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*Questioning Secularization, History, and Ethics: A Review Essay of Radical Secularization?*¹

Stijn Latré, Walter van Herck, and Guido Vanheeswijck, eds., *Radical Secularization?: An Inquiry into the Religious Roots of Secular Culture*, Bloomsbury, 2014, 256 pp., \$120.00 US (hbk). ISBN 9781628921786.

Gathering together papers from a 2012 conference in Antwerp, the edited collection *Radical Secularization?: An Inquiry into the Religious Roots of Secular Culture* advances a philosophical inquiry into the meaning of secularization. In an increasingly postsecular world, debate and reflection on secularization now acknowledges the obsolescence of the linear secularization theories that dominated sociological thought in the 1970s and 1980s.² The idea that religion would decline as modern industrial society progressed has now been repudiated by its own advocates, and now more nuanced assessments of the role of religion in the public sphere have been set forth.³ In particular, the idea that social and cultural “progress” is a value-neutral term has been called into question. Through the discourse on political theology the realization that many modern concepts are religious in nature has called into question the idea that the secular offers a value-neutral basis for culture and politics, and this is the conversation that occupies the essays in *Radical Secularization?*.

Following the editor’s introduction (Chapter 1), which situates the chapters in relation to one another and explains the multivalent meaning of the term “radical” in the title, the first section of the book is titled “In the Wake of Löwith and Blumenberg.” Consisting of three succinct chapters, this first section deals directly with the controversy surrounding the secularized identity of modern concepts, particularly in the context of a debate between the two aforementioned thinkers.

In Chapter 2, “Heaven on Earth? The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate,” Jean-Claude Monod describes two sides of the debate on secularization. On one hand is the idea that the descriptive power of secularization has come and gone and that we now live in a “post-

¹ I would like to thank Lucian Stone and an anonymous reviewer for their constructive feedback on this review, as well as Ian Parlee, Chris Grafton, and Sean Dutton for their thoughts on religion and the secular.

² Cf. Charles T. Mathewes, “An Interview with Peter Berger,” *The Hedgehog Review* (Spring & Summer 2006) and David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards A Revised General Theory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

³ Cf. Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, eds. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

secular world” (7). On the other hand, some argue that secularization continues, albeit in differentiated and uneven ways. Already in this first essay, Monod identifies a key tension between the sociological analysis of secularization as a process of religious decline, and the philosophical meaning of the category of the secular. This philosophical approach is exemplified in the debate between Karl Löwith and Hans Blumenberg. Monod helpfully describes Löwith’s thesis in the following way: “the modern philosophies of history, and more generally the modern ‘faith in history,’ are nothing but a secularization of messianism” (8). Where sociological analysis of secularization seeks to understand “the withering away of the public influence of religion,” Löwith understands secularization as pointing to “a hidden continuity” between religion and modern reason (8-9). The former view construes secularization as “de-theologization” and the latter understands the secular as an illegitimate category, a kind of fiction that masquerades as a value-neutral and ahistorical ground for culture and politics, but in fact owes a great debt to religion (particularly Christianity and its *Heilsgeschichte*). Monod also summarizes Blumenberg’s response in the claim that “secularization may not be used to discard all modern achievements as merely illegitimate transfers of theological concepts to a more worldly sphere” (9). So with Löwith’s radical critique of modernity on one hand, and Blumenberg’s cautious rejection of it on the other, the reader is left to wonder what relevance this disagreement has for contemporary theorization on the nature of secularization.

Although the debate between Löwith and Blumenberg has long past, Monod makes a case for its continuing relevance. First, Blumenberg’s objection is a helpful caution: “an analogy or surface resemblance is not a secularization; not every ternary structuration of history is a metamorphosis of the Trinity; nor is every historical expectation the expectation of the *eschaton* or the millennium” (10). This is an important reminder that although certain Christian concepts are conditions of possibility for certain corresponding modern “secular” concepts, this correspondence (if it exists) is a tendency and not a rule. However, despite the way that Blumenberg tempers Löwith’s identification of secular teleology with Christian eschatology, Monod sees in Löwith’s insight a helpful critique of the deep Christian complicity with “the fact that the West thinks that it has a historical universal ‘task,’ a historical mission which will lead the ‘barbarian’ peoples out of their backwardness, superstition, and so on, to the path of ‘civilization’” (10). Interestingly, Monod’s critique of Western colonial reason is both drawn from Löwith’s argument and qualified by Blumenberg’s critique of that argument’s teleology. The rest of Chapter 2 interestingly connects Löwith and Foucault’s genealogical critiques, and explores the problematic use of both Löwith and Blumenberg in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Charles Taylor.

In Chapter 3, “The Eternal Return of Gnosticism?: Secularization and the Problem of Evil,” Willem Styfhals extends the discussion by exploring Eric Voegelin’s identification of modern political thought with Gnosticism, and its connection with the works of Löwith and Blumenberg. Pointing out that secularization is most often understood as “a mere privation of Christianity,” Styfhals reminds readers that in order to properly reevaluate Löwith’s potential contribution to contemporary debates on secularization we must avoid preoccupation with “the *process* of secularization” at the expense of “the *substance* that is secularized” (19). After summarizing Löwith and Blumenberg’s positions, Styfhals introduces the work of Voegelin whose book *The New Science of Politics* extended the themes of Löwith’s work into the political sphere. Focusing on the problem of evil and its relation to modern eschatology, Styfhals contrasts the uncertainty of Christian belief with the attempted certainties of modern secular eschatology (23). For Voegelin, both modernity and Gnosticism externalize evil, blaming the problem of evil on a poorly constructed universe.

Christianity, on the other hand, internalizes evil and seeks out salvation on the level of the individual. Styfhals writes: “On one hand, the modern/Gnostic salvation pursues an eschatological destruction of immanence as a cosmological revolution from evil to good. Christianity, on the other hand, appeals to an individual and transcendent eschatology that hopes for forgiveness of our own human sins” (24). The crux of Voegelin’s critique comes with the identification of modern thinking with Gnostic thinking because both take control of their own salvation and place it within the immanent and historical realm of “progress towards a better world” (25). The divinization of humanity within both Gnosticism and modernity runs counter to the distance between God and humanity in Christianity. In this context, Voegelin critiques both the modern and Gnostic striving after certainty and control, showing how these ideas give rise to totalitarian politics and genocide (25). Following his summary of Voegelin’s book, Styfhals situates the book in relation to Blumenberg’s very different and non-reductive interpretation of evil and modernity, and concludes with a brief thematic summary that affirms the contemporary relevance of the themes of evil and salvation for discussions of secularization.

In Chapter 4, “Secularization as a Category of Historical Entitlement,” Herbert De Vriese outlines the history of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate, beginning with its context in 1960s German social thought, and its subsequent uncritical adoption, through to its contemporary relevance. De Vriese points in particular to Blumenberg’s critical insight that “descriptive concepts, when used for the interpretation of historical processes, are only value-neutral in appearance” (33). Reminding the reader that both historical and contemporary secularization theories are not merely descriptive but also normative, De Vriese again distinguishes between the social scientific and philosophical veins of the secularization debate, and concludes with an engagement with Gianni Vattimo’s claim that secularization is the essence of Christianity, and its similarities with the work of Marcel Gauchet and Charles Taylor (41).

The second section of *Radical Secularization?* is titled “Secularization in Christianity and Beyond,” and it continues dealing with the stated themes of the volume as they extend beyond the debate between Löwith and Blumenberg. Where the first section consisted of three expository chapters meant to set the stage for debate on secularization, the chapters in the rest of the volume are much more focused on particular topics. In Chapter 5, André Cloots examines Marcel Gauchet’s influential book *The Disenchantment of the World*, pointing out the differences between Gauchet and Taylor in their definitions of secularization. Where Gauchet prefers to speak of disenchantment as a key concept, Cloots points out that Taylor does not see disenchantment as the central issue of the transition to modernity. Cloots writes that, “Taylor precisely wants to argue that disenchantment is no given, not a fact to be accepted, even if you want to accept modernity and its secularization” (48). In framing his essay, Cloots makes much of the fact that Taylor does not mention disenchantment in relation to secularization, but one need only look to the first chapter of *The Malaise of Modernity* to see Taylor acknowledging a connection between secularization and disenchantment.⁴ Cloots’s point remains, however, that Taylor does not identify secularization with disenchantment with the same intensity as Gauchet. Following from this distinction between Gauchet and Taylor, Cloots describes Gauchet’s theory of the

⁴ For his association of secularization with disenchantment see Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: Anansi, 1991), 3. See also Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 26-27, for what may be an implicit critique of Gauchet’s emphasis on disenchantment as the heart of secularization.

“departure from religion” as something interior to religion rather than something opposed to it.

Picking up on Cloots’s in-depth discussion of Gauchet, in Chapter 6 Andreas Michel connects Gauchet to Vattimo’s claim that secularization is at the core of the Christian faith. Michel outlines how this connection also involves a contradiction. On one hand, Vattimo’s argument that the incarnation of Christ is vital to secularization is an “abandonment of the difference between the sacred and the mundane” (67). On the other hand, Gauchet understands the incarnation of Christ as something that “confirms God’s ultimate difference from mankind [sic]” (67). Focusing on Christianity, as many of the essays implicitly or explicitly do, Michel helpfully outlines the similarities and differences between Gauchet and Vattimo specifically on the incarnation of Christ and the “return to religion.”

Chapter 7 is a long essay by John Milbank titled, “The Legitimacy and Genealogy of Secularization in Question” which first engages with Jürgen Habermas’s theory of secularism, followed by an examination of Taylor and Gauchet. Repeating and furthering his critique of secular reason initiated in *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank disputes the idea that one can remain agnostic on the question of religion and construct a neutral social-political space (89). This helpful critique is unfortunately followed by some vitriol (122 ff.19), and the concluding claim that “the celebration of secularization as emancipation and source of value only exists to prevent us from seeing how it is Christianity which supremely upholds both religious liberty and freedom as such” (120). Milbank’s helpful critique of the secular claim to neutrality is overshadowed by this overstatement, especially its failure to distinguish between the ways in which Christianity has and has not upheld religious liberty and freedom. On one hand, Milbank surely relies upon a critique of the identification of religion with violence. This much is helpful because it encourages readers to clearly distinguish between what violence is the fault of religion and what violence is the fault of other aspects of the human experience. On the other hand, Milbank goes too far when he writes that “it is the Christian Church which is above all the historical matrix of religious liberty” insofar as this statement betrays an attitude that does not recognize the experience of those for whom the Christian church has been the opposite (121).

Milbank’s Radical Orthodoxy is addressed by Guido Vanheeswijk in the subsequent chapter, who explores Taylor’s relationship with Radical Orthodoxy and compares it to Brad Gregory’s work in *The Unintended Reformation*. His essay concludes on a refreshing note with a reflection on the poetry of Nietzsche, Rilke, and Celan (147-149). Although previous essays in the volume acknowledged the significance of Charles Taylor’s work, it receives a truly substantial treatment by Charles Lockwood in Chapter 9, “Apologetics and Anti-Apologetics in Taylor’s *A Secular Age*.” Lockwood identifies a tension in Taylor’s *A Secular Age* between the apologetic “ought” and the anti-apologetic caution, and argues that Taylor’s “apologetic moments should be seen as deviations from the book’s single fundamental objective: to provide a more nuanced and even-handed account of secularization than mainstream theorists have been able to offer” (164-165). Gerbert Faure writes further of Taylor in Chapter 10, “Religion, Modernity and the Notion of Subtler Languages,” arguing that “Taylor attempts to demonstrate that the development of disenchantment and the significance of a religious attitude are not mutually exclusive” (175). Chapter 11, by Walter Van Herck, departs from the established group of thinkers and examines the role of faith and belief in the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Also departing from the established group of thinkers, Stijn Latré takes up some themes from Karl Jaspers in Chapter 12, “The Axial Age and the Dynamics of Transcendence,” also drawing upon the work of Robert Bellah and Jan Assmann. The essay “To World or Not to World: An Axial Genealogy of Secular

Life” by Laurens ten Kate concludes the volume with a look at Taylor and Gauchet alongside Jean-Luc Nancy’s deconstruction of Christianity.

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Although the essays in the second section of the book are valuable and interesting, I will limit my comments on the essays in the second section to those above because of both the economy of reviewing an edited collection and the critical aims of this particular review. To offer a comprehensive critical assessment of a book of this type would be presumptuous even in the space allotted, and so the following comments will only intervene in the thematic constellation of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate dealt with in the first three chapters of *Radical Secularization?*.

First of all, it is striking that nowhere in the first three essays in the volume is the work of Hans Jonas mentioned or explored, especially in relation to the work of Voegelin. This omission is unfortunate because Jonas speaks so clearly and pointedly to the issues that occupy Löwith, Blumenberg, and Voegelin. In an essay called “Gnosticism, Nihilism, and Existentialism,” appended to his key work *The Gnostic Religion*, Jonas compares Gnosticism and modernity and explores the problems and prospects of such a comparison from a methodological standpoint. In addition to the work of Jonas, nowhere in the volume is the work of Jacob Taubes discussed at any length. Much like Jonas, Taubes discusses topics that are central to the work undertaken in *Radical Secularization?*, most pointedly in his book *Occidental Eschatology*. In an effort to draw connections not made in the edited collection, the rest of this review will briefly summarize possible contributions that Jonas and Taubes could make that might broaden the debate hitherto restricted to Löwith, Blumenberg, and Voegelin.

Nietzsche suggests that history is important to people for three reasons. The first way is called “monumental history,” and it pertains to the “action and struggle” of humanity. The second way is called “antiquarian history,” and it pertains to the human disposition toward “conservatism and reverence.” The final way is called “critical history,” which relates to human suffering and the “desire for deliverance.”⁵ These three ways in which history is necessary each straddle Nietzsche’s other two insights that “life does not need the service of history,” and that human life can be harmed by an “excess of history.”⁶ A warning that Nietzsche gives regarding monumental history in particular, but which may apply to all three types of historical reflection, is that comparison across the divide from the past to the present leaves us with an “elusive” insight. The effort to learn anything from history is always complicated by the distance between past and present, and when we bring something across that divide in hopes that it will speak to our present situation we find that “many of its differences must be neglected” and consequently the past is forced into the confines of the present with “all the sharp angles broken off for the sake of correspondence.”⁷ Nietzsche warns that monumental history in particular, with its desire for action and its search for resources for present struggles, “will always bring together things that are incompatible and generalize them into compatibility.”⁸

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrian Collins (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1949), 12.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁸ Ibid., 15.

This historical and historiographical warning has much to say to those concerned with secularization. Löwith's claim that modern progress is a secularized version of ancient Christian eschatology involves just the sort of leap that Nietzsche warns against, although Löwith's work is descriptive and mostly avoids seeking out actionable insight from the resource of history. Blumenberg's warning that not everything that looks like a secularized concept really is one resonates deeply with Nietzsche's caution because both try to prevent the cheapening of both past and present by emphasizing their irreducibility to each other. The tension between this irreducibility of past and present, and the desire to compare or parallel the thought-worlds of past and present also leads into another question: in what sense *can* history inform present action? The two neglected voices of Jonas and Taubes each have answers to this question that could benefit the reader of *Radical Secularization*?

In "Gnosticism, Nihilism, and Existentialism," Jonas sets out to risk the comparison that Nietzsche warns against—in his case drawing a parallel between ancient Gnosticism and contemporary Nihilism. But Jonas's comparison is no mere theory of correspondence between Gnostic thought and modern nihilism and existentialism. Instead of seeking to simply show how present thinking owes something to past thinking Jonas seeks a "reciprocal illumination" of both parts of the comparison: an existential reading of Gnosticism and a Gnostic reading of existentialism.⁹ Jonas narrates the process under which he came to make this reciprocal comparison with the illustration of a lock and key, stating that finding similarities between modern existentialism and ancient Gnosticism was like finding a key that could open any lock. He states that "[o]nly later, after I had outgrown the belief in a universal key, did I begin to wonder *why* this one had in fact worked so well in this case."¹⁰ His answer is not that the key will work on any lock, and correspondingly that the comparison he makes is so broad that the door will open each time. Instead, Jonas discovers something about methodology in the reciprocal relationship between lock and key. The hermeneutical lens and the object of study comingle: "lock turns into key, and key into lock."¹¹ To mix metaphors a bit, the relationship between lock and key that Jonas suggests is illustrative of the historiographical dilemma, and this speaks to the tension between Löwith and Blumenberg. It seems that, in simplified terms, Löwith risks using secularization as a skeleton key that can unlock any modern concept and release its inner debt to messianic and apocalyptic ideas. On the other hand, Blumenberg's rejoinder seems to reassure us that the key of secularization cannot open all doors it encounters. However, Jonas understands that sometimes the discernibility between the lock and the key can waver, and that the prescriptions of the lens can distort the descriptions of what that lens views. This means that we must acknowledge that one postsecular vision is descriptive, showing the debt that modern "secular" concepts owe to theological concepts; while another postsecular vision is prescriptive, seeking a normative ethic for public discourse and politics after the myth of secular neutrality has been exposed. Both views can accept that some parts of society are being de-theologized (corresponding to the common definition of secularization), while others keep up the masquerade of value-neutrality while concealing a secret debt to religion (the illegitimacy that Löwith establishes and Blumenberg critiques), but neither view can avoid the slippage between description and prescription.

⁹ Hans Jonas, "Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism," in *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 2nd Ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 321.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

This leads us to Taubes, who writes at length on the philosophy of history in his *Occidental Eschatology*.¹² Unlike the thinkers explored so far, Taubes writes explicitly of the ethical dimension of historical reflection, relevant to the inevitable slippage between description and prescription just mentioned. For Taubes, “[t]he essence of history is freedom,” and this freedom is specifically an emancipatory freedom that seeks the liberation of the oppressed.¹³ Similarly to Löwith and Voegelin, Taubes draws parallels between Gnostic and Christian ideas, and contemporary systems of thought like Marxism and Nihilism. However, what sets Taubes apart and makes him an ideal conversation partner for the contributors to *Radical Secularization?* is that he follows through on the point made by De Vriese in Chapter 4, that theories of secularization contain an implicit normative element. Instead of repressing the role of ethics in the philosophy of history, Taubes embraces it and explores its depths. Where Voegelin inquires into the problem of evil and critiques modern and Gnostic striving after certainty and control, Taubes shows how apocalyptic thinking can actively resist evil by negating the world as it stands.¹⁴ Although he does not address secularization by name, Taubes shares Voegelin’s interest in Gnosticism and Jonas’s identification of Gnostic thought with the existential and nihilistic idea that we are thrown into this world. Taubes highlights in particular the role of self-alienation in Gnostic thinking, and what could be more pertinent in our present situation? The Gnostic feeling that we are alienated from the world and exiled onto its surface should sound familiar to us. Religion, the secular, and violence are each profoundly at issue in our present public discourse, meaning that we should attend to both the ways in which we draw from our history and what we draw from our history.

Overall, and in light of the insights of Jonas and Taubes, I think that the contributions to *Radical Secularization?* speak to the complex reality of secularization in a helpful but limited way. Whether it is social-scientific or philosophical, reflection on the meaning of secularization must come to grips with the unavoidability of ethics and its place within all methodology. The fact that the essays in the volume remain focused on the debt that modern society owes to Christianity in particular should also give us pause. Although secularization has traditionally referred to simple de-Christianization, this tradition has now been challenged and questioned to such a degree that a collection like this should more than acknowledge that many religious traditions have seen secularizations, but actually focus on it. Attention to more than just the Christian legacy of secularization would have strengthened the volume, along with a broadening of the thinkers considered. These criticisms aside, the volume provides a helpful look into the present discourse on the meaning of secularization.

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¹² Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

¹³ Ibid., 5 and 19.

¹⁴ Ibid., 12-13.

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