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Secularization between Faith and Reason: Reinvestigating the Löwith-Blumenberg Debate

Sjoerd Griffioen

The “postsecularism debate” has dominated various academic fields for over a decade now, and its core issue, the relation between modernity and religion, is still relevant and still contested. To either contextualize the current debate or find structural commonalities, some scholars are turning to previous debates on secularization. Thus renewed attention is paid to the German “secularization debate” of the 1960s or, more narrowly defined, the “Löwith-Blumenberg debate.”¹ In foreshadowing the current postsecularism debate, this discussion already dealt extensively with the tension between religious modes of thought and modern claims of enlightenment and self-sufficient rationality.²

Referring to the Löwith-Blumenberg debate is nearly unavoidable when one decides to investigate secularization as a philosophical topic. This makes it all the more questionable that such a widespread recognition of its importance has not led to a critical reinvestigation of the debate. Instead, it seems that a majority of scholars, even in the postsecularism discourse, simply adopt the entrenched view of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate, which is biased in favor

1. Kahn, “Introduction”; Breckman, “Democracy between Disenchantment and Political Theology”; Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism*; Steinmetz-Jenkins, “French Laïcité.”

2. Harrington, “Social Theory and Theology,” 42–44; Harrington, “Theological History,” 21–24; Latré, “De erfenis van het Löwith-Blumenberg debat,” 20–24; Bangstad, “Contesting Secularism/s,” 189; Gordon and Skolnik, “Editor’s Introduction,” 6.

of Hans Blumenberg.³ This widely accepted view dictates that Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History* (1949) is an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of modernity by exposing the modern idea of progress as a mere secularized Christian eschatology or providence. The formula that made Löwith's theory famous, that "progress is secularized eschatology," supposedly implies that modernity itself is nothing more than a "Christian heresy." Fortunately, Blumenberg showed the misguided and fallacious nature of this attempt, first in his 1962 lecture "Säkularisation: Kritik einer Kategorie historischer Illegitimität" ("Secularization: Critique of a Category of Historical Illegitimacy") and more extensively in his 1966 book *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*).⁴ Blumenberg has thereby, so the argument goes, undermined the so-called secularization theorem, which argued for the illegitimacy of modernity because of its purported indebtedness to Christianity. Many commentators are convinced, like Elizabeth Brient, that "*Legitimacy* provides a decisive refutation of Löwith's thesis" and, as Martin Jay states, that it means "a death blow" to the secularization theorem itself.⁵

By interpreting Löwith solely through Blumenberg's critique, most scholars have failed to see that Blumenberg in fact attacks a straw man that bears little resemblance to Löwith's actual argument. Other scholars, however, have proved more observant. Joe Paul Kroll, Burkhard Liebsch, and Franz Joseph Wetz, for instance, noticed that Blumenberg's critique of Löwith misses its mark in important respects.⁶ For example, Blumenberg's misrepresentation of Löwith's account obscures some points of *agreement* between them as to how Christian phenomena relate to their modern counterparts. Milan Babík, for instance, asserts that Blumenberg's own theory indeed "converges with Löwith's secularization model."⁷ Furthermore, several scholars have noticed that Löwith and Blumenberg "agree a good deal" on some aversions, such as toward the "philosophy of history,"⁸ which both reject as an unwarranted projection of eschatological hope onto immanent history. For Pini

3. E.g., Harrington, "Social Theory and Theology"; Harrington, "Theological History"; Buch, "Umbuchung." Such interpretations tend to rely on Wallace's reading of the debate ("Progress, Secularization, and Modernity").

4. I use Wallace's 1983 translation of *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (hereafter cited as *LMA*).

5. Brient, *Immanence of the Infinite*, 29n32; Jay, Review of *Legitimacy*, 192.

6. Kroll, "Human End to History?"; Liebsch, *Verzeitlichte Welt*, 70–71; Wetz, *Hans Blumenberg*, 48.

7. Babík, "Nazism as a Secular Religion," 393.

8. Pippin, "Blumenberg and the Modernity Problem," 541.

Ifergan, “Blumenberg espoused a view . . . reminiscent of Löwith’s, whereby historical consciousness and eschatological belief are beyond reconciliation.”⁹

Despite these otherwise valuable attempts at assessing and mitigating Blumenberg’s critique, it remains necessary to offer a further analysis of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate. First, most of the aforementioned scholars have offered their remarks only in passing, without elaborating on where and to what extent Blumenberg’s critique falters and on how Löwith *should* be interpreted.¹⁰ Second, and more important, these commentators continue to ignore a significant aspect of Löwith’s account that was already overlooked by his critics: his normative claim against modernity and its idea of progress does not derive from or depend on his account of “secularization.” Rather, it relies on an ideal-typical conception of “pure faith” and “pure reason,” two idealized ahistorical norms of which modern thought falls short, according to Löwith. Thus Löwith is misrepresented as a “secularization theorist” and is therefore not “decisively refuted” by Blumenberg. The present article provides the groundwork for a new perspective on this historically significant debate, which is that it is neither a refutation of a faulty theory by a superior one, nor a mock fight between two similar arguments, but a polemic between two incompatible philosophical positions, clouded by misunderstandings on both sides.¹¹

First I expound on Blumenberg’s straw man representation of Löwith, and then elaborate on the former’s critique. I subsequently reconstruct Löwith’s account, bringing to light the extent to which Blumenberg misrepresented him. Partly building on the sparse reservations offered by aforementioned scholars, I then offer a rebuttal of Blumenberg’s critique and provide my own proposition for how this debate should be assessed.

The Secularization Theorem and Blumenberg’s Straw Man

The cultural pessimism (*Kulturpessimismus*) that had dominated the intellectual discourse of the Weimar Republic did not disappear after World War II. Rather, it became intertwined with “the question of guilt,” *die Schuldfrage*.

9. Ifergan, “Cutting to the Chase,” 168.

10. Kroll’s historical analysis, “A Human End to History?,” on which I partly build in this article, certainly constitutes an exception with regard to this first point. With respect to my second point, however, he does—valuable insights notwithstanding—tend to downplay those aspects that separate Löwith from Blumenberg.

11. The scope of this approach is limited to an analysis of Blumenberg’s critique of Löwith—that is, to *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* and *Meaning in History*, respectively. It includes an estimation of the contours of the philosophical difference between the two scholars, but an in-depth exploration of this ideological divide—which would entail examining both scholars’ oeuvres to a greater extent—must await further research.

Thus the war was interpreted as an indication of the bankruptcy of the West or of modernity itself.¹² This meant that the concept of *Schuld*—with its dual implication of guilt and debt—was elevated to the level of philosophical self-diagnosis, where it was used to question not only the recent catastrophe but also the entire epoch in which it took place.

Underlying these philosophical expressions of pessimism was a sense, not always explicated, that modernity is somehow the product of “alienation” from an original, authentic state, where humankind lived in a more truthful and genuine relation with nature, with transcendence, or with itself. This alienation is not simply a disconnection; on the contrary, what was deemed lost somehow remained present, in its absence, as a reference point for a nostalgic yearning. In this sense, the present contains a continuing debt and guilt, which suggests an illegitimate continuity between past and present (*LMA*, 117–18). Often these pessimistic accounts were conveyed through the narrative form of *Verfallsgeschichte* (history of decline)—such as in Martin Heidegger, Eric Voegelin, and Theodor W. Adorno—in which the current situation is seen as the product of a long history of regression. The objective of such *Verfallsgeschichten* is the unveiling of an underlying guilt/debt, a *Schuld* that unmasks the current situation as “illegitimate.”¹³

Blumenberg, who was younger than most of the prominent philosophical pessimists, perceived this tendency toward delegitimizing modernity with apprehension. He was especially disgruntled with those accounts that attacked the *secular* nature of modernity, which suggested that the modern age’s illegitimacy lies in its distorted relation with transcendence or religion. Accusatory accounts of this type were popular among the German public, such as Hans Sedlmayr’s *Verlust der Mitte* (*Loss of the Center*) or Romano Guardini’s *Das Ende der Neuzeit* (*The End of the Modern World*). Some of these narratives adopted the aforementioned topos of “alienation” but interpreted it as “secularization.”¹⁴ This implies that modernity is defined by its break with religion, on the one hand, but also remains bound to it, in its indebtedness, on the other.

Hence it is assumed that there is a covert, illegitimate continuity between Christianity and modernity that renders the latter a deplorable “Christian her-

12. Boterman, *Cultuur als macht*, 578–613.

13. *LMA*, 113–20, 125; Blumenberg, “Säkularisation,” 242; Blumenberg, *Care Crosses the River*, 39; Kroll, “Human End to History?,” 93.

14. Kroll, “Human End to History?,” 24–30; Pannenberg, “Die christliche Legitimität der Neuzeit,” 114–16. See also Lübke on how the concept of secularization was used to “come to terms with the (recent) past” (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) (*Säkularisierung*, 109–16).

esy.”¹⁵ In *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Blumenberg notes that these theories assume that the authentic, religious “substance” remains hidden but is nonetheless present in its secular derivations, “implied” or “wrapped up” in it, as it were:

The genuine substance of that which was secularized is “wrapped up in” [*die Implikation des*] what thus became worldly, and remains “wrapped up in” it as what is essential to it, as when, in the model instance developed by Heidegger for the hermeneutics of his school, “Dasein’s understanding of Being” is essential to it and yet “in the first instance and for the most part” hidden and withdrawn from it. I am almost inclined to say that that was what I was afraid of. (*LMA*, 17)

In general, Blumenberg intended to undermine such theories—which he subsumed under the heading “secularization theorem”¹⁶—but to do so, he needed to make one especially prolific account his primary target, serving as a representative for this theorem, that is, Löwith’s *Meaning in History*. Blumenberg chose Löwith as his primary object of critique because his thesis was especially well known and, as Robert M. Wallace suggests, because it was regarded as the most full-blown critique of modernity in terms of the secularization theorem.¹⁷ Also, since the central thesis of *Meaning in History* appeared to be easily apprehendable and in fact was quickly appropriated by others, it had acquired a “dogmatizing effect,” according to Blumenberg.¹⁸ Indeed, the impression that Löwith had had a dogmatizing effect is not far off the mark, if one regards the air of self-evidence with which the formula was adopted by a wide variety of scholars, such as Carl Schmitt’s students Reinhart Koselleck and Hanno Kesting, the political philosopher Voegelin, and the physicist-philosopher Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker.¹⁹ It was especially in the field of theology, however, that Löwith’s formula found its most favorable reception, for instance, in Rudolf Bultmann’s *History and Eschatology* (1957). In this respect, it has been noted that Blumenberg’s critique applies more to the theo-

15. Blumenberg, “Säkularisation,” 265. See, e.g., Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*.

16. Other often-mentioned examples of secularization theorists are Schmitt, *Political Theology*; Schmitt, *Political Theology II*; Delekat, *Über den Begriff Säkularisierung*; and Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*.

17. Wallace, “Progress, Secularization, and Modernity,” 68; Wallace, introduction, xvi; Ruh, *Säkularisierung als Interpretationskategorie*, 199.

18. *LMA*, 27. See, e.g., Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*.

19. Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise*; Kesting, *Geschichtsphilosophie und Weltbürgerkrieg*; Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*; von Weizsäcker, *Relevance of Science*.

logical appropriation of Löwith's formula than to Löwith's theory itself.²⁰ Yet there are examples of theological writers active in that time, such as Friedrich Delekat and Alfred Müller-Armack, whose theories seem to meet Blumenberg's description of the "secularization theory" even better than the aforementioned scholars, without displaying an explicit indebtedness to Löwith.²¹

Blumenberg, however, chose Löwith as the principal representative of the secularization theorem, and in doing so he constructed a straw man to attack the secularization theorem in general. According to Blumenberg's portrayal, Löwith denounced modernity by arguing that "progress," the modern age's core principle, was nothing but secularized eschatology. This would render modernity itself disingenuous and illegitimate—or, to express it as a formula, modernity is illegitimate *because* it is secularized. The "secularization as alienation" topos determines that Christian "eschatology" is the authentic, original substance and that progress is a mere derivation in which the original core remains implied (*LMA*, 19, 27–35). This derivation is most apparent in the grand "philosophies of history"—especially of the Hegelian, Marxist, or Comteian varieties—that tell sweeping tales about the secular salvation of humankind, culminating in worldly visions of paradise (*LMA*, 32, 85–86).

Modern thought is defined by this idea of progress, the argument continues, because it conceives of itself as having "overcome" Christianity. The exposure of modern progress as a derivation of what it explicitly rejects shows its "false self-consciousness"—in other words, the illegitimacy—that extends to the modern epoch in general.²² Blumenberg interprets Löwith as implying that "the autonomy of . . . historical consciousness as an ultimate category is exposed as its self-deception as soon as it is recognized, in accordance with the secularization theorem, as existing 'by the grace of' Christianity" (*LMA*, 28).

The purported illegitimacy of modernity resides not only in its misguided self-consciousness but, more important, in an act of "expropriation." That is, the status of the modern age is defined by the fact that it consists of expropriated substances, such as eschatology, that were originally—and thus properly—Christian. In short, Löwith is interpreted as arguing that modernity is illegitimate on no other grounds than *because* it is determined by Christianity. The implied *Schuld* should hence be read as "guilt" rather than as a vague

20. Zabel, "Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung," 243. For a similar argument, see Ruh, *Säkularisierung als Interpretationskategorie*, 262–65.

21. Delekat, *Über den Begriff Säkularisierung*; Gogarten, *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit*; Müller-Armack, *Jahrhundert ohne Gott*.

22. *LMA*, 25, 117–18; Wallace, "Progress, Secularization, and Modernity," 67.

indebtedness; that is, it invokes a juridical framework.²³ So “secularization” functions as a category of guilt, and saying that *x* is a secularized form of *y* is enough to render *x* illegitimate.²⁴ This would of course be a dubious assumption (were it not that Löwith does not actually make it), which Blumenberg then criticizes.

Blumenberg's Critique

For the sharpest version of Blumenberg's critique, one must turn to his 1962 lecture on secularization. *Legitimacy*, written in 1966, can be seen as an elaboration of this initial criticism that is supplemented by his own account of modernity's relation to its religious past, whereas in the later edition of the book (1974) Blumenberg arguably downplays the sharpness of his original polemic in response to various criticisms while holding on to the gist of his initial argument.²⁵

Blumenberg's first concern with Löwith's purported use of the concept of secularization is that it is wielded as an explanatory device rather than as something that needs prior explanation. Instead of first elucidating what happened in a process that can, descriptively, be called secularization afterward, this term is used as a ready-made and easily applicable explanation in itself. Such uses of *secularization* explain (or delegitimize) the modern work ethic as “inner-worldly asceticism,” the varieties of modern utopianism as varieties of paradise, and the modern idea of individualism as the secularization of Christianity's focus on the individual soul.²⁶ Such a use of secularization as an explanatory device is intrinsically problematic, as Blumenberg goes on to show.

He first demonstrates that the secularization theorem is based by analogy on the model of expropriation. This model pertained to a situation during the Reformation in which tangible possessions that belonged to the church were estranged by a secular institution. It was subsequently appropriated and interpreted as the alienation of ideas or concepts from the spiritual domain by the

23. This framework was invoked by Lübke (*Säkularisierung*), on whom Blumenberg explicitly draws to describe the secularization theorem, especially in the first edition (1966) of *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 12–13, 16). Zabel later criticized Blumenberg for his tendency to reduce any use of the concept of secularization to the juridical notion of expropriation (“Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung”).

24. Wallace, introduction, xiv; Pippin, “Blumenberg and the Modernity Problem,” 540–41; Brient, *Immanence of the Infinite*, 17, 21–23.

25. On the changes made in the separate versions of *Legitimacy*, see Dickey, “Blumenberg and Secularization”; on its relation to the 1962 lecture, see Kroll, “Human End to History?,” 131–58.

26. *LMA*, 4; Blumenberg, “Säkularisation,” 240–41; Brient, *Immanence of the Infinite*, 17.

worldly sphere.²⁷ Advocates of the secularization theorem use this model either implicitly or explicitly, but, according to Blumenberg, they should be able to demonstrate that such an expropriation actually occurred (*LMA*, 16). To do so, they should be able to meet the following requirements that Blumenberg devised: they must demonstrate “a) die Identifizierbarkeit des enteigneten Gutes; b) die Legitimität des primären Eigentums; c) die Einseitigkeit des Entzuges” (a) the identifiability of the expropriated possession; b) the legitimacy of the original ownership; c) the one-sidedness of the withdrawal [expropriation]).²⁸ He then shows that the secularization theory cannot meet these requirements and is not even aware of this “methodical burden of proof” (methodischen Beweislast).²⁹

These unfulfillable criteria are meant to establish that the secularization theorem is based on a fallacious presupposition, namely, “substantialism.”³⁰ This entails that the secularization theory assumes the existence of fixed “substances” (intellectual contents, e.g., ideas or concepts) that appear within history and remain constant throughout it. Tied to their initial context of origination, these “authentic” contents, through appropriation, become alienated but preserve their implicit connection to their origin. The notion of authenticity, which is central to the secularization theorem, presupposes that these substances contain a “dimension of hidden meaning”—in other words, these origins remain present in their absence.³¹

In his critique of the secularization theorem Blumenberg zooms in on Löwith’s case. First, “progress” cannot be a secularized form of “eschatology,” because there can be no substantive continuity, and hence no identifiability, of one substance throughout the process, due to the differences between the phenomena. There is a structural difference between progress and eschatology, Blumenberg argues: whereas “an eschatology speaks of an event breaking into history, an event that transcends and is heterogeneous to it, . . . the idea of progress extrapolates from a structure present in every moment to a future that is immanent in history” (*LMA*, 30). Then there is a genetic, or historical, distinction between the two, in that these phenomena have different historical origins. In Blumenberg’s theory this implies that they answer two separate questions. Whereas eschatology was meant to address the transcendent mean-

27. *LMA*, 18–19; Blumenberg, “Säkularisation,” 241–42. See also Lübke, *Säkularisierung*, 28–30.

28. Blumenberg, “Säkularisation,” 241.

29. Blumenberg, “Säkularisation,” 243.

30. *LMA*, 28–29, 48–49, 64–66, 88, 120, 466; Blumenberg, “Säkularisation,” 263.

31. *LMA*, 17–19; Blumenberg, “Säkularisation,” 263.

ing and goal of history in its totality, the idea of progress originated to conceptualize the more modest and more specific idea of scientific and artistic progression.³²

The second requirement, “legitimate ownership,” suggests that this notion is equally troublesome because it presupposes a questionable concept of authenticity, which is only really a construction projected onto “eschatology” afterward. Blumenberg demonstrates that Christian eschatology is a historically problematic phenomenon that had—insofar as it actually existed in an unadulterated sense—a very short life span. The early Christian form of eschatology, the radical, immediate expectation of the *eschaton* (*Naherwartung*), quickly caused disappointment, given the apparent delay of the Second Coming. Therefore it became transformed and diluted in medieval eschatological thought. Blumenberg makes two observations in this respect. First, the transformation of eschatology during the Middle Ages meant that the *eschaton* became a thing to be feared instead of hoped for, which implies that modern progress cannot be a secularization of Christian hopefulness, as Löwith purportedly claims.³³ Second, and this also refutes the attainability of the third requirement, Blumenberg argues that through this medieval transformation of eschatology it in fact “secularized itself.” By suppressing the immediateness of expectation, this self-secularization opened more room for human activity and thus became more affirmative toward worldly history.³⁴ Hence it cannot be claimed that “the world” expropriated something from “the spiritual realm.”³⁵

After this specific critique of Löwith’s account, Blumenberg drives his point home by connecting it to a more fundamental critique of the secularization theorem in general. He argues that the theorem’s implicit substantialism, which allows it to presuppose a fixed “substance” that can be alienated by “the world,” in fact reveals it to be a kind of crypto-theology. Its notion of authenticity not only betrays a Romanticist substantialism in which the phenomenon always remains bounded to its original context of origin but also requires a *transcendent source*. The secularization theorem must presuppose such a source, even when this point of origin is concealed. This is because the secularization theorem situates concepts that are authentically conceived exclusively in the past, in “pure” Christianity, and ignores their historical contingency. Therefore the secularization theorem enters into the realm of “theologischen

32. Blumenberg, “Säkularisation,” 243.

33. Blumenberg, “Säkularisation,” 246. On the role of *Naherwartung* in Blumenberg’s theory, see Ruh, *Säkularisierung als Interpretationskategorie*, 98–107.

34. Blumenberg, “Säkularisation,” 247; *LMA*, 44–47.

35. *LMA*, 47; Blumenberg, “Säkularisation,” 248.

Selbstdeutung und Selbstbehauptung” (theological self-definition and self-assertion). If it does not replace theology’s Christian-Platonic notion of ownership—which presupposes a divine origin and implies the derivative nature of subsequent “copies”—then it is nothing more than a form of crypto-theology, Blumenberg suggests.³⁶ This also explains the incriminating indebtedness of the modern age, because as a derivation of theology the theorem also adopts theology’s rancor toward the modern age as the purported “usurper” of Christianity.³⁷

In opposition to this crypto-theological assault on modernity, Blumenberg offers a defense of the modern age through his own conception of history. Using the secularization theorem as a counterposition, Blumenberg conceives of the relation between modernity and Christianity as one of a functional continuity and a substantive discontinuity. To account for this continuity, he postulates a transepochal structure of questions and answers. Modernity should be seen as the result of an independent answer to the problems of the Christian medieval worldview, which disintegrated from internal pressures and contradictions. The modern idea of human “self-assertion” (*Selbstbehauptung*)—modernity’s core principle—thus responds to the crippling uncertainty caused by late medieval “theological absolutism,” and the modern idea of progress signifies the extrapolation of this self-assertion to the realm of history. Modernity and progress—through self-assertion—are therefore vindicated by Blumenberg in opposition to theological absolutism or transcendence in general.³⁸

Blumenberg’s critique of the secularization theorem and his concomitant portrayal of Löwith as a secularization theorist became widely accepted. To give but a few examples, Laurence Dickey writes that “by all accounts, Blumenberg was most successful” in refuting the secularization theorem.³⁹ And William J. Bouwsma found *Legitimacy*, as “an extended refutation of Karl Löwith’s . . . *Meaning in History*,” to be “wholly convincing.”⁴⁰ This also means that many scholars have adopted Blumenberg’s straw man as a truthful representation of Löwith’s account, implying that *Meaning in History* consists solely of an attempt to demonstrate modernity’s illegitimacy on the basis of the

36. Blumenberg, “Säkularisation,” 244, 254; *LMA*, 10.

37. Blumenberg, “Säkularisation,” 242; *LMA*, 119; Ruh, *Säkularisierung als Interpretationskategorie*, 120–21.

38. *LMA*. See also Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*; Blumenberg, “Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric,” 456; Blumenberg, *Care Crosses the River*, 42, 56. On Blumenberg’s “philosophical antiabsolutism,” see Savage, afterword, 223; and Marquard, “Entlastung vom Absoluten.”

39. Dickey, “Blumenberg and Secularization,” 153–54. See also Rorty, “Against Belatedness.”

40. Bouwsma, Review of *Legitimacy*, 698.

expropriation model and its concomitant substantialism.⁴¹ Benjamin Lazier, for instance, writes that Löwith's thesis "identifies a substance proper to medieval Christianity, which in its modern guise appears to have undergone transformation into a secularized form but in fact has not dislodged itself from its originally Christian framework."⁴² And Robert B. Pippin concurs that Löwith, in trying to show modernity's indebtedness, "does often breezily assume that pointing out this necessary Christian 'horizon' is enough to delegitimize, expose as self-deceived, the claim that the modern belief in progress is wholly modern and therewith rational."⁴³

Arguably, Blumenberg's critique of the secularization theorem seems justified in itself. Indeed, if one seeks to demonstrate the illegitimacy of modernity with this model of expropriation, one at least has to be able to delineate this "substance," assert the legitimacy of the original ownership, and reveal how the expropriation took place. This is impossible simply because, whereas one could construct a notion of substantive continuity as a heuristic instrument, one cannot, when investigating the historical development of ideas, actually find them as objects can be found in nature. The question here, however, is not whether Blumenberg's critique of the secularization theorem is justified but whether he justifiably portrayed Löwith as a secularization theorist.⁴⁴

Löwith's Account

First Line of Thought: Secularization as Conflation

In Blumenberg's critique of Löwith much depends on the former's substantialist reading of the latter's assumption that the modern idea of progress is a secularized form of eschatology, and the concomitant portrayal of Löwith's account as based on the model of expropriation rests on this substantialist inter-

41. Wallace, "Progress, Secularization, and Modernity"; Henning, *Philosophy after Marx*, 377–78; Trierweiler, review of *Work on Myth*, 155; Lindahl, "Macht en rationaliteit," 10; Ingram, "Blumenberg and the Philosophical Grounds of Historiography," 5; Palti, "In Memoriam," 504; Yack, "Myth and Modernity," 253; Bouwsma, review of *Legitimacy*, 698.

42. Lazier, "Overcoming Gnosticism," 628.

43. Pippin, "Blumenberg and the Modernity Problem," 541.

44. I have suggested earlier that Blumenberg's description of the secularization theorem in fact approximates some scholars, such as Müller-Armack and Delekat, better than others. I would also suggest that one can find the two characteristics of the secularization theorem—substantialism and expropriation—most clearly in Delekat, *Über den Begriff Säkularisation*. Still, one might also wonder, as Ruh does, whether the ill-fitting nature of "the secularization theorem" as an ideal-type should not lead one to question if it has any merit in the first place (*Säkularisierung als Interpretationskategorie*, 267).

pretation. Hence, to assess whether Blumenberg's critique is justified, it is necessary to ascertain, first, what Löwith meant by his assertion and, second, what role it plays in his overall theory. This, however, requires a reconstruction of Löwith's account, because, despite its seeming straightforwardness, on closer inspection the narrative turns out to be far more complicated and ambiguous than has been admitted. Moreover, it can be seen as lacking in clarity and at times in consistency, especially in those elements that have formed the focus of his later critics—an ambiguity that has evidently made Löwith's narrative susceptible to misinterpretations.⁴⁵ Consequently, to give Löwith's account a fighting chance against Blumenberg's critique, I consider it necessary to reconstruct this theory in a way that restructures his own arguments and explicates those aspects that have proved relevant in light of his later criticisms. This reconstruction separates two lines of thought intertwined in Löwith's original argument, and, corresponding to these lines of thought, it distinguishes between a descriptive and a normative claim. The account of secularization serves only a descriptive function secondary with regard to a—previously underexposed—second line of thought in *Meaning in History*, which connects to its central normative claim, namely, the denunciation of modernity on the basis of pure faith and pure reason. The upshot of this reconstruction is that, at least analytically speaking, the central normative claim of Löwith does not depend on his secondary line of thought, that is, his theory of secularization.

However, it is necessary to find out what secularization means in Löwith's theory. To do so, it is important to briefly discuss his conception of Christianity. Alluding to the book's title, *Meaning in History*, Löwith states in the preface: "I have tried to be honest . . . about the impossibility . . . of imposing on history a reasoned order or of drawing out the working of God." That is, "to the critical mind, neither a providential design nor a natural law of progressive development is discernible in the tragic human comedy of all times."⁴⁶ When speaking about "meaning in history," Löwith understands *meaning* in a teleological sense, as "purpose." To him, this implies that to the critical mind—properly speaking—*there is no meaning in history* (*MiH*, 5). The book is an account of how this fallacious idea of a purposeful history developed from its Christian origin up till Löwith's own time (*MiH*, 3). As the subtitle—*The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*—indicates, this book seeks to expose the implicit presupposition of theological patterns in modern histor-

45. As Kroll also notes ("Human End to History?," 105–11).

46. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, v (hereafter cited as *MiH*).

ical thought, the most important of which is “the theological concept of history as a history of fulfillment and salvation” (*MiH*, 1).

An ideal-typical depiction of Christianity functions as a benchmark of secularization in Löwith's theory. Significantly, a “genuine” Christianity, Löwith argues, is hostile toward any assumption of meaning *in* history. Salvation, the only thing truly meaningful to Christian faith, occurs not in history but beyond it. It concerns the individual soul and is indifferent, if not inimical, to worldly constellations. Similarly, the *eschaton* does not imply the fulfillment of history, in the sense that history anticipates its goal, but essentially means the termination of it. In the face of absolute transcendence, Löwith suggests, Christianity can relativize history only to the extent of rendering it meaningless. Similarly, God's hidden plan, the history of salvation (*Heilsgeschehen*), is said to take place behind or beyond worldly history (*Weltgeschichte*), rather than be intertwined in it. This distinction is paralleled by Augustine's paradigmatic separation of the *civitas Dei* from the *civitas terrena*. Another significant aspect of Christian faith is that it is motivated by hope, which separates the Christian faith from the resolute detachment that Löwith finds in the Greek worldview, and to which he himself is inclined. Given that the hope of Christianity is a hope for a wholly transcendent salvation, it nullifies every hope in an inner-historical fulfillment.⁴⁷

The most evident line of argumentation that one can find in *Meaning in History* is that these originally separated spheres of *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschehen* that existed within Christian thought became intertwined throughout history. Finally, they became synthesized in the modern “philosophy of history” of, for instance, Auguste Comte, G. W. F. Hegel, and Karl Marx—the secular salvation histories mentioned above.⁴⁸ These philosophies of history, but also a more modest idea of “infinite progress,” represent what Löwith perceives as the modern historical consciousness. Contrary to Christianity, the modern historical consciousness projects its hope on history itself and expects a fulfillment to occur within history. Thus, Löwith argues, it consists of “degrading sacred history to the level of secular history and exulting the latter to the level of the first” (*MiH*, 59). For most of *Meaning in History*, Löwith traces the gradual conflation of sacred and profane history, beginning with the pessimistic “histories of decline” of his (near) contemporaries Oswald Spengler and Heidegger, via the optimistic philosophies of history of the nineteenth and eighteenth cen-

47. For Löwith's depiction of Christianity, see *MiH*, 3–19, 160–207.

48. *MiH*, 33–103; Löwith, “Christentum, Geschichte und Philosophie,” 435–37.

turies, until he arrives at the point where they were first drawn together, in the “theological historicism” of a twelfth-century Franciscan, Joachim of Fiore.⁴⁹

As to how this conflation occurs, it is important to note that, contrary to what one might expect from reading Blumenberg, Löwith does not phrase this in terms of the transferal of a substance from one context to another. Rather, he appears to conceptualize it as the appropriation of a theological *pattern* and the simultaneous rejection of the concomitant theological *content*. Thus the Enlightenment thinkers and philosophers of history adopted the Christian telological scheme of future fulfillment and turned it against the Christian belief in providence and transcendence. This was possible because this scheme was now interpreted as “progress,” increasingly regarded as the progressive overcoming of Christianity and other archaisms in favor of human freedom and rationality. Hence Löwith’s much-repeated statement that such modern notions of progress are “Christian by derivation and anti-Christian by consequence.”⁵⁰

In light of this, it becomes possible to define *secularization*—a term Löwith uses only sparingly—from this reconstruction of *Meaning in History*.⁵¹ That is, rather than signify the alienation of a substance, secularization should be held to denote the gradual conflation of sacred and profane history through the adoption of the theological scheme and the simultaneous rejection of the theological content. However, this assertion is not enough for Löwith to pass judgment on modern historical consciousness; on the contrary, it is only secondary to his central argument.

Second Line of Thought: The Athens-Jerusalem Antithesis

Although Löwith does not explicitly separate his second line of argumentation—which I refer to as the “Athens-Jerusalem antithesis”⁵²—it should be seen as a distinct argument. Löwith regards modernity as caught between two incompatible but nonetheless venerable traditions, namely, Christian “faith” and Greek “reason,” and denounces modern thought because it cannot decide between the two.⁵³ He states that the “modern mind has not made up

49. *MiH*, 156; Löwith, “Christentum, Geschichte und Philosophie,” 438. For Löwith’s critique of *Verfallsgeschichte*, see Martin Heidegger and *European Nihilism*, 95; and “Das Verhängnis des Fortschritts,” 19–20.

50. *MiH*, 202; see also 60, 61, 112–14, 197, 202.

51. Löwith uses the term only in an unspecific manner, e.g., *MiH*, 103, 158, 193.

52. Kroll, “Human End to History?,” 153; Löwith, *Wissen, Glaube und Skepsis*, 34.

53. *MiH*, 165, 207; Riesterer, *Karl Löwith’s View of History*, 71. This is not to say that he believes a genuine decision to be viable; see his negative appraisal of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche in *From Hegel to Nietzsche* and his rejection of decisionism in *Heidegger and European Nihilism*.

its mind whether it should be Christian or pagan. It sees with one eye of faith and one eye of reason. Hence its vision is necessarily dim in comparison with either Greek or biblical thinking.”⁵⁴

Löwith presents Christian faith and Greek rationality as the only two truthful outlooks on the world and its history. A “pure” Christianity is disinterested in worldly affairs because it focuses on transcendent salvation. The classical Greek standpoint—as Löwith conceives it, that is, in terms of a Stoic-Epicurean detachment⁵⁵—also rejects any notion of a meaningful history. However, it does this not because of a hope for salvation but because of a rigid skepticism with regard to transient affairs, inspired by a reason that solely devotes its attention to the permanence of nature and the cosmos. Since “truth” is seen to reside in permanence, history has never been a proper object for philosophy. Indeed, “to the Greek thinkers a philosophy of history would have been a contradiction in terms.”⁵⁶ The only insight that Greek thought offers in history is that it should be regarded as cyclical rather than linear; this corresponds with the motions of the heavens, but is also dictated by the classic conception of fate (*MiH*, 4–11). In addition, whereas “pure faith” is driven by both a hope for salvation and a fear of damnation, “genuine reason” rejects both hope and fear—in accordance with the Stoic credo *nec spe nec metu* (neither hope nor fear)—in a spirit of calm resignation and acceptance of fate (*MiH*, 199–204). Löwith himself favors the Greek option, and most of his work should be read in light of his attitude of resignation and the attempt to live “hopelessly, without being *de-sperans*.”⁵⁷

54. *MiH*, 207; see also 3, 19, 165.

55. Habermas, “Karl Löwith;” 83; Kroll, “Human End to History?,” 100. With regard to this affiliation with Greek thought, it has been suggested by scholars such as Odo Marquard (“Politischer Polytheismus,” 79) that, despite the overt disagreements between Blumenberg and Löwith, their positions are quite similar, since both their philosophies can be identified with Greek thought, namely, Epicureanism and Stoicism, respectively. I am inclined to disagree with the general tenet behind this reading of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate, since it downplays the substantial differences between the two scholars, which center—in my analysis—on their evaluations of modernity and history. In this respect, I think that there is something to be said for Hans-Georg Gadamer’s interpretation of Löwith’s philosophy (“Hermeneutics and Historicism,” 550–51), which is that his resort to the Greek notion of the “cosmos” serves as a negative mirror image of the things he wishes to deny rather than as a basis for a positive philosophy. From this it follows that Löwith’s “Stoicism” is more a modern philosophical reflection than an “authentically” classical position, which might also apply to Blumenberg’s purported Epicureanism. But an extensive analysis of the authenticity of Löwith’s Stoicism lies beyond the scope of this article.

56. *MiH*, 4; Löwith, *Wissen, Glaube und Skepsis*, 218–39.

57. Kroll, “Human End to History?,” 115.

The crucial inference that follows from this distinction between Athens and Jerusalem is Löwith's ultimate rejection of modernity. This inference is contingent on two features of this antithesis: both poles agree on the essential meaninglessness of history, and these two poles are incompatible. Modernity—through its constitutive principle of progress—is condemned by Löwith because it cannot choose between reason and faith. Rather, it wants to synthesize both options by rejecting a belief in transcendence while embracing hopefulness for the future. In doing so, modern thought seeks to impose meaning and hope on the realm of history, whereas the impossibility of this imposition is the one thing faith and reason agree on.⁵⁸ Thus modernity's error lies in its unawareness of the fundamental opposition between its constituent parts:

Modern man is still living on the capital of the cross *and* the circle, of Christianity and antiquity; and the intellectual history of Western man is a continuous attempt to reconcile the one with the other, revelation with reason. This attempt has never succeeded, and it cannot succeed unless by compromise. Both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard have shown that the initial decision between Christianity and paganism remains decisive; for how could one reconcile the classical theory that the world is eternal with the Christian faith in creation, the cycle with the *eschaton*, and the pagan acceptance of fate with the Christian duty of hope? (*MiH*, 165)

The question then arises how these two lines of thought, secularization-as-conflation and the Athens-Jerusalem antithesis, can be related to each other. The assertion that the modern idea of progress is the result of the conflation of sacred and secular history is analytically distinct from the assertion that modern consciousness cannot choose between the Greek and Christian modes of thought. That is, the distinction between sacred and secular history—both of which are conceived in a linear sense rather than a cyclical one—is *already a product of Christianity*. Löwith's account of secularization does not convey how modernity became caught in between Athens and Jerusalem and why it cannot choose between them; it only describes how it departed from the Christian position, namely, by conflating secular and sacred history into one notion of purposeful history. Indeed, Löwith's account of secularization-as-conflation does not provide the reasons for rejecting the modern conception of history, since he does not wish to return to the Christian position per se.

Continuing the reconstruction of Löwith's narrative, these two lines of thought can be conceived as building up to the same conclusion, although

58. *MiH*, 192; Löwith, "Christentum, Geschichte und Philosophie," 435–36, 444–45.

clearly the second argument is more important than the first. The primary objective of *Meaning in History* is the evaluation of modern historical thought in terms of its deviation from both the Christian and the Greek modes of thought. Löwith's negative judgment of modernity hinges on the idea that it discards the pure transcendence of Christianity (faith) without, however, resorting to the only other genuine alternative, namely, a Greek-philosophical appreciation of the unchanging cosmos combined with a rejection of any hope in future fulfillment (reason). Instead, modern thought—and especially the philosophy of history—supplants this originally transcendent end with a *telos* that is neither fully immanent nor transcendent but an inherently unstable amalgam of the two. The secularization-as-conflation argument illustrates how the modern idea of progress originated out of Christianity, whereas, in my interpretation, it is only the Athens-Jerusalem-antithesis argument that supplies the normative ground for rejecting this idea. Löwith's condemnation of modern historical thought as “foreign to wisdom *and* faith” serves as the ultimate point of *Meaning in History*; it is with respect to this conclusion that the description of secularization plays a secondary part (*MiH*, 192).

Reevaluation of Blumenberg's Critique

Blumenberg regards Löwith as a representative of the secularization theorem, which in turn is a species of a broader genre of *Verfallsgeschichte*.⁵⁹ However, Löwith's theory can be distinguished from such histories of decline, at least as they are portrayed by Blumenberg, namely, as crypto-theological stories of alienation or expropriation from a transcendent source. Indeed, in his *Meaning in History* as well as on other occasions, Löwith himself rejects such histories of decline as merely pessimistic versions of the Hegelian philosophy of history that he objects to.⁶⁰ Bearing in mind his own Stoicism with regard to not only hope but also fear—which is merely the other side of hope—it is not difficult to see that, in contrast to these pessimistic histories of decline, his own historical narrative is meant to be sobering, in that it renounces a yearning for either the future or the past. Löwith thus renounces not only a hope for a future fulfillment but also a longing for a golden age from which we supposedly became

59. On the connection between cultural pessimism, *Verfallsgeschichte*, and the secularization theorem, see Kroll, “Human End to History?,” 93. Löwith is depicted as a *Verfallshistoriker* by Habermas (“Karl Löwith,” 84) and Rorty (“Against Belatedness”), among others. Blumenberg suggests that Löwith belongs to the camp of “cultural pessimism” (*LMA*, 15–18).

60. *MiH*, 11–13, 199; Löwith, “Das Verhängnis des Fortschritts,” 19–20; Löwith, “Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus,” 300, 318; Barash, “Sense of History,” 81–82; Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism*, 59.

removed, which, after all, is a precondition for *Verfallsgeschichte* (*MiH*, 89–90, 180–81, 190–200).

Blumenberg's more specific critique of Löwith begins with the accusation of substantialism. Löwith's narrative does not trace the gradual alienation of a single substance but focuses on the continued existence of schemes or patterns, while the contents or substances gradually become replaced. For example, Löwith says that Comte adopted the "Catholic *system* without faith in Christ"; that is, the Christian form had been turned against its substance, analogous to how the originally Christian idea of a purposeful history was interpreted in the Enlightenment in terms of the victory over Christianity itself.⁶¹ This, according to Löwith, explains "the ambiguous *structure* of [the] leading idea of progress, which is as Christian by derivation as it is anti-Christian by implication."⁶² Occasionally, Löwith even seems inclined toward a more functionalistic account of "secularization," thus approximating Blumenberg's own argument. For instance, Löwith states that "eventually . . . the very doctrine of progress had to assume the *function* of providence, that is, to foresee and to provide for the future."⁶³ Admittedly, Löwith's theory is not entirely consistent with regard to the substance-form distinction, nor is this distinction entirely explicit—which makes his account vulnerable to wrongful accusations of substantialism.⁶⁴ But even though there are a few instances in which Löwith appears to suggest otherwise, the general sense obtained from a close reading of *Meaning in History* is that the author takes secularization to refer to a substantive discontinuity and a formal continuity, that is, as the projection of the pattern of *Heilsgeschehen* onto the material of *Weltgeschichte*.

A possible objection that one could offer in support of Blumenberg's critique is that, even if this continuity is purely formal, it can still be evaluated in terms of an expropriation and hence in terms of illegitimacy. However, a close inspection of Löwith's argument demonstrates that his attack on modernity is not based on the model of expropriation, be it of a substance or of a form. Before I return to what actually serves as the ground of Löwith's normativity, it can be conceded that *Meaning in History* does not describe the theft of a

61. *MiH*, 83 (emphasis added); see also 88.

62. *MiH*, 61 (emphasis added).

63. *MiH*, 60 (emphasis added). See also Löwith, "Das Verhängnis des Fortschritts," 26: "Durch diese ungeheuren Erfolge des wissenschaftlichen Fortschritts nimmt nun der Physiker die *Stelle* des Theologen ein: der planbare Fortschritt hat die *Funktion* der Vorsehung übernommen" (Through the tremendous successes of scientific progress, the physicist now takes the *position* of the theologian: planable progress has taken over the *function* of providence [emphasis added]).

64. For example, note the differences between *MiH*, 111, 114, and 44, on Marx.

Christian substance or form by “the world” but instead shows how secularization originated within Christianity itself—for instance, in the Franciscan spirituality of Joachim of Fiore (*MiH*, 155–59). Furthermore, the entire juridical terminology that Blumenberg introduces into the discussion—expropriation, possession, and ownership—is misapplied to Löwith’s theory. This has been noted by commentators such as Zabel, but also by Löwith himself.⁶⁵ Indeed, Löwith explicitly made this point in a review of Blumenberg’s book, written two years after the first publication of *Legitimacy*, stating that he never intended to use secularization in a juridical sense, as denoting either legitimate or illegitimate ownership of a “substance.” The presupposition of legitimate ownership is fruitless with regard to history, Löwith argues in his review, since all ideas or concepts necessarily estrange themselves from their origins in the appropriation by others. Hence all historical development is “illegitimate,” which renders this concept useless: “im übertragenen Sinn, auf historische Epochen angewandt, kann von Legitimität oder Illegitimität eigentlich keine Rede sein” (in a figurative sense, applied to historical epochs, there can be no question of legitimacy or illegitimacy).⁶⁶

Löwith’s concept of secularization was never intended as a category of guilt in a juridical sense, and in his response to Blumenberg, Löwith stated that he simply sought to discern the conditions of possibility of modern historical thought:

Denn auch unsere These [Löwith’s] besagt nicht mehr und nicht weniger, als daß alttestamentliche Prophetie und christliche Eschatologie einen Horizont von Fragestellungen und ein geistiges Klima geschaffen haben—im Hinblick auf die Geschichtsphilosophie einen Horizont der Zukunft und einer künftigen Erfüllung—, das den modern Geschichtsbegriff und den weltlichen Fortschrittsglauben *ermöglicht* hat.

[For our thesis signifies nothing more and nothing less than that Old Testament prophecy and Christian eschatology have created a horizon of question-positions and an intellectual climate—in view of the philosophy of history: a horizon of the future and future fulfillment—which has *made possible* [the existence of] the modern conception of history and belief in worldly progress.]⁶⁷

65. Löwith, “Besprechung des Buches *Die Legitimität*,” 459; Zabel, “Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung,” 229–30.

66. Löwith, “Besprechung des Buches *Die Legitimität*,” 459; *MiH*, 212–13.

67. Löwith “Besprechung des Buches *Die Legitimität*,” 455. However, Löwith only supplies vague rebuttals in his review without properly addressing Blumenberg’s actual accusations, such as those con-

This assertion suggests neither the substantialism that Blumenberg attributes to him nor the normative weight that the concept of secularization is supposed to carry according to his critics. My reconstruction of Löwith's theory supports this impression, in that it shows that his account of secularization describes how the modern idea of progress came to be through a substantive discontinuity and functional continuity with the Christian hope for a future fulfillment, rather than forming his principal normative argument.

Blumenberg's criticism is partly misdirected because he mistook Löwith's descriptive account of secularization for his normative claim. If secularization is indeed regarded as the sole carrier of normativity, namely, as a category of guilt, then it is easily perceived as an accusation of illegitimacy and expropriation. This misunderstanding remained present in the later edition of *Legitimacy*, where Blumenberg did respond to Löwith's "vehement" attack, but continued to interpret the latter as implying that "the autonomy of . . . historical consciousness as an ultimate category is *exposed as its self-deception* as soon as it is recognized, in accordance with the secularization theorem, as existing 'by the grace of' Christianity."⁶⁸ Blumenberg still reads Löwith as saying that modernity is illegitimate for no other reason than because it is secularized.

It is precisely the second line of thought—the Athens-Jerusalem antithesis that Blumenberg mostly ignores—that forms the normative basis for the conclusion of *Meaning in History*: the rejection of modern historical thought due to its failure to choose between the ideal-types of faith and reason. Thus Löwith's principal normative claim entails a rejection of modern historical consciousness, not because it would be illegitimate but simply because it is erroneous. The fateful mistake he sees in the modern consciousness is that it tries to combine two outlooks that contradict each other: faith and reason. One is intertwined with an "acosmic" hope—to use a Weberian term—whereas the other necessarily rejects hope and affirms the cosmos. The mistake of modern thought consists in rejecting the transcendent nature of religious hope while clinging to hope itself. Modern thought remains within the religious frame of thought while rejecting its vital core, the transcendent orientation point. Modern thought then mistakenly directs its hope to history, which is

cerning substantialism or expropriation. Perhaps this lack of critical-constructive contributions is why this review has received little attention by commentators on the Löwith-Blumenberg debate.

68. *LMA*, 28; emphasis added. Blumenberg did not revise his interpretation of Löwith in this respect, as this quotation demonstrates. Although he did acknowledge in his later version of *Legitimacy* that Löwith favors the Greek worldview instead of the Christian one—writing that Löwith supposedly promotes "a renaissance of cyclical cosmology"—Blumenberg continued to regard the *Meaning in History* as an example of the secularization theorem.

the one domain rejected by both faith and reason as utterly and intrinsically meaningless (*MiH*, 89–90, 189).

As mentioned, Löwith criticizes modernity for being *wrong* rather than for being illegitimate. This distinction is important, because it not only pertains to the question of whether Blumenberg was justified in his critique but also illuminates a significant characteristic of Löwith's account, namely, the supposedly "ahistorical" nature of his theory. Arguably, the juristic framework of "(il)legitimacy" that Blumenberg introduces refers to states of affairs that can only be called "historical."⁶⁹ It refers to rightful or unrightful ownership and to legitimate transferal or illegitimate expropriation of the "possession" in question, that is, to historical states or developments.⁷⁰ This is, however, not what Löwith—who is described as an antihistoricist—intends to do, according to my reading; to avoid self-contradiction, he needs to avoid the impression that he criticizes modern historical consciousness on the basis of a norm that is itself historical. It is for that reason that he requires an ahistorical benchmark—the "faith-reason antithesis"—as a basis for critique. One can imagine that he thus seeks to escape the criticism leveled at him several times, namely, that he remains somehow indebted to the historical consciousness that he seeks to reject.⁷¹ This reading of Löwith's theory fits well with the objection that he raised in some of his minor writings against Hans-Georg Gadamer and historicism in general, which is that "truth" is independent of its historical expression.⁷² In that sense, it can be surmised that, to Löwith, modernity is not illegitimate but simply erroneous—an ahistorical, logical category. It appears that Blumenberg did not recognize this tenet of Löwith's theory, perhaps due to the ambiguous nature of *Meaning in History*. Instead, Löwith is portrayed as a simple *Verfallshistoriker*, and most commentators apparently did not see a reason to look behind the straw man that they were presented with.

Three things need to be addressed before I turn to what the consequences are of this rebuttal for the resulting appraisal of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate. First, the aforementioned confusions and misinterpretations have left

69. Incidentally, this notion that "legitimacy" is a category that refers to historical continuity can be found in Schmitt's critique of Blumenberg, in *Political Theology II*, 116–20.

70. In addition, the more "biological" metaphor of (il)legitimate *offspring*—modernity as a "bastard child" of Christianity—also relies on such a historical mode of thought.

71. Habermas, "Karl Löwith," 86; Riesterer, *Karl Löwith's View of History*, 78. See also Elst, *Bevrijding van de holbewoner*, 139–40, who deals with this question in more detail.

72. Löwith, "Die Dynamik der Geschichte und der Historismus." On the Gadamer-Löwith debate, which centered on the viability of Löwith's positive "antihistoricism," see Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Historicism"; and Löwith, "Vermittlung und Unmittelbarkeit," 215–18.

their mark on the debate, and part of this misunderstanding can be reduced to confusion over form and substance. That is, since Blumenberg associated secularization solely with substantialism, he could only conceive it in terms of a substantive continuity, thus ignoring the fact that secularization could also be held to imply a formal continuity and a substantive discontinuity, as one actually finds in Löwith's account.⁷³ But Löwith in turn failed to see that Blumenberg wielded a purely substantialistic definition of secularization, which explains why—instead of attacking this definition and elaborating on his own definition that *would* allow for substantive discontinuity—he merely asked in his review of *Legitimacy*, rather naively, what secularization could be other than the immanentization of something originally transcendent.⁷⁴

Second, even though Löwith steers clear of the dubious assumptions of the secularization theorem, his own argument is not beyond reproach. A critique of his account of secularization, however, does not endanger his normative claim, because the former only describes how the modern idea of progress came to be, not why it should be rejected. If it can indeed be proved that modern progress originated independently from Christianity, as Blumenberg intends, then this would arguably matter little to Löwith's normative claim because it rests on philosophical a prioris, which—although they evidently remain disputable—are immune to easy refutations.

Third, however, regardless of Blumenberg's inability to refute Löwith's theory, this does not imply that the connection between Löwith and the *Verfallsgeschichten* of the secularization theorem is simply chimerical. That is, although Löwith's own theory cannot be reduced to a quasi-theological narrative of alienation from paradise, it is not difficult to see why his theory—or rather, the formula that others extracted from it—lends itself for such appropriations. Given the dual definition of *Schuld*, secularization cannot be seen to function as a category of guilt in Löwith's account, even though he does argue for a certain “indebtedness” in a way that sometimes approximates the readings of his critics.⁷⁵ And even if it is acknowledged, in line with my reconstruction, that this indication of indebtedness is not the principal normative basis for Löwith's critique of modernity, it must still be conceded that it is not purely “neutral,” either. On occasion one can find in *Meaning in History*—especially in the chapter on Marx—a tendency to revel in the observation that

73. *MiH*, 113–14, 155–56, 197; Löwith, “Besprechung des Buches *Die Legitimität*,” 456.

74. Löwith, “Besprechung des Buches *Die Legitimität*,” 456.

75. In this observation I am “indebted” to an anonymous reviewer, who remarked that even though the “guilt” accusation has been refuted, there remains an element of “indebtedness” in Löwith's theory that is not completely neutral in a normative sense.

something seemingly anti-Christian has remained indebted to Christianity all along, although the implication of this assertion remains unclear.⁷⁶

Agreements and Disagreements

To understand how the Löwith-Blumenberg debate should be interpreted if it is indeed not a question of a decisive refutation of one theory by another, I turn to those scholars who *have* noticed the discrepancy between Löwith's own account and Blumenberg's portrayal of him. Evidently, one's appraisal of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate in general depends on one's interpretation of Löwith's account and concomitantly on how one reads Blumenberg's criticism. Even if one accepts the assumption that Blumenberg misrepresents Löwith, one could still draw different conclusions from it. In this respect, I show that because aforementioned scholars ignore the central claim of Löwith's narrative, they display a tendency of reconciling the positions of Blumenberg and Löwith, whereas from my analysis there emerges a picture of a fundamental divide between the two views.

Several scholars who have proved themselves more observant as to certain discrepancies between Blumenberg's depiction and Löwith's own account agree that the former's main criticism, substantialism, is unjustified. It has been acknowledged by Liebsch that, contrary to Blumenberg's claims, one cannot find a substantialist definition of secularization in Löwith, and Wetz agrees that Löwith "begreift *mitnichten* die neuzeitliche Geschichtsphilosophie als eine bloße Umformung der heilsgeschichtlichen Substanz des Mittelalters" (*by no means* understand[s] the modern philosophy of history as a mere transformation of the salvation-historical substance of the Middle Ages), and concurs that he was focused on the conditions of possibility of modern thought.⁷⁷ In this vein, scholars such as Babík note that Löwith's account of secularization should be seen more in terms of a formal than a substantive continuity. Indeed, "[Löwith] does not contend that the transcendental *civitas Dei* made it across the epochal break, only that the *eschaton* did: the habit of comprehending history in terms of an eschatological structure."⁷⁸

It appears that most commentators who criticize Blumenberg's portrayal of Löwith do so to argue for some sort of reconciliation between the two positions. This is possible if one focuses solely on Löwith's descriptive account of secularization, given that it indeed asserts a substantive discontinuity and a formal continuity between Christianity and modernity, similar to Blumenberg's

76. Ruh, *Säkularisierung als Interpretationskategorie*, 242–45.

77. Liebsch, *Verzeitlichte Welt*, 70–71; Wetz, *Hans Blumenberg*, 47 (emphasis added).

78. Babík, "Nazism as a Secular Religion," 393.

own theory. Babík, Kroll, and Odo Marquard, for instance, point out that both accounts narrate how the modern idea of progress relates to Christian eschatological thought, either in terms of a projection of the scheme of *Heilsgeschehen* onto *Weltgeschichte* or as the formulation of a modern answer to a medieval problem.⁷⁹ With regard to Löwith's notion of Christianity providing the precondition for modernity, Kroll states that "to say that Biblical eschatology opened a new perspective is reconcilable with claims stopping short of positing a straightforward genetic derivation [substantialism]; reconcilable, even, with Blumenberg's theory of a functional substitution of eschatology by 'progress.'" ⁸⁰ To this, one could add that Löwith himself even suggests a functional substitution in the aforementioned remarks that "man will seek to *replace* providence" or that "progress had to assume the *function* of providence."⁸¹

The reconcilability between Löwith's and Blumenberg's accounts extends to what we might distinguish as a normative level, especially in their shared aversion to the "philosophy of history." Both Löwith and Blumenberg object to the exultation of the idea of "progress" to the totality of history, visible in philosophies of history in which a secular "salvation" is expected to occur within history.⁸² Pippin, for instance, states that Blumenberg "agrees with a good deal" of what Löwith argues: "For all his criticism, he agrees that the modern view of progress as the 'significance' of history as a whole is a remnant of sorts of the premodern tradition, and is an inappropriate, even illegitimate one, one that cannot trace its parentage to modernity itself."⁸³ This aversion to immanentized eschatology—which contains a violent potential toward everything that obstructs the future fulfillment—points to a shared fear of totalitarianism, as Jeffrey Barash suggests, but also to a joint aversion to Christianity, as Kroll argues.⁸⁴ Indeed, both Löwith's and Blumenberg's accounts might be construed as attempts to "overcome" a residue of Christianity: the hopeful expectation of salvation, either within or without history.⁸⁵

Valuable points are made by aforementioned commentators, especially insofar as they demonstrate that Löwith's and Blumenberg's narratives can potentially be reconciled on a descriptive level, and that Löwith's account has not been "disproved" as univocally as Blumenberg's followers seem to believe.

79. Kroll, "Human End to History?," 111; Babík, "Nazism as a Secular Religion," 393; Marquard, *Schwierigkeiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie*, 17.

80. Kroll, "Human End to History?," 111.

81. *MiH*, 111, 60 respectively (emphasis added).

82. Liebsch, *Verzeitlichte Welt*, 70–71n162; Kroll, "Human End to History?," 157; Pippin, "Blumenberg and the Modernity Problem," 541; Ifergan, "Cutting to the Chase," 168.

83. Pippin, "Blumenberg and the Modernity Problem," 541.

84. Barash, "Sense of History," 70; Kroll, "Human End to History?," 157.

85. Marquard, "Politischer Polytheismus," 79.

However, these mitigations appear to occur in light of a regrettable tendency, which is a failure to do full justice to the normative core of Löwith's standpoint—namely, the latter's decisive rejection of modernity due to its erroneous nature in light of faith and reason. They thereby neglect the impossibility of reconciling Löwith and Blumenberg on a deeper, normative level, and subsequently neglect the substantial differences between the two. Moreover, these attempts at reconciliation usually mean that one position is curtailed to fall in line with the other. It is implied, especially by Kroll and Buch, that while Löwith can be read in line with Blumenberg, the latter's argument should be seen as a superior version of the former's, not least because of the weak points in *Meaning in History* that Blumenberg's critique has uncovered.⁸⁶ Hence, among these scholars there is, with few reservations, an inclination to agree with the gist of Blumenberg's criticism, combined with a readiness to evaluate Löwith's standpoint favorably only when and insofar as it can be seen as compatible with the former's.⁸⁷

My reconstruction of Löwith's account, however, supports a different appraisal of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate. Although there are similarities on a descriptive level, Löwith's and Blumenberg's theories diverge significantly on a normative level. This places the debate in a different light: it shows that it does not boil down to a definite refutation of an inferior theory by a superior one, nor, for that matter, is it merely a concocted disagreement that conceals deeper similarities between the two. Rather, the debate should be seen as a conflict between two fundamentally incompatible normative standpoints. The fact that both Löwith and Blumenberg criticize the philosophy of history should thus be considered in view of the different grounds from which they mount this criticism: respectively, a condemnation of "historical consciousness" in general or a defense of modernity and a modest idea of progress.

In sum: if substantialism, expropriation, or a preoccupation with (il)legitimacy cannot be found in Löwith's theory, it can be conceded that he is not a

86. Buch, "Umbuchung," 353–56. Kroll argues that Löwith's and Blumenberg's stories are not so dissimilar once they are compared with Schmitt ("Human End to History?," 154, 169, 241), and in arguing this case, he sometimes underemphasizes the differences between Löwith and Blumenberg over against Schmitt, who is portrayed as the "real" adversary of both (17–20, 158, 237). Whether or not this assertion—that the difference between Schmitt and Löwith/Blumenberg is greater or deeper than the difference between Löwith and Blumenberg—is true, Kroll appears to be slightly inconsistent in his reading of Löwith. Whereas at first he is critical of Blumenberg's interpretation of Löwith, later he appears to accept the former's substantialist-juridical reading (154, 169, 241) without explicit reservations. In both cases, however, one receives the impression that Löwith's and Blumenberg's theories are very much alike but that Blumenberg's is simply a superior version of a similar argument (17, 154–57).

87. See, e.g., Pippin, "Blumenberg and the Modernity Problem"; Buch, "Umbuchung"; Kroll, "Human End to History?" Incidentally, Marquard appears to do the opposite and tries to write Blumenberg in line with Löwith (*Schwierigkeiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie*, 15–18).

secularization theorist, even when one focuses solely on his first claim, concerning secularization, as most scholars do. However, this does not imply that the opposition between the two is merely apparent. The underlying difference between them only comes into view clearly when accounting for Löwith's second claim, the Athens-Jerusalem antithesis, which provides the normative ground for the central point of *Meaning in History*: the critique of modernity's indecisiveness vis-à-vis faith and pure reason. While Löwith attempts to reject any kind of historical thought—and, by implication, modernity itself—and resorts to the “ahistorical,” ideal-typical positions of faith and reason, Blumenberg presupposes his own defense of modernity. He defends a modest idea of historical progress and, with it, the historical realm as the habitus of humankind, in opposition to any attempt at holding the modern age up to metahistorical standards.

Conclusion

Blumenberg's critique of the secularization theorem falters when it is directed at Löwith, provided that the latter's descriptive account of secularization presupposes only a formal continuity in the conflation of sacred and profane history. The most significant error in the commonly accepted view, however, is that Löwith's descriptive account of secularization is confused with his normative claim. Failing to distinguish these two arguments, Blumenberg reduces *Meaning in History* to the formula “Modernity is illegitimate because it is secularized.” I have argued instead that secularization does not function as a vehicle of guilt in Löwith's theory, even though the suggestion of indebtedness survives. The true basis for his normativity lies elsewhere, namely, in his faith-reason antithesis. In this respect, I contend that Löwith's presupposition of two idealized, ahistorical norms may very well be contestable, but that it falls beyond the reach of Blumenberg's attempt at refutation.

My reconstruction of the debate points to a fundamental divide between the two scholars. While Blumenberg argues in defense of modernity against transcendence, Löwith argues against human hubris and in favor of a sense of proportionality in relation to a greater whole, the cosmos. Both Löwith and Blumenberg identify modernity as a Promethean age, marked by a revolt against transcendence, be it against the cosmos or against the divine.⁸⁸ Löwith condemns this move as a turning away from any sense of measurement, causing humanity to be adrift in a meaningless void—“perpetually falling . . . in all

88. On the “Promethean” character of modernity, see Löwith, “Das Verhängnis des Fortschritts,” 26–29; and Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*. On the latter, see Campbell, “Work on Reason,” 63.

directions,” as Friedrich Nietzsche wrote—that it calls history.⁸⁹ Blumenberg, on the other hand, celebrates this revolt. Not only does he defend modernity against the attacks of its angry predecessor, theology, or against the crypto-theology of the secularization theorem, but his *Legitimacy* and his other works also display his endeavor to vindicate humanity’s attempt at securing a place for itself in opposition to what he perceives as the threat of the “Absolute,” in the form of either nature or transcendence. Arguably, it is this distinction between an anti-Promethean rejection and a Promethean defense of history that truly separates Löwith from Blumenberg, and that has determined their debate underneath their mutual misunderstandings and covert similarities. Fundamentally, Blumenberg’s account can be regarded as a defense not only of modernity but of novelty in general, of the right to start anew. Löwith’s theory is a critique of any such attempts as hubris, as the convolution of those truths that might be ahistorical but which he still identifies with their age-old articulations. It is only in this general sense that the common portrayal of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate is correct: a struggle between the new and the old. This admission also explains why Löwith came to be identified—albeit unjustly—with conservative, crypto-theological *Verfallsgeschichten* in the first place.

The contemporary postsecularism discourse is still grappling with those subjects that, as I have shown, were left up for debate by Löwith and Blumenberg. Peter Eli Gordon and Jonathan Skolnik have noted that “Blumenberg is often celebrated as the great modernist, the champion of humanism and self-assertion, but it is Löwith, who asserted that we are never beyond religion, who arguably most anticipates the current religious revival.”⁹⁰ If this is indeed the case, then a reevaluation of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate along the lines that I have sketched is especially relevant for the current discourse. Not only does it confirm postsecularism’s suggestion that the relation between modernity and religion cannot be reduced to a simple discontinuity, as both scholars speculate, but it also indicates that a thesis along Löwithian lines might still be viable for those scholars in the field of postsecularism, such as Gianni Vattimo, who wish to explore the purported continuity between Christianity and modernity.⁹¹ Perhaps more important, it demonstrates that any conceptualization of this relation will prove highly contestable—especially if it is informed by incompatible normative positions.

89. Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 94.

90. Gordon and Skolnik, “Editor’s Introduction,” 6.

91. Harris, “Gianni Vattimo’s Theory of Secularisation.”

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