

# Introduction

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In his book *The Kingdom and the Glory*, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben coins the notion “theological genealogy” to trace the modern concept of power back to theological speculations between the second and the fifth centuries. Agamben is particularly interested in “locating government in its theological locus in the Trinitarian *oikonomia*.”<sup>1</sup> Thus describing a structural kinship between modern political concepts and premodern theology, Agamben explicitly holds on to the presuppositions of the project of political theology. Political theology, a concept famously introduced by the German philosopher and jurist Carl Schmitt in a book of that name (1922), points to the various continuities and even identities of theology and (modern) politics.<sup>2</sup> Agamben’s interest in theological genealogy remains essentially political but opens up toward a wider approach as well, supplementing Schmitt’s notion with his own views on an “economic theology.”<sup>3</sup>

When extricated from the specific politico-economic context in which Agamben introduced the concept of theological genealogy, his genealogical project is ultimately a quest to expose a nonsecular core behind the overall drive for secularization and modernization. On this point, Agamben, as well as many other contemporary theorists, are indebted to genealogical readings of secular modernity that were first developed in twentieth-century German thought and in the German debates on secularization. This German discourse on reli-

gion and modernity is the object of study of this book. Many decades before the contemporary debates on political theology and postsecularism, German philosophers as diverse as Karl Löwith, Carl Schmitt, Hans Blumenberg, or Jacob Taubes, and even Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Ernst Cassirer or Hannah Arendt, already exposed, assessed, and discussed the theological origins of secular modernity. These thinkers not only addressed the carryover of theological concepts into the modern discourse on politics and economics but also conceptualized the various ways in which theological forces had implications for a wider range of modern cultural manifestations and, according to some, even constituted the essence of modernity as such.

#### SECULARIZATION AND GENEALOGY

Traditionally, the genealogical relations between theology and modernity were understood through the concept of secularization. This concept was used most famously by Carl Schmitt in his renowned *Political Theology* to trace modern secular concepts back to their premodern theological origins.

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they are transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology.<sup>4</sup>

Insofar as secularization is, for Schmitt, a historical process that connects modern concepts back to their theological origins, secularization is essentially a genealogical concept. Although neither Schmitt nor any of the other thinkers discussed in this book explicitly identified their intellectual project as genealogical, the concept of secularization is ultimately used to give insights into the *genealogy of the secular*.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the concept of secularization is hardly exhaustive of the possible genealogical relations between the modern and the premodern or between the secular and the theological. Going beyond the concept of secularization proper, this book takes into account the heterogeneity and conceptual variety of genealogical readings of modernity that were conceived in twentieth-century German thought. While the notion of secularization played an undeniably central role in twentieth-century German intellectual history, its conceptual limitations make it unsuitable for repre-

senting the German discussions on the relation between religion and modernity in general. These conceptual limitations are twofold: on the one hand, the notion of secularization is too general and vague to be conceptually useful; on the other hand, secularization designates a too-specific relation between theology and modernity.

The conceptual scope of secularization is initially so wide that it ultimately has to incorporate contradictory meanings. In its most common and straightforward meaning, secularization designates the modern decline of religious authority that concretely takes shape in the separation between church and state or in a decreasing number of believers. In relation to these aspects, Charles Taylor understands secularization as “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic to one in which it is understood to be one option among others.”<sup>6</sup> In addition to this intuitive historical and sociopolitical interpretation, the concept of secularization can also have a second meaning in many respects is opposed to its first meaning. Secularization, in this sense, designates the transformation of religious practices and theological ideas into secular forms. This is the meaning of secularization that Schmitt appealed to. German philosopher Hans Blumenberg was probably the first to point to this ambiguity in the concept of secularization in his renowned *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966).

There is after all a difference between, on the one hand, saying that in a particular state the “secularization of the countryside” is very advanced, and that this is indicated by the empirical decline of obligations owed by the village communities to the church, and, on the other hand, formulating the thesis that the capitalist valuation of success in business is the secularization of ‘certainty of salvation’ in the context of the reformation doctrine of predestination.<sup>7</sup>

The scope of these two discourses on secularization could hardly be more divergent. In the first instance, secularization is an empirical category that describes certain sociological, historical, and political (r)evolutions; in the second instance, where Blumenberg made an implied reference to Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, secularization becomes a theoretical or philosophical concept that is used to make sense of modern intellectual history.<sup>8</sup> Instead of describing the supposed disappearance of religion in the modern age, this second meaning of secularization designates the hidden survival of structural religious contents in modern culture.

Uncovering the tacit continuation of religion within the secular, the second meaning of secularization problematizes the first. It conceptualizes not so much

the decline but the changed nature and possible continuation of religion in modernity. What is at play is not the *death* of religion but its *afterlife*. This specific interpretation of secularization has been discussed most explicitly in the German secularization debates of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s that find their origins in ways of thinking that were influential in Germany during and even before the interwar period. As such, these theoretical and philosophical debates constitute a major focal point of this book.

However, since secularization is but one way to conceive the transformations, transfers, ramifications, and survivals of religious motives in modern or secular phenomena, its meaning has become too narrow to account for the richness of the debate in twentieth-century German thought. Many authors have analyzed the genealogical connections between religion and modernity without making use of the concept of secularization. Max Weber, for instance, traced the logic of capitalism back to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination but he did not frame this issue as a theory of secularization—as Blumenberg's statement that was quoted above might seem to suggest. For Weber, the modern politico-economical system and the human practices that are defined as capitalism were at their point of origin conditioned by assumptions and beliefs that can only be termed religious, but he does not label this relation as one of "secularization." Generally, Weber conceived of the relation between religion and modern society as one of *rationalization* and *disenchantment* instead of secularization.

In highlighting the connection between religion and capitalism, Walter Benjamin's genealogy of modern economy shared some of Weber's insights. Moreover, Benjamin similarly studied the relation between economy and religion without appealing to the notion of secularization. However, Benjamin goes much further than Weber in that, in his view, capitalism is an "essentially religious phenomenon" because it "serves essentially to allay the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered answers."<sup>9</sup> Both capitalism and religion, that is to say, are to be understood as a "cult" driven by a "vast sense of guilt that is unable to find relief."<sup>10</sup> Benjamin argued against the mere opposition between religious or cultic forces and a supposedly secularized society, emphasizing that capitalism's religious core will not be simply annihilated by the "reformation of this religion . . . or even from the complete renouncement of this religion."<sup>11</sup>

From a very different perspective, Aby Warburg equally dropped the category of secularization, preferring instead the *afterlife* (*Nachleben*) of religion. In

many of his essays, the German art-historian Warburg outlined how the belief in pagan gods and the ritual practices that come along with it have survived the Christian dominance of the Middle Ages and preserved a strong influence well into the age of Reformation. Warburg's genealogical project focuses on the *survival* (*Fortleben*) of religious essences and ultimately analyzed how the accompanying feelings made possible the modern quest to carve out the central position of humanity. In his analysis of Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I*, for instance, Warburg interpreted the newly found confidence in the powers of human intellect as originating from the endeavor to ward off the deep threat that is posed by planet-gods. In his view, contemplative activity and the individual mental efforts of thinking arose from the attempt to neutralize the spirit of Saturn. "Here," wrote Warburg, "the cosmic conflict is echoed in a process that takes place within man himself. The daemonic grotesques have disappeared; and saturnine gloom has been spiritualized into human, humanistic contemplation."<sup>12</sup> As such, Warburg argued that modern reason and the supplementary method of meticulous observation and calculation cannot be simply opposed to irrational beliefs and pagan anxieties since the latter are in many ways the driving force behind the former.

As opposed to Weber, Benjamin, and Warburg, the German theories of secularization in the strict sense only described the modern *immanentization* of theology. The classic example of such a secularization thesis is Karl Löwith's claim that the modern ideal of progress is a secularized form of eschatology. According to Löwith, both the faith in divine providence and the theological concept of a redemptive end of time (*Eschaton*) secretly structure the modern belief in the progressive meaning of history. As such, a theological content is understood as living on under the guise of a distinctly modern concept. In his book *Meaning in History*, Löwith shows how the modern philosophy of history repeats the Christian history of salvation but wrongfully applies its transcendent content to the immanent course of profane history: "the moderns elaborate a philosophy of history by secularizing theological principles and applying them to an ever increasing number of empirical facts."<sup>13</sup> For Löwith, as well as for his contemporaries such as Eric Voegelin or Odo Marquard, this transposition of theological contents to historical phenomena is not just an innocent category mistake. Rather, their immanentization creates the dangerous illusion that immanent history and our actions within it pertain to an absolute meaning, thus potentially resulting in totalitarian politics. In general, these theories of secularization as immanentization are indeed predominantly pessimistic about modernity.

According to Blumenberg, secularization's implied rejection of the "legitimacy of the modern age," as well as its narrative of continuity, finds its origin in the metaphorical history of the concept. Secularization first came into being as a juridical concept around the end of the seventeenth century, designating the expropriation of ecclesiastical goods and territories by lay political authorities. In a later stage, this specific juridical concept was used as a metaphor for the relation between Christian ideas and modern culture, more generally. Because of this metaphorical background, Blumenberg argues, secularization has certain connotations that simply cannot be dismissed. For one, the connotation of identity and continuity is fundamentally in tune with secularization's juridical meaning. As secularization initially signified the transfer of a specific property from the ecclesiastical to the political sphere, it implies that the content that has been transferred remains identical—whether it is a material or, later on, an intellectual content. Furthermore, secularization's pessimistic account of modernity as an inauthentic derivation of Christian thought could also be derived from secularization's metaphorical history. Indeed, the juridical concept of secularization designated an expropriation of territories that belonged to the church originally.

As one of the strongest opponents of the theorem of secularization, Blumenberg elaborated extensively on alternative understandings of the interaction between theology and modernity. Unlike Löwith, Blumenberg did not discover hidden religious traces in secular phenomena but showed how pre-modern, theological dynamics made modernity possible, preparing its path, so to speak, without however animating it from within. In a meticulous historical analysis of late-medieval and early-modern intellectual history, Blumenberg argued that the theological idea of divine omnipotence implied such a radical humiliation of the human aspirations to reach absolute truth or transcendent redemption that it paradoxically triggered the rise of human self-assertion. In his view, modern human beings were only able to assert their own finite lives on earth after every transcendent aspiration had become in vain. In this regard, Blumenberg did not consider the relation between theology and modernity as an illegitimate transposition of theological contents from one historical paradigm to another. Instead, his analysis focuses on a complex historical dialectic between theological problems that demand nontheological resolutions.

What mainly occurred in the process that is interpreted as secularization, at least (so far) in all but a few recognizable and specific instances, should be described not as the *transposition* of theological contents into secularized alienation from

their origin but rather as the *re-occupation* of answer positions that had become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated.<sup>14</sup>

As a substitute for the notion of secularization, reoccupation (*Umbesetzung*) is as much a genealogical category as secularization itself is. Just like Löwith, Blumenberg disputes the absolute justification and self-foundation of modern rationality by unmasking its contingent historical origins in premodern theology. Unlike the former, however, Blumenberg's genealogical insight into the theological dynamic from which modernity arose implies an affirmation of the modern paradigm, albeit a modest one. Blumenberg does not develop a secularization theory in the traditional sense but his project can be characterized as a genealogy of the secular, insofar as he also uncovers the theological roots of secular modernity.

The same holds true for a range of other figures discussed in this book, who neither made use of the concept of secularization nor strictly belonged to the classic German secularization debate, but who did reflect on the multifaceted, genealogical relations between theology and modernity. In other words, the genealogical project of tracing the origins of modern and secular phenomena cannot only be recognized in secularization theorists such as Löwith and Schmitt or in its fiercest opponents like Blumenberg, but also in the work of German thinkers like Walter Benjamin, Ernst Cassirer, Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and Jan Assmann. Although it is tempting to associate these thinkers with Schmitt's now popular notion of political theology, this book presents a reading of their work from a perspective that is neither exclusively political nor Schmittian. Indeed, Benjamin's, Assmann's, Arendt's, as well as Jacob Taubes's thinking is presented here in opposition to Schmitt's reflections on political theology and secularization. Attenuating the inevitable political connotation of secularization and political theology in the Schmittian sense, the essays in this book explore their meaning from a much broader and decidedly interdisciplinary perspective.

In sum, this book takes into account a wide range of interactions between theology and modernity—cultural, literary, and philosophical interactions, as well as political lines of influence; continuity as well as discontinuity; legitimacy as well as illegitimacy; disenchantments (Weber), reoccupations (Blumenberg) or theologizations (Assmann), as well as theological genealogies (Agamben), secularizations (Löwith), or political theologies (Schmitt). In spelling out different possible relations between theology and modernity, these concepts can ultimately be understood as presenting different *genealogies of*

*the secular*. In all their variety and heterogeneity, they genealogically trace the historical origins of secular modernity to premodern theology and religion. Referring to the genealogical strategies implied in these concepts avoids some of the pitfalls of secularization and allows for a broader focus. While secularization primarily characterized the relation between theology and secularism as one of immanentization, inauthentic derivation, and continuation, this book encompasses a greater variety of possible interactions between theological and modern contents.

#### RELIGION AND GENEALOGY

Evidently, genealogical thinking has a long-standing tradition in continental thought. The genealogical strategy that underlies the German debates on secularization is both in tune and at odds with the way continental philosophy has usually conceived genealogy.

The concept of genealogy itself has a genealogy that goes back to Nietzsche's great project, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887). For, in this foundational text already, genealogy presents itself as the project to *historicize* the present and to lay bare overlooked connections with the past. In thus uncovering the origins of the present, genealogical research focuses on the "conceptual transformations," a given idea or belief undergoes in the process of becoming a hidden force and a forgotten dynamic.<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche's main question being "[H]ow was such forgetting *possible?*," he retraces the very contingencies and discontinuities behind concepts that are all too often understood as self-evident.<sup>16</sup> In the later analysis of Michel Foucault, as well, the genealogical project is therefore understood first and foremost as a process of unmasking. Genealogy, that is, proves that the most highly charged and universally cherished concepts that underlie religion and morality, such as human liberty or reason, are neither fundamental to man's nature nor separable from a historical evolution that is colored by chance and conflict. Genealogy, in the words of Foucault, "will never neglect as inaccessible the vicissitudes of history. On the contrary, it will cultivate the details and accidents that accompany every beginning; it will be scrupulously attentive to their petty malice; it will await their emergence, once unmasked, as the face of the other."<sup>17</sup> The German debates on secularization picked up on this thread and scanned through the impurities of history to uncover, within the heart of supposedly modern and secular phenomena and concepts, traces of the premodern.



Nonetheless, the German discourse on religion and modernity that this book focuses on also subverted some of the terms of Nietzsche's seminal work on genealogy. While for Nietzsche religion, and Christian morality in particular, were forces of forgetfulness, here religion itself reveals what is being forgotten and at times even repressed. When religious affinities and theological categories are seen to be at work in the very attempt to create a distance from the premodern past, the genealogical strategies that will be looked at in this book bring out that religions are not, as Nietzsche put it hyperbolically, "at their most fundamental, systems of cruelty."<sup>18</sup> The authors that are studied here in detail have argued that the dynamic of secularization and modernization, including Nietzsche's own rejection of religion, thrives on energies and fields of understanding that are deeply religious. While Nietzsche sought to undermine religion, morality, and theology by unmasking their secular genealogy, the thinkers discussed here did the exact opposite. They sought to nuance the absolutist claims of secularism and modernity by unmasking their origins in religious contexts of meaning.

From these perspectives, the genealogical project of unmasking and uncovering ought not be considered a process of historical purification since it, on the contrary, opens up toward an essential and ineradicable heterogeneity that pertains to all things historical. Genealogy of course suggests lineage, continuation, and inheritance, but for Nietzsche and Foucault genealogy aims to uncover the historical contingency of the origins of ideas, values, and institutions. The act of revealing a forgotten influence of theological concepts within modernization does not merely result from any hope to expel, once and for all, these premodern or anachronistic layers of history. In other words, the genealogical projects discussed in this book revolve around the argument, put forward by some of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century, that identifying human progress with mere rationalization results in an undue reduction. These thinkers contend that it is not just fallacious but even downright suspect to isolate the concepts by way of which modern humanity understands its own position from premodern and theological concepts. In this sense, genealogy typically delegitimizes certain ideas and undermines their immediate and uncritical acceptance. However, pointing to the contingency of these ideas can also make us realize why we attach importance to them. Genealogy undermines the absolute justification of values and ideas but explains at the same time why they can have legitimacy for us. This type of genealogy avoids secularization's pessimistic narrative of false inheritance by gaining insights into the complexities and contingencies of historical development. Ultimately, this

strategy could even entail a defense of “the legitimacy of the modern age,” as the title of Hans Blumenberg’s seminal book suggested.

REFLECTIONS ON THE SECULAR IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY GERMAN THOUGHT (SYNOPSIS)

Part I of the book elaborates on specific methodological and philosophical issues that were already hinted at in the introduction. The two chapters of this section critically reflect on the conceptual scope of secularization and assess its genealogical implications.

The volume opens with Kirk Wetters’s “Genealogy Trouble: Secularization and the Leveling of Theory.” This essay is programmatic for the rest of the book, as it presents an in-depth critique of the genealogical strategies implied in the concept of secularization. First, Wetters presents a methodological analysis of the role of genealogical arguments in writing intellectual history, distinguishing between “weak,” “traditional,” and “critical,” forms of genealogy. Wetters then analyzes the Löwith-Blumenberg debate in terms of these distinctions. More concretely, he nuances the traditional reception of the debate by showing how Löwith’s and Blumenberg’s positions do not differ as significantly as is often argued. The historical pictures Blumenberg and Löwith draw are even surprisingly similar. What ultimately motivates Blumenberg’s criticism, Wetters shows, is not Löwith’s argumentation as such but its specific “weak” genealogical rhetoric. Accordingly, Blumenberg adopts Löwith’s historical picture to a large extent but develops it into a “stronger” genealogy. Also taking Max Weber’s and Giorgio Agamben’s theological genealogies into account, Wetters is combining a historical perspective on secularization theory with a methodological reflection on the practice of genealogical thinking.

In the second chapter, “‘The God of Myth Is Not Dead’—Modernity and Its Cryptotheologies: A Jewish Perspective,” Agata Bielik-Robson goes beyond the alternative between an acceptance or a rejection of Löwith’s theory of secularization as immanentization. Based on Jewish-messianic ideas borrowed from Gershom Scholem, Ernst Bloch, Jacob Taubes, up to Jacques Derrida and the philosophy of Hans Blumenberg, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Gilles Deleuze, she develops a nuanced philosophical alternative to the concept of secularization through her notion of *cryptotheology*. Affirming the demise of traditional theologies and the belief in the divine absolute, this cryptotheology does not simply give up on the modern translation of the religious content, but applies it to the world. Bielik-Robson is interested in the shift of the messianic interest

from the spiritual-otherworldly to the material-innerworldly and the recovery of a *factum brutum* pertaining to the world.

Part II focuses on major German philosophers whose work has rarely been associated with secularization—the chapters respectively discuss Walter Benjamin, Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger, Immanuel Kant, and Hannah Arendt. These chapters show how some of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century figured as the protagonists of the debate on religion, modernity, and secularism, and how their thinking prefigured the secularization debates proper between Schmitt, Löwith and Blumenberg that took place in postwar Germany.

Sigrid Weigel's chapter "The 'Distance to Revelation' and the Difference between Divine and Wordly Order: Walter Benjamin's Critique of Secularization as Historical Development" renders a substantial analysis of Benjamin's philosophy from the perspective of an interest in the issue of secularization. Contrary to the secularization theorists who describe secularization as a historical evolution, thereby considering the relation between religious and worldly concepts genealogically as one of transferal (Schmitt) or transformation (Blumenberg), Benjamin defines the realm of the secular as always already separated from the sacred. Still, while he thus understands history as being marked by its remoteness from the realm of divine revelation, Weigel argues that Benjamin uses biblical concepts and thought-images as standards that can neither be met nor be avoided. In Benjamin's work, such concepts do not bring the theological and the historical together in one equivocal unity but they reflect a double reference to both profane and religious ideas.

In the chapter "Theology and Politics: Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger before, in, and after the Davos Debate," Jeffrey Andrew Barash recasts the famous Davos Debate in 1929 between Cassirer and Heidegger as a discussion about the phenomenon of religion. Presenting both Cassirer and Heidegger as thinkers who are engaged with the relation between myth, religion, and art, Barash understands Cassirer's views as pertaining to the historical and sociological interest on religion, while arguing that Heidegger's criticism of historical schemas to sketch out the development of religion is indebted to authors like Bultmann, Barth, and Gogarten. Still, one of the most interesting oppositions between Cassirer and Heidegger revolves around the former's emphasis on an unconditioned, ethical truth with an intrinsic validity that is independent of any finite mode of existence. It is from this perspective that Cassirer not only criticizes Heidegger's concept of truth as remaining dependent on the singular

finitude of *Dasein*, but also approaches the theme of political theology and theological voluntarism.

In his chapter “Is Progress a Category of Consolation? Kant, Blumenberg, and the Politics of the Moderns,” Michaël Foessel develops a philosophical rereading of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate through the figure of Immanuel Kant. After presenting an overview of Blumenberg’s objections against Löwith’s interpretation of modern progress as secularized eschatology, he shows how Blumenberg’s alternative reading ultimately sides with Kant’s interpretation of progress, which Löwith interestingly did not discuss. Kant’s and Blumenberg’s conceptions discard progressivism’s paradigmatic triumphalism but present progress as a category of consolation. The modern concept of a progress to infinity thus appears as a regulative idea, in the Kantian sense, which gives meaning to historical disappointments rather than as a secularized eschatological concept that wants to overcome history itself.

The scope of the secularization debate in Germany obviously goes beyond the classic Löwith-Blumenberg debate. As an important intellectual current in postwar Germany, the secularization debate comprised a variety of academic topics and involved a whole range of thinkers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds whose writings and ideas have largely remained under the radar. Although Hannah Arendt is certainly a major figure in twentieth-century continental philosophy, her writings have never been associated with the topic of secularization. In his essay “Hannah Arendt, Secularization Theory, and the Politics of Secularism,” Samuel Moyn convincingly shows, however, that Arendt’s *On Revolution* implies a reflection on the problem of secularization that can be read as a critical rejection of Carl Schmitt’s political theology. Mindful of the double meaning of the concept of secularization, discussed earlier in this introduction, Moyn argues that Arendt does not just develop a *theory of secularization* but also defends the *politics of secularism* as a goal of modern politics. The essay ends by examining how Arendt might reply to currently influential challengers of a secular politics.

Part III is devoted entirely to Jacob Taubes’s views on secularization, whose central role in the secularization debates has been largely overlooked. While Taubes’s writings have recently received more scholarly attention and have become increasingly influential in the current discourse on political theology, they have not yet been properly read as contributions to the German secularization debate. With the possible exception of his *Occidental Eschatology*, Taubes never discussed to topic of secularization systematically.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless,

his role in the German secularization debates could hardly be overestimated, as he arguably contributed to the perception that the different reflections on secularization in postwar German thought can be conceived as a real debate. Taubes's style of thinking was always very practical and essentially dialogical and confrontational: in every monograph he saw potential for debates and criticism, and from every idea a thinker coined he could make up a topic for a conference, workshop, or essay collection. Taubes, moreover, critically engaged in the work of the main participants of the classic secularization debate, and corresponded with these scholars too—not just with Schmitt and Blumenberg, but also with Scholem, Voegelin, Arendt, Löwith, and Marquard. Part of the reason why Taubes's conception of secularization remains unexplored is the fact that some of his writings on the topic are not easily accessible. This is especially true for his essay "On the Symbolic Order of Modern Democracy," which is reprinted in this book and introduced by Martin Tremml.

In "Secularization and the Symbols of Democracy: Jacob Taubes's Critique of Carl Schmitt," Martin Tremml elaborates on the intellectual encounter between Jacob Taubes and Carl Schmitt. In spite of radically different backgrounds, Taubes and Schmitt share an interest in the relevance of the history of religion for the current (political) predicament. Especially the figure of the *Katechon* and eschatological theology in general seemed relevant for their discussions. Tremml then focuses more specifically on Taubes's interpretation of modern democracy, which implies a critical dialogue with Schmitt. He shows how Taubes traces democracy's political symbolism back to radical Christian heresies that rejected the absolute authority of the church.

In "On the Symbolic Order of Modern Democracy," Taubes elaborates on the theological symbolism applied in secular politics. Initially, theology's hierarchical and authoritarian symbolism seems only at work in monarchical political systems. However, Taubes immediately adds that the symbols of democracy can be similarly traced back to theology, albeit to more heretical, revolutionary, and mystical doctrines that counter traditional orthodoxy. Their mystical emphasis on holiness of the congregation embodying the divine announces, according to Taubes, the democratic values of equality and brotherliness. The chapter closes with a reflection on the theological inspiration of dictatorship in the works Kierkegaard, Marx, Donoso, and Proudhon.

The part of the book on Taubes closes with Sigrid Weigel's chapter, "In Paul's Mask: Jacob Taubes Reads Walter Benjamin." The chapter presents an analysis of Taubes's biased appropriation of Walter Benjamin's thought. Although not explicitly addressing Taubes as a secularization theorist, Weigel

discusses some of the genealogical lines he traced between premodern theology and certain modern phenomena or intellectuals. First, she elaborates on Taubes's connection between ancient Gnosticism and Surrealism, meticulously dissecting Benjamin's role in his argumentation. She then shows how Taubes interprets Benjamin himself as a modern Gnostic Marcionite, and finally even as a modern exegete of Paul's letters to the Corinthians and Romans.

The final part of the book, IV, puts another German thinker forward whose work has rarely been associated with secularization. Although the work of Egyptologist Jan Assmann is mainly associated with memory studies, his work deserves to be studied in a book on the German discourse on religion and modernity. The case of Assmann takes up a somewhat exceptional position in this book for two reasons—the first one more historical, the second more philosophical. First, Assmann is much younger than the main participants of the German secularization debate, and only started his academic career when its importance in the German intellectual world was already waning. Nonetheless, he knew some of the main debaters personally, and arguably continues their legacy today. Especially in *Herrschaft und Heil*, he elaborated extensively on the topic of secularization and political theology in dialogue with thinkers such as Schmitt and Blumenberg.<sup>20</sup> In contradistinction to his other works, this book has found relatively little attention in the English-speaking world, especially because it has not been translated. *Herrschaft und Heil* brings us to a second reason why Assmann's work differs from the other authors who are studied here. Assmann develops his own critical alternative to the theory of secularization in the form of a political genealogy of theology. In opposing secularization, however, Assmann himself arguably belongs to the long tradition of German secularization theory, albeit as a late voice in the debate. Assmann's thinking indeed testifies to the heterogeneity of genealogical strategies that are applied in the German discourse on religion and modernity.

Assmann's contribution is introduced by Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins. His chapter "Secularization and Theologization: An Introduction to Jan Assmann's *Monotheism*" presents an overview of the role of secularization and political theology in Assmann's work at large, and clarifies Assmann's relation to the German secularization debate.

In the final chapter, "Monotheism," Jan Assmann summarizes his main arguments from *Herrschaft und Heil*, making them available in English for the first time. The essay presents an alternative to the theory of secularization in the form of a theory of theologization. Reversing Schmitt's secularization

thesis, Assmann argues that theology is not first made political in the process of secularization, but that monotheistic theology itself relied from the outset on secular political concepts it borrowed from the ancient civilizations. In this regard, he presents a genealogy of theology rather than a theological genealogy.

#### SECULARIZATION, POLITICAL THEOLOGY AND GENEALOGY TODAY

Today, the concept of secularization has lost much of its credibility, especially as an empirical, sociological tool. It only seems to retain its descriptive validity for the marginal case of Western Europe. Contradicting the traditional secularization narrative, the significance of religious authority has not disappeared in our age. On the contrary, the adherents of desecularization or postsecularism pertinently state that our age is rather confronted with an increasing role of religious sensitivities in the public sphere.<sup>21</sup> However, while this empirical conception of secularization has become problematical today, the more expanded and conceptual view of secularization, central to the German debates, has gained popularity in contemporary academic discussions. The genealogical project that underlies the German secularization debates, tracing modernity back to its Christian, Jewish, or monotheistic roots, is echoed in recent studies such as Jean-Luc Nancy's *Deconstruction of Christianity*, Hans Joas's *The Sacredness of the Person*, Giorgio Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory* and *The Time that Remains*.<sup>22</sup> Apart from these significant European contributions, the issue has recently gained particular prominence in the American scholarly world with studies such as Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, Mark Lilla's *The Stillborn God*, Gil Anidjar's *Blood*, Thomas Pfau's *Minding the Modern*, Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation*, or Michael Gillespie's *The Theological Origins of Modernity*.<sup>23</sup> These books are generally critical of modern culture and resemble, in that respect, the more pessimistic and conservative interpretations of secularization put forward by thinkers such as Karl Löwith. In comparison to Blumenberg's sophisticated defense of modern thought, Löwith's criticism could initially appear as an outdated nostalgia for premodernity. Today, however, such pessimistic, critical positions are often considered to be more intellectually stimulating and philosophically sophisticated than the optimistic defenses of modern values in Blumenberg's sense, which could now appear as naive or even somewhat clichéd.

In spite of the significant structural parallels to the German secularization debates, these recent studies rarely use the concept of secularization itself, with the exception of Taylor and Gregory, and they enter even less into direct

discussion with their German predecessors. Nonetheless, they often introduce or legitimize their intellectual projects through a cursory reference to the German secularization debates: Nancy and Taylor programmatically mention Blumenberg at the very beginning and the very end of their books, respectively; Anidjar and Agamben frame their projects in a critical dialogue with Schmitt, Taubes, and Benjamin. Agamben is also the only one to elaborate on the Löwith-Blumenberg debate.

In order to gain a deeper insight into the stakes of the current debates, it is for several reasons worthwhile to study their German predecessors. First, this return to the German origins of the current debates shows that a genealogy of the secular does not necessarily imply critique, deconstruction, or delegitimation. Genealogy can give rise to the cultural pessimism of contemporary scholars as diverse as Gregory, Anidjar, Taylor, and Pfau, but more positive genealogical projects, which nonetheless refuse to succumb to Enlightenment's naive optimism, can be discovered in their German predecessors like Blumenberg and Taubes. Relying on such thinkers can entail a modest and sophisticated legitimation of the modern paradigm along the lines of Victoria Kahn's recent *The Future of Illusion*.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, getting in touch with the common German origins of the current debates on political theology and postsecularism brings unity to a very heterogeneous scene. Indeed, the contemporary authors that are listed here have often failed to see the connection between their works. At the same time, this approach even bridges some of the conceptual differences between European and American approaches of religion's role in secular society. Finally, and most importantly, the return to the German debates reveals the presuppositions as well as the limitations of current discourses. Not unlike Daniel Weidner's essay, *The Rhetoric of Secularization*, which relies on Weber's and Blumenberg's thought, the appeal to such German thinkers helps answer fundamental questions about the concepts of secularization and the theoretical practices of genealogy:<sup>25</sup> What is actually meant when someone claims that modernity is indebted to theology? What does one try to achieve with such a genealogy? And, what are its normative presuppositions and implications? These are indeed some of the central questions that this book tries to answer.

#### NOTES

1. Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), xi.



2. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
3. Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 1.
4. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.
5. Although Agamben is probably the first to connect the concept of genealogy to the German secularization debates (see especially the first chapter of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 1–16), there are other thinkers who approached the problem of secularization from the perspective of genealogy: Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 3; Hans Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person: a New Genealogy of Human Rights* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2013). The concept also surfaces in some recent secondary literature on secularization and political theology: Manuel Borutta, “Genealogie der Säkularisierungstheorie: Zur Historisierung einer großen Erzählung der Moderne,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 36 (2010) 3: 347–76; Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, “Michael Oakeshott’s Theological Genealogy of Political Modernity,” *European Legacy* 19 (2014) 3, 323–34.
6. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.
7. Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 10.
8. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Dover, 2003).
9. Walter Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 288.
10. *Ibid.*, 288.
11. *Ibid.*, 289.
12. Aby Warburg, “Pagan–Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther,” in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), 645.
13. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 19.
14. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy*, 65.
15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 13.
16. *Ibid.*, 12.

17. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice. Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D. F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 144.
18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 38.
19. Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
20. Jan Assmann, *Herrschaft und Heil. Politische Theologie in Altägypten, Israel und Europa* (Munich, Germany: Fischer Verlag, 2000).
21. See Peter Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999); Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14 (2006) 1: 1–25; Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, trans. Brian Mc Neil (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006); Rodney Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P." *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999): 3, 249–73.
22. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person*; Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*; Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).
23. Respectively, see Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008); Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013); Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*; Michael A. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008). For other recent books that pursue a similar project see: Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2011).
24. Victoria Kahn, *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2014).
25. See Daniel Weidner, "The Rhetoric of Secularization," *New German Critique* 41 (2014): 1, 1–31.