodern condition as:

> . . . the epoch in which reality can no longer be conceived of as a structure solidly tied
> to a sole foundation that philosophy would have the task of knowing, or that religion
> would have the task of adoring. The pluralistic world in which we live cannot be

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[65] Gianni Vattimo, 'Het museum en de postmoderne ervaring van kunst', in: Gianni Vattimo and Henk Slager, editors, *De transparante samenleving* (Amsterdam: Boom, 1989), 96.

[66] Vattimo, *Belief*, 32.

[67] De Wit, 'Return to Religion', 392–394.

interpreted by an ideology that wants to unify it at all costs in the name of a sole truth, which some academic disciplines would have the task and capacity of knowing.[68]

Vattimo thus not only defends a philosophical position as post-foundationalism, he also links his philosophical position to a cultural ideal. He proposes a fully secular philosophy and culture. As in the thought of Rorty, we can speak of a multi-layered usage of secularization. The structure of a twofold secularization in the work of Rorty is thus, as Groot has also demonstrated,[69] also present in the work of Vattimo. Gianni Vattimo's originality lies in his effort to extend the theory of secularization to a rereading of the gospel as itself a phase in the history of secularization. This is a meaning of secularization as *Verweltlichung*. It explains modernity in terms of a gradual incarnation of Christianity into the profane. A central thought in the progressive use of secularity is that it presupposes a historical progress in modernity that was preceded by a historical consciousness in the Hebrew and Christian Bible. The idea of secularization as *Verweltlichung*, however, has deep roots in the nineteenth century and can hardly be said to be a particularly postmodern idea. The distinctiveness of Vattimo's project is that he extends the influence of Christianity to postmodernism. Vattimo rejects the absolutist and unifying aspirations of metaphysics and positivist science, and opts for a truth-pluralism and epistemological perspectivism. A direct consequence of this is that science is bereft of tools to either confirm or falsify religious truth. For only an 'absolute philosophy can feel the necessity of refuting religious experience.'[70] In the light of his understanding of postmodernism as a condition of pluralism, secularization can no longer be thought of as synonymous with atheism or religious neutrality. Postmodernity has made this positivistic secularism implausible.[71] The return of religion and the end of metaphysics are more than coincidences: they belong together as aspects of secularization. For Vattimo, the concept of secularization refers to a continuity between modernity and postmodernity, instead of a rupture. Postmodernity is part of modern history and secularization is as it were its guiding thread. To describe the transition from modernity to postmodernity as a secularization also conjures up associations with religion. According to Vattimo, secularization can be interpreted as a fruit of religion; as the outcome of a process that is inherent in Christianity.

What is the reason for this idea of secularization as a process that overarches both modernity and postmodernity? Is not secularization one of the key values of the Enlightenment and the tradition of positivism that Vattimo rejects? Indeed, there is reason to believe that Vattimo, precisely because he gives such a central place to the notion of secularization, sooner or later ends up in a familiar positivist pattern. His narrative on secularization, however, is more complex and is certainly not simply another variation of the orthodox model of secularization. He criticizes an idea of secularization as an idealizing of the future. Secularization cannot mean, for Vattimo, a linear process toward a unitary future. Secularization cannot give an univocal explanation of the course

[68] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 5.
[69] Groot, 11–12.
[70] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 5.
[71] "The end of metaphysics and the death of the moral God have liquidated the philosophical basis of atheism. Contemporary philosophers seem to be mostly religious or irreligious as if out of inertia, rather than for strong theoretical reasons. . . . God was denied either because his existence was not verifiable by scientific experiment or because he was a stage ineluctably overcome in the progressive enlightenment of reason." Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 17.

of history. In this sense, modern secularization is itself a myth.[72]

5.2.1 Postmodernism and the Secularization of Progress

In the twentieth century, the philosophy of Heidegger has often been interpreted in an atheistic sense: as a philosophy that turns away from the *Hinterwelterei* of Christianity to a more authentic understanding of human agency, as for example in Sartre's existentialism. Vattimo does something completely different in his nihilistic interpretation of Heidegger. He sees certain analogies between Heidegger's attack on metaphysics and a development in the Christian religion itself. He denies that Christian theology is as such onto-theological. Christianity may have been often stated in an onto-theological vocabulary, but in that same tradition, we can find a critique of the identification of the sacred and violence and of the idea of God as merely a highest being. In the New Testament, for example, Christ is shown in weakness and he suffers the death of a victim. But also in later theological traditions, as in Joachim of Fiore's trinitarian interpretation of history, we can witness a dissolution of the strong and violent character of the sacred to a more spiritual understanding. This tendency to a weaker rationality can be called a secularization. Vattimo discusses secularization as a term that explains the Western philosophical tradition from metaphysics, through historicism to postmodernism. Secularization is a process at work in various transitions of Western culture. In modernity the transition from a religious understanding of the world to a more scientific and immanent understanding of the world can be seen as a secularization. But it does not stop there. In Marxism and Bloch's utopianism, for example, the belief in a transcendent goal of humanity is replaced by a historical goal, the victory of the proletariat. Vattimo sees this historical awareness as yet another secularization. The transcendent metaphysics is replaced a belief in progress.[73]

In the wake of Nietzsche, Vattimo problematizes and contextualizes the modern notion of history and asserts that the conditions for the possibility of the modern, historical outlook are no longer present. In postmodernity, we see the dissolution of the very notion of progress itself. Once the belief in a transcendent God goes, the idea of a goal in history loses its plausibility. The idea of a unitary, teleological history is replaced by countless other narratives, corresponding to as many particular perspectives. Secularization thus ultimately leads to a dissolution of history. In postmodernity, secularization indicates a 'historization of historicity.' In one sense this can be interpreted as a break with modernity, in another it is a continuation of modernity, a more radical application of its historical outlook. In line with Nietszche's critique, modernity can no longfer be thought of in terms of a linear history, rather the ideal of a cumulative progress is exposed as itself a historically contingent notion. The secularization of historicism cannot be taken to mean simply the falsification of historicism. In a sense the postmodern approach tries to overcome the older mode of historicity. But this cannot simply be the next stage of history. In a postmodern approach we are constantly aware

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[72] "The realization of the universality of history has made universal history impossible. Consequently, the idea that the course of history could be thought of as enlightenment, as the liberation of reason from the shadows of mythical knowledge, has lost its legitimacy. Demythologization has itself come to be seen as a myth." Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 39.

[73] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 8.

that we are formed by a history we cannot undo. Vattimo employs the Heideggerian term *Verwindung* for this way of dealing with history.[74] The postmodern was thus, in a way, already present in the modern. The secularization of history and progress is not a mere contingent development, but radicalizes an aspect of modernity itself.

Secularization, especially in relation to the role of aesthetics, enables Vattimo to see a deeper unity underneath the changing conditions of western culture. It is in particular the relation secularization has with aesthetization of experience, that marks out its specific postmodern character.

> Secularization …is a term that describes not only what happens in a certain era and what nature it assumes, but also the 'value' that dominates and guides consciousness in the era in question, primarily as faith in progress – which is both a secularized faith and a faith in secularization. But faith in progress, understood as a kind of faith in the historical process that is ever more devoid of providential and meta-historical elements is …identified with faith in the value of the new.[75]

The postmodern experience of time and history emerges in early twentieth century thought. The possibility of the new as such is considered more important than a substantial, utopian ideal. We can think for example of Heidegger's idea of human existence as 'project'. Vattimo speaks of a tendency to 'locate the value of an action in the fact of its making possible other choices and other actions.'[76] Other examples of the arrival of a postmodern, aesthetic understanding of secularity are the literary experiments by such early twentieth century writers as James Joyce and Marcel Proust. In the German tradition of *Verweltlichung* a version of secularization was articulated that implies a farewell to a transcendent reality and the emergence of a science and rationality that tries to be wholly immanent. Vattimo sketches this modern account of secularization as the centrality of the idea of the new. This is reflected in modernity's fascination with the concept of genius and in the central role artists and art acquired in modern culture and the obsession with the new in the cultural *Avant Garde* as in Dadaism and Futurism.[77] Vattimo sees the relation of modernity, secularization and 'the appreciation of the new' as follows:

1. Modernity is characterized as the era of *Diesseitigkeit*; as the abandonment of the sacred vision of existence and the affirmation of the profane realm instead.

2. As concepts, secularization and modernity hang together as a belief in progress, which takes shape as a resumption of Judeo- Christian belief in the meaning of history from which all references to transcendence are eliminated.

3. This extreme secularization of the providential vision of history is simply the equivalent of affirming the new as the fundamental value.[78]

Vattimo thus places postmodernity in the perspective of a modern secularization. The modern concept entails an affirmation of the profane, implicit in Judaism and Christianity, on the one hand, and a cultural transformation from a religious worldview

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[74] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 179.
[75] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 99–100.
[76] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 100.
[77] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 100.
[78] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 101.

to a worldview that replaces the idiom of Christianity with the idiom of science and progress on the other hand. Postmodernity no longer remains with this unilinear account of secularization and its confidence about immanent closure. Therefore, Vattimo proposes seeing the postmodern as a very specific hermeneutics of modernity that can be explained as secularization. In postmodernity, there is a secularization of scientific culture itself, exemplified by the emergence of modern technology and mass media. Art and the centrality of genius prefigure within modernity the tendency to progressively untie nature and culture. A secularized version of a scientific culture is increasingly modeled after art. For, as Vattimo has it, '…art has found itself in the same ungrounded condition that science and technology only today explicitly recognize themselves to be in.'[79] The secularization of modern rationality and its unmasking as perspectivistic is thus at the same time a continuation and a rejection of modernity. Postmodernity pushes secularization to its extreme. It entails a more radical sense of historicity and recognizes an infinite number of possible perspectives. Postmodernism, in the form of art's occupation with the new, was present in modernity from its very beginning.[80]

To what extent can Vattimo do justice to secularization, with its deep roots in Christianity and modernity, and to his postmodern concerns with the end of the great narratives? The key to understanding the fragile balance between secularization and postmodernity lies in Vattimo's historicist ontology. In a discussion of the term 'post-histoire' in Arnold Gehlen, Vattimo argues that, whereas modernity thought of history as teleologic, as leading us to some point in the future in which all true knowledge would converge, postmodernity is skeptical about that alleged ultimate, fixed goal and finds greater worth in the new as such.

> The condition that Gehlen calls post-historical does not only reflect …an extreme phase of the development of technology, one at which we have not yet arrived but at which it seems reasonable to expect to arrive; progress also becomes routine because, in theoretical terms, the development of technology has been prepared and accompanied by the 'secularization' of the very notion of progress: the history of ideas thus leads – through a process which could also be described as the logical development of a line of reasoning – to its voiding. For Christianity, history appears as the history of salvation; it then becomes the search for a worldly condition of perfection, before turning, little by little, into the history of progress. But the ideal of progress is finally revealed to be a hollow one, since its ultimate value is to create conditions in which further progress is possible in a guise that is always new. By depriving progress of a destination, secularization dissolves the very notion of progress itself, as happens in nineteenth and twentieth-century culture.[81]

So, for Vattimo, we can only speak of a postmodern secularization as a non-teleological account of history. This post-historicist awareness not only discovers the roots of secularization in Christianity, but also sees that Christianity asks for a more radical secularization that exposes the idea of progress as a metaphysical prejudice. Vattimo does not understand postmodern secularity as progress in the meaning that 19th century historicism ascribed to it. Nor is the postmodern a return to a premodern, or religious mode of thinking; rather the postmodern notion of progress is one which is continuously aware

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[79] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 101.

[80] "Art functions as an anticipation or emblem." Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 101.

[81] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 7–8 Gehlen's essay is published as Arnold Gehlen, 'Säkularisierung des Fortschritts', in: Arnold Gehlen, editor, *Einblicke* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1978).

of its own historicity and the artificiality of life conditions. The postmodern idea of progress no longer expects any salvation from this progress, rather it is willing to call salvation the very possibility of progress and variety in a culture that has learned that there is not one single trajectory that leads to salvation for all. Vattimo recognizes in Gehlen's essay an understanding of secularization as a crisis in the heart of modern scientific, secular culture. The secularization of progress, according to Vattimo, means an end to its unitary pretensions, not a return to a pre-scientific mode of existence. Secularization in the end secularizes itself: secularizes the idea of progress and dissolves it. It belongs to the essence of modernity and hence of postmodernity that it jumps over its own shadow. Modernity cannot define itself, rather, in being new, modernity creates a distance from itself. 'The essence of modernity becomes truly visible only from the moment in which ... the mechanism of modernity distances itself from us.'[82]

The notions of dissolution of progress and post-historicity suggest that secularization changes the very experience of what it is to have a history. Whereas the postmodern critique starts off as a *historicist* critique of metaphysics, it tends to leave the idea of history behind. Vattimo sees this account of progress as secularization and as intrinsically connected with dissolution and nihilism.[83] Modern, utopian thought tends to leave history behind and makes the present entirely dependent on the future. This is latent in modernity, but becomes excessive in postmodernity. Vattimo writes: "... the post-modern displays, as its most common and most imposing trait, an effort to free itself from the logic of overcoming, development, and innovation."[84] It is at this point that Vattimo sees the value of Heidegger's term *Verwindung* as distinct from *Überwindung*. This term functions to let secularization cohere with nihilism. This term "deserves to be placed alongside those of secularization and (Nietzschean) nihilism in any consideration of modernity that is philosophical and not merely *historisch*."[85]

The distinctive postmodern trait of secularization is the dissolution of progress. This means that progress becomes so routine in modern societies dominated by technology and modern communication media, that the idea of progress itself becomes problematical. Arnold Gehlen speaks of an *emptying out* of progress. Differentiation in highly advanced societies, Gehlen says, "fans out in divergent processes that develop their own internal legality ever further, and slowly progress ... is displaced towards the periphery of facts and consciousness, and there it is totally emptied out."[86] Expanding on what Gehlen says here, Vattimo asserts that "secularization itself ... contains a tendency toward dissolution."[87] Modern secularization is generally understood as a

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[82] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 103.

[83] "Progress seems to show a tendency to dissolve itself and, with it, the value of the new as well, not only in the effective process of secularization, but even in the most extremely futuristic utopias." Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 104.

[84] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 105.

[85] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 106.

[86] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 102. The original reads: "*Säkularisierung* wird dann ebenfalss zu einem mehrdimensionalen Vorgang. Sie besteht im allgemeinen darin, dass die Eigengesetze der neuen Welt den Glauben erdrücken, oder vielmehr nicht eigentlich ihn sondern die siegesbeglückte Gewissheit. Zugleich sich der grosse Entwurf, dem Sachzwang folgend, in auseinanderlaufende Prozesse auf, die immer mehr ihre eigene Gesetzlichkeit entfalten, und langsam verschiebt sich der grosse Fortschritt, da man unbedingt an ihm festhalten will, an die Peripherie der Tatsachen und der Geister und entleert sich dort." Gehlen, 409. A term such as 'emptying out' used here and on page 103 by Vattimo reminds us of Vattimo's later use of the term as a translation of the Pauline term *kenosis*. Here it is not explicitly linked to that theological term.

[87] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 102–3.

process according to which the world will become organized more and more rationally and religion will eventually wither away. For Vattimo, it belongs to modernity to 'outgrow itself' and to see the ideal of secularization secularized. That is: to see the idea of progress in an historical perspective and to realize that there might be no such thing as progress and teleology in history and that even the idea of history may be mistaken or at least outdated. In the consciousness of postmodernity, history comes to a point where the need for something new 'beyond' is no longer felt, but the new becomes valued for its own sake. At this point a new idea of infinity emerges. No longer as an indefinite point in the future, but as the unlimited possibilities of the present. The embodiment of this postmodern consciousness is a technological society as 'the phantasmagoric play of a society built around the marketplace and technological mass media.'[88] The awareness of an end of history is most visible in art. Modern art and literature, as Vattimo sees it, are experiments of '…temporality outside its supposedly natural linearity.'[89]

5.2.2 *Postmodern Secularization as kenosis*

One of the most original aspects of weak thought is its hermeneutics of Christianity. Theories of secularization often discuss secularization as a decline of religion. Vattimo, on the other hand, sees Western, secular culture as deeply influenced by Christianity. Secularization in a postmodern context bids farewell to both the transcendent God of the metaphysical tradition and to the objective world of science. The return of religion in our late modern culture is thus in a very complex way related to secularization. In weak thought, secularization is analyzed in relation to the formative role of Christianity in Western cultures, in relation to the emergence of a secular (scientific) culture and in relation to the return of religion. This understanding of secularization translates methodologically into the emergence of hermeneutics. In hermeneutics, philosophy overcomes metaphysics and rediscovers its roots in the Western religious tradition.[90] In religion, hermeneutics liberates exegesis from the dogmatics of the (Roman Catholic) Church. Especially in the Protestant tradition, hermeneutics emerges in the new space of the free interpretation of scripture.[91] The development of hermeneutics in the nineteenth century shows us that, alongside a harder rationalistic philosophy, there is a softer current of interpretative, pluralistic truth, in general 'well disposed to religion'.[92] To

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[88] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 106.

[89] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 107.

[90] Vattimo writes: "As the nihilistic implications of its own premises are developed, hermeneutics encounters charity and so rediscovers its own links with the Western tradition. This is no accident. It is simply another, probably more radical, way of experiencing its own concrete historicity, its belonging to modernity. …Hermeneutics belongs to modernity inasmuch as the grounds of its 'truth' (there are no facts only interpretations) may only be set forth on the basis of the fulfillment within nihilism of the principle of reality which it regards as characteristic of modernity. But modernity is the child of the Western religious tradition, above all as the secularization of this tradition. It seems that hermeneutics has not only been a consequence of modern secularization (as a philosophy."

[91] Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 43. For the origin of hermeneutics in the uncertainty following the Reformation see: H.W. de Knijff, *Sleutel en slot. Beknopte geschiedenis van de bijbelse hermeneutiek* (Kampen: Kok, 1980), 39–69. See also Kevin Vanhoozer, 'Scripture and Tradition', in: *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 149–169.

[92] "…in that its critique of the idea of truth as verifiable conformity between proposition and thing undermine the rationalist, empiricist, positivist and even idealist and Marxist negations of the possibility of

make nihilistic ontology meaningful, without either becoming arbitrary or falling back in metaphysics, is to recognize that it has its source in the Christian religion:

> It can rediscover its own authentic meaning as nihilistic ontology only if it recovers its substantial link, at source, with the Judeo-Christian tradition as the constitutive tradition of the West. In other words: modern hermeneutic philosophy is born in Europe not only because here there is a religion of the book that focuses attention on the phenomenon of interpretation, but also because this religion has at its base the idea of the incarnation of God, which it conceives as *kenosis*, as abasement and, in our translation, as weakening.[93]

Secularization is thus not only a relationship between Christianity and modernity, but in hermeneutics it radicalizes the demythologizing intent of modernity, to an extent that Vattimo can say that it "leads in contemporary thinking to the dissolution of the very myth of objectivity."[94] Secularization and hermeneutics in turn are rooted in Christianity as the religion of *kenosis*. Vattimo, thus, sees postmodernism as a more radical consequence of Christianity and its secular intent. It is significant that the theological notions that come into play here are not commonly associated with secularization. Whereas the 'modern' secularization theorists emphasized such theological notions as creation, the rational and instrumental relation to the world as promoting a the contingency of the world and man's relation to it, Vattimo hardly discusses these notions. In his postmodern theory of secularization *kenosis*, *caritas* and friendship are central theological notions. I want to focus on three aspects of the hermeneutics of Christianity in weak thought: in the first place the notion of *kenosis*; in the second place on the notion of *caritas* as a norm for secularization processes and in the third place on friendship and the claim that a weakening of religion will result in a less violent culture.

Kenosis

Kenosis is a term that has played a dominant role in recent philosophy of religion. The term as such is taken from the letter of St. Paul to the Philippians, where Christ is said to have emptied himself (eauton ekenoosen). With this word the humility of Christ is expressed and his partaking in the flesh. More specifically it expresses the idea that Christ, in the flesh, gives up his divinity and the attributes thereof, such as omniscience and omnipotence.[95] For several postmodern authors this is taken to provide an alternative for classical theological models that emphasize the highness and sovereignty of Christ.[96] The New Testament idea of *kenosis* has considerable influence in contemporary religious

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religious experience … it certainly dissolves the bases of the principal arguments that philosophy has offered in favor of atheism." The interpretation of the development of hermeneutics should result in no less than a 'nihilistic ontology.' Vattimo, *Beyond interpretation*, 47.

[93] Vattimo, *Beyond interpretation*, 48.

[94] Vattimo, *Beyond interpretation*, 52.

[95] Thomas V. Morris, 'The Metaphysics of God Incarnate', in: Michael C. Rea, editor, *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology: Volume 1: Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 218.

[96] *Kenosis* as a philosophical notion has been employed by protestant authors mainly. Hegel for instance discusses it as an expression of the idea that "in Christ the transcendence of God became an immanent process in the world." In contemporary thought the concept is employed by death-of-God theologian Thomas Altizer. Graham Ward, 'Deconstructive Theology', in: Kevin J. Vanhoozer, editor, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 76–91.

writing. It is widely used as a concept that enables a smooth blending and blurring of discourses that were formerly regarded as irreconcilable.[97] Vattimo uses it primarily to interpret postmodern secularization as taking place within the context of the Christian tradition. By specifying secularization as *kenosis*, he attempts to save truth from a mere deconstruction of metaphysics. The anti-metaphysical and anti-transcendental critique of postmodern thought does not touch upon Christian truth. For truth in a Christian sense is incarnated and reveals itself in a historical context. For Vattimo the centrality of *kenosis* has as a consequence that truth surpasses the boundaries of dogmatic religion. Vattimo sees the possibility of a wide-ranging pluralism of religious forms that are all legitimate interpretations of the original hermeneutic event: the incarnation.

For the paradigmatic case of such a historicist religion, Vattimo refers to Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202), who thought of the phases in history in an evolutionary sense. After the age of the Father and the Son comes the age of the Spirit. In the age of the Spirit the spiritual sense of the scriptures is central and 'charity takes the place of discipline.'[98] For Vattimo the most important contribution of Joachim is that he thought of the Christian truth as unfolding in history. Vattimo sees Joachim's idea of history as a paradigm for a postmodern philosophy of history that can unite the tradition of Christianity and the emergence of Western culture. In postmodernity Vattimo sees a realization of the third phase: the era of the Spirit. He sees it as bearing resemblance to postmodern thought.[99] The theology of Joachim gives Vattimo a perspective on the end of metaphysics as not merely ending, but entering another phase. Philosophy did not discover the end of metaphysics itself, but is indebted for this to the Christian idea of history as a *Geschehen*. The Judeo-Christian heritage is still living forth in postmodern culture. For Vattimo, weak thought and the spiritualization of Christianity are consequences of the same constitutive event: the incarnation. Secularization is thus an "interpretative application of the biblical message on a level that is not strictly sacramental, sacred or ecclesiologic."[100] Every attempt to draw a sharp line between Christianity and modernity, fails to do justice to the historical continuity between *kenotic* Christianity and secular modernity. Secularization as hermeneutics belongs to modernity and is at the same time the deepest meaning of Christianity.

The double origin of secularization – in religion and in the Enlightenment – produces a paradoxical effect. The Enlightenment origins of secularization are rationalistic and demythologizing; in its contemporary working, however, secularization results in "the demythologizing of the myth of objectivity and creates room for myth and religion."[101] The consequence of Vattimo's usage of the term secularization is that it lets reason and faith, religion and philosophy, cohere. The close alignment between nihilism, secularization and *kenosis*, also allows Vattimo to distance himself from Hegelian metaphysics, according to which Being shows itself in a dialectical process. Secularization no longer takes place according to a 'law of philosophy', but a 'law of religion'. The

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[97] See for some examples Frederiks, 211–222. And Laurens ten Kate, 'Econokenosis: Three Meanings of Kenosis in 'Post-modern' Thought; on Derrida, with References to Vattimo and Barth', in: Onno Zijlstra, editor, *Letting Go. Rethinking Kenosis* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002), 285–310.

[98] Vattimo, *Beyond interpretation*, 49.

[99] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 31. And seeVattimo, *Beyond interpretation*, 49–50. Compare this to Rorty's notion of the three stages of Religion, Philosophy, and Literature.

[100] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 48.

[101] Vattimo, *Beyond interpretation*, 52.

Enlightenment initially separated faith and knowledge, but due to a continuing seculariization this separation is undone in what Vattimo calls 'a nihilistic ontology', which he defines as "...as the renewal, pursuit, 'application' and interpretation of the substance of the Christian revelation, and preeminently the dogma of the incarnation of God."[102] This is not merely to say that hermeneutic philosophy and Christianity are compatible, rather that hermeneutics as a nihilistic ontology is dependent on the decisive events proclaimed in the Christian tradition. The Christian tradition is not a bygone phase in the history of the West. It is rather the other way around. Through a deeper understanding of secularization as an ongoing process of weakening, originating in the *kenotic* events of Judaism and Christianity, "hermeneutics becomes aware of its own place within the history of salvation."[103] The 'law of philosophy' is distorted by *kenosis* as the historical embodiment of the weak logic of Christianity. The fact that the kenotic interpretation distorts the 'law of philosophy' does not mean that the kenotic interpretation comes down to a mere pluralism. Secularization, understood as *kenosis*, follows a specific, weak logic. This logic is revealed in Christianity's rule of love. Postmodernism, as the knowledge of an ultimate and inescapable plurality, cannot be upheld.[104] The only circumstance under which a given plurality makes sense is in the process of secularization as *kenosis*. Vattimo backs away from a mere pluralism, and argues that we have to be more specific as to the nature of Being. Vattimo asserts that "...even the pure and simple affirmation of the irreducible multivocity of Being would always be the object of a 'unitary' metaphysical affirmation."[105] The characterization of secularization as *kenosis* is thus not without consequences, but it implies an alternative to a relativism often associated with postmodernism.

> When, as often happens, philosophy in general and hermeneutics in particular declare that there are many ways of having an experience of truth (for example that myth is an 'other' way alongside the *logos*), this is stated as *logos*, which is implicitly affirmed as the superior form....Hermeneutics can be what it is – a non-metaphyiscal philosophy with an essentially interpretative attitude towards truth, and thus a nihilistic ontology – only as heir to the Christian myth of the incarnation of God.[106]

To be postmodern also means to be beyond a mere affirmation of irreducible plurality. In order to avoid the extremes of objectivism and relativism, Vattimo speaks of *kenosis* as the historical embodiment of truth as weakness. *Kenosis* is the logic of secularization, so that the end of metaphysics cannot serve as a legitimation for myth and ideology, or for mere relativism.[107] When Being is dynamic, says Vattimo, it does not have the stability ascribed to it by the metaphysical tradition. Rather it is always an event here and now. In this light, the 'rebirth of religion' is no coincidence, but is an application of the Western religious tradition and the weakening of Being. This familiarity between

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[102] Vattimo, *Beyond interpretation*, 52.
[103] Vattimo, *Beyond interpretation*, 56–7.
[104] Vattimo, *Beyond interpretation*, 47.
[105] Vattimo, *Beyond interpretation*, 54.
[106] Vattimo, *Beyond interpretation*, 54.
[107] Vattimo writes: "When for example post-metaphysical philosophy limits itself to a mere defense of pluralism for its own sake, she does nothing but preach a return to myth and ideology without any principle of criticism, apart from tolerance ...if the overcoming of metaphysics will be complete than it may not be reduced to a new legitimation of myth and ideology nor to the leap of faith of Pascal." Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 24–25.

religion and weakening gives philosophy a basis on which to reflect critically on the forms religion takes in postmodernity.[108] To think of nihilism as secularization and of secularization in terms of *kenosis*, is not the consequence of a logical argumentation. It does have a "global plausibility in its practical unfolding." This relation between the Christian religion and the history of Western thought is a history of weakening that is a result of the working of Christianity.[109] *Kenosis* suggests that God is not so much an omnipotent sovereign, but shows himself in humility. The Christian tradition has given us concepts like brotherhood, love for ones neighbor, and non-violence. To think of secularization as *kenosis* does not mean the end of religion; rather the fulfilment of religion. Secularization as a farewell to the sacred is in this sense a fulfilment of religion: in Christianity, the sacred becomes flesh and thus makes it possible to speak of God as part of the secular.[110] We could as well say that the sacred has become part of history. Religious language is thus not so much a matter of articulating supernatural truths, but is related to concrete events in history. Thus, the loss of authority of the Church and belief in God are signs of the truth of Christianity as *kenosis*, not of its failure.[111]

Caritas

The bond between *kenosis* and secularization results, on the one hand, in the acceptance of a range of views as legitimate interpretations of the Christian truth. On the other hand it emphasizes the continuity with the kenotic events of Christianity. Openness to truth in different interpretations and religious traditions is possible only as a consequence of the very unique character of the Christian faith and the Christian tradition of interpretation, which Vattimo calls the productiveness of interpretation. Interpreting hermeneutics as a transcription of *kenosis* means that it belongs to Christianity to exceed its founding texts and to produce more and more interpretations of the hermeneutic event. The standards for judging are historical though, not objective. *Kenosis* offers philosophy and theology a standard by which to evaluate concrete interpretations. Vattimo speaks of *caritas* or love as the limit of interpretation. This is obviously a criterion taken from the Christian tradition itself and this invites the question as to whether we can use it legitimately. For is not the criterion of love itself a historically contingent criterion? How can it be used then as a guiding criterion to evaluate historical processes of interpretation? Vattimo acknowledges this, but at the same time he holds that a viewpoint 'from nowhere' is impossible. In interpreting the world and making moral choices, we can only orient ourselves by making reference to the tradition we are already in. The history of Christianity and the history of the end of metaphysics are in this sense one and the same history; we cannot take in a transcendent perspective from

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[108] "…this rebirth of religion can and should be examined critically (by philosophy), if she would betray her own essential inspiration." Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 27.

[109] There is not always a strict argumentative connection. Vattimo sees a certain family resemblance between kenotic Christianity and postmodern, weak thought. The central thesis of Vattimo seems to be the following: "To analyze what it means for the return of religion, that secularization is seen as a constitutive element of the history of being and consequently of history of salvation." Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 29.

[110] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 32.

[111] "…secularization …also constitutes the Church's loss of temporal authority and human reason's increasing autonomy from its dependence upon an absolute God, a fearful Judge who so transcends our ideas about good and evil as to appear as a capricious or bizarre sovereign – is precisely a positive effect of Jesus' teaching, and not a way of moving away from it. It may be that Voltaire himself is a positive effect of the Christianization of mankind, and not a blasphemous enemy of Christ." Vattimo, *Belief*, 41.

which to judge this history. The history of salvation can therefore not be separated from profane history: "The history of salvation calls into being the history of interpretation. But at the same time the history of salvation happens and shows itself only as the history of interpretation."[112] Profane history has a meaning because it is intertwined with the history of salvation. The latter *continues* as the history of interpretation. This has not only to do with the fact that there is an obvious historical gap between the facts of the history of salvation (Jesus, Scripture etc.) and present and future generations, but as well with a certain productivity in the process of interpretation. Interpretation goes beyond the original intention of the author and adds something of meaning and truth to the facts, the text. This too is a shared feature of the Judeo-Christian tradition and Western culture. The idea present in both Christianity and European hermeneutical philosophy is that interpretation is not something secondary and accidental, but essential.[113] To see secularization as a 'positive secularization' is to acknowledge its dependence on Christianity. "As a hermeneutic and saving event, the incarnation of Christ (the *kenosis*, the self-emptying of God) is . . . itself an archetypical form of secularization."[114] Vattimo regards secularization as 'the constitutive trait of an authentic religious experience.'[115] Secularization is not the decline of religion, not the adaptation of religion to the standards of modern science, but an authentic religious experience. Vattimo's interpretation of what it means to be secular consists in a return to religion as secularization.

To think of the return to religion in terms of *kenosis*, as Vattimo has in mind, implies a certain norm. Not just any religious revival is welcomed by Vattimo. There are signs of a rebirth of religion that contradict this experience of finitude. There is a religious revival in Italy, for example, which is to Vattimo's mind too much a right-wing effort to return to a pre-modern religion of eternal certainties. For Vattimo, the return of religion can not be a return to the past, but must stay post-modern, must continue to realize that the God of the metaphysical tradition is dead. Every form of fundamentalism is a return to a metaphysical religion and therefore at odds with the rationality proper to the postmodern condition. For Vattimo, the history of Western thought provides a norm, for what can be thought after Christianity and after modernity. Vattimo says that philosophy has to take seriously the character of interpretation inherent in theory. Every philosophy is historically determined and finite. That is the reason for Vattimo's emphasis on hermeneutics – understood as the philosophy of interpretation – as the only possible philosophy of postmodernism.[116]

5.2.3 Secularization and the Truth of Christianity

This section evaluates Vattimo's proposal to interpret secularization as an application of the gospel of the weakening of the *logos*. In the first place I will criticize Vattimo's usage of the concept of *kenosis* with an argument from biblical theology. In the second place

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[112] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 62.
[113] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 67.
[114] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 70.
[115] Vattimo, *Belief*, 21.
[116] Martin Weiss, 'Hermeneutik der Postmoderne. Metaphysikkritik und Interpretation bei Gianni Vattimo', Ph. D thesis, Universität Wien (2005).

I will criticize Vattimo's equation of secularization and Christianity with an argument from René Girard's anthropology of religion.

The original context of *kenosis* is the letter of Paul to the Philippians, according to which Christ 'emptied Himself' (Philippians 2:7). The term functions in Vattimo's writings to give a biblical legitimization for secularization. It is very questionable, however, to what extent the term *kenosis* can give this legitimization. As Vattimo uses it, *kenosis* depicts only a downward mobility of humility and weakening. But this is a very selective use of the text. The direct context of the word kenosis is not only a movement of humiliation, but also of the exaltation of the Son and the subjection of all things to him.[117] The point I want to make here is not a matter of mere biblicism, rather I do contest the rather one-sided usage of *kenosis* by Vattimo (and many other postmodern authors). With regard to secularization as weakening, a more comprehensive definition of *kenosis* would show that *kenosis* is not a matter of mere emptying, but rather an *Umwertung* in which power and transcendence are not done away with, but rather are redefined in terms of the righteous rule of God. The Christological hymn in Philippians finds its culminating point in the adoration of Christ as Lord. Vattimo's narrowing of *kenosis* to a weakening and dissolution of transcendence is , in this perspective, mistaken.

Another text that Vattimo quotes is from the Epistle to the Hebrews. The first two verses of that Epistle read: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds." Vattimo reads the reference to the Son (In the last days He has spoken to us through the Son.) in contradistinction to the prophets of the Old Testament, with their idea of an omnipotent, creator-God. Here too, however, the author speaks of a glorification of the Son and the subjection of everything to him.[118] Vattimo here makes an uncritical opposition between the Old Testament and the New Testament and unrightfully makes *kenosis* and incarnation sound as mere weakenings and humiliation, whereas in the New Testament witness it is also a testimony of the divine power attributed to the son of man.[119]

However sympathetic I find Vattimo's intention to introduce biblical notions in the philosophical debate, I think he interprets these texts too much from his own pre-understanding of what *kenosis* is. I think Frascati-Lochhead is right, when she says that the intention of the text from Hebrews is the antithesis of the interpretation Vattimo suggests.[120] Vattimo reads the New Testament in opposition to the Old Testament. In particular with regard to the ethical implications of the New Testament, it is questionable whether this approach does justice to the New Testament authors.[121] Vattimo tends

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[117] As the KJV reads: "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

[118] The KJV continues: "…whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high."

[119] E. Verhoef, *Filippenzen Filemon. Een praktische bijbelverklaring* (Kampen: Kok, 1998), 43–45.

[120] Marta Frascati-Lochhead, *Kenosis and Feminist Theology The Challenge of Gianni Vattimo* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 157.

[121] See for example: Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order. An Outline for Evangelical ethics*,

to select elements from the Christian tradition and the Bible, without giving a more encompassing legitimation of his choices. There is a considerable tension with the interpretation of *kenosis* in a more encompassing series of events, which not only entails the humiliation of Christ, but also his resurrection, exaltation and judgment. The idea of Christ as the one who sits on the throne and who judges does not fit his scheme of weakening. When he speaks of the possibility of an afterlife, he says: "Eternal life is nothing else than the perfect maturing of the meanings and spiritual forms the history of mankind has brought forth ..."[122] To my mind this is an arbitrary interpretation of the tradition. Moreover, it is in a sense a form of natural theology, as it can think of eternity only in terms of a continuation of the here and now.

According to Vattimo, a consequence of the secularization of Christianity is that it is open to new interpretations and that the only rule for interpretation is the rule of love. I am not convinced that Vattimo is right here. If we followed Vattimo, every dogmatic creed of Christianity and every institutional form of the Christian religion could be left behind, without losing its essence: love. I find this particularly unsatisfying when Vattimo claims that this is coherent with René Girard's account of the uniqueness of Christianity. Therefore this section assesses Vattimo's relation to René Girard.

Girard has developed a theory that enables us, according to Vattimo, to interpret Christianity as essentially different from metaphysics. Christianity is not of a piece with metaphysics, but is the exception to metaphysics. For a brief summary of Girard's theory of a non-violent Christianity we can rely on Vattimo's summary of it:

> Girard claims that human societies are held together by a powerful drive, the mimetic drive, which is also the source of crises that threatens to destroy them when the need to imitate others erupts into the will to possess things belonging to others and engenders a war of all against all. The harmony is re-established only by finding the scapegoat on which to focus the violence, rather in the way that the anger of the fans in a soccer stadium tends to discharge itself upon the referee. Since it really works – ending war and re-establishing the basis of society – the scapegoat is invested with sacred attributes and made into a cultic object, while still retaining the status of the sacrificial victim.[123]

Vattimo sees his own program closely related to the work of René Girard. For both the truth of Christianity consists of a critique of truth in a strong sense.[124] The difference between them is that Vattimo sees this critique as compatible with a secular culture, whereas Girard does not think that a post-modern secular culture in the end overcomes violence or the sacred. In this respect, the two stand in radical opposition to each other. When we realize that Girard sees any type of human culture as originally violent, this stands in sharp contrast to Vattimo.[125] Girard's problem with religion is not transcendence as such and Girard does not criticize Christianity because it knows a transcendent God, as Vattimo does.[126] Girard is more critical of the post-religious,

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Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 156.

[122] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 59.

[123] Vattimo, *Belief*, 37.

[124] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 43.

[125] Milbank is a different case. He sees the necessity of a Christian, historical social ontology. To his mind, Girard's shortcoming is that he proposes resisting secularity, but does not offer an alternative social theory. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 395.

[126] Guido Vanheeswijck, 'Every Man Has a God or an Idol. René Girard's View of Christianity and

secular culture of the West, because the violent mechanism inherent in all forms of human culture can easily survive in an immanentist ontology. Girard finds this mechanism constitutive of human culture and he sees traces of it in a wide range of cultural phenomena, from primitive religion to modern novels. Unfortunately, the gospel of the death and resurrection of Christ has also been interpreted in terms of the metaphysics of violence. Girard has suggested that we interpret the incarnation and suffering of Christ as the event in which these mimetic and violent mechanisms were exposed. Thereby he distances himself from classical theological dogmas, which define the death of Christ as a *placatio*, as a sacrifice that pays for the sins of human beings.[127] Vattimo sees the presence of violence in the Bible and the history of the Church as a transitional phase. In the tradition of G.E. Lessing, Vattimo speaks of divine pedagogy and divine education, suggesting a growing awareness of the spiritual, non-violent nature of true religion.[128] Vattimo suggests moving a 'little bit' beyond Girard, by considering the theistic tradition as of a piece with the violent scapegoat mechanism. To Vattimo's mind, it would be in continuity with Girard's theories to deny God the predicates classical theology has ascribed to him such as omnipotence and eternity, and his transcendence. It is questionable however to what extent this is coherent with Girard, or rather contradicts Girard's theory. [129] Vattimo suggests that we can identify the God of metaphysics, (*ipsum esse subsistens*) with the violence of the scapegoat mechanism and with the God of whom Nietzsche spoke as the God who had died.

I think Vattimo here unrightfully identifies Judaism and Christianity with ontotheology and monotheism with violence. Surely, Girard's theory does not depend on a correspondence theory of truth in a static and ontological sense. But he does hold that the anthropological theories of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism have the facts right. His idea, contra Vattimo, that there are not only interpretations, but also facts, means that there are anthropological facts and that there is no relativism involved in recognizing and judging then. For Girard, the Christian witness of the unique God of the Bible – who is decisively different from the gods of natural theology – cannot be left out without jeopardizing the whole theory of scapegoating and mimetic desire. For transcendence is for Girard a necessary condition for preventing violence. Vattimo does not recognize that the flattening out of transcendence and his truth pluralism are not shared by Girard. Whereas Vattimo holds that there are 'only interpretations', Girard is an advocate of the truth and uniqueness of orthodox Christianity.[130] Christianity cannot approach other religions and cultures by leaving the witness of violent sacrifice

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Religion', in: P.H.A.I. Jonkers and Ruud Welten, editors, *God In France: Eight Contemporary French Thinkers On God* (Leuven, 2005), 75.

[127] Vattimo describes Girard's position as follows: "Jesus' incarnation did not take place to supply the father with a victim adequate to his wrath; rather, Jesus came into the world precisely to reveal and abolish the nexus between violence and the sacred. He was put to death because such a revelation was intolerable to a humanity rooted in the violent tradition of sacrificial religions." Vattimo, *Belief*, 37.

[128] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 38.

[129] Vattimo argues "…that the natural sacred is violent not only insofar as the victim-based mechanism presupposes a divinity thirsty for vengeance, but also insofar as it attributes to such a divinity all the predicates of omnipotence, absoluteness, eternity and transcendence with respect to humanity that are precisely the attributes assigned to God by natural theologies, even by those who think of themselves as the prolegomena to the Christian faith." Vattimo, *Belief*, 39.

[130] René Girard, 'Not Just Interpretations, there Are Facts, Too', in: Pierpaolo Antonello, René Girard and Gianni Vattimo, editors, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 95–6.

behind. The Christian witness of the innocence of the victim is unique and will not only unveil sacred violence, but will also evoke a counter-force, as the gospels also narrate.[131] Although both Vattimo and Girard understand the Christian unveiling of sacred violence as the event in which secularization is rooted, they draw opposite conclusions from there. Girard says that, as inheritors of the unveiling of sacred violence, we lack an efficient theory of secularization. For Girard, the relationship between Christianity and secularization is more complex than Vattimo suggests. As Girard sees it, the paradoxical result of the centrality of love in Vattimo's interpretation of Christian theology makes it increasingly difficult to oppose violence.[132] The idea of secularization as a mere weakening and disappearance of religion makes us blind to the fact that this cannot explain the violent nature of a secularized culture itself, and it leaves us bereft of a means by which to counter violence. Now let me discuss these two points in some more detail.

Vattimo's discussion with René Girard turns on the point of relativism. Relativism, says Vattimo, is perfectly consistent with the Christian religion, as the God of the Bible is not an abstract truth, but a relational person, who has incarnated.[133] The weakening of Being, and the relativism that flow from this conception of God and truth, enable us to live according to a rule of love and tolerance only. In practice this means that Vattimo is an advocate of negative liberty and of proceduralist ethics, which he defends with a theological idea of a divine pedagogy.[134] Vattimo's idea of the eventuality of Being translates into a radically sociological account of philosophy. Philosophy is never 'first philosophy', but is concerned with the always shifting processes and conflicting interpretations of the world. Therefore nothing is sacred and everything is open for political discussion, with as guidelines the avoidance of violence in the context of "informed and explicit consent."[135] For Vattimo, the outcome of the secularization process that first started with the Jewish and Christian scriptures is now being achieved in the postmodern culture of relativism. Vattimo claims that the central insights of Heidegger and Girard are essentially consistent with relativism. He reads Heidegger's history of metaphysics as a history equivalent to the history of the violence of the scapegoat mechanism. When the metaphysical mechanisms that Heidegger and Girard, each in their own terms, identify are unmasked, there is something like a continued revelation of the anti-metaphysical God of the Bible.[136] In a fascinating exposition on the similarities between Heidegger and Girard, Vattimo says that for both Girard and Heidegger,

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[131] Girard, 109.

[132] "We are in need of a goog theory of secularization because secularization also entails the end of the sacrificial, and that is a development that deprives us of the ordianry cultural equipment for facing up to violence. There is a temporality to the sacrificial, and violence is subject to erosion and entropy, bu t Vattimo's approach seems to me to combat its symptoms. When, thanks to Christianity, get rid of the sacred, there is a salvific opening up to agape, to charity, but there is also an opening up to greater violence. …And if one has a theory of culture, he or she must account for the extraordinary aspects of this culture." René Girard and Gianni Vattimo, 'Christianity and Modernity', in: Pierpaolo Antonello, René Girard and Gianni Vattimo, editors, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 32.

[133] René Girard and Gianni Vattimo, 'Geloof en relativisme', in: Pierpaolo Antonello, René Girard and Gianni Vattimo, editors, *Waarheid of zwak geloof? Dialoog over christendom en relativisme* (Kapellen: Pelckmans / Klement, 2008), 48–9.

[134] Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation. Ethics, Politics, and Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 104.

[135] Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation*, 105.

[136] Gianni Vattimo, 'Girard en Heidegger: Kénosis en het einde van de metafysica', in: Pierpaolo Antonello, René Girard and Gianni Vattimo, editors, *Waarheid of zwak geloof? Dialoog over christendom en relativisme* (Kapellen: Pelckmans / Klement, 2008), 85.

the emancipatory meaning of history is bound up with the end of the sacred violence of the natural religions.[137]

For Girard, the stakes with regard to relativism are quite different. The truth of Christianity cannot be to equate all cultures and religions. The anthropological truth of Christianity, namely the innocence of the victim, may not be clouded by a too uncritical appeal to love as the central message of Christianity.[138] For Girard the innocence of the victim is a truth that cannot be dissolved in weak thinking. There are anthropological facts and not only interpretations. Girard shares with Vattimo a discontent with the Enlightenment tradition of representational knowledge, but sees nihilism as the regrettable consequence of that. The failure of representationalism creates the need for another mode of describing and explaining human behavior. The modern novel was to Girard's mind, a response to the incapacity of philosophy to describe and explain human behavior. As he asserts:

> I see the current form of nihilism as the failure of what we call the Enlightenment, the rational vision of the universe elaborated by the eighteenth century. In this rational vision, human relations become too complex to analyze (and so in compensation we have the unsurpassed perspicacity of the modern novel) In my view, instead of giving up and drifting into some form of nihilism, asserting like some philosophers that there exists no certain truth, we must return to anthropology and psychology and study human relations better than they have been studied to date.[139]

For Girard the problem of violence is not solved simply by jettisoning and weakening metaphysical truth. In a way, Girard would say, the discarding of ontological difference unleashes violence. Once everything and everyone is on the same ontological plane, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish oneself and this makes mimetic violence explode.[140] The weakening of truth in postmodernity, Girard seems to imply, did not only give us a more open and tolerant society, but also a society that is violent on a scale that has never been seen before. In a sense this is to say that there is not only a postmodern ethics of love, but it is accompanied by a postmodern production of terror. For Girard therefore, secularization as a progressive dissolution of religion and a surpassing of the law is not desirable. Since human beings desire mimetically and are vulnerable to collective violence. Secularization as the abolition of authority and (ecclesial) institutions, is increasingly vulnerable to mimetic violence. The Christian rites are, as Girard sees it, intended to channel human, collective desire in a peaceful way. Without these rites there is a considerable chance of a return of violence.

5.3 THE DISSOLUTION OF THE WORLD

In Vattimo's highly original philosophy of secularization, he weaves together two programmatic terms, namely nihilism and secularization. At a surface level these two concepts cohere, but at a deeper level, there is considerable tension between them. Whereas

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[137] Vattimo, 'Girard en Heidegger', 86.

[138] Girard and Vattimo, 'Christianity', 46–7.

[139] Girard and Vattimo, 'Christianity', 61.

[140] Meganck writes: "Dat deze wereldsheid garant staat voor vredelievendheid is zeker niet wat Girard bedoelt. Integendeel, het geweld heeft zich 'gehorizontaliseerd' en de markt is niet zozeer onze *chance* op een vriendelijker wereld, als het terrein bij uitstek voor het seculiere geweld." Meganck, 224.

secularization is used to *affirm* the world and to save it from transcendental abstractions, nihilism is usually defined as a *denial* of the inherent worth of reality and the impossibility of knowing that world.[141] The postmodern habit to refuse to speak of 'the world' and instead to speak in a fragmented mode of multiple worlds, makes the question urgent whether the idea of the world has any meaning left.[142] In this section I will set out to demonstrate that Vattimo's position in the end denies the world. In this perspective his reflections on art and the artificial nature of postmodern society are very instructive. In Vattimo's philosophy of language there is no reference between words and the world, as the only conceivable meaning is in intertextual allusions. The world itself has no meaning.

> Whilst single things belong to the world insofar as they are inserted in a referential totality of significance … the world as such and as a whole does not refer and thus has no significance. Anxiety is a mark of this insignificance, the utter gratuitousness of the fact that the world is[143]

In the primacy of fear and the loss of "sense of reality",[144] Vattimo echoes the concerns of existentialists like Sartre. Despite his effort to distance himself from the humanism of the existentialists, both observe an *Entwirklichung* of the world and man.[145] When Vattimo uses the word secularization to express the way man is in the world; he does not mean a restored relation with the world, but a definite loss of the world. The very notion of reality becomes problematic. He sees the idea of a single, objective reality springing from a desire to escape a world of contingency. Giving up of reality is the radical consequence of modernity, as the metaphysical notions of ground and a systematic account of reality reach a culmination in technology. In technology, an objectifying stance is applied to man and the inner self. In this sense metaphysics becomes fully apparent in its collapse. Everything dissolves in communication. In the postmodern world, every account of the world turns out to be but another local construction, a dialect as it were. When all accounts of reality are exposed as just as many contingent narratives, there is no need to mourn the loss of the single world; instead this can be experienced as liberation and emancipation.

5.3.1 *World Dissolution as a Mark of Postmodern Culture*

At several places, Vattimo refers for his account of the relation man has to the world, to the three stages of *Verfall* in Nietzsche's philosophy. In his *Götzendämmerung* Nietzsche distinguishes between three stages of a *Verfall*. *First* he discerns the stage of the Platonic *Hinterwelt*. According to Plato the truth of the world was to be thought of

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[141] I refer here particularly to Nietzsche's reduction of the world to 'will to power' Richard Schacht, 'Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm', in: Robert Audi, editor, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 615.

[142] Silverman voices this question explicitly in Hugh J. Silverman, 'Can the Globalized World Be in-the-World?', in: *Weakening Philosophy. Essays in honour of Gianni Vattimo* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2007), 111.

[143] Vattimo, *Transparent Society*, 150.

[144] Vattimo, *Transparent Society*, 24.

[145] The term *Entwirklichung* in relation to Sartre is from Gerrit Cornelis van Niftrik, *De boodschap van Sartre* (Callenbach, 1953), 201. He also uses the term *Entweltlichung* with regard to Sartre.

as a realm beyond this world. The stable and static world of ideas made it possible to have knowledge of the transient and mutable world. The *second* stage is the stage of the Kantian discovery that the world is co-constituted by the human subject. Without the constituting activity of the human subject, there is no world to be known. The thing in itself cannot be known. The only thing we can say about it is that we cannot deny its existence. The *third* stage of *Verfall* is the stage of positive science. This is the stage in which the world is claimed to be known as it is in itself. It is the activity of the establishing of facts, which marks out its ultimately subjective character. This is why we speak of the world as a product of modern science. So even in the stage of positive science, argues Vattimo, there is no longer a true world, rather "…truth is reduced entirely to what is 'posited' by the human subject, namely – 'will to power'."[146] In trying to find the true, objective world, we stay within the boundaries of metaphysics. What Vattimo rejects in metaphysics is that it "identifies being with the objectively given" and "the calculable, measurable and definitively manipulable object of techno-science."[147] Vattimo's effort is not to improve the objective picture of the world, rather to leave the subject-object scheme behind and replace it with another way of relating to the world. Vattimo seeks to "quit a horizon of thought that is an enemy of freedom and of the historicity of existing."[148] This condition is one of a dissolution of reality:

> …as science speaks increasingly little of objects that can be compared with those in everyday experience, it is no longer clear what to call 'reality' – what I see and feel or what is described in books about physics or astrophysics? Technology and the production of commodities increasingly configure the world as an artificial world, where one cannot distinguish between natural, basic needs and those induced and manipulated by advertisement, so that here too is no longer a measuring-stick to distinguish the real from the 'invented'.[149]

In the emergence of nihilism, the world is increasingly a product of human creativity. Vattimo does see this happen in postmodern culture and there is absolutely no doubt that his observations are to the point. It is quite another thing, however, to equate this loss of reality with an aesthetic experience and to defend it philosophically. As Vattimo sees it, aesthetic experience is paradigmatic for postmodern culture. In an aesthetic culture, the loss of reality and solidity of the world can be experienced as a liberation. The aesthetic experience opens up our everyday life for other possible worlds, in the light of which the world of science is but a limitation.[150]

In modern technology (and for Vattimo this is most of all information technology), there is a constant production of world pictures, which makes the classical distinction between the humanities and the sciences problematic. The sciences too are caught up in a process of redescribing the world.[151] In this paradox, that our reservoir of scientific knowledge is exploding at a time in which the world is increasingly designed by human beings, modern rationalism is both declining and triumphing. The sciences of

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146 Vattimo, *Belief*, 29–30.
147 Vattimo, *Belief*, 30.
148 Vattimo, *Belief*, 31.
149 Vattimo, *Belief*, 31.
150 Vattimo writes: In an aesthetic culture, the loss of reality and solidity of the world can be experienced as a liberation. The aesthetic experience opens up our everyday life for other possible worlds, in the light of which the world of science is but a limitation. Vattimo, *Transparent Society*, 156.
151 Vattimo, *Transparent Society*, 41.

man produce a gigantic amount of knowledge about a reality that is itself a human design. The irony is that with the emergence of the communication society, this ideal of transparency is at the same time disavowed. Through the constant expansion of interlocutors as producers of information, the idea of an accurate description of reality becomes implausible.

The aesthetic experience of the world as a gateway to truth cannot be understood as a more original relation to the world than the representational idea of knowledge. Rather, experience is understood as a more radical understanding of representational knowing; as knowing now takes place in the "mirror play of the world."[152] The Heideggerian philosophy as a philosophy of the experience of 'in der Welt sein', is interpreted by Vattimo as a philosophy that experiences Being in contingent acts of creativity. For Heidegger a work of art has the capacity to bring forth reality. Vattimo underscores that in this respect Heidegger speaks in the plural, of worlds, rather than of the world. The meaning of an aesthetic experience is in its capacity to bring forth worlds which are "not just imaginary, but constitute being itself, that is, are events of being".[153]

To what extent is the dissolution of the world a fruitful perspective for a philosophy of culture? Would a liberation from the limits of this world really inaugurate a more free and plural society? Is not the most dominant development in our 'aestheticized culture' the unification of lifestyles as promoted by commercial manipulation? And in what sense can a postmodern culture which centers around information technology be said to be a more just society? Vattimo's response to these questions is that understanding the world in terms of weak thinking would not simply be a world that suits our desires better, rather the process of the dissolution of the world should be a conflictual process. The reason why the emancipatory effect of world dissolution holds off is that we are still too much in the grip of the laws of the real world. The tendency to follow the consensus of the majority is a symptom of the realism of the laws of the market that is still at work in postmodern society, and that frustrates the emancipatory potential of an aesthetic culture.[154] The limited success of the aesthetization of the world should not lead us to return to the world ('Hinnehmen der Welt'[155]), rather, within the context of a highly technological culture, we should fully benefit from the possibilities of an aestheticized culture. Only when we give priority to aesthetics over the alleged realism of economics can there be a truly free and plural society.[156]

Philosophically, the dissolution of reality is defended by Vattimo as nihilism. The most explicit text on the possibility of a world loss that at the same time can do justice to an experience of the world is in the text *Hermeneutics and Nihilism*. Vattimo is in

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[152] Vattimo, *Transparent Society*, 55. See also Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 117.

[153] Vattimo, *Transparent Society*, 71. "In essence, the 'continuous references to other, possible lifeworlds are not merely imaginary, marginal, or complementary, but in their reciprocal game they comprise and constitute the so-called real world." Vattimo, *Transparent Society*, 90–1.

[154] "Das es jedoch nicht geschieht, liegt daran, das noch eine gewisse Repression wirksam ist, ein verbleibender Einfluss des Wirklichkeitsprinzips, das, in der weiten Bedeutung, die wir ihm geben, mit dem Gesetz des Marktes identifiziert werden kann." Gianni Vattimo, 'Die Grenzen der Wirklichkeitsauflösung', in: Gianni Vattimo and Wolfgang Welsch, editors, *Medien - Welten Wirklichkeiten* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1997), 23.

[155] Vattimo, 'Grenzen', 24.

[156] "Die Menschheit muss sich heute auf die Hohe ihrer technischen Möglichkeiten begeben und das Ideal eines Menschen schaffen, der sich dieser Möglichkieten bewusst ist und sie bis zum letzten ausschöpft. Und diese bestehen für uns, wie fur Marcuse und selbst für Nietzsche in einer radikalen Aesthetisierung der Existenz." Vattimo, 'Grenzen', 25.

this text fully aware of the problematic coincidence of nihilism and an experience of the world. Vattimo's objective in this text is to show the coherence of nihilism and hermeneutics, against the constructivist hermeneutics of Gadamer, Apel and others, which risks retrieving a neo-Kantian idea of the subject. Against this approach, Vattimo emphasizes the 'nihilistic aspects' of Heidegger's work.[157] For Vattimo there are two aspects of Heidegger's work that enable a nihilistic interpretation. First, the analysis of *Dasein* (existence) as a hermeneutic totality and, second, in the later works, the idea of *Andenken* as a relationship to a tradition. The idea of *Dasein* as a hermeneutic pre-understanding of the world, brings Vattimo to the following reflection:

> Being-in-the-world does not mean being effectively in contact with all the different things that constitute the world, but rather being always already familiar with a total-ity of meanings, that is, with a context of references. In Heidegger's analysis of the world-character of the world, things give themselves to *Dasein* only within a project, or, as Heidegger says, as tools. *Dasein* exists in the form of a project in which things *are* only insofar as they belong to this project, or, in other words, only insofar as they have a specific meaning in this context. This preliminary familiarity with the world, which is identified with the very existence of *Dasein*, is what Heidegger calls 'understanding' or 'pre-understanding'. Every act of knowledge is nothing other than an articulation or an interpretation of this preliminary familiarity with the world.[158]

Vattimo explicitly denies the idea of being 'in contact' with the world as entailed in Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*. The way man is in the world is a 'thrown-ness', that can hardly be said to entail knowing or participating in this world. Vattimo gives a central role to the 'being towards death', in the way man is related to the world. In doing so, being in the world can be explained only in negative terms. Vattimo writes:

> Dasein establishes itself as a hermeneutic totality only insofar as it continually lives the possibility of no-longer-being-there. This condition may be described by saying that the foundation of Dasein coincides with its groundlessness: the hermeneutic to-tality of Dasein exists only in relation to the constitutive possibility of no longer being (there).[159]

Vattimo writes that Heidegger's idea of *Andenken* is not simply an embeddedness in a tradition, but more a continuing 'mirror play' in which nothing has a fixed meaning. The thing is not simply given, but is given only in an *Ereignis*. For a thing to appear in a context, means at the same time its dissolution in a network of references.[160] *Andenken* is not establishing a connection with tradition in order to construct a positive ontology, rather, against the forgetting of Being in the metaphyisical tradition, Heidegger pro-poses entrusting oneself to tradition. To entrust oneself to tradition, however is like a 'leap in the abyss of mortality'. Tradition is thus never a safe heaven, rather the context in which words constantly receive new meanings.[161] For Vattimo, the awareness of this

[157] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 114.
[158] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 115–6.
[159] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 116.
[160] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 117.
[161] "Tradition is the transmitting of linguistic messages that constitute the horizon within which Dasein is thrown as an historically determined project: and tradition derives its importance from the fact that Being, as a horizon of disclosure in which things appear, can arise only as a trace of past words or an announcement that has been handed down to us. …tradition does not supply us with a fixed point of support, but rather pushes us on in a sort of return in *infinitum* to the past, a return through which the historical horizons that we inhabit become more fluid." Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 120–21.

hermeneutic constitution of *Dasein*, is a way to truth and to Being and at the same time a nihilistic experience, for being, so Vattimo's line of thought goes, "tends to identify itself with nothingness".[162] An experience in this nihilist sense is typically "ahistoric and discontinuous."[163] It is clear that in the tension in Vattimo's work with regard to the worldly character of nihilistic hermeneutics, the scale tips to the nihilistic side and can only be valued in its rejection of the stasis of metaphysics. It experiences itself "...as mortal, as something that – in its capacity for death – experiences Being in a radically different manner from that which is familiar to the metaphysical tradition."[164]

5.3.2 Theological World Denial.

Vattimo's philosophy of secularization is an effort to speak theologically in a culture that is increasingly governed by information technology. For Vattimo, this has a theological background. Vattimo is very critical of the way theology relates to secularization. In the first place he observes a denial of secularity in the postmodern shift towards apophatic theology, as in the work of Derrida. In the second place he signals a sort of negligence of the world in the tradition of dialectical theology. A dominant development in postmodern philosophy of religion and theology, is to take recourse to negative theology. The central thought in this approach is to acknowledge the rightful criticism of modernity and postmodernity. The tradition of negative theology subsequently does not see this as a falsification of religion, but holds that it belongs to the essence of true religion that God always transcends human language and concepts.[165]

Vattimo has resisted this tradition of negative theology as represented in theology by Barth[166] and in contemporary philosophy by Derrida, for reasons that have very much to do with his take on secularization. He speaks of dialectical theology's assertion of God's absolute transcendence.[167] Vattimo instead, has a positive account of religion that refuses to escape in the world-fleeing abstractions of apophatic theology. To Vattimo's mind, this return of religion in terms of radical alterity, is once again a statement of God's objectivity. This denies the value of the history of secularization. In this response there is in the end no positive role for history. It, moreover, neglects the critique of metaphysical theology.[168] Likewise, death-of-God theology negatively affirms God's radical difference with respect to this world. The wholly other God to

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[162] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 123.

[163] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 127–8.

[164] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 128.

[165] Bauer and Hardt speak of a "...Traditionsstrang negativer Theologie im kulturellen Gedächtnis des Christentums: in den ikonoklastischen Praktiken von Judentum und Christentum manifestiert sich als das tiefste Geheimnis der Welt die radikale Andersheit Gottes." Christan Bauer and Peter Hardt, 'Vom Unsagbaren sprechen. Postmoderne Sprachprobleme und theologische Erkenntniswege', ⟨URL: http://www.postmoderne-theologie.de/de/texte_vom_unsagbaren_sprechen.html⟩.

[166] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 36.

[167] Vattimo, *Belief*, 46.

[168] "The wholly other God about whom so much is spoken in contemporary religious philosophy, is not only not the incarnated God of Christianity; it is still the ancient God of metaphysics, in that he is seen as the last ground upon which reason cannot touch...but because of that in her invariability and stability is affirmed." Poorthuis remarks with regard to Levinas that the thought of Levinas as a radical disenchantment of the world is constitutive of secularization, which implies a technical, profit-seeking relation to the world. Marcel Poorthuis, 'Recensie van *God in Frankrijk*', *Areopagus* 8(1) (2004), 42

which many contemporary philosophers seem receptive, does to a large extent bear the marks of the 'violent god' of the natural religions: "His transcendence, understood as inaccessible for reason, as paradoxical and mysterious . . . ." In these theologies, there is no positive expectation of the secular. Rather, it is a turn to a theology without incarnation (Derrida, Levinas) and hence it can see secularization only as a regress, in which one touches upon the radical transcendence of God whose Divinity consists only of his being radically other.[169]

For Vattimo, incarnation connects the reality of God and the world. The process of secularization and the reality of incarnation are not identical, but have a 'family resemblance'. Secularization and the end of metaphysics are bound together in a historical process in which there is no difference between world history and the history of salvation. God is only knowable through the incarnation of Christ. Neither Bonhoeffer, nor the other God-is-dead theologians have developed – to Vattimo's mind – a positive theory on how the death of the metaphysical God opens up a new perspective for religion based on the doctrine of incarnation. In Vattimo's reading of the death of God, we find *in* the secular the achievement of religion. And *in* the secular we find Gods revelation. Secularization is "the fulfillment of a history of salvation whose continuing thread is from the beginning the death of God."[170] A reemphasizing of God's radical transcendence would neglect this historical process. Vattimo rejects dialectical theology, because it does the opposite of what he thinks secularization intends. What Barth and Gogarten meant by secularization was that the divine was so transcendent and 'wholly other' that it could not but leave the secular distinct from God and hence autonomous. To Vattimo it is exactly its historical character that makes Christianity compatible with a weak ontology. Revelation does not speak of objective truth, but is an ongoing salvation.[171] Therefore, Vattimo can say that secularization is the very essence of Christianity. This appreciation of Christianity's inescapable embeddedness in history is what separates Vattimo from dialectical theology:

> If secularization is the essence of the history of salvation – that is, a transformation that 'reduces' the metaphysical-natural sacred by virtue of God's decision to institute a relation of friendship with humanity (this is the meaning of Jesus' incarnation) – then one must oppose the unwarranted linkage of Christian doctrine with this or that given historical reality with the most complete readiness to read the 'signs of the times', in order that we may always identify ourselves anew with history by honestly recognizing our own historicity.[172]

The incarnation is a hermeneutical fact. In Vattimo the process of secularization is interpreted as part of a greater historical process, in which two lines are converging: on the one hand the end of metaphysics as analyzed by Heidegger, on the other the secularization of the Christian West, which is not a decline of religion as such but a changed Christianity in which the key concepts are maintained but no longer refer to the fixed content of the history of salvation, rather these contents have really become part of profane history. Consequently, Vattimo is reluctant of positions that use 'the end of metaphysics' as an occasion to return to orthodoxy or kinds of fundamentalism. His

[169] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 43.
[170] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 42–3.
[171] Vattimo, *Belief*, 48.
[172] Vattimo, *Belief*, 53–4.

effort is to continue the Christian tradition in its kenotic and secularizing intent and to develop religion in a secular and aesthetic mode. Falling back into a positivistic or transcendental religion would mean a betrayal of this central message of Christianity. Vattimo's discourse on secularization is thus not only a polemic on traditional metaphysical theology, but also on supposed alternatives to metaphysical theology. All too easily such alternatives slide back into modes of thinking that have considerable similarity with ontotheology. A truly historicist theology cannot think of God as an ineffable 'God beyond God.'

But does Vattimo's model remain loyal to its concerns with historical contingency? The discussion of Derrida and Levinas brings Vattimo to a remarkable observation, that has to do with the 'Judaic' character of some contemporary philosophy of religion. Vattimo speaks of a 'predominance of Judaic religiosity in the return of religion.'[173] His complaints about the Judaic predominance is articulated as follows: "It is a fact that the total otherness of God with respect to the world appears to be affirmed at the expense of any recognition of novelty in the Christian event." With regard to Levinas and Derrida this has to do with the alleged a-historic character of Jewish thought.[174] The Jewish character of Levinas' philosophy has been an object of critique on several other occasions, for example in his contribution to the seminar with Gadamer and Derrida on Religion.[175] What I find striking in this critique of the Judaic character of Levinas's philosophy is that Vattimo interprets this as a lack of awareness of the historical destiny of Being. It is "historicity reduced to its finitude." The experience of contingency for Vattimo has its limits in the recognition of a process in history, which cannot be interrupted by a free, willing God or experiences of contingency. But this is to say that secularization means that there is an undeniable concurrence between experience and God and to neglect this concurrence would mean to be on the wrong side of history.[176]

I agree with Vattimo, when he opposes a theology of radical alterity. A theological insistence on the radical alterity of God is fated to leave the secular bereft of any inherent meaning. Vattimo puts forward a quite different account of secularization than certain forms of death-of-God theology.[177] If emphasizing God's transcendence leads to a loss of meaning of the secular, I think Vattimo is right to resist such an approach. This is, however, but one horn of the dilemma. The other is the insistence on a process of

[173] Vattimo, *Belief*, 84.

[174] He writes: "There is no real difference between historical times; since every historical moment is immediately related to eternity, the historicity of existence is entirely reduced to its finitude, that is, to the fact we are always already thrown into a situation whose particular traits are given little consideration, compared to the purely 'vertical' relation to the eternal". Vattimo, *Belief*, 84.

[175] Gianni Vattimo, 'The trace of the trace', in: Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, editors, *Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 79–94.

[176] Sciglitano draws on Vattimo's dealing with the sacred-profane dichotomy in a discussion on Altizer: "As for Vattimo and for Hegel, love appears to have for Altizer the quality of an identity between the divine and the secular that has overcome alienation which includes the Old Testament picture of God's relation to the world and many aspects of the New Testament. In this sense, difference, whether between the divine and the world or within the divine, construed as Trinity, gets eliminated or dissolved, and with it goes the ground for a world that is genuinely other than the divine and rooted in God's gracious Being." Anthony C. Sciglitano, 'Contesting the world and the Divine. Balthasar's trinitarian 'response' to Gianni Vattimo's secular Christianity', *Modern Theology* 23(4) (2007), 536.

[177] As Sciglitano explains, for Vattimo they fail to articulate '…an explicit theory of secularization and of the death of God as the positive affirmation of divinity based on the idea of incarnation contemporary thought emphasizes the disappearance of the sacred from the world precisely by affirming transcendence as the total 'alterity' of the biblical God.' Sciglitano, 535.

secularization in history, that is said to reflect a genuine appreciation of historical contingency. The focus on secularization as a phase in the history of Being makes Vattimo vulnerable to yet another teleological account of Being. I understand his suspicion of the Jewish tradition to be a consequence of this teleological bias of Vattimo's theory, in which the specific Judeo-Christian understanding of history dissolves.

The implications of Vattimo's philosophy of secularization for the way man relates to the world are unsatisfactory in one more way. Vattimo reproaches the theologians of alterity and negative theology for failing to conceptualize a meaningful relation of God and world. This may be so, but Vattimo's model of *kenosis* in the end gives up on the world as well, as it is identified with a free play of simulacra and interpretations and Vattimo proposes giving up the very principle of reality. It seems as if Vattimo, in trying to avoid a theological objectivism, ends up in a radical subjectivism and that both are unable to give a satisfactory account of man and world.

5.4 HETEROTOPIAN POLITICS.

From his thesis of the weakening of Being, Vattimo draws far-reaching conclusions for the design of a postmodern culture. A weakening of truth leads to a culture in which the traditional hierarchies give way to a more horizontal structuring of society. A society of generalized communication is in this sense a sign of the times, that Being is now becoming more and more immanent. Value is no longer thought of as hierarchically ordered, but the values that are expressed in culture are endlessly translatable into other idioms there is only exchange value.[178] Vattimo interprets the philosophical systems of existentialism and humanistic Marxism as attempts to resist the accomplishment of nihilism as the reduction of Being to exchange value. In a similar vein he criticizes forms of *Geisteswissenschaften* and Wittgensteinian philosophy as marked by a 'pathos of authenticity', that try to save some domains from exchange value: to mark out a domain in which we meet something of Being itself. Vattimo interprets this as resistance of nihilism and pleads in favour of an experience beyond these dualities.

Like no other philosopher today, Gianni Vattimo is aware of the political and social context in which philosophical ideas echo. His ideas were formed initially by his confrontation with the revolutionary left in Italy in the Nineteen-Sixties. His initial political concerns show a resistance against the metaphysical nature of leftist ideology (socialism and communism). Vattimo welcomed postmodernism as the liberation of the metaphysical preoccupation of leftist thought. Subsequently, however, he realized that the downfall of communism and socialism after 1989 created a standoff with regard to the identity of Western democracies. The resurgence of religion in contemporary culture is – at least partly – a consequence of this ideological vacuum. Religion in postmodern society can once again be a possible guide for the future.[179] Notes from his period as a member of the European Parliament – published in *Wie werde ich Kommunist* – make clear that Gianni Vattimo a 'renewed communism' as the best answer to the

[178] "In a world of generalized exchange value all is given …as narration or récit. Essentially this narration is articulated by the mass media, which are inextricably intertwined with the tradition of messages that language brings to us from the past and from other cultures: the mass media thus represent not just an ideological perversion, but rather a vertiginous form of this same tradition." Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 27.

[179] Gianni Vattimo, 'After onto-theology: philosophy between science and religion', in: Mark Wrathall, editor, *Religion after Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 29–30.

challenges of postmodernism.[180] This turn to communism is comparable to his conversion to Christianity, of which he wrote in the essay *Belief.* To his mind there is a great deal of similarity between communism and socialism on the one hand and Christianity on the other, as both are radically unnatural projects.[181] In its shared utopian intention, Vattimo sees the possibility of developing a Christian communism.

If there is such a thing as a postmodern politics, it must be the awareness of the end of meta-narratives. The awareness of unlimited plurality makes postmodernism preeminently political.[182] For Vattimo this is the central idea of a postmodern politics.[183] Postmodern politics emerges with the disenchantment of utopian ideologies. The great political ideologies of the twentieth century tried to realize an ideal society. Even when these political programs were carried out in the name of the good, or the human, they often lead to horrors on a massive scale.[184] Postmodern politics attempts to shape a new European identity. The quest for this identity acquired a new urgency when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989. The absence of an ideological counterpart created the need for more substantial identity. Vattimo detects two trends in this quest for a European identity.[185]

In the first place there is what he calls the Catholic integralist identity. It defines the essential European identity as a Christian identity that stands in radical opposition to the secular character of modernity. The other position is the secularist position that defines Europe as essentially rooted in Enlightenment rationalism and sees this as discontinuous with the Christian past. Despite their differences, the two positions agree in the idea that there is an opposition between secularity and Christianity. Vattimo argues for a middle position. He neither wants to identify solely with Christian exclusivism, nor with the idea that secular modernity is independent from its religious past. Vattimo holds that modern, secular Europe is essentially a secularization of Christianity. Europe is the non-religious form of Christianity and it embodies values and practices that originate in Christianity. Only in the regions where Christianity was once the dominant religion has secularity flourished. In the discussion on European identity, Vattimo argues that in the constitution of the European Union, no reference needs to be made to Christianity. This is not because he would find Christianity of no value to the European community, but because Europe is itself an embodiment of Christianity.[186] Christianity should not present itself as a fraction, that fights for its case, rather it is the presupposition on which a multicultural and multi-religious Europe rests.

Postmodern theory does not simply do away with utopian ideas, rather it first of all criticizes the intertwinedness of utopian politics with a teleological account of history, or the sacralization of the utopian goal as in totalitarian regimes.[187] Instead, in postmod-

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[180] Gianni Vattimo, *Wie werde ich Kommunist* (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 2008), 32.

[181] Vattimo, *Kommunist*, 15.

[182] "Denn in der Postmoderne wurde die bislang eher latente Pluralität vordringlich und unübersehbar." Welsch, *Postmoderne Moderne*, 242.

[183] Gianni Vattimo, 'The End of (Hi)story', *Chicago Review* 35:4 (1986), 20–30.

[184] Hans Achterhuis, *De erfenis van de utopie* (Baarn: Ambo, 1998).

[185] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 73–4. See also Vattimo, *Kommunist*, 19. For Milbank on the relevance of communism for the ideological course of the West see: Milbank, 'Gift of Ruling', 232: "Communism … gave the West a binding purpose: oppose the gigantomachy of totalitarian regimes."

[186] "Voor mij moet in de Europese grondwet niet naar het christendom worden verwezen omdat seculariteit tot het christelijk patrimonium behoort." France Guwy and Gianni Vattimo, 'Europa en religie (3): Gianni Vattimo. Voor een christendom zonder religie', *De Standaard* 01/07 (2004).

[187] Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes: Religion and Politics from the European Dictators to Al Qaeda* (New

ern politics the notion of difference plays a dominant role. The older utopian ideologies were flawed in absolutizing a single particular concept; the postmodern utopia is the 'utopia of the manifold'.[188] But if the aim of postmodern politics is to realize a society in which theoretically endless plurality is desired, how can it be something other than downright anarchy? For Vattimo it is clear that a society that is secular in a postmodern sense is no longer organized according to a dichotomy of Church and state. In a postmodern sense, the modern nation-state is also unmasked as an unjust concentration of power in a central sovereignty. What then is Vattimo's proposal for a postmodern politics? How does he see the classical distinction of Church and state? And what are the ramifications of the relatedness of secularization and hermeneutics for Vattimo's political ideas on secularity and religion? It is clearly not his intention to simply do away with the history of utopian politics. His effort is to apply the Heideggerian notion of *Verwindung* to the Utopian ideal. His political theorizing of secularization and hermeneutics means first of all that Vattimo insists on the essential continuity between Christianity and secular politics. How does Vattimo see the relation between present-day liberal culture and the role of religion in society? Does the rebirth of religion make an end to the privatization of religion and the Church-state divide? Vattimo does not think this was ever really the case. It was precisely the greater – more or less unconscious – continuity between Christian Europe and secular Europe that made secularization possible. As Vattimo sees it 'this separation succeeded only because it was realized on the solid, if unacknowledged, basis of a common religious heritage.'[189] The liberal separation of public and private sphere and Church and state was possible on the basis of a tacit agreement on essentially Christian values.[190] When we speak of Christianity, says Vattimo, we also speak of 'liberal society, of the West, and of modern democracy."[191] It is exactly this compatibility or even identity of (Christian) religion and liberal democracy that is at stake for Vattimo. He wants to oppose any attempt to separate liberalism and religion along the lines of an anti-modernity or communitarian discourse ('cultural apartheid'[192])

One of the most pressing concerns behind the quarrel over the legitimacy of the secular is its claim to neutrality. Vattimo subscribes to the idea that in the 16th and 17th century, starting with the Reformation, Christianity has become a source of disagreement and violence, instead of a unifying power. He is critical about the way liberal politics has dealt with it since. Religion was declared a private matter and increasingly banned from the public arena. Today, however, not least as a consequence of the growth of non-Christian religions in Europe, such as Islam, it is questionable whether the neutral approach still works. Secularity as neutrality is experienced by Muslims as a threat to authentic religious experience.[193] Moreover, argues Vattimo, neutrality with regard to religious matters is possible due to a tacit agreement that has a Christian inspiration. The success of a profane, public sphere was made possible, not despite, but thanks to a large amount of tacit agreement on Christian morality.[194] Therefore, we will always

York: Harper Collins, 2007), 38–122.

[188] Welsch, *Postmoderne Moderne*, 183.

[189] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 95e.

[190] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 100.

[191] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 97.

[192] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 102.

[193] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 100.

[194] "…the separation succeeded, because it arose on the firm basis of a (not as such recognizable)

have to take notice of the fact that the Christian religion has an intrinsic relation with modern secular society. Does this mean that Vattimo argues for a (re)christianization of European culture as the best guarantee of a sustainable tolerance? Vattimo argues exactly the other way around. Christianity cannot play the role of one of the religious parties in a multicultural society. Christianity is not simply one party among many, rather it is the precondition that made the multicultural and multireligious society possible. In this sense, Vattimo is not a multicultural thinker, rather he quite explicitly claims a unique place for Christianity. To his mind, Christianity has a much more complex relation to the state and to other religions than multiculturalists have it. Its vocation is rather to 'further articulate its own profile as a source and precondition of secularity'[195] So although Vattimo rejects the picture of a liberal, neutral society that functions as an umbrella under which diverse religions can seek recognition, he is equally opposed to an explicit presence of the Church in society. Vattimo suggests that we should always realize that a secular culture originates in the Christian West and that the fate of Christianity and secular culture are inescapably intertwined.[196] Christianity is the carrier of the idea of secularity and in a multicultural context it should continue to disseminate its laïcistic intent.

Another aspect of political reality that is indebted to the Christian past, is universal intent. The current globalizing direction of the western political and social reality is understandable only from the missionary nature of Christianity and its claim to universality. Although the modern Christian West has often been imperialistic and Eurocentric, Vattimo is not downright negative about this. A certain missionary universalism belongs to the original Christian heritage. The role he sees for Christianity today is, however, not to spread the truth of Christianity, in an evangelizing mode, as a superior claim to truth, rather to pursue a secular culture as an open space that makes possible a dialogue of different religions and views of life. The motto of such a postcolonial Christianity would not be 'universalism' but 'hospitality'.[197] In Vattimo's reading of the history of western culture as a history of secularization, the position of Christianity is privileged, in the sense that it brings with it the conditions for a secular society. As an example, Vattimo points to the controversy over the wearing of the veil by Muslim girls in French public schools. The veil is an expression of belonging to a strong tradition at odds with secular modernity. The symbol of the cross on the other hand does not give way to this friction, precisely because it refers to the origins of that society that has developed to our present-day secular society. Christianity as a weak identity enables a coexistence of diverse religious traditions, precisely because it tends to secularize. The identification of, or parallel between, secularization and Christianity leads Vattimo to do away with the distinction between secular and profane history. As a matter of fact, he sees this idea of secularity as 'the last metaphysical misunderstanding' of Christian thought. He defines this as:

common religion." Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 100.

[195] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 103.

[196] Vattimo writes: "To share in the fate of modernity and the West means most of all the deep Christian meaning of secularization . . . the profane space of liberal society has a religious character, more than liberalism and Christianity usually admit. It makes no sense to take the position of one of the parties in the field of religious conflict as a specific identity. Its calling is much more to articulate more fully its own specific profile as source and precondition." Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 103.

[197] Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 106.

...the idea that there is a radical separation between the history of salvation and sec-
ular history by virtue of which the meaning of revelation would be exclusively apoca-
lyptic: the unveiling of the senselessness of world history in light of an event so other
that the times and rhythms of history can only have a negative sense, to be annulled
in the paradox of the leap of faith, or treated as a time of trial.[198]

Vattimo thus opposes any form of a doctrine of 'two regiments'. Instead his position
leads to an identification of sacred and profane history. The eventual convergence of
Christianity and secularity can on the one hand be seen as a universal victory of Chris-
tianity. On the other hand it can equally well be regarded as the ultimate affirmation of
secularism and as a theological finessing of the modern critique of religion.[199] The idea
that there is a difference between philosophy and theology, between sacred and secular
history, is regarded as an obstacle to the single universal truth in which philosophy in-
corporates theology.[200] Vattimo, unlike for instance Lyotard, for whom politics remains
a conflict between a 'desire for justice and a desire for the unknown' proposes think-
ing of a postmodern politics in terms of charity and tolerance. Whereas for Lyotard
paralogy is a central notion, for Vattimo the homologation of the world is central.[201]

In the human sciences, and especially in cultural anthropology, the idea that differ-
ent cultures are as many incommensurable forms of life is influential. Vattimo laments
the widespread application of this idea. He defends a different position within post-
modernism. Most explicitly he does so in confrontation with Rorty's application of the
concept. For Rorty the result of the postmodern critique of transcendental philosophy
would make any claim to truth explainable in terms of cultural anthropology. Accord-
ing to Vattimo, this idea of cultural anthropology and alterity needs serious revision
and is no longer convincing in the light of new developments, most notably globaliza-
tion. In the process of globalization, we do not only become aware of countless different
cultures, but we also see them melt more and more together. In the light of his idea of
hermeneutics, Vattimo speaks of a disappearance of alterity.[202] On the one hand there
is an increasing sense of difference in postmodern culture; a development that makes
unilinear accounts of progression implausible. This is what Vattimo calls the 'utopian
crisis'.[203] On the other hand the postmodern condition is one of a growing sense of
unity. In the global village of communication technology, everyone is aware of belong-
ing to a single, human community.

For Vattimo, cultural anthropology cannot be a neutral affair, but is itself ideolog-
ically laden and always seriously influences its object. Therefore, the western cultural
anthropologist cannot neutrally engage (non-Western) religion, but will itself alter and
produce cultural and religious forms. Philosophy and hermeneutics cannot dissolve in
cultural anthropology, as Rorty suggests, but have an ontological meaning. This is not

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[198] Vattimo, *Belief*, 81.

[199] Frankenberry, 'Weakening Religious Belief', 278.

[200] Giovanni Leghissa, 'Säkularisierung und Philosophie', in: Giovanni Leghissa, editor, *Abschied. The-
ologie, Metaphysik und die Philosophie heute* (Wien: Turia + Kant, 2003), 20.

[201] Welsch, *Postmoderne Moderne*, 184. With regard to Lyotard, Welsch writes that the postmodern
philosophy of language, to which heterogenity is fundamental, is inherently unjust and conflicting: "Die
Unlösbarkeit des Streits – die Unvermeidlichkeit des Unrechts – ist eine Folge dieser Verfassung der Sprache
selbst. Grundlegende Heterogenität und wirkliche Gerechtigkeit sind inkompatibel." Welsch, *Postmoderne
Moderne*, 233.

[202] Vattimo, *Beyond interpretation*, 160.

[203] Gianni Vattimo, 'Utopia Dispersed', *Diogenes* 53 No.1 (2006), 18.

to say that the hermeneutics Vattimo has in mind is a sort of transcendental science, but he does assert that the nature of hermeneutics is more than a coincidence and that it is not without liability for the cultures and religions it encounters. He speaks of hermeneutics as a specific *Geschick*, which cannot be explained exhaustively in terms of positive science. Anthropology cannot dissolve metaphysics, rather it becomes, itself, part of the metaphysical tradition.[204] In hermeneutics, there can be no radical alterity, but rather a reciprocal relation of alterity and sameness. Vattimo asserts that both sameness and alterity have always been present in the history of hermeneutics. As a discipline, hermeneutics had its origin in the collapse of European unity. As a philosophical theory, it attained dominance in the time of a "fully unfolded metaphysical and scientific-technological unification."[205] Hermeneutics emerged in the context of unity breaking down and attained dominance in a context of Western 'homologation.' For Vattimo it is therefore likely that the "eventuality of Being" is inseparable from the "homologation of the Western world".[206] The political significance of hermeneutics is then that the course of Western culture is not a mere pluriformity of contingent forms of life. Rather, hermeneutics is an ontological and normative undertaking. The discourse of "radical alterity" turns out to be "an internal aspect of the general process of Westernization."[207] For Vattimo, thus, the context of a hermeneutic culture is neither one of total (Western, imperialistic) organization, nor one of authentic alterity, but a gigantic construction site, in which the founding texts of Western tradition have lost their authority and are interpreted in dialogue with countless other texts. In Vattimo's eyes, the idea of a merely descriptive anthropology, which claims superiority over theological and metaphysical 'imperialistic' ways of engaging other cultures, is highly suspect. In the post-imperialistic situation of cultural reapprochment, Vattimo sees not a value-free encounter. In our time we see alterity disappear as a consequence of the ubiquity of contamination. Therefore the role of hermeneutics in our day is to express an ontology.[208]

If there is one philosophical school, which Vattimo criticizes for seeing the modern secular West as a corrupted society, in which authentic human existence is thwarted, it is the Frankfurt school of Adorno and Marcuse. Their criticism of culture was in fact an ascetic ideal, which resisted 'cultural industry'. One could only withdraw from its influence by means of avantgarde Art, like Beckett's prose and Schönberg's atonal music: "Die Disharmonie evoziert die Schönheit nur als ihr utopisches Gegenteil – alles andere ist Täuschung und Lüge."[209] Vattimo refuses to see mass society as a threat to human

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[204] Vattimo writes: "It is only through the use of these profoundly Western categories that anthropology becomes a science, or …a part of the metaphysical enterprise of reducing the world to measurable objectness. …this in turn raises questions about the possibility of thinking about anthropology as a discourse on cultures that are other." Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 135.

[205] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 154.

[206] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 155.

[207] Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 156. or, as Vattimo puts it even more paradoxically: "Hermeneutics starts out by trying to see anthropology as an ideal site for verifying its own notion of Being as eventuality and alterity, but ends up by returning to reflect upon the significance of sameness, and on the relation between the latter and the metaphysical homologation of the world." Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 156–7.

[208] "Hermeneutics first emerges as a technical discipline in Europe in the age of the collapse of traditional Christian unity, but it is perhaps in this condition of contamination that hermeneutics instead develops into an *ontology*." Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, 159.

[209] In Vattimo's social theory, the idea of such an aesthetic sphere of 'authentic' human existence is highly suspect. It isolates authentic experience from the social. Instead, Vattimo proposes seeing the

freedom, rather he claims that secularization enables a plural society, whose greatest virtue is that it tolerates a great variety of religious and cultural identities. His political theory flows quite naturally from his account of the postmodern condition. For Vattimo the dissolution of metaphysics and the end of socialism are parallel processes. In the weakening of philosophy there is a shift away from the founding of political systems, to a deliberative democracy understood as a separation of politics and truth.[210] Cultures, ethical and economic systems are as many contingent entities, which in our postmodern era should be radically questioned. Vattimo's political theory is designed to acknowledge religious and cultural diversity. The politics that flows from Vattimo's secularization thesis urges us to give up on strong metaphysical claims, and to fully acknowledge the historical contingency of our religious and cultural identities. Vattimo associates any hierarchical ordering of society with arbitrariness and authoritarianism.[211] This thesis is quite ambiguous on the role of religion in western societies, since Vattimo on the one hand underscores the necessity of a certain humility with regard to the truth of Christianity, while on the other hand assigning a very specific and unique role to the Christian religion as the only religion that understands God in a kenotic way. Likewise, Vattimo is committed to a discourse of tolerance and plurality, but he resists the attempt to accept plurality as a mere contingent, anthropological fact. Whereas much of postmodern theorizing in the postwar period begins from a disenchantment with the course of European history, and its view of a close alignment of religion and politics as the best trajectory for an emancipatory politics, Vattimo sees the democratic project of the Western European states as a continuation of Christianity.[212] Novalis' famous phrase, *Die Christenheit oder Europa*, is for Vattimo as valid today as it was in the nineteenth century. He insists on the weak nature of postmodern ontology and relativism in truth theory. They must avoid the dangers of political radicalism. An increasing plurality is thus a sufficient remedy against fascism and other forms of totalitarian politics. In this heterotopian idea of society, Vattimo tries to undermine the danger of the dominant, utopian political theories of the twentieth century. For Vattimo, the weakness and the strength, the particularity and universality of Christianity coincide. Today, in a world in which more and more religious and cultural identities claim recognition, Christianity should understand itself as the inventor of a profane space in which identity conflicts can be solved in a peaceful manner. It is precisely the missionary claim to universality that tends towards its disappearance. The concrete difference will be that when Christianity presents itself as a strong, rights-claiming identity, it will occasion an understanding of secularity in the 'French' laïcistic sense: an understanding of secularity that can only deal with religious identities by pushing them back into the private domain. Instead, when Christianity is interpreted as a weak identity, it will show that

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emergence of modern and postmodern society not as a threat to human freedom and authentic existence, but as a new form of being in the world and as new forms of community. Vattimo, 'Grenzen', 22.

[210] Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation*, 83–4.

[211] Th. de Wit comments: "In the style of some nineteenth century liberals and anarchists he invariably associates vertical 'state-like' relations with violence, militarism, arbitrariness capriciousness, authoritarianism . . . , while by contrast their subversion and unmaking are associated with *kenosis* ('friendship with God'), with an 'ethic of non-violence', and with *caritas*, which, according to Vattimo, constitutes the only limit to secularisation'." De Wit, 'Return to Religion', 398.

[212] He writes: "Europe, as a project of political construction totally based on the willingness of citizens and states with equal rights to join, is today the most concrete and visible manifestation of an anti-naturalistic (that is 'Marxist', Christian, and socialist) politics." Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation*, 118.

a religious identity is in fact the richest form of secular life. Christianity thus has a guiding function in renewing our social constellation to a truly multicultural society.

In a 2004 article, Vattimo relates the secularization of Western culture to the hatred felt in the Arab world for the Western lack of values. Whereas in earlier writings Vattimo stressed the universal meaning of secularization, he now has considerable sympathy for the 'incomplete secularization' of third world countries.[213] His concern is with what he calls 'the hegemony of capitalism and American military Imperialism.' Frustrated with the Bush administration in the United States and the presidency of Berlusconi in his own country, he goes as far as proposing a renewed understanding of communism.[214] In an essay on the renewal of communism, he writes: "Auch ich war ins Postmoderne Ende der Ideologien verwickelt",[215] He stresses the need for a renewed understanding of communism. How can we understand this? Vattimo's philosophy was entirely dedicated to overcome the 'grand narratives', and Communism seems to be the greatest narrative of them all. And by replacing the left-wing utopianism with a postmodern heterotopianism, his farewell to leftist idealism seemed complete. Vattimo explains his position as follows. The *Wende* of 1989 was not only the downfall of great narratives, it was also the instantiation of the great narrative of capitalism. Ironically, it was exactly in the victory of capitalism over communism that Marx's theories on the concentration of capital turned out to be right. And it was precisely in the downfall of ideologies that capitalism really acquired an indomitable status that the left did not dare to contest. He writes:

> Wie kommt es, dass der Kapitalismus der sogenannten freien Märkte seine grössten Triumphe ausgerechnet jetzt feiert, da der sowjetische Staat abgedankt hat und der Kommunismus nicht mehr droht? Dass wir das Ende des Kalten Krieges bedauern müssen, da wir in immer heissere Kriege hineingetrieben werden?[216]

The predominance of neo-liberalism, with its insistence on a global, free market economy, not Marxism, is the true heir of strong metaphysical thought. In the European Union, Vattimo sees the possibility for a third road, as an alternative to the American hegemony and its terroristic counterpart. The weakening of thought is not so much over, for Vattimo, but it needs to be applied more fully. The spread of neo-liberalism, the supposed naturalness of a free market economy, the military operations of the free countries, and the increasing control of governments over the private lives of their citizens, are – in Vattimo's eyes – strong ideas that function in an objectivist discourse. Only Marxism and socialism can bring change to a Europe that will otherwise be subject to American hegemony.

In a more encompassing meaning, the negative account of Weak Thought as a protest against any form of representation and hierarchic ordering of society is in severe crisis. As a model of such a radically flattened society, Vattimo points to Hardt

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[213] Gianni Vattimo, 'Towards a twilight of values?', in: Jérôme Bindé, editor, *The Future of values: 21st century talks* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004), 7–12.

[214] Vattimo, *Kommunist*, 7–8.

[215] Vattimo's describes his conversion to communism as follows: "Da ich sehe, wie de 'Entwicklung', die der Markt garantieren soll, scheitert, muss einer wie ich, der nie Kommunist war (das gestehe ich), einer werden, um die Wahrheit der Marx'schen Prophezeihungen *in corpere vili* zu untersuchen." Vattimo, *Kommunist*, 37.

[216] Vattimo, *Kommunist*, 36.

and Negri's idea of Empire. Contemporary, liberal society, to them is best characterized as an Empire. Its scope is global and not bound to nation states. The crucial difference, however, between historical empires and our current liberal Empire is that the former were disciplined by external force, whereas the latter, our consumer society is disciplined purely through spontaneous, affective identification of citizens with the Empire.[217] Vattimo agrees with the diagnosis of contemporary Western culture as an auto-disciplined Empire. But he rejects the idea that this Empire can produce out of itself an emancipated, just society. According to Vattimo this is an impossibility. He speaks of an '...alte Sehnsucht nach der schönen Moralität, nach einer schönen Gesellschaft und Hegemonie.'[218] As Vattimo sees it, the social theory of Hardt and Negri is too much caught up with the need to establish here and now, a utopian hegemony. His own sympathies remain with a more relativistic and plural society. All we can achieve in terms of a just, non-Utopian society is a balance between '...nicht allzu unterschiedlichen und tragfähigen Kräften', which enables a society which allows its members to live out specific identities, without enmity. This live and let live approach, with a minimalization of the role of the state, better suits Vattimo's philosophy of weakening. So it is fair to say that – with his preference for socialism and communism – Vattimo has made a significant shift. Vattimo is quite aware of this as he writes on his relation to the school of 'pensiero debole'. His initial aversion against left wing idealism had its context in the violent degeneration of the left in 1968. Now, after the rise of global capitalism, Vattimo is willing to reconsider some of his earlier ideas. As a matter of fact it is possible that the initial, postmodern thinking of Vattimo was quite supportive towards the capitalist society that he now repudiates. The spontaneous, frivolous, avant-garde society Vattimo had in mind when he wrote *The Transparent Society* typically delegates everything to the free association of citizens. In fact there is neither a law nor a binding ethic, as Vattimo saw *caritas* – love – and the avoidance of suffering as sufficient guidelines for social behavior. The irony is that Negri and Hardt in 1994 already criticized him on exactly this point. They spoke of such an arrangement as an avoidance of politics.[219] The minimalization of politics as pursued by the postmodern ideal of plurality and tolerance, even *caritas*, fits remarkably well with the desires for a (neo)liberal consumer society and unbridled competition. The idea of a maximization of the public realm and a minimal state, which applies to both Rorty and Vattimo,[220] results in a remarkable paradox. This paradox is that the increasing horizontalization of power in postmodernism heightens the need for an absolute arbiter, who guards over the equality of all parties in the public realm. Thus relativism in a sense breeds dictatorship, as "the social state takes away any social dialectic that might constitute an actual civil society," resulting in the autonomy of the political from the social.[221] Vattimo's view of the role of information technology and mass media has drastically changed with his shift to communism. In *The Transparent Society*, he saw the emergence of an information society as genuine liberation. Now he has changed his mind about it, as he has realized that information technology

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[217] Vattimo, *Kommunist*, 24.

[218] Vattimo, *Kommunist*, 26.

[219] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Labor of Dionysus. A Critique of the State-Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 237.

[220] A significant difference it seems to me between explicit postmodern liberalism and Vattimo's idea of a transparent society is that, for Vattimo, social life ought to be governed by a substantial value; love. For Rorty, however, the only guideline is a negative criterion, the absence of suffering.

[221] Hardt and Negri, *Labor of Dionysus*, 268–9.

and mass media seem to serve a capitalist-consumerist society uncritically.[222] Instead of emancipating citizens, mass media can easily manipulate public opinion and create a distance between politicians and voters. Vattimo compares the media society with a globe that is entirely self referential. Those who are in it can benefit from its blessings, but those on the outside are increasingly primitive.

> Der Rest der Gesellschaft wird immer 'primitiver' infolge der schnellen technischen Entwicklung ständig neuer Dispositionen, die in der Blase stattfinden. Nur dass ein derartiges Verschwinden der Grenzen zwischen links und rechts die These impliziert, das die Verwandlung der Welt in eine einheitliche Gesellschaft reicher, freier, und demokratische Bürger nur noch eine Frage von Informationen ist. Man bracht nur alle mit dem Internet zu verbinden, um alle Konflikte zu lösen und eine neue Ära frei von Entfremdung zu eröffnen.[223]

Not only does Vattimo now have second thoughts about the promises of the information society, he also sees the idea of an end of history as problematic. Instead Vattimo now speaks of a "fortwährende Notwendigkeit der Revolution."[224] The idea of Revolution runs against the central thought of Weak Thinking, which saw a gradual *Überwinding* of metaphysics as the only perspective for a postmodern culture. ("Nihilism is our only chance", says Vattimo repeatedly in *The End of Modernity*.) In the idea of revolution as the only alternative beyond an alleged American imperialism, he seems to leave the logic of weak thinking behind. It seems that the kind of communism Vattimo has in mind will always be defended with very strong, or thick descriptions of the good, of justice, and the nature of man. Without such notions it would be hard to grasp what is actually lost in the supposedly capitalist and imperialist hegemony of the West.

5.5 EVALUATION

What is Vattimo's contribution to the present debate on secularization and postmodernism? In the first place, his genealogy of secularity convincingly shows how the liberal picture of secularization onesidedly creates an opposition between religion and secular culture. Secularity can be interpreted as in line with the Christian tradition. Whereas for Rorty the whole idea of secularity is at odds with religion, Vattimo has made a case for an intrinsic connection between Christianity and secularity. He establishes a link between Christianity, modernity and postmodernity, by seeing secularization as a constitutive trait within all of them.[225] In the history of secularization, Vattimo sees the realization of Being. Vattimo is inspired for this by Joachim of Fiore, Lessing and more generally a Hegelian account of history as the realization of the Spirit. Secularity cannot be understood in a formal sense. It is embedded in a tradition that runs from the Hebrew Bible and Christianity to the emergence of modern culture and its weakening in postmodernism. This way of dealing with historicity is problematic, though. Vattimo has a strong desire to make the whole of history fit into a single scheme. This desire for a general scheme leads him on many occasions to conflicts with particular

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[222] Vattimo, *Kommunist*, 72.
[223] Vattimo, *Kommunist*, 47.
[224] Vattimo, *Kommunist*, 47.
[225] Vattimo, *Belief*, 43.

religions and conceptions of God. There is a tendency toward spiritualization and an idea of universal salvation, which overrides the testimonies of particular traditions. A striking example of this is the way Vattimo deals with Judaism and the Hebrew Bible. Vattimo emphasizes those texts in the New Testament that suggest the more spiritual and 'friendly' character of Christianity over Judaism and of the New Testament over the Old Testament. To my mind this is a Marcionic way of dealing with scripture. It creates, rather than finds, an opposition between the – allegedly – violent God of the Old Testament and the revelation of the God of love in the New Testament. This opposition cannot be upheld, if only for the reason that in the New Testament too, violence and judgment are inherent to the proclamation of the one God of Israel and the New Testament book of Revelations may be by far the most violent book in the Bible.

This is not to say that I defend a violent image of God, rather I think that both ethically and theologically it is undesirable to create an opposition between love and justice, and between a loving God and a just God. In a similar vein, Vattimo finds the Jewish tradition highly suspect in its effort to hold onto the idea of a personal, particular God.[226] Vattimo's spiritualizing and universalizing philosophy of religion is rather modern as it encourages us to give up both a too *particular* God and a too worldly revelation of God. Instead I entirely agree with De Lange that a de-hellenization of philosophy need not imply a de-judaization.[227] De Lange is very sympathetic toward Vattimo. He sees the notion of secularization as applied by Vattimo as a promising perspective for theological hermeneutics. To his mind, however, and I entirely agree with him on this point, his use of Biblical notions to support his convergence of Christianity and secularization is quite arbitrary. Vattimo tends to reduce the biblical message to the concept of love, at the expense of other concepts, such as truth and justice.[228]

Vattimo's concrete prospects for Christianity in the West entail an end to traditional Christianity. Not only Judaism is suspect. In particular the ethical claims of the Catholic Church are indications, for Vattimo, of a surviving power structure in Christianity. In this view, the consequence of secularization would entail the end of the Church as an institution, as an "historical positive religion".[229] It would become a religion without religion; without reference to any concrete tradition. The idea of weak thought in Christianity might turn out to be a Trojan horse of a philosophical mastery over religion.[230] In the end there is hardly any difference between modern secularism and Vattimo's post-modern secularization, in the sense that both explicitly hold that the existence of religion alongside secular society is undesirable.

The universalizing tendency in Vattimo's thinking can be elucidated from the way he interprets Löwith. On several occasions Vattimo refers approvingly to the work of Löwith, as someone who would have demonstrated the essential continuity between Christianity and modern historicism. This is only partially true and it obscures a crucial disagreement between Löwith and Vattimo. Vattimo does not mention that for Löwith it was exactly this historical interpretation of Christianity that was a fruit of modernity. Original Christianity, as in Augustine and Christ's teaching, were crucially different in

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[226] See also De Wit, 'Return to Religion', 404–5.

[227] Frits de Lange, 'Kenotic Ethics. Gianni Vattimo, Reading the 'Signs of the Time', in: Onno Zijlstra, editor, *Letting Go. Rethinking Kenosis* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002), 68.

[228] De Lange, 'Kenotic Ethics', 65.

[229] Girard and Vattimo, 'Christianity', 29.

[230] Cf. Jonker's critique of Hent de Vries in Jonkers, 'God in France', 10–12.

the meaning it attached to history.[231] Löwith apppreciates the non-historicist character of Christianity (and Stoicism for that matter). Vattimo, on the other hand, stresses the equivalence of Christianity and historicism and sees it as a necessary stage in the history of Being.

Politically, Vattimo's idea of a postmodern secularization is a more radical secularization. Vattimo no longer understands secularity as a relative independence of religion and politics, rather he sees it as the dissolution of religion in politics. Vattimo's weak thought and his emphasis on charity and love might at first sight seem to be the most modest with regard to historical contingencies. A closer look has demonstrated that not only does his philosophy of secularization result in a dissolution of world and history, but it also leaves political philosophy bereft of tools to distinguish between religion and politics, since Vattimo intends to overcome this distinction. The final outcome of Vattimo's religion of love is that he has a hard time granting religion its rightful place as a historically, contingent phenomenon.[232]

Compared to Rorty, Vattimo has a significantly different approach to the postmodern condition. Whereas both reject the ideal of representational knowledge, for Rorty this is by and large a theoretical matter, which has no further consequences for liberal institutions. On the contrary: he tends to reinstall a form of classical liberalism that insists on a rigid separation of public and private and is repressive of religion. The secular ideal and the Enlightened institutions of state, economy and public sphere (including media) are the best suited tools for realizing this secular Utopia. For Vattimo on the other hand, the stakes are quite different. He sees how the changes in late modern culture call for a new understanding of culture and liberal institutions, as in a process of weakening. For Vattimo it is a good thing that liberal institutions loosen their grip on our lives. In the postmodern, centreless society, human creativity can fully flourish. As he sees it, in the emergence of mass media, the dissolution of liberal institutions is irreversible. This is not to be resisted, rather it is the realization of Being.

The political consequences of the fundamental continuity of Christianity and Western secular society can be worked out in contrast with Rorty's thoughts on the subject. For neither Rorty, nor Vattimo is there a public role for religion. Rorty denies religion the right to public recognition, because religion is a private affair and the public sphere does not allow for religious rhetoric. For Vattimo there is a completely different reason why the Church does not interfere in the public sphere: not because Christianity excludes secularity; rather the opposite. Far from being a party claiming recognition in the public sphere, the Christian religion is the silent presupposition that made secular society possible. Vattimo, in a way attempts to overcome the duality of public and private. As Raymond Aron explains, in Marxist philosophy, the duality of sacred and profane is functionally equivalent to the distinction between private and public.[233] Rorty in a way rejects Marx' embargo on this distinction, as he explicitly makes a case for religion and irony as private. Vattimo, on the other hand, follows Marx in his rejection of the

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[231] Löwith, 207–9.

[232] Vattimo, *Belief*, 81.

[233] "Het politieke staatsburgerschap is, met betrekking tot de werkzaamheid van de arbeider, vergelijkbaar met de bestemming van de onsterfelijke ziel volgens het christendom met betrekking tot het ellendige bestaan op deze aarde. Deze twee splitsingen, deze twee vervreemdingen lopen parallel: de tweespalt van het profane en het heilige evenals die van het private en het publieke hebben tot oorzaak de niet-vervulling door de mens van zijn menselijkheid." Raymond Aron, *Essai sur les libertés* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1965), 24.

duality and reconciliation of religion and politics. The dissolution of the boundary between state and society is not only a chance to liberation, as Marx intended, but can also be the most extreme form of slavery, as man is now part, only and completely, of one reality.[234]

The idea of weak thought has been to free philosophy of the grip of metaphysical presuppositions. Secularization expresses this transition from a metaphysical and often transcendental mode of thought to an account of human knowledge as more worldly and embodied. As we have seen above, for Vattimo it is explicitly the world that has become utterly problematic. To use the Nietzschean phrase, Vattimo often cites; 'the true world has become a fable'. But how can one be secular, if one believes at the same time that there is no true world? Vattimo's usage of secularization is almost the opposite of world affirmation. It radicalizes the intention of world affirmation to an extent that it becomes its opposite: it becomes nihilistic. The idea of secularity as an affirmation of the world cannot at the same time mean a nihilism, meaning a dissolution of the world. At the end of modernity we do not, as Vattimo claims, finally experience the world, rather the world dissolves. The meaning of the weakening of Being is that the world and history no longer have any inherent meaning, they put no constraints on what can be a legitimate interpretation. I think it is fair to say, with René Girard, that this nihilistic bent of Vattimo's philosophy entirely neglects anthropology and history as the contexts in which truth can be tested.[235] The emancipatory value of postmodernism is therfore highly questionable. When, in the name of nihilism, history and humanism are left behind, there is no reason left to hope. Marramao writes:

> In Abschweifen davon, in der Bewegung der Differenzierungen, der Entfaltungen, des Strebens (im Nomadentum Lyotards, der Dromologie Virilios) tritt die Existenz über die Grenzen, läuft sie in nicht wiederzugewinnender Weise davon. Sie befindet sich nicht mehr im Sonnenlicht des zentralen Wesens. Sie gewinnt ihren Rhythmus dann nur noch im "Übergriff" auf die Nacht. Man muss sagen, dass diejenigen, die diese Seite des Nihilismus radikal gedacht haben, nichts zeitlich Erlösendes, nichts historisch Befreiendes finden konnten (Heidegger, Bataille)[236]

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[234] Aron, *Essai*, 28–29,38.

[235] Girard and Vattimo, 'Geloof en relativisme', 61.

[236] Giacomo Marramao, 'Hypermodernität und Verzeitlichung der Geschichte. Notizen zur Frage der Säkularisation', in: Peter Koslowski, Robert Spaemann and Reinhard Löw, editors, *Moderne oder Postmoderne. Zur Signatur des gegenwartigen Zeitalters* (Weinheim: Acta Humaniora, 1986), 100.

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Trajectories of Postmodern Secularity

> *"Postmodernism is not able to speak of violence. Violence*
> *is placed in parentheses and its origin is simply ignored. And with it, the most important*
> *truth: that reality is in some measure knowable."*
> René Girard[1]

6.1 AGAIN: WHAT IS SECULARIZATION?

This chapter offers an evaluation of the three paradigms discusses and considers the perspectives of a postmodern secularity. I will continue to distinguish between three current usages. First, the concept of secularization as a socio-historical process. Second, the concept of secularity as the autonomy of the political from the religious. And third, as the affirmation of immanent reality against the assumptions of transcendence. Somewhat schematically, the positions of my interlocutors on these issues can be ordered as follows:

	Neopragmatism	*Weak Thought*	*Radical Orthodoxy*
Secularization Process	Immanentization	Weakening	Sacralization
Political Secularity	Separation	Synthesis	Antithesis
Ontological Secularity	Linguistic Idealism	Dissolution	Participation

FIGURE 6.1: Perspectives on secularity

The three paradigms of secularity that are scrutinized in this book, all reinterpret the concept of secularity in the context of postmodernism. They criticize the traditional understanding of secularity against the background of the epistemological crisis in postmodern philosophy. In the three paradigms, secularization is continued in postmodernism. The postmodern condition, however, also complicates the meaning of

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[1] Giulio Meotti and René Girard, 'Intellectuals as Castrators of Meaning: An Interview with Réne Girard', *Modern Age* 50 no. 2 (2008).

secularity. In their critique of the modern project, Rorty, Vattimo and Milbank all fear the violent implications of a purely relativistic, postmodern logic. Rorty's pragmatism, Vattimo's writing on *caritas* and *kenosis* and Milbank's writing on participation are attempts to escape the violent implications of postmodern secularization. Rorty's writing on pragmatism and ethnocentrism, and his rejection of deconstruction, Milbank's critique of Derrida and Deleuze, and Vattimo's critique of the idea of alterity in Derrida, all affirm that postmodernism is potentially violent and challenges us to formulate a peaceful postmodernism.

Rorty employs the concept of secularization in two – partly conflicting – meanings. When he writes on the history of philosophy as a history of secularization, it refers to a shift from a transcendental philosophy to a radical sense of immanence. Rorty's theory of secularization is indebted to Nietzsche's description of the development of nihilism. This is most evident in the habit to explain the history of Western culture as a threefold secularization. Just as Nietzsche sketched the development of nihilism in the phases of respectively the camel, the lion and the child, so Rorty uses a tally like 'from religion to philosophy to poetry' or 'from logic to language to play' in order to describe the progressive secularizing trend in history and in the history of philosophy in particular.

The turn away from traditional philosophy to a more literary understanding of philosophy, does not come without backfire. The weakening of rationality of philosophical and scientific discourse enables the return of tradition, myth and religion. This necessitates, for some, once again, an appeal to the concept of secularization. The contradictory return of secularity is symptomatic for postmodernism as such: it challenges the credentials of modernity, of which secularization is an inalienable aspect, but wrestles with the return of religion that results from this critique. This leads Rorty to retake secularization in a political sense. Along with secularization, several other, typically modern, distinctions, such as the distinction between public and private, the cognitive and non-cognitive, reappear. Rorty's philosophy of secularization can thus at the same time be characterized as postmodern (secularization as weakening of rationality) and as hypermodern (secularism as an antidote to the return of religion).

For Rorty, secularization is in a very specific way related to his interpretation of the Enlightenment. He sees the Enlightenment as a rather limited undertaking that cleared the road for an independent, scientific rationality, but did not change the ordering of European society, nor the structure of rationality. A culture of positive science emerged, which merely put reason in the place once held by God. For Rorty the Enlightenment did not truly secularize western culture. Secularization really took off in eighteenth century romanticism, when a literary culture and a public sphere emerged, which gave birth to a utopian politics. Rorty embraces this secularist, utopian politics as the true heir of the Enlightenment. In the twentieth century utopian politics is experienced as utterly problematic. This was a consequence of the traumatic outcomes of the most important utopian ideology: Marxism. Rorty, though, wants to hold on to the imaginative politics of the eighteenth century. Rorty attempts to cut secularization loose from the monotheistic vocabulary and to graft it upon a polytheistic vocabulary.

The possibility of such a utopian polytheism is, however, very questionable. In the first place it is not clear, how a polytheism would have a preference for non-violence. Neither the polytheism of antiquity, nor the modern reinventor of polytheism, Friedrich Nietzsche, thought this was the case. In the second place, when asked what the course of such a utopian society might be, Rorty hesitates between a truly polytheistic pluralism

and a downright ethnocentric perspective. The only *imaginable* Utopia is the modern, secularized nation state. A truly polytheistic Utopia is an oxymoron. The only reason to hope, the only reason to have utopian imaginations, is because the values such a Utopia embodies are more desirable than others.[2]

Rorty's polytheistic notion of Utopia cannot escape a 'secular production' of religion. Like Vattimo, Rorty follows the familiar positivist secularization paradigm, which believes that religion will disappear from the public square. The revisionist scholars of secularization, however, have demonstrated convincingly that the period commonly associated with secularization was in fact a 'second religious age' that did not follow the protocols of the secularization theory. Rorty's attempt to separate between a philosophical and a political secularization does not fix this theoretical shortcoming. Throughout the modern period, there is a more complex relation between religion and secularity. Rorty fails to account for this and therefore it is not surprising that in his own philosophy of secularization, religion returns.

Other attempts to speak in a more nuanced way of secularization and religion in the postmodern condition fail to see that secularization cannot be thought of in terms of a gradual decline of religion. Brunkhorst, for instance, writes that there is a difference between religious and idealistic/materialistic postmodernism.[3] My reading of Rorty shows that he cannot be counted in a straightforward way in the tradition of secularization of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It may have seemed so in 1988 when Brunkhorst wrote her article, but Rorty's later writings clearly show an inclination toward the polytheistic version of postmodernism she is ascribing to Lyotard and Heidegger. She is right to insist that Rorty does propagate an interpretation of postmodernism as an emancipatory and utopian philosophy of solidarity. He rejects the idea, though, that this utopian future can only be realized in continuity with the Judaeo-Christian. On the contrary, he tries to combine the emancipatory value of the traditional secularization paradigm with a polytheistic pluralism.

The continuity of the Judeao-Christian tradition and secularization is a central concern in Vattimo's philosophy. Like Rorty, Vattimo interprets the postmodern condition as a phase in the secularization process. For Vattimo this is more than the outcome of a contingent process. The result of secularization is not the 'random' outcome of a contingent socio-historical play of forces. For Vattimo it is the realization of Being in the event; what Heidegger called *Ereignis*. The history of secularization is the history of nihilism, as the gradual dissolution of the *Hinterwelt* and complete acceptance of this world alone. The history of nihilism is an advent of Being as difference. This theological dimension of secularization means that the history of secularization is closely related to the history of salvation. In his account of historicism as a secularization of the Christian

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[2] From another angle Grippe reaches a similar conclusion, when he asserts that "Rorty's narrative of plurality cannot be sustained on the meta-meta-narrative plane if his neo-pragmatic project is to be a coherent effort to advance as desirable the Utopia of social hope." Edward J. Grippe, *Richard Rorty's New Pragmatism: Neither Liberal nor Free* (London: Continuum, 2007), 128.

[3] She writes: "Both Adornoand Rorty ... relate a different history of the emergence of modernity than, for instance Heidegger and Lyotard. Whereas Lyotard and even Foucault conceptualize, with Heidegger, the history of occidental rationality by beginning with the Greeks, Rorty and Adorno favor a perspective enlightened by the sociology of religion and explain the spirit of modernity from its Judaeo-Christian origins. These differing histories come to a critical point in the opposition of a neo-pagan polytheism of heterogeneous language islands to a moral materialism of solidarity among life forms." Hauke Brunkhorst, 'Adorno, Heidegger, and Postmodernity', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 14(3-4) (1988). as cited in Hart.

notion of a history of salvation, Vattimo sees the emergence of secularized, pluralistic societies as an immanentization of the sacred. Inspired by Joachim of Fiore, he sees in history three phases, the phase of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Postmodernism has a certain likeness with the third phase of the Spirit, as God is no longer a transcendent reality, but has weakened himself and lives and works in human beings and history. The secularization thesis is ,thus, turned on its head. Secularization is no longer the defeat of religion, but the ultimate victory of religion in the emergence of social democratic societies.

The relationship between Rorty and Vattimo can be clarified with reference to Hans Blumenberg's thesis. The secularization that occurs in modern philosophy is a direct result of a nominalist emphasis upon divine omnipotence and a form of scepticism. Modern philosophy is thus a response to an internal incoherence in Christian theology and is a legitimate construct independent of Christian theology. Vattimo argues the other way around. The secularization of European culture is the result of the emptying of God in Christ. This makes for a continuity between God and creation that has given way to secularization. Thus it is legitimate to see a secularized culture as a Christian culture. The increased generalization, abstraction and emptying of the concept of God that characterizes modernity is not the result of Christianity's internal incoherence. The postmodern condition is coherent with the character of Christianity's kenotic God. For Vattimo, thus, secularization relates in a more complex way to Christianity than Rorty has it. Nevertheless a theoretical shortcoming of Vattimo's theory of secularization is that his genenalogy almost completely identifies secularization with the deepest intentions of Christianity. The paradigm of Radical Orthodoxy reckons with multiple roots of modern secularity, that are partly neo-pagan and at odds with Christianity.

John Milbank has criticized postmodern philosophy extensively. He developed his criticism in an interpretation of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze: the French interpreters of Heidegger. In Rorty and Vattimo, we meet a different strand in postmodern theory, which is more critical of the differential logic that is so dominant in French postmodernism. In particular Rorty laments the mere negative, deconstructionist, approach to humanism and progressive politics. In fact, Milbank agrees with Rorty exactly at this point. Rorty gives a pragmatist twist to postmodernism and Milbank agrees with this. The two men differ when it comes to articulating what such a postmodern pragmatism might entail and how it relates to religion. Present-day, postmodern relativism, to Milbank's mind cannot provide a suitable basis for a secular society and religious tolerance.[4] Postmodernism, in the scheme of Radical Orthodoxy, marks not the end to secularization, but its completion. Postmodernism ushers in a more radical secularization. It prescribes pluralism and it abjures meta-narratives. But this is itself a new symbolic order at variance with Christianity. For Milbank, thus, postmodern secularism is a religion in self-denial.

[4] See as well De Lange: "Radicaal ontologisch pluralisme is geen noodzakelijke voorwaarde voor religieuze tolerantie. Men kan zelfs … verdedigen, dat een vorm van theïstisch realisme een betere basis verschaft aan tolerantie dan het secularisme, omdat het de oriëntatie (het 'commitment') op de waarheidsvraag en de dialoog in een samenleving levend houdt, die anders in onverschilligheid verflauwt." Frits de Lange, 'Pluralisme en de christelijk traditie', *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* 95/3 (1995), 100–125.

6.2 A SECULAR SOCIETY

For Rorty, the secular is the sphere of politics, clearly distinguished from religion. The picture Rorty has of premodern relations of the religious and the political, is one of politics dominated by religious institutions. He interprets the Enlightenment as essentially a secularizing project. Rorty's view of the constellation typical of modernity runs parallel to the way he sees secularization in general. The critical spirit of the Enlightenment was an excellent opportunity to take a pragmatic approach to philosophy and politics, instead the European mind became obsessed with 'answering the skeptic' and with the search for indubitable foundations. The question as to what legitimates politics is, therefore, exemplary for modernity. Rorty's postmodern politics suggests we answer the question as to what legitimates and ultimately grounds our politics with a frank 'nothing'. Instead the pragmatic belief that truth is 'what is good for us in the way of belief,'[5] should sufficiently guide our moral and political considerations. Rorty's postmodern Utopia gives up on the Rawlsian attempt to give a non-circular defense of liberal institutions and replaces this by a form of ethnocentrism.[6] Rorty's position is inherently instabile as it oscillates between necessity and arbitrariness. In the private realm irony reigns supreme and are there absolutely no boundaries to the process of re-description of contingent identities. In the public realm a liberal is dead serious and not a touch of irony is permitted. Exactly the minimal solidarity defined only in negative terms, suggests that there is no inherent meaning in community.

A comparable lack of meaning is detectable in his conception of historicity. Can one speak of genuine historicity in Rorty's philosophy? I think not. Rorty stresses the radical openness of the future that could continue in any possible direction. I would argue that historicity enables modes of reasoning and co-belonging of citizens to larger bodies. Without any substantial relation to past and future, historicity is reduced to mere temporality. Rorty understands freedom as the capacity to change at any time in any desired alternative identity. This absolute freedom expects nothing positive from history, rather understands historical contingency as an attitude of doubt and detachment. The capacity to change, to receive and pass on meaning need not be a threat to historicity and individuality, but can also take place against the background of a narrative that connects the interpreter – weblike – to other humans and a shared history. An attitude of remembrance and faithful anticipation is an alternative to Rorty's rigid dualism of irony and solidarity.

What has drawn the attention of many critics, including Charles Taylor, is that Rorty has been so hostile to dualisms of all kinds, but cherishes the public private distinction. To my mind, the dualistic nature of modernity is not really overcome by Rorty, rather it is replaced by a dualism of public and private. The public pole of the dual-

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[5] "The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons." William James, *Pragmatism* (Teddington: The Echo Library, 2009), 32.

[6] An ethnocentrims which consists in the willingness "…to name a set of moral virtues: tolerance, respect for the opinions of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than on force …the virtues which members of a civilized (read 'liberal') society must possess if the society is to endure." Rorty, *Objectivity*, 37. Rorty also writes: "Followers of Dewey like myself would like to praise parliamentary democracy and the welfare state as very good things, but only on the basis of invidious comparisons with suggested concrete alternatives, not on the basis of claims that these institutions are truer to human nature, or more rational, or in better accord with the universal moral law, than feudalism or totalitarianism." Rorty, *Objectivity*, 21.

ism is seen as a threat to the flourishing of the private pole, just as the existence of a supernatural God would form a threat to the autonomy of man. Now, what could possibly legitimize such a shift in which the content may be somewhat changed, but the basic structure is retained. Whereas the tension in the premodern view was primarily between the immanent and the transcendent, in Rorty's secularized view the primary tension is between the individual and the social. Neither of which are given any substance really. The upshot of Rorty's criticism of Enlightenment turns out to be only a partial rejection of the Enlightenment. That Rorty cannot leave epistemology behind so easily is clear from the fact that he silently reintroduces new dualisms that govern his political philosophy. A dualism of private and public and a related dualism of philosophy and politics. The possibility to make such distinctions presupposes a privileged standpoint from where to draw the line between public and private and between philosophy and politics. If postmodernism teaches us one thing it is to be suspicious of these supposedly natural distinctions.

Rorty would argue that the solidarity of liberal citizens may not be grounded in rational convictions, but is structured around collective narratives and sentiments: this solidarity is based on ethnocentric and quasi-nationalistic sentiments ('we bourgeois liberals'). This is itself alright, but by moving completely away from rational accounts of politics, his secularist message becomes even harder to grasp, since religions do just that: they offer narratives that enable people to act morally, feel part of an – always partly imaginary – community and shared future. At the same time, Rorty's own version of liberalism is enriched by religious notions. His writings on polytheism affirm this religious inclination in his version of postmodernism. The influence of Nietzsche is obvious, since Nietzsche has seen the arrival of the *Übermensch* as essentially a religious event.

For Rorty and Milbank secularity is a central concern. Rorty writes on secularization in a modern manner as a process that banishes religion to the private realm. Milbank and the revisionists of secularization, seriously question the rationality of this process. Secularization, is a rational proces by hindsight only, because it reinterpreted both the political and the religious. Secularization is the invention of a new religious praxis. Van Rooden explains that, for instance, in the Netherlands, religion changes from a visible external order, to a community of religio-political subjects – connected through an inner piety – for whom the state is the supreme form of community. This process cannot be explained as secularization (It can neither be explained as privatization nor as a separation of Church and state). Of course, formally Church and state were separated institutions, but the way citizens belonged to the state was explicitly religious.[7] This change in modern culture cannot be understood as a continuous process of secularization. In fact it is better to speak of a paradigm shift. There is not in any straigtforward sense a decline of religion, nor a privatization of religion, but a relocation of religion from a visible, hierarchic order, to the inner selves of political and religious subjects. That this process was not a decline of religion as such can easily

[7] In the Dutch constitution of 1796, religious adherence was explicitly recommended: "De eerbiedwaardige erkentenis van een albesturend Opperwezen versterkt de banden der maatschappij en blijft iederen burger ten duursten aanbevolen." As quoted in: Onderwijsraad, 'Dienstverband, godsdienst en de openbare school. Over de aanstelling van de leraren godsdienst en levensbeschouwelijke vorming op de openbare school' (2006), ⟨URL: http://www.onderwijsraad.nl/upload/publicaties/330/documenten/dienstverband_godsdienst_en_de_openbare_school.pdf⟩, 10.

be demonstrated when we look at the way the churches in the Netherlands operated in the newly created space of civic life. They were highly succesful and in many ways pioneered in their resistance against the older hierarchic orderings. The emergence of the voluntary associations for overseas mission in The Netherlands and in the United Kingdom, as well provide examples of newly produced religious imaginations.[8]

When we look at Vattimo's political theory, it is evident that he, no more than Rorty, succeeds in getting a more critical perspective on secularization. He differs in the valuation of the Christian past, which for him has remaining significance for postmodern culture. For Vattimo there is a theocratic substrate under his postmodern, liberal theorizing. In Vattimo we see a certain aspect of the 19th century ideal of a political community play a dominant role: namely the identity of the political and the religious subject. Despite his interest in the relevance of the Christian tradition for secularization, Vattimo does interpret this entirely in terms of a weakening of structures and a dissolution of the religious in the political. Vattimo's account of secularization pays a great deal more attention to the indebtedness of secularization to the Christian tradition, but the outcome is as secularistic as Rorty's account. There is no room for traditional religion or for the Church as an institution.

It is John Milbank, who from the Christian tradition, pleads for the distinction and relative autonomy of two domains: the religious and the political. It is exactly the insistence on the existence of the Church as a community and a 'counter-kingdom', that distinguishes John Milbank as a political theologian, from the secularization theologies of the the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Writing on Gutierrez and other liberation theologians, Milbank claims that: "all versions of the autonomy of the secular are bound to reinstate the abstract opposition of the individual and the social"[9] The public/private distinction serves as a master structure that divides up all of culture, regardless of its specific content or character. The religious – now bereft of its own dynamics – is mastered by the public-private ratio. Milbank speaks of a remaining 'religious use-value'. In Milbank's view this public private distinction is once again an ahistorical principle. The crucial problem of this formalism is that it rules out tradition and historically contingent forms of life. For Milbank, the Church is an historical concrete form of life. It cannot be made to fit into a formal mechanism of public and private: rather it radically questions the naturalness of this formalism.

6.3 A SECULAR WORLD

The problematic relation modern philosophy had to the world is a central concern for postmodern philosophy. Secularization plays a double role in this problematic. In the first place it is criticized, as it is part of the discourse of modernity. In the second place it is employed as a remedy to the returned irrationality, religion, and relativism as a consequence of this critique. The heritage of empiricism and positivism is complex though. For although Rorty radically rejects the reductionist materialism, he is in some sense a materialist himself. His critique of positivism, does not make him reconsider religious speech or God talk. In Rorty's account, secularization refers to a progression in

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[8] Peter van Rooden, *Religieuze regimes. Over godsdienst en maatschappij in Nederland, 1570-1990* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1996), 121–47.

[9] Milbank, 'Against secular order', 206.

history understood as an increasing willingness to see this world as the only reality. In premodern times, religion prevented human agents to really appreciate finite existence. Instead a *Hinterwelt*, was thought to be the real world and the immanent world was but a shadow. From Christianity and Platonic philosophy, modernity makes a secularizing move, by putting an embargo on knowledge of the transcendent. According to Rorty the postmodern condition is the condition of a radical historicism and epistemological naturalism. Under the parameters of modern philosophy, the philosopher guarded over the proper line of separation between knowledge of the empirical world and what was from now on seen as mere speculation of the transcendent. Rorty's central thesis in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is that he sees the subject of this philosophy as a secularized substitute for God. He criticizes the capacity of the human agent to know the world, in favor of a more fragmentary relation to the world. Modern science makes a construction of the world based on the categories of the mind or language. For Rorty, there is no such a privileged relation to the world. There is no 'glassy essence,' nor an immutable structure of either the noumenal or the categories of language. The human capacity to 'know,' and to use language, is just a way of coping with the world. The way man is related to the world can thus never be qualified with such distinctions as true or false. It does not make sense to use such predications. All we can say is that we can cope with our environment better. Calling such relations true or false is redundant.

The autonomy of the world is thus a very questionable thing to Rorty. We know that the world is out there, but our relation to that world can only be one of certain accommodated, linguistic behavior, not one of knowing. The world is out there, but we can have only random descriptions of it. The world sets no limits to our language, for the truth and justification of our descriptions are regulated socially. Rorty, thus, in fact leaves the world for what it is and makes the community of speakers the only relevant context for our descriptions of the world. He calls this the ontological priority of the social.

Rorty's account of the world concerns the world as a closed spatio-temporal system. The world must be taken as all there is, but it cannot be objectively known, as in the tradition of representationalism. After the transcendental constitution of the world in Kantian philosophy, and the failed project of logical positivism with its criterion of meaning, postmodernism finally accepts the world as it is, supposedly. Rorty holds that we make sense of our relation to the world without making use of 'transcendental arguments' and without making use of tertia. What then does it mean for Rorty to explain the world without making reference to supernatural, transcendent principles, or to deny the possibility of a framework that somehow molds our perception of the world? It means that Rorty sees the secularized understanding of man's relation to the world as always in process and is so without any stability or goal. Without transcendental principles and without tertia between man and world, there is no point in skepticism, for these are all attempts to isolate some privileged instance in man's understanding, that have nothing to do with the actual social, historical processes of the acquirement of knowledge. Instead, linguistic behaviorism tells us that the process of knowing is a natural process that cannot be judged by some transcending principle. Our knowledge has some objectivity in the sense only that it has proven itself as working truths in a pragmatic-evolutionary way.

To unconditionally accept this world as the only reality there is, might sound as a plausible turn to naturalism. But it does not come without backfire. This backfire

becomes obvious in Rorty's Nietzschean suspicion of science. Science is but one more metaphysical yearning and should be treated with accordingly. In the line of Nietzsche's critique of the absolutist pretensions of modern science he breaks altogether with positivism and sees the world as a flux of which we have only random descriptions. The consequence of this, is that the world is not affirmed. Rorty's rejection of representational knowledge, drives him in the hands of a radical separation of truth and world. Truth and justification are social practices, that swing entirely free of the world. The world thus is denied a role in belief formation and finally gets lost in the endless hurly-burly of human interpretations. With the philosophies of representationalism and positivism, Rorty bids farewell to the concept of nature as well. So two direct consequences of Rorty's postmodern secularization are 1) the invention of a new infinity, namely the infinity of endless processes of redescription and reinterpretation and as a consequence of this 2) the abolition of the ideas of nature and reality. This understanding of interpretation cannot convince us entirely. Rorty's insistence on naturalism in epistemology has not offered any real alternative to traditional philosophy.

In this respect it is promising to compare Rorty to Milbank. One would expect that exactly the attack on positive science opens new perspectives for religion and theology, Milbank does not agree with this mere rejection of positivism. Milbank sees positivism as a post-Christian phenomenon.[10] The anarchy that follows from postmodern descriptions of the world is non-Christian and in this sense Milbank sides with positivism. In the positivism of the social sciences, Milbank sees a kinship with Christian world affirmation. In our comparison with Rorty's dissolution of secularization in nihilism there is a tendency to lose the world. This is what Rorty calls 'world making,'[11] but is essentially the flipside of world denying. In positivism, Milbank sees remnants of Christian world affirmation, threatened to be lost in postmodernism. He argues for the kinship between sociology and theology.[12] To Milbank's mind, thus, the secularity of the world cannot be granted in the 'secular metaphysics' of postmodernism. The thesis of a secular acceptance of the world is problematic. Postmodern models such as Rorty's, are committed to one more optional 'coding' of the world. It prefers to speak of the world as an indifferent flux, of which man can give only random descriptions. This is not only a way of getting rid of an objectivistic world picture. In the same movement of opening up the imagination it threatens to initiate a 'diminution of the real'.[13] Christianity has expressed the non-triviality of the world in such concepts as creation, *kenosis*, and the Eucharist. The Christian Eucharistic metaphysics underwrites contingency and historicity, yet sees this temporal and historical process as partaking in the divine. Does this not imply a simple return to the rigid metaphysics of modernity and scholasticism? Milbank argues that this is not the case. He steers away from a rigid God-talk, that pretends to mirror, or to

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[10] Christianity and positivism share, according to Milbank, the following aspects: 1. An identification of the good with being, power and positivity. 2. A search for a harmonic non agonistic social order. 3. An elevation of the particular beyond the general. 4. A realization that reason begins in collective devotion and can never really leave it behind . 5. (sometimes) a non-nominalistic recognition that there are surd 'general facts' and irreducible relations and a refusal to pretend that we can see with certainty beyond the givenness of appearances. Milbank, 'Preface to the second edition', xv.

[11] Rorty, 'Worldmaking'.

[12] "Purged of the secular metaphysics which I disinter, sociology has contributed to the writing of history an indispensable insistence upon the synchronic and the geographical and to social ethics a refusal of a merely contractualist notion of the ideal society." Milbank, 'Preface to the second edition', xv.

[13] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 32.

know God in an absolute manner. The Eucharistic model shows exactly this, that God can be known only to some extent and only in the mode of participation.

Both Rorty and Milbank affirm that secularity defines the postmodern condition. For Rorty this means that in a continued secularization, claims to truth – as expressed in religion and metaphysics – will be weakened. This secularization as a 'secularisation de la pensée', does not obstruct, but enables the central political project of modernity: secularization of society. The concept of secularity thus plays a double role for Rorty. On the one hand it is object of critique as it is part of the tradition of the Enlightenment. On the other hand secularity is appealed to in order to ward off the threats of the religious voices that have returned and reclaim their right for free speech, as a consequences of the postmodern critique. Via Marquard we can sufficiently describe this undertaking as an attempt to take secularization out of its traditional monotheistic context and inscribe it in a polytheistic vocabulary.

Descriptively John Milbank can completely underwrite this state of affairs. There is in postmodernism an achieving of the Enlightenment. He draws opposite conclusions, though. Precisely because postmodernism sticks to secularization, it cannot claim to have overcome modernity. He sees resurging religion and polytheism as symptoms of the quasi-religious structure of postmodernism itself, not as survivals from premodern times, that still need to be secularized. Instead of pushing religion to the private sphere, Milbank suggests that a more balanced relation between religion and the secular is needed. To his mind, the religious perspective is not anti-secular, but can do justice to an experience of the world, history and embodiment that is beyond empty formalism and latent violence.

Rorty's concern is primarily epistemological. As ontology is for him always dependent on the possibility of a theory of knowledge, it virtually loses his interest. Gianni Vattimo is in this sense closer to John Milbank. His theory of the weakening of Being, is intended as an ontology. Vattimo stands in the German tradition of *Seinsdenken*, especially the tradition of Martin Heidegger. In art and the postmodern media society we see the modern subject and its relation to the world disappear. Although Vattimo advocates a postmodern ontology, it is very questionable whether he succeeds in holding in one vision both nihilism and ontology. Vattimo sees the process of secularization lead to a dissolution of reality. To his mind, virtual reality is metaphoric for this weakened, communicative network structure of the postmodern world.

This is, I think, entirely unconvincing. In the first place it is not clear how the dissolution of the world can be interpreted as the outcome of secularization. The primary intention of secularization was to affirm the world, not to deny it. Postmodern man, in the face of the destruction of his natural environment, once again denies the world in a virtual *askesis*. The experience of the world in Vattimo's postmodernism is not merely a return to the world, now freed of its metaphysical presumptions, it is also a strongly normative program in which every description of the world has to be uncovered as yet another point of view, that is a-priori at the same level with every other point of view. The production of new worldpictures, contributes to this allegedly liberating labor. As others experience it, however, this construction of world pictures is a highly normative undertaking and in no way more natural or liberating than any other metaphysical picture of the world. The emergence of a virtual world in postmodernism can also be experienced as an anti-human reality.

Philosophically, Milbank and Vattimo have a significant point of agreement in their

rejection of concepts as 'alterity' (Derrida) and 'radical transcendence' (Karl Barth) as to ascertain the proper field of knowledge reserved for theology. Every attempt to formulate a 'sublimity beyond representation', functions to confirm the questionable idea of an autonomous secular world, completely transparent to the mind. Both Milbank and Vattimo affirm that this way of stating God's transcendence cuts the theological loose from history and the world. Whereas Vattimo's progressive account of secularization is rejected by Milbank, he is equally critical of approaches that entirely deny history. In his criticism of the theology of Barth and the philosophy of alterity of Derrida, Milbank is close to Vattimo. Both men underscore the philosophical relevance of history. For both Milbank and Vattimo, the theology of secularization, as provided by theologians of a Barthian stripe, are misled. They tend to stress the radical otherness of God. They succeed in safeguarding God from secular critique, but at the same time, make God so transcendent that the world becomes a domain completely independent from God. In the theologies of Milbank and Vattimo, God is present in the created order. Milbank expresses this by a Thomistic idea of participation, Gianni Vatttimo by the means of the concept of *kenosis*.

As I see it, in a world in which our desires are increasingly influenced by mediated images beyond our control, religion and Church, could give us a more authentic, more human mode of dealing with our world and our fellow humans. To my mind this would not imply a growing dominance of religious codes and institutions in our world, as if religion could itself be yet another force in our media society. Rather the role of religion would be to counter the sense of world loss in postmodern philosophy and culture and to insist on the secular, worldly character of our experience of world and society. Religion could contribute to a corrected understanding of secularity as itself emerging from a religious awareness that the world and human sociality have an intrinsic value that cannot be given over, without consequences, to endless manipulation by media and digital technology.

For this to happen it would be necessary to overcome traditional identifications of religion and supranaturalism. Secularity enables a perspective that can revive a sense of reality and community that threatens to get lost in postmodern nominalism and the digitalization of experience. In this respect the idea is crucial that secularization is to a certain extent inherent to the Judeo-Christian tradition and that secular modernity is indebted to religion.[14] The one-sided focus on a dichotomy of religion and secularity has been criticized rightfully by many thinkers of diverse religions, granting contingency and finitude. The postmodern perspective, made possible by authors such as Rorty, makes it possible to reconsider theological language. This time not as claims to static eternal truths, but as possible descriptions of the world. As I see it, this makes possible a return to a more original biblical understanding of truth and secularity. In the postmodern turn, philosophy tries to restore the experience of true secularity. The world was lost in the abstractions of modern philosophy, and postmodernity attempts to restore the relation between man and world. Its labor of spatialization, temporalization, its appreciation of embodiment and particularity all testify to this. Our conclusion, however, must be that postmodern philosophy at least in some exemplary cases, like Vattimo and Rorty, cannot really live up to this claim. On the contrary, we must conclude that this is highly questionable. Postmodern philosophy has a nihilistic intent that carries in it

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[14] Charles Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 41vv.

the seeds of destruction. Its ontology of difference does not appreciate any difference in particular, but tends to make infinite series of distinctions, that in the end makes it impossible to see the difference between endless difference and sameness. In this sense the postmodern is the radicalization of modernity. It replaces the ahistoric, single, true description of reality with the equally ahistoric, infinite plurality of descriptions of the world. In these 'optional descriptions' (D.Z. Phillips) postmodernism can be seen as still in the grip of an absolutist metaphysics.[15]

Vattimo's and Milbank's readings of western philosophy, show that secularity originates in Christianity. This means that we cannot make an opposition of a secular perspective and a religious perspective. Rather we should realize that the idea of a secular culture is historically and qua content (morally and intellectually) dependent on Christianity. I think Milbank is after this when he states that a differential immanentism is not more peaceful than a transcendent schema. There is the possibility of a peaceful metaphysics as opposed to an ontological agonism. The notion of the secularity of the world threatens to get lost in the postmodern discourses of Weak Thought and Neopragmatism. I think Radical Orthodoxy rightfully voices a critique of postmodern ontologies. More specific, Radical Orthodoxy signals the loss of the original meaning of secularity as the inherent worth of the world. Secularity can save us from a world made strange.[16] Secularity is an alternative to a hyperimmanence, which reduces all representations to mere immanence. In Rorty's theory, all descriptions of the world and distinctions that make it possible to orientate ourselves within the world, are just as many prejudices that can be replaced by any other description or distinction. 'The world is out there, descriptions of the world are not', says Rorty repeatedly, and he thus excludes the possibility of a true description of the world. Radical Orthodoxy is less prone to such radical world denial. As Milbank proposes, in the Orthodox idea of a participation of the world in the good, there is always an inherent worth in the material, the bodily and the social, that avoids the latent nihilism of neopragmatism and weak thought.

6.4 PERSPECTIVES OF POSTMODERN SECULARITY

When John Milbank and Richard Rorty in 1989 published respectively *Theology and Social Theory* and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, both men responded to the challenges posed by the collapse of traditional East-West rhetoric and the emergence of neo-liberalism. Rorty saw a further secularization of culture as the best guarantee for human freedom. Milbank, on the other hand, saw 1989 as the possible end to a secular age. It was possible then, to reconsider the course postmodern philosophy and to connect postmodern critique to a revaluation of Europe's religious identity.[17]

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[15] Phillips, 149. For the idea of Rorty as loyal to a Cartesian subjectivism, see Grippe, 140–3.

[16] Winquist writes on Derrida's notion of différance as '…an open-ended indeterminable, disseminative undecidability within discourse. The word and the world are made strange.' Winquist, 33.

[17] John Milbank, 'Against the Resignations of the Age', in: Francis P. McHugh and Samuel M. Natale, editors, *Things Old and New. Catholic Social Teaching Revisited* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 1–39. "The post 1989 liberalism is increasingly problematic as it lacks a substantial counter ideology, namely communism, on which existence it depended." In these two positions, we can already see how deeply divided contemporary thought is on the idea of a secular culture. Milbank, 'Gift of Ruling', 232.

Two circumstances enable us today to evaluate the two alternatives – secularism and post-secularism – more precisely. When Habermas discusses his notion of a post-secular society, he points in the first place, to the clash of civilizations between the Arabic World and the liberal West.[18] In postmodern culture the debate on religion and secularity is fueled by the clash with the Arab world. Today it is visible, more clearly than before, that the West can not neglect its deep, religious roots in Christendom. The 'north-Atlantic bourgeois liberalism' Rorty had in mind was not as attractive as it looked after the collapse of ideologies in 1989. In other words, the supposed liberating and emancipating effects of postmodernism, are not mirrored in actual societal and economic developments. As Habermas sees it, the terrorism was in part a result of a 'beschleunigten und radikal entwurzelnden Modernisierung'.[19]

A second, significant development is the gigantic impact of neo-liberalism. Post-ideological culture was not as tolerant as was expected, but had a massive – often destructive – impact on traditional forms of life. Habermas searches for a 'secularization that does not destroy'.[20] For Vattimo this development was the main reason to re-asses postmodernism as a social theory and to develop a renewed communism. Postmodern, liberal culture tends to forget about fundamental differences and thereby the possibility of a moral sensibility is threatened. Habermas writes:

> Moralische Empfindungen, die bisher nur in religiöser Sprache einen hinreichend diffe-renzierten Ausdruck besitzen, können allgemeine Resonanz finden, sobald sich für ein fast schon Vergessenes, aber implizit Vermisstes eine rettende Formulierung einstellt. Sehr selten gelingt das, aber manchmal. Eine Säkularisierung, die nicht vernichtet, vollzieht sich im Modus der Übersetzung. Das ist es, was der Westen als die weltweit säkularisierende Macht aus seiner eigenen Geschichte lernen kann.[21]

For Habermas, the remaining relevance of religion is to 'guarantee the differences'. Is this not – ultimately – the difference between God and human being, the sacred and the secular?

The idea of a postmodern, liberal culture, as itself a very dominant form of life, makes the idea of a postmodern secularization very questionable. The merely negative farewell to ideology and religion has not resulted in a more peaceful and just society, nor a more humane one. Milbank has most explicitly explored this line of a 'destructive secularization.' He sees the dissolution of boundaries, such as the fusion of nature and culture, and public and private, as symptoms of the totalitarian ambition of modern and postmodern reason. Its secularizing intent does not aim at an affirmation of the profane as something distinct from religion nor at an affirmation of religion as something different from politics, but at a dissolution of both.

Vattimo in many ways agrees with Milbank's response to postmodernism. For Vattimo, however, nihilism offers a non-violent alternative to radical forms of postmodernism. In Nietzsche he sees the key figure of a friendly nihilism. I think, that his

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[18] See as well Robert Kagan's book, who speaks of a 'return of history'. Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2008).

[19] Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen: Dankesrede des Friedenspreisträgers* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001).

[20] Habermas sees a close proximity between neo-liberalism and postmodernism. See his essay *The Postnational Constellation.* Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 88.

[21] Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen.*

interpretation of Nietzsche cannot be upheld. Vattimo relies for a non-violent postmodernism on Nietzsche's nihilism. But as many critics have argued: was not Nietzsche himself very much interested in the *Übermensch* as a violent being who had overcome the meekness and humility of Christian morality. Vattimo says that the *Übermensch* in Nietzsche's later philosophy is an artistic figure.[22] According to Vattimo then, "…there is no strict relation between nihilism and violence. In fact, even if one cannot attribute this to Nietzsche, one of the effects of nihilism may well be to undermine the reasons by which violence is justified and nourished."[23] It is very questionable, however, whether this perspective can be rightfully derived from Nietzsche. Vattimo completely identifies metaphysics and classical theology, the end of metaphysics and the death of God. This interpretation of Nietzsche's idea of the death of God is one-sided. There are good reasons to see the death of God as primarily Christocentric. Nietzsche's criticism did not solely concern the strong God of metaphysics, in favor of the weak god of 'true' Christianity. Nietzsche's most severe criticism goes out to the crucified God: it concerns exactly the weak identity of Christianity.[24] Vattimo, however, downplays the importance of the criticism of the 'crucified God' and makes it seem as if Nietzsche were primarily concerned with a philosophical and moral God. While the promise of postmodernism was to do justice to finitude and contingency, the outcome of naturalization and secularization is that a new universalizing spirit emerges. This is not accidental for Rorty and Vattimo, but it seems inherent to Nietzschean postmodern philosophy. Postmodern philosophy typically claims that truth pluralism is the best antidote against intolerance and violence. It is not made clear how the transparent and virtually mediated world Vattimo embraces, can do justice to the emancipatory claims of secularization. It is far from obvious that the weakening of structures in the postmodern world have a *parti pris* for justice or love. Postmodern deconstructions do not as such have any emancipatory potential, and do not as such have a peaceful intent.

The investigation into the idea of a postmodern secularity has shown that for both Rorty and Milbank, postmodernism is a crucial turning point for theorizing on secularity. Both men would agree that the postmodern condition is a narrative condition. As Girard says, the nineteenth century gave us the novel, when the theoretical possibilities of representationalism, no longer were able describing the growing complexity of modern society. This is completely in accordance with what Rorty and Milbank bring to the fore. Milbank's ecclesiological and eschatological concerns and Rorty's utopianism, express the need for a narrative embodiment of secularity. The narrative nature of the postmodern condition is underestimated, when empty formalism and legalism are introduced in the form of speechrules.[25] In the line of René Girard, John Milbank and Peter Sloterdijk, formalism in explaining and understanding human – collective – behavior is falling short. Solutions that tend to illuminate social realities in terms of a more detailed and formal analysis of speech tend to overlook the complexity of historically embodied patterns and other than logical aspects of human behavior. An increasingly

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[22] "…as one who experiments and in so doing transcends the interests tied to the struggle for existence: a figure far distant from the strong subject that many interpreters – basing their readings on other texts by Nietzsche – have wished to identify with the *Übermensch*."

[23] Vattimo, *Beyond interpretation*, 29.

[24] See especially Ad Prosman, *Geloven na Nietzsche. Nietzsche's nihilisme in de spiegel van de theologie* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2007).

[25] I think here, for example of Robert Audi's 'secular rationale principle'. Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996), 25–8.

flat society in which no hierarchical orderings exist, and the political reality of a 'direct access democracy' (Taylor), is not only an ideal condition for human participation and solidarity, but also for the escalation of collective violence. Thus, Girard sketches two possible trajectories of secularization in relation to religion and violence. Either Christianity will be achieved in secularization, as the consequence of its own critique of religion, or secularization means a turn to a pre-Christian intuition, of which the violent consequences become visible now in resurging ethnic violence and an unbridled liberal market economy, based on unlimited desire. The positive expectations that Rorty and Vattimo have expressed of a non-ideological secularism, have been proven wrong and the ideological tensions of the pre 1989 era have been merely replaced by a more fragmented – and therefore essentially postmodern – terror. I think, therefore, that John Milbank is essentially right when he sees in Christianity a less formal and more embodied form of secularity. His position is not without risk either. In pleading for a 'postmodern theocracy'[26] and a 'liturgical society', he is not only opening up perspectives for a more substantial account of citizenship, but he also risks the proper sense of demarcation between religion and society, religion and the state. In this sense his position is not immune to an undesirable mixing up of religion and politics.

Today's political culture is characterized by a growing opposition between political secularism and religious fundamentalism. I take it this is a fruitless opposition that can be overcome by a more thoroughgoing awareness of what it means to be secular. We can no longer act as if religion is an unequivocal explanation of the crisis of modern democracy. It might as well be the the the lack of religion that threatens modern democracies by making democracy a purely formal system, without inherent value and purpose. The embedding of democracy in the traditions of Christianity and Judaism, is to my mind a necessary precondition for the future of democracy. Moreover, the emphasis on the alleged dangers of religion makes us lose sight of other – maybe more pressing and more real – threats to democracy. As I read left wing economists like Noreena Hertz, the crisis of modern democracies is primarily an increasingly aggressive, globalizing capitalism.[27] The idea of a secular society might receive new meanings in the light of these developments. It could mean today that politics has to be relatively independent – not only of religion – but much more of the market and the power of international corporations. Secularity as a sensitivity for relativity and multiplicity of spheres of life, can attain new meanings here. It is misleading to focus on religion as the primary threat to modern democracy while paying no attention to the resurging power of a global, free

[26] Milbank uses the term theocracy only in combination with such adjectives as 'postmodern' and 'anarchic.' This distinguishes it in a crucial way from other forms of theocracy and shariacracy. Scholar in political theology, Theo de Wit, gives a good explanation of this difference: "…De ervaringsbasis van het verlangen naar een theocratie ('géén dominantie van mensen over mensen, alleen God heerst') is niet zelden uitzichtloze onderdrukking door een despotisch regime. Het gaat hier om een vorm van theocratisch anarchisme ('er zijn geen zinvolle politieke doelen waaraan je je kunt hechten, alleen God verdient vertrouwen') dat vooral bij joodse denkers regelmatig in zwang was. Deze religieuze cultivering van een reserve en een geestelijke onafhankelijkheid ten opzichte van alle aardse macht dient scherp te worden onderscheiden van theocratie in de zin van een totalitaire overheersing door een priesterkaste of het revolutionaire streven naar een waarheidsregime, waarbij met behulp van geweld een nieuwe mens (vandaag bijvoorbeeld de 'goede moslim') gefabriceerd wordt. Dat laatste is slechts een religieuze variant van het twintigste-eeuwse totalitarisme." Theo de Wit, 'Politiek zonder ontknoping, religie zonder garantie', *De helling. Kwartaalblad voor linkse politiek* 1 (2008).

[27] Noreena Hertz, *The Silent Takeover. Global Capitalism and the Death of Democracy* (London: Arrow Books, 2001).

market. The secularist rhetoric that fears the presence of religion in society, is also mis-leading because we can not simply repeat the arguments from the nineteenth century in which both the state and the Church had a firm seat. Today's challenge is not primarily to save the state from religion, but even more of saving the state as such. The crisis of democracy is the crisis of weak states and powerless governments.[28] The state is not threatened more by religion, than by market parties, a failing public system and media manipulation.

Closely related to this is the overall valuation of the political Enlightenment and utopian politics. Rorty sees the political history of the West as a history of progress that need not raise any serious questions concerning the legitimacy of modern secularism. "…the overall features of that Utopia have been fairly familiar for two hundred years"[29], writes Rorty. His belief is that the end of ideology and pragmatic economic reform will finally bring mankind to full maturity and make an end to evil.[30] The postmodern condition did not turn out to be like that. Today some speak of a 'return of history and the end of dreams'. Moreover, Rorty's words express a dogmatic belief in a progress in economic equality and the dependence of evil and morality on – apparently more basic – economic circumstances. Nothing, however, supports this progressive faith. Wasn't the French revolution itself one of the most bloody processes of redescription imaginable?[31] Writing in the beginning of the nineteen-nineties, some optimism was undoubtedly fueled by the collapse of communism. But even though the tone of voice of Rorty's optimism might sound quite naive, the belief in progress, the belief that violence and cruelty were much worse in the past than they are now, and the belief that violence and cruelty are essentially religious problems are widespread. Maybe even more dangerous is the belief in the 'finally mature' humanity. It reminds us of the utopian politics that, in various modes of totalitarianism, all saw a last enemy after which the Kingdom would *finally* be realized. Utopian politics has not only accomplished greater freedom and equality, it also has been a major influence in totalitarian regimes. Violence is not per se a problem of hierarchical or religious modes of thinking. Egalitarian modes of thinking can lead to even greater excesses of violence. The concept of secularity plays an essential role here and it is likely that it will remain of central importance for the future of postmodern societies.

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[28] James Fearon and David Lait, 'Neotrusteeship and the Problem of Weak States', *International Security* 28/4 (2004), 5–43.

[29] Rorty, *Objectivity*, 39.

[30] "In this utopia nobody will be humiliated by bullies – neither by slave owners, nor by factory owners, nor by husbands. The elimination of vast and social and economic inequalities will help treat one another decently. Mankind will finally escape from the thuggery of the schoolyard, put away childish things, and be morally mature." Rorty, *Objectivity*, 39.

[31] Jean Bethke Elstain discusses Rorty's superficial dealing with the terror of the French revolution in more detail. Jean Bethke Elstain, 'Don't Be Cruel. Reflections on Rortyan Liberalism', in: Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley, editors, *Richard Rorty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 146.

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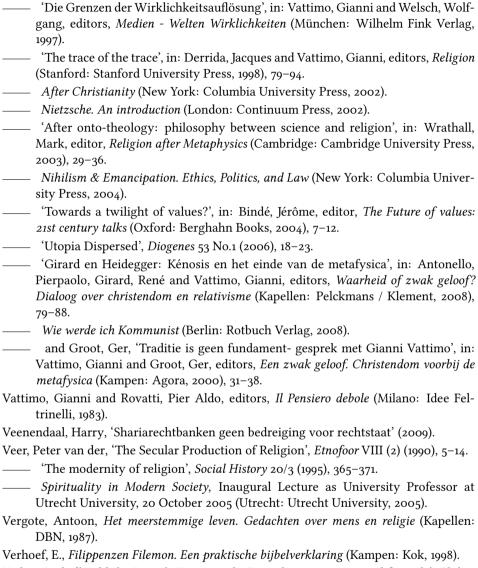
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Samenvatting in het Nederlands

Postmoderne seculariteit

De postmoderniteit kent een terugkeer van de religie. Ten gevolge van de kritiek op het rationalisme van de moderniteit, is er in het postmoderne denken sprake van een hernieuwde aandacht voor de religie, traditie en de mythe. Deze ontwikkeling gaat gepaard met een onzekerheid over de meest geëigende plaats van de religie in de samenleving. In het postmoderne denken klinkt daarom tegelijk een beroep op de actualiteit van de seculariteit. Wanneer we ons realiseren dat de seculariteit een van de kernwoorden is van de Verlichting, is de verwarring compleet. Hoe kunnen we tegelijk recht doen aan de terugkeer van de religie en de domeinen van religie en politiek adequaat onderscheiden?

In de hedendaagse cultuurtheorie is deze spanning tussen enerzijds de postmoderne conditie en anderzijds de seculariteit met handen te tasten. In deze studie bespreek ik een drietal paradigma's die een hermeneutiek bieden van het begrip seculariteit in de context van de postmoderniteit. Deze paradigma's zijn het neo-pragmatisme van Richard Rorty, de Radical Orthodoxy van John Milbank en het zwakke denken van Gianni Vattimo. Het veld van onderzoek wordt nader bepaald door een aantal betekenisaspecten van seculariteit. Ik onderscheid ten eerste het socio-historische gebruik van 'secularisatie'. Dit begrip wordt veelal op een speculatieve manier gebruikt om ontwikkelingen in geschiedsfilosofische zin te duiden. Ten tweede onderscheid ik de seculariteit van de wereld. In deze zin verwijst het vooral naar de ervaring van de wereld als profane ruimte. Ten derde onderscheid ik het politieke gebruik van seculariteit. Seculariteit in de politieke zin verwijst naar de (relatieve autonomie van het domein van de politiek ten opzichte van de religie.

Voor ik de drie paradigma's bespreek, geef ik een schets van de belangrijkste historische ontwikkelingen in de geschiedenis van het westerse denken. Daarbij maak ik vooral gebruik van het werk van Charles Taylor en Jean-Claude Monod. Taylor beschrijft de ontwikkeling van een dominant christelijke cultuur naar een verlichte seculiere cultuur. Monod beschrijft de verschillende vormen die de seculariteit aanneemt in de Europese cultuur in de 19e en 20e eeuw.

Het begrip seculariteit kent een lange geschiedenis die teruggaat op de vroegste kerk. De vroegste kerk zag zich gesteld voor de vraag hoe de heilsgeschiedenis zich

verhield tot de profane geschiedenis. Vooral Augustinus' leer van de twee rijken is hier van doorslaggevende betekenis geweest. Augustinus vermijdt twee extremen. Ten eerste namelijk de positie volgens welke de geschiedenis van het Romeinse rijk een *preparatio evangelica* zou zijn en ten tweede de positie die zich geheel afwendt van de seculiere geschiedenis. Kerk en wereld hebben elk hun eigen sfeer, en christenen hebben ook in de wereld hun taak te vervullen.

In de middeleeuwen werd de grens tussen kerkelijke en de wereldlijke macht voortdurend betwist. Vooral in de zogenaamde Investituurstrijd is duidelijk te zien dat de twee sferen voortdurend in elkaar overlopen. Het begrip seculariseren wordt ook wel gebruikt in het grensverkeer tussen de kerkelijke en wereldlijke sfeer. De wereldlijke macht is ook nooit zuiver seculier. Wereldlijke heersers hebben belang bij geestelijke benoemingen en andersom heeft de kerk aanzienlijke wereldlijke macht. In de periode die volgt op de Reformatie wordt de verhouding tussen werldlijke en kerkelijke macht nog complexer. In gebieden die voorheen Rooms-Katholiek waren dienen nu de ook de gereformeerde en lutherse kerken zich aan. De opkomende natiestaten moeten zich op een nieuwe manier tot deze kerken verhouden. De periode van de godsdienstoorlogen loopt uit op de vrede van Westfalen, waar het werkwoord seculariseren wordt gebruikt voor het overgaan van bisdommen in wereldlijke handen. Dit gebeurde bijvoorbeeld met het bisdom Utrecht in 1528.

Deze politieke betekenis van secularisatie is dominant in de Verlichting. Volgend op de Franse revolutie worden vele kerkelijke goederen geseculariseerd. In Frankrijk werd een voorlopig nieuw evenwicht bereikt in het concordaat dat Napoleon sloot met paus Pius VII. In toenemende mate wordt de secularisatie dat de kerk grenzen stelt. Niet allen de politiek kan worden geseculariseerd, maar ook het onderwijs en de publieke ruimte.

Het begrip secularisatie heeft op deze manier gediend om afstand te creëren tot het christelijke verleden van de Europese cultuur. Het is echter ook gebruikt om juist de continuiteit tot dit verleden te benadrukken. In de filosofie van Hegel zien we deze poging belichaamd. In zijn filosofie wordt hiervoor het begrip *Verweltlichung* gebruikt. Voor Charles Taylor is het daarom van belang dat secularisatie niet per se die betekenis heeft die velen er vandaag aan geven. Reeds in de 16e eeuw waren er meerdere benaderingen waren ten opzichte van de religieuze pluraliteit. Niet alleen de religieuze neutraliteit van de politiek was een optie, er was ook een common-ground benadering die juist zocht naar een positieve rol van gedeeld, godsdienstig geloof en een gelijke behandeling van verschillende confessies. Zeker in de Verenigde Staten heeft deze benadering invloed gehad.

Een andere historische nuancering die Taylor aanbrengt is dat het Christendom de seculariteit niet heeft uitgevonden. Het Christendom staat in de lijn van de religies van de *Achsenzeit*, waarin de verhouding van de wereld en het heilige al enigermate wordt geproblematiseerd. De dualiteit van heilig en profaan die in deze tijd is verkregen – Taylor spreekt van disembedding – gaat in de moderne secularisatie juist weer verloren. Een zekere sympathie voor het voor-christelijke heidendom is typerend voor deze moderne geesteshouding. Taylor plaatst de moderne secularisatie dus in een meer omvattend historisch verband, namelijk de disembedding die in de Achsenzeit als was teweegebracht. De disembedding van de moderniteit is echter radicaler. het brengt niet een kritsichere houding tot het heilige tot stand, maar brengt een scheiding tussen het seculiere en het sacrale teweeg. Het schiet tekort om de modern secularisatie als een

louter negatief proces van ontheiliging te zien. Taylor ziet de moderne tijd vooral als het ontstaan van een nieuw paradigma, waarin het heilige op een geheel nieuwe wijze wordt gelokaliseerd. De moderne seculariteit is niet de ontdekking hoe de wereld – ontdaan van haar religieuze franje – er op zichzelf uitziet. In de secularisatie wort er een nieuwe orde verbeeld, die de oudere religieuze verbeelding vervangt. Taylor spreekt van een moderne 'social imaginary'.

De belangrijkste componenten van deze sociale verbeelding zijn de publieke ruimte en de daaraan gerelateerde soevereiniteit van het volk en de ontologisch het idee een immanent gesloten werkelijkheid. De publieke ruimte is een typisch moderne uitvinding, omdat het geen legitimatie van buiten zichzelf behoeft. Seculier zijn in deze zin betekent dat de enige legitimatie die vereist is, die van menselijke consensus is. In voormoderne tijden ontleende een volk, natie of monarch haar legitimiteit aan iets wat haar transcendeerde, de moderne volksoevereiniteit is zelf-funderend. Het volk in de moderne zin, verklaart zichzelf tot volk (We the people...). Dit wil niet zeggen dat de religie hiermee verdwijnt. Tegen de klassieke secularisatietheorie in beweert Taylor dat juist in de moderne tijd religieuze bewegingen ontstonden, die zich wonderwel redden in deze maatschappelijke context. Het Methodisme bijvoorbeeld was een beweging waarin ook van onderop door vrije menselijke associaties de gemeenschap vorm werd gegeven.

In de moderne tijd wordt ook de ervaring van de werkelijkheid seculier in de zin dat deze als een gesloten werkelijkheid wordt voorgesteld. Deze immanentie van de werkelijkheid wordt reeds in de Romantiek, maar nog veel sterker in het midden van de 20e eeuw, onder andere door Martin Heidegger, geproblematiseerd. Voor Taylor is het van belang te zien dat de moderne immanentie niet het residu is dat overblijft wanneer het geloof is verwijderd, maar dat de moderne seculariteit ontstaan is als een theologische constructie. Zij werd pas mogelijk in een theologisch kader dat God vooral als een rationele ontwerper van de orde in deze wereld voorstelde.

Monod ziet het begrip seculariteit vooral ontwikkeld worden in de filosofie van Hegel. Voor Hegel was de revolutionaire logica van de Franse revolutie problematisch. Zij bedreigde de continuïteit van de geschiedenis. Het begrip *Verweltlichung* vervult precies deze rol voor Hegel. Het maakt het mogelijk om juist in de moderniteit de waarheid van het Christendom te zien. De Reformatie en de Franse revolutie hadden een abstracte vrijheid teweeggebracht. In de staat ziet Hegel de belichaming van de menselijke vrijheid en de expressie van de universele rede. De linkse Hegelianen, vooral Karl Marx nemen het begrip Verweltlichung ook weer op, maar voor Marx betekent het juist een meer radicale secularisatie. Niet alleen het onderscheid tussen kerk en staat wordt gekritiseerd, maar ook het burgelijke onderscheid tussen het publieke en private domein. Bij Nietzsche heeft het begrip Verweltlichung een negatieve betekenis. Het is typerend voor een cultuur die alles beziet onder het gezichtspunt van de tijdelijkheid (*sub specie saeculi*). Daartegenover stelt hij de Griekse cultuur die alles *sub specie aeterni*. Voor Nietzsche komt het juist aan op *Entweltlichung*. De grote 19e eeuwse emancipatie-ideologieën ziet Nietzsche als voortzettingen van het Christendom, die met dezelfde argwaan benaderd moeten worden.

In de 20e eeuw veroorzaakt het begrip secularisatie een controverse in de politieke filosofie en theologie. Carl Schmitt schreef dat alle politieke concepten van de moderne tijd, geseculariseerde, theologische concepten waren. Vooral Hans Blumenberg heeft dit gebruik van het begrip secularisatie afgewezen. Hij spreekt van de legitimiteit van de moderne tijd.

In de sociologie van de 20e eeuw heeft de secularisatiethese zeer lang standge-houden. Het verband tussen modernisering en secularisatie werd door velen onder-schreven. Recent hebben echter ook prominente godsdienstsociologen, waaronder Pe-ter Berger, dit verband betwist. Terwijl in de vroegere godsdienstsociologie wel werd gesproken van de 'American exception', spreekt Berger van de 'European exception'. De secularisatie als gevolg van modernisering, lijkt zich vooral in Europa voor te doen, terwijl er in andere delen van de wereld juist sprake is van een toename van religiositeit. De drang om juist de teruggang van religie te verklaren mag wel een vooroordeel van de sociologie genomen. De toename van religie die zich in de moderne tijd ook voordeed heeft minder de aandacht getrokken. In dit verband is het werk van Callum Brown zeer interessant. Zij betwisten het verband tussen moderniteit en secularisering en wijzen erop dat de feitelijk secularisatie in Europese landen pas laat in de 20e eeuw plaatsvond. De moderne tijd was bij nader inzien helemaal geen tijd van verdwijnende religie, maar een tijd van toenemende religiositeit. Peter van de Veer spreekt in dit verband van een 'secular production of religion'.

In de context van de postmoderniteit is de vanzelfsprekendheid van de secular-isatie dus ondermijnd. Het blijft zinvol om te onderscheiden tussen de verschillende betekenissen van seculariteit. Als socio-historisch proces is met name het lineaire karakter te kritiseren. De ontologische zin van seculariteit wordt vooral geproblema-tiseerd in de kentheoretische kritiek van de postmoderne filosofie, die met name terug-gaat op Nietzsche en Heidegger. De politieke zin van de seculariteit wordt met name geproblematiseerd door het discours van post-seculariteit. Post-seculiere denkers zoeken naar nieuwe verbindingen van het politieke en het religieuze.

In het Amerikaanse pragmatisme speelt het begrip seculariteit een rol sinds John Dewey beweerde dat een 'seculier humanisme' de eigenlijke religie van de mensheid was. Pragmatisten zijn altijd sterk verdeeld geweest over de mogelijkheid van een seculiere samenleving. Iemand als Sidney Hook heeft het pragmatisme juist in een seculier-marxistische richting ontwikkeld. In het werk van Richard Rorty – de filosoof die verantwoordelijk is voor de recente opleving van het pragmatisme – zien we vooral een nadruk op de seculariteit van de filosofie en de cultuur. Een nadere analyse van de filosofie van Rorty laat zien dat het begrip seculariteit op verschillende niveau's een rol speelt. Rorty benadrukt de wenselijkheid van een seculiere cultuur en ziet religie als een irrationeel aspect van het mens-zijn, dat het beste als een privé aangelegenheid kan worden beschouwd. Deze lijn van denken wordt echter doorkruist door een andere betekenis van secularisatie in het denken van Rorty. Hij gebruikt het begrip namelijk ook om duidelijk te maken dat de filosofie niet langer een bevoorrechte positie inneemt, verheven boven het alledaagse taalgebruik. In een waarlijk postmoderne cultuur is ook de filosofie geseculariseerd. Net als de filosofie van de Verlichting de Europese cultuur ontdeed van de dominantie van de religie, zo moeten nu de waarheidsaanspraken van wetenschap en filosofie geseculariseerd worden. De filosofie en de wetenschap bieden geen rotsvaste fundamenten voor de inrichting van de cultuur, maar bieden evenzovele contingente taalspelen.

De vraag die dit tweede gebruik van secularisatie oproept is uiteraard: Was het pleidooi voor een secularisatie van de cultuur juist niet gestoeld op de sterke cogni-tieve aanspraken van de filosofie van de Verlichting? Het is zelfs zo dat Rorty spreekt van twee verlichtingen. Er is een filosofische Verlichting en een politieke Verlichting.

Rorty's postmodernisme heeft slechts betrekking op de filosofische Verlichting. De politieke Verlichting – verstaan als een secularisatie van de samenleving – is voor Rorty nog steeds na te streven. Maar is de Verlichting wel op die manier op te splitsen? Rorty is zich bewust van deze spanning in zijn dneken en probeert haar op te lossen door een pragmatische rechtvaardiging te geven van zijn secularisme. Deze is met nadruk niet op een non-circulaire manier te rechtvaardigen.

Bij Rorty is het begrip secularisatie dus ten eerste bedoeld als een verwereldlijking of immanentisering van de filosofie. Dit betekent dat hij postmoderniteit niet verstaat als een terugkeer naar de religie, maar veeleer als een radicalisering van de secularisatie. Zoals de filosofie in de moderniteit God van de troon heeft gestoten, zo is het in de postmoderniteit zaak om korte metten te maken met de geprivilegeerde status van de filosofie en de wetenschap in de moderne cultuur. Rorty heeft – zeker in zijn hoofdwerk *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* – vooral de transcendentaal-filosofie van Kant op het oog. De filosofie van de modere tijd heeft zich altijd bezig gehouden met de problematische relatie van het kennende subject en de objectieve werkelijkheid. Rorty stelt voor om deze traditionele filosofische problemen te omzeilen en de filosofie te gaan zien als een literair genre dat zich bezig houdt met praktische maatschappelijke problemen. Deze filosofie heeft geen baat bij waarheid als een representationele relatie tot de wereld, de intersubjectieve consensus volstaat.

Het is echter de vraag of deze secularisatie van de filosofie de problemen wel oplost. In de eerste instantie lijkt het loslaten van de representationele relatie tussen subject en wereld een meer directe ervaring tot de wereld mogelijk te maken. Rorty beroept zich op het betekenisholisme van Donald Davidson. Dit model zou tegelijk recht doen aan de rol van de intermenselijke betekenis (meaning) en de (niet-representationalistische) referentie van de taal. Het is inderdaad zo dat Rorty zich hier op beroept op die momenten dat hij ervan beschuldigd wordt de taal en de werkelijkheid helemaal van elkaar los te maken. De vraag naar de waarheid van uitspraken wordt door Rorty echter geheel beantwoord in termen van intersubjectiviteit. De wereld speelt daarin geen enkele rol.

Ten aanzien van de politieke seculariteit is Rorty uitermate ambigu. Aan de ene kant pleit hij voor een publieke ruimte die geheel vrij is van religie en kerk. De burgers van een seculiere cultuur zijn geheel vrij om in het privé domein de meest uiteenlopende visies op religie en identiteit te ontwikkelen. In het publieke domein geldt een minimale solidariteit. Burgers zijn vooral geroepen lijden te verminderen. Rorty is hierin een criticus van wat hij noemt 'cultureel links'. Linkse politici zijn volgens hem veel te veel bezig met de publieke erkenning van allerlei (culturele, sexuele) identiteiten en verwaarlozen hun primaire taak, namelijk de sociaal-economische emancipatie van burgers. Rorty is een pleitbezorger van een oud-linkse, New Deal-achtige politiek. Rorty's postmoderne relativisme stelt hem ook hier voor de nodige problemen. Wat rechtvaardigt deze 'North-Atlantic bourgeois' samenleving. Is het cultuurrelativisme niet veel voor de hand liggender als conseqentie van de postmoderne kritiek in de kentheorie. Rorty erkent dat het westerse liberalisme op geen theoretische fundering kan bogen. Integendeel, hij ziet het experiment van menselijke vrijheid, waarvan de Verenigde Staten de expressie zijn, juist in zijn volstrekte contingentie en onbepaaldheid als een project dat een quasi-religiueze instemming van mensen verlangt. Het geschrift *Achieving our Country* loopt over van – door Whitman en Emerson geïnspireerde – Romantisch-religieuze lyriek. Juist door Rorty's beoogde scheiding van kerk en staat, wordt een vorm van civil religion noodzakelijk die de verzameling postmoderne individuen tot een samenleving

maakt. Hoewel Rorty dus met klem betoogt dat de postmoderne conditie een seculiere conditie is, lijkt ook bij hem sprake te zijn van een terugkeer van de religie.

Dat de secularisatie de kern van het postmodernisme uitmaakt, wordt niet alleen door Rorty onderschreven, maar ook door de Anglicaanse theoloog John Milbank. Milbank beweert dat er nooit een postmoderniteit geweest is, was die er geweest zou het een post-seculariteit moeten zijn. Hoewel in de tweede helft van de 20e op bijna alle aspecten van de moderniteit kritiek is geleverd (op haar rationalisme, universalisme etc.) is haar seculariteit nooit geproblematiseerd. Als vertegenwoordiger van het Radical Orthodoxy denken in de theologie ziet Milbank de postmoderniteit als een gelegenheid om de seculiere koers van het westerse denken te heroverwegen. Hierbij deelt het denken van Radical Orthodoxy veel inzichten met het postmodernisme van Rorty. Voor beiden geldt de correspondentietheorie van waarheid als een erfenis van de het moderne denken. Milbank benadrukt dat kennis niet tot stand komt door een correspondentie tussen woord en werkelijkheid, maar altijd verweven is in een narratief verband. Milbank beschouwt zich dan ook als pragmatist, al staat zijn pragmatisme veel kritischer ten opzichte van het postmodernisme dan bij Rorty het geval is. Volgens Milbank maakt het postmodernisme het nu juist mogelijk om het seculiere denken zelf als een narratief te zien. Milbank onderscheidt in het seculiere denken vier paradigma's: liberalisme, positivisme, dialectiek en differentiedenken. Milbank wantrouwt het moderne onderscheid tussen de de objectieve en religieuze rede en stelt voor om het seculiere denken te zien als zelf reeds een metaphysisch vooringenomen. De seculariteit als neutraal standpunt, vanwaaruit de verschillende religies kunnen worden bezien, is zelf reeds een metafysische constructie. Als metafysische constructie moet het seculiere denken op pragmatische wijze vergeleken worden met het Christendom.

Milbank kijkt kritisch naar de gevestigde definitie van secularisatie als een proces van verdwijnende religie. In deze visie – en daarin staat hij dicht bij Charles Taylor – is de secularisatie niet slechts het verwijderen van een religieuze laag van de Europese cultuur, waarna het seculiere overblijft. Secularisatie is ook de constructie van een bepaald cultuurideaal en bovendien grootdeels een theologische onderneming. Milbank ziet vooral de ontologie van het laatmiddeleeuwse nominalisme een seculiere ontologie mogelijk maken. In het nominalisme is God vooral door middel van zijn wil en macht verbonden met de wereld en verdwijnt de middeleeuwse gedachte dat de werkelijkheid participeert aan het zijn van God. Een tweede bron van de moderne seculariteit is het politieke denken van Thomas Hobbes en Hugo de Groot, waarin niet alleen de politiek als wetenschap wordt uitgevonden, maar ook het object van die wetenschap, namelijk de samenleving. De derde bron de moderne seculariteit ziet Milbank in het denken van Machiavelli. Machiavelli liet de christelijke deugdenleer geheel achter zich en herdefinëert politiek in termen van instrumentele manipulatie. Het onstaan van het seculiere in de Europese geschiedenis is dus niet de verwerkelijking van iets wat reeds in de Joods-Christelijke traditie was besloten, maar is een constructie van een natuurrecht waaraan bepaalde theologische en neo-pagane elementen ten grondslag liggen. In dit opzicht zou Milbank het met Rorty eens zijn dat de (seculiere) waarheid niet zozeer gevonden wordt, maar gemaakt. Deze secularisatie betekent bovendien dat er een immanente ruimte wordt gecreëerd, die niet – zoals in het middeleeuwse denken – slechts ten dele gekend kan worden, maar vanuit een innerlijke wetmatigheid, ten volle gekend kan worden. Hier blijkt ten volle de affiniteit met de postmoderne kritiek op het mod-

erne presentiedenken. In de visie op secularisatie die Milbank verwoordt is de moderniteit een terugkeer naar een monistisch wereldbeeld, waarin geen plek meer is voor het christelijke besef voor voorlopigheid dat kenmerkend was voor de middeleeuwen. Milbank ontwikkelt dus een omgekeerde secularisatietheorie, die onder secularisatie vooral verstaat een sacralisering van de wereld die niet meer relatief is ten opzichte van een transcendente werkelijkheid. De postmoderniteit is slechts een radicalisering van het moderne, seculiere denken. De moderniteit claimde nog kennis over de immanente werkelijkheid, de postmodernen wijzen zelfs deze kennis van de hand als een overschatting van het menselijke kenvermogen.

De kritiek van Milbank op het seculiere denken kan ook weer begrepen worden in termen van een politieke en een ontologische kritiek. Milbank is het meest uitgesproken over de ontologische veronderstellingen van het seculiere denken. Milbank ziet het postmodernisme als een dubbele secularisatie. In de moderne tijd werd kennis van God als speculatief van de hand gewezen De grote filosofische systemen van de moderniteit vervingen als het ware de transcendente God met een transcendentaal subject, waardoor de werkelijkheid geconstitueerd werd. In de postmoderniteit wordt ook dit subject verworpen. Milbank reconstrueert de postmoderne kritiek op het moderne kenideaal in een artikel met de titel *The End of Enlightenment: Post-Modern or Post-Secular?* Hiertoe herformuleert hij de grote kentheoretische verschuivingen in termen van het nabije (the near) en het verre (far off). Het christelijke en Platoonse denken zagen de relatie van het verre en het nabije als een participatie van het schepselmatige aan het eeuwige. Het verre bepaalde het nabije. De moderniteit acht deze kennis van het verre ongelooofwaardig en de kopernicaanse wending maakt dat het nabije het verre constitueert. In de postmoderniteit wordt beseft dat het subject niet bestaat, maar het product is van een onkenbare werkelijkheid. In de postmoderniteit keert dus het primaat van het verre terug, maar ditmaal ontdaan van de specifiek christelijke kenbaarheid van het verre als goedheid, schoonheid en liefde. Het postmoderne 'subject', het zelf, ziet zich als een spoor van oneindig proces dat aan haar voorafgaat, zonder dat de relatie tot dit proces ook maar op enige wijze gekwalificeerd of gekend kan worden. Dit geeft aan het postmoderne begrip van immanentie een buitengewoon onheilspellend karakter. Het postmoderne denken zal immers elke kennisclaim als voorlopig of als bevooroordeeld van de hand moeten wijzen. In die zin is het christelijke, orthodoxe denken bescheidener dan het postmoderne denken. Het postmoderne denken levert wat Rorty 'the last transcendental argument, that ends all transcendental arguments'. Daarin is het postmoderne denken absoluut zeker. Het orthodoxe denken houdt vol dat de ultieme werkelijkheid slechts ten dele, op de wijze van de analogie gekend kan worden. De postmoderne denkfiguur van de differentie wordt hiermee door Milbank geproblematiseerd. Wanneer diffentie als een noodzakelijk aspect van het kennen wordt gezien, heeft deze geen morele betekenis. Om goed te handelen is het ook nodig dat het goede kenbaar is. Milbank argumenteert dus pragmatisch voor de christelijke prioriteit van het goede, tegenover het postmoderne differentiedenken dat elke uitspraak over het goede noodzakelijkerwijs opschort.

Ook de terugkeer van de religie in de postmoderne tijd ziet Milbank in het kader van dit metafysische schema. Er is ook voor het postmoderne denken een onrepresenteerbare werkelijkheid die de mens bepaalt. Milbank spreekt van een anoniem, distributief proces en dat er in de postmoderne cultuur een tendens is dit proces te vergoddelijken. De postmoderne immanentie is dus nadrukkelijk post-christelijk, maar niet

eenduidig seculier. Hiermee gaat voor Milbank het seculiere denken niet vooraf aan de religie, maar is zelf reeds een quasi-religieus narratief. Het Christendom is daarmee geroepen zich te verstaan als een contra-narratief van het seculiere denken.

Milbank's denken over de politieke zin van de seculariteit is ook weer te verstaan als een kritiek op het monisme dat in de moderne tijd opkomt. In het middeleeuwse denken was er een onderscheiding tussen het seculiere en het sacrale. Deze onderscheiding speelt in de moderniteit geen rol meer. De mens leeft nu alleen in het seculiere domein. Terwijl volegens velen de secularisatie een proces van pacifcatie was, waarin het gewelddadige potentieel van het Christendom werd beteugeld, redeneert Milbank precies andersom. Hij neemt hiervoor zijn uitgangspunt in het vroege politieke denken van ondermeer Thomas Hobbes. Milbank argumenteert dat in het afstand nemen van het Christendom, als een willekeurige godsdienstige identiteit, de staat genoodzaakt is de aard van het samenleven te bepalen. Aangezien het liberalisme hier geen inhoudelijke uitspraak over kan doen, wordt de aard van de politiek formeel en procedureel. Milbank vergelijkt dit met een spiegelzaal, die alles oneindig representeert, maar die in het midden leeg is. De verschillende ideologieën van de 18e en 19e eeuw (nationalisme, historisme) ziet Milbank als surrogaten om deze leegte op te vullen. Juist de secularisatie maakt op deze wijze de sacralisatie van het politieke mogelijk, zoals in het fascisme en nazisme ook gebeurd is. Tegelijk is het liberalisme niet zozeer het antwoord op het geweld, maar structureert het nu juist voor het eerst de aard van het samenleven als competitie en strijd, zoals vooral bij Hobbes het geval is. De secularisatie als een desacralisatie te verstaan is alleen mogelijk vanuit het vooroordeel dat de religie obscuur is en het sociale transparant en rationeel. Milbank ziet de postmoderne kritiek op het seculiere liberalisme en het failliet van haar economische systeem, het kapitalisme, als de gelegenheid bij uitstek om de rol van de religie te heroverwegen De postmoderne doelloosheid zou juist gebaat kunnen zijn bij meer substantiele benaderingen van politiek en economie. Seculariteit is daarmee niet zozeer een waarde die de scheiding van religie en politiek garandeert, maar juist de mogelijkheid van een vruchtbare interactie.

Het derde paradigma van postmoderne seculariteit is afkomstig van de Italiaanse filosoof Gianni Vattimo. Vattimo verstaat onder secularisatie een proces dat in het Joodse en Christelijke denken begonnen is en in de postmoderne cultuur haar voltooiing vindt. Voor Vattimo zijn seculariteit en religie dus geen tegengestelde begrippen, maar lopen ze juist in elkaar over. Het begrip dat Vattimo's theorie het best verduidelijkt is *kenosis*. Vattimo's gebruik van het christelijke begrip kenosis is niet alleen bedoeld om het Christendom en de moderne seculariteit met elkaar te verzoenen, het dient ook om het postmodernisme te behoeden voor een zuiver relativisme. *Kenosis* is een normatief begrip. Vattimo ziet zich nadrukkelijk als een leerling van Heidegger en formuleert zijn secularisatie als een kritiek op wat Heidegger noemde 'ontotheologie'. Van Heidegger neemt Vattimo vooral het begrip differentie over. Verder is het denken van Nietzsche van grote invloed op Vattimo en dan met name Nietzsche's nihilisme. Nihilisme betekent voor Vattimo vooral de onebepaaldheid van het zijn. Het nihilisme moet het denken behoeden voor een differentiedenken dat als het ware voorafgaat aan de geschiedenis. Het begrip differentie kan ook weer een 'transcendentaal' principe worden. Voor Vattimo gaat het niet om het honoreren van het onderscheid tussen het Zijn en de zijnden, maar om de aanwezigheid van het Zijn in de geschiedenis.

Vattimo heeft een duidelijke visie op de geschiedenis van de secularisatie. De sec-

ularisatie begint volgens hem met het Christendom en gaat van het Christendom uit, terug op de bijbel. Begrippen als schepping, incarnatie, en kenosis, wijzen op een relativering van het heilige in het christendom. Het heilige is geen taboe, maar is aanwezig in de wereld. In het Christendom is sprake van een heilsgeschiedenis. In de moderniteit is er sprake van een secularisatie van deze heilsgeschiedenis, die leidt tot het historische denken en het idee van een binnenwereldlijk, utopisch denken. Is de postmoderniteit nu het einde van dit vooruitgangsdenken of haar voortzetting. Vattimo beweert eigenlijk dat de postmoderniteit beide impliceert. In het postmoderniteit wordt vooruitgang zelf geseculariseerd. Er is niet langer één verhaal over de vooruitgang en niet langer één doel, maar in de postmoderne tijd verwijdt het perspectief zich. De vooruitgang wordt tot een simultane ervaring, van eindeloos veel perspectieven. Een postmoderne simultaniteit is dus het paradoxale einde van de secularisatie in de postmoderniteit. Er is niet langer een vernieuwing met een bepaald doel, maar het nieuwe wordt om zichzelf gewaardeerd. Vooruitgang en vernieuwing in de cultuur verwijst niet langer naar een doel boven of voor ons, maar verwijst naar oneindig veel andere culturere artefacten. Daarmee is ook de ontologische seculariteit in het geding.

De secularisatietheorie van Vattimo heeft ingrijpende ontologische consequenties. Voor Heidegger is de estehetische ervaring typerend voor de postmoderne conditie. Kunst heeft niet zozeer betrekking op een nauwkeurige representatie van de werkelijkheid, maar is een activiteit die juist nieuwe ervaringen mogelijk maakt. In de postmoderniteit wordt de ervaring 'kunstmatig'. Dit zien we vooral gebeuren in de massamedia, die ertoe leiden dat mensen niet meer zozeer een werkelijkeheid ervaren, maar een verbeelding van deze werkelijheid. Dit beschrijft Vattimo het uitvoerigst in zijn boek *The Transparent Society*. Het gevolg van een toenemende secularisatie – die gewoonlijk wordt begrepen als een waardering van het aardse – leidt er bij Vattimo dus toe dat de wereld uiteindelijk verdwijnt ten gunste van, door media en technologie verbeelde en gedigitaliseerde, projecties. Vattimo verwijst veelvuldig naar dit fenomeen met het woord dissolution – oplossing. De 'harde' werkelijkheid van de wetenschap en metafysica wordt week en lost op in de postmoderne ervaring.

De politieke implicaties van Vattimo's secularisatietheorie vertonen een zelfde paradoxaliteit. Aan de ene kant benadrukt Vattimo dat het seculiere denken een Joods-Christelijke erfenis is. Deze erfenis wordt echter alleen geaccepteerd in de radicaal postmoderne vorm die zij bij Vattimo aanneemt. Het Christendom moet volgens Vattimo gezuiverd worden van de laatste resten van metafysica. De scheiding van kerk en staat is daarbij volgens Vattimo het laatste metafysische misverstand. Er is slechts één geschiedenis en het onderscheid tussen een profane gescheidenis en een heilsgeschiedenis is een restant van een christendom dat heil verstond als een redding uit deze wereld. Voor een heilsgeschiedenis en voor een institutionele kerk die daarvan getuigt is volgens Vattimo geen plaats meer. Opnieuw is het opvallend, dat de meer oorspronkelijke betekenis van seculariteit – dat juist het onderscheid en de relatieve zelfstandigheid van verschillende levensgebieden beoogde – bij Vattimo in haar tegendeel verkeert en leidt tot een homgenisering van de wereld (Vattimo gebruikt het begrip 'homologation of the world'). De secularisatie betekent dus tegelijk de overwinning van het Christendom en haar verdwijnen.

Samenvattend kunnen we stellen dat de secularisatie in het postmoderne denken een prominente, maar tegelijk problematische rol vervult. Bij de drie auteurs is vastgesteld

dat zij de secularisatie in zekere zin omarmen, maar zich er op andere aspecten ook weer van distantiëren. Voor Rorty is de secularisatie het deel van de Verlichting dat nog steeds de moeite waard is. Tegelijk ondergraaft hij zijn eigen secularisme door de theoretische onderbouwing van dit secularisme te kritiseren. Bij hem zien we niet aleen een verzet tegen de invloed van de religie in het publieke domein, maar ook een vorm van civil religion, die op gespannen voet staat met de seculariteit Voor Milbank is de secularisatie niet eenduidig te verstaan als een afnemende religiositeit. Integendeel, de secularisatie van de vroegmoderne tijd was voor een groot deel een theologische constructie. De terugkeer van de religie in de postmoderniteit mag dan ook geen verrassing heten, het religieuze maakte van meet af aan deel uit van de secularisatie. In de cultuur is meer dan ooit behoefte aan een inbreng van de religie als alternatief voor het zielloze neo-liberalisme. Voor Vattimo is de postmoderniteit de uiterste consequentie van een geestelijke boodschap – kenosis – die reeds met het christendom gegeven was. In de praktijk betekent dit voor Vattimo dat de triomf van het Christendom samenvalt met haar verdwijnen. Duidelijker kan de religieze ambiguïteit van het postmodernisme niet verwoord worden.

Curriculum Vitae

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