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Weir, Todd Hagman

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Introduction: Comparing Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Culture Wars

Todd H. Weir

University of Groningen, Netherlands

This special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary History* on ‘Europe’s interwar *Kulturkampf*’ explores the religious dimensions of the deep conflicts that characterized the interbellum. The heightened sense of contingency, the partisan violence, and the political polarization have led observers to call this period an ‘age of anxiety’, an ‘age of catastrophe’, ‘a second thirty years war’, even a ‘world civil war of ideologies’.¹ Introducing the term ‘culture war’ into this crowded field of catchphrases is meant as a useful provocation. It inserts religion into the analysis of the clash of modern worldviews, which have hitherto been viewed largely from the perspective of political ideology. Furthermore, it prompts comparisons with other ‘culture wars’, in particular the nineteenth-century clashes over the public role of the Catholic Church, during which the term *Kulturkampf* was originally coined. The aim of this article is to sketch out the dimensions of such a comparison, drawing on some of the key findings of the contributors to this special issue. Finally, it asks what bearing these investigations of the interwar *Kulturkampf* could have on our understanding of the course of twentieth-century European history as a whole.

The application of the term ‘culture war’ to the interwar period requires a clarification of where and how it has been used descriptively and analytically in the past. Only then can valid comparisons be undertaken. To begin with, attention must be given to its valence in the interbellum, when it was nearly always used as ‘*Kulturkampf*’ with direct reference to the campaign to suppress the Catholic

1 E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London 1994); I. Kershaw, ‘Europe’s Second Thirty Years War’, *History Today*, 55 (2005) 10–17; E. Nolte, T. Nipperdey, A. Doering-Manteuffel and H.-U. Thamer (eds), *Weltbürgerkrieg der Ideologien: Antworten an Ernst Nolte: Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag* (Berlin 1993); H.A. Winkler, *The Age of Catastrophe: A History of the West 1914–1945* (New Haven, CT 2015).

Corresponding author:

Todd H. Weir, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Groningen, Oude Boteringestraat 38, 9712 GK Groningen, Netherlands.

Email: t.h.weir@rug.nl

Church waged by the new German state with the parliamentary support of liberals between 1871 and 1878. Not surprisingly, it appears most often in German sources. During the formulation of the Weimar Constitution, for example, Catholic and Protestant leaders warned that if the socialists or communists came to power, the country might return to the arbitrary violation of church rights by a hostile state.² In 1928 a German Jesuit raised the spectre of a 'worldwide Kulturkampf', in which anti-Christianity would become an aspect of a global struggle between states.³ Three years later, the Bavarian minister of culture proposed giving a misleading name to an emergency decree meant to suppress the anticlerical actions of German freethinkers, so that it would not appear as a 'pure Kulturkampf law', implying ironically that atheists had become a religious community targeted by the state.⁴ When used in other national contexts, the German term was generally retained. Thus, a French observer compared Hitler's struggle against the Catholic Church in 1936 to Bismarck's earlier efforts, concluding that 'le nouveau Kulturkampf' was being waged with great amplitude and perfidiousness.⁵ These contemporary examples illustrate the limited scope of interwar usage, which was tied to a specific historical memory. It was most frequently invoked to warn of the re-emergence of a similar constellation of state and political parties engaging in anti-Catholic persecution, or, more rarely, to describe state persecution of other religious groups and even secularists.

The term Kulturkampf was only fully liberated from the historical context of its coinage in the 1990s, when it was translated and applied to contemporary US political life.⁶ Commentators from the right and left found 'culture wars' a congenial term for describing the shift in US politics that had taken place since the 1960s, whereby the divide between Republicans and Democrats increasingly appeared to be rooted in a fundamental clash of two sets of cultural values. In the twenty-first century, the US culture wars have been given a geographical twist, with the division between 'blue states', where the majority is thought to support a secular-liberal order, and the 'red states', thought to be dominated by conservative adherents of traditional Christianity.

The US 'culture wars' constituted part of the background conversation that informed a recent generation of historians, who, armed with new questions and cultural historical methods for investigating religion, extended Bismarck's Kulturkampf from an isolated to a signature event of nineteenth-century Europe. Whereas many social historians had previously interpreted the Kulturkampf within a modernization framework and thereby implicitly taken the side of the modernizing liberals against 'reactionary' Catholicism, the new histories

2 L. Richter, *Kirche und Schule in den Beratungen der Weimarer Nationalversammlung* (Düsseldorf 1996) in particular 555; D.J. Schneider, 'Kirchliche Zeitlage', *Kirchliches Jahrbuch für die evangelischen Landeskirchen Deutschlands* (1920), 302–420, 410.

3 *Bericht über den Katholikentag 1928* (Paderborn 1928), 206, 208.

4 Bundesarchiv Berlin, R 1501/126031, 46; R 1501/20631, vol. 6, 153.

5 F. Chretien, 'Le nouveau Kulturkampf', *Le Correspondent* (1936), 540–4.

6 J.D. Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York, NY 1991), xii.

neutralized the term 'culture war' and used it to designate the organization of European politics into two cultures that were locked in a long-term conflict. In their edited volume of 2003, Christopher Clark and Wolfgang Kaiser defined the culture wars as 'secular-Catholic' conflicts, which pitted the Catholic Church against a broad front of opponents, most of whom were united in support of secularizing the state and particularly public education.⁷ These included atheist republicans, but also Jewish and Christian liberals who promoted secularization of the state as a way of furthering the purification of their own religion, which they held to be compatible with modern science.⁸

These cultural-historical studies of the interactions of religion and politics in the nineteenth-century provide a template for the study of religion in the 'age of extremes'. They also provide a good basis for comparison. The first question that comparison should address is whether the First World War really marked a rupture in European religious politics. In other words, does it make sense to speak of a *second* European culture war, or was this merely a continuation of nineteenth-century struggles over religion that has been overlooked by historians who have simply used the conventional caesura of the First World War to end their studies? There was much continuity in rhetoric and politics to be sure, however, the parameters of religious conflict changed significantly after 1918. Rather than being principally secular-Catholic, these were secularist-religious conflicts. In other words, the Catholic Church no longer featured as the chief target; instead the fate of religion as whole appeared to be at stake. By 1929 it became clear to international observers that the Soviet Union intended to destroy its churches and remove religion from public sphere. The antireligious rather than anticlerical thrust of much of the interwar secularism contributed to acts of cross-Christian solidarity unheard of in nineteenth century. When Pope Pius XI declared a 'crusade of prayer' against the Bolshevik persecution of the Christians of Russia in February 1930, Protestant and Orthodox leaders applauded. Despite official Vatican opposition, some Catholic priests took part in the ecumenical efforts led by Protestant and Orthodox clergy and laymen to stem the Bolshevik tide.⁹

The political underpinnings of anticlericalism had also changed since 1914. The liberal and republican parties that had once appeared as the chief opponents of state religion were greatly weakened. The revolutionary socialists, anarchists and communists, who became the main agents of anticlerical agitation after 1918, are

7 C. Clark and W. Kaiser (eds), *Culture Wars: Secular-Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge 2003), 8. In their introductory essay, the editors credit Hunter's 'mistranslation' of the German *Kulturkampf* as having enabled the term 'culture wars' to achieve a 'far more encompassing application than the term *Kulturkampf* would bear'.

8 L. Leff, *Sacred Bonds of Solidarity the Rise of Jewish Internationalism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA 2006), 9–10; M. Borutta, *Antikatholizismus: Deutschland und Italien im Zeitalter der europäischen Kulturkämpfe* (Göttingen 2010); A. Joskowicz, *The Modernity of Others: Jewish Anti-Catholicism in Germany and France* (Stanford, CA 2014); T. Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession* (New York, NY 2014).

9 S. Roulin, *Un credo anticommuniste; la commission Pro Deo de l'Entente internationale anticommuniste, ou la dimension religieuse d'un combat politique: 1924–1945* (Lausanne 2010); L. Pettinaroli, 'La politique russe du Saint-Siège (1905–1939)', PhD thesis, Université Lyon 2 (2008), 1049–51.

better identified as secularist rather than secular. This difference should be underlined, as it tends to be lost in much current scholarship, which utilizes the term secularism both for governmental policies of church-state separation and for an immanent, naturalistic and anticlerical worldview.¹⁰ Studies rooted in nineteenth-century history tend to treat these as two sides of the same coin, based on the assumption that both were essential aspects of liberalism. Yet, these two definitions need to be disentangled if we are to understand the dynamics of twentieth-century religion and politics. Liberal secular states were often at odds with the advocates of radical secularism, such as communists and socialists. And many religious leaders considered worldview secularism (and not state separation) to be the great spiritual trial of the day. In 1925, Pope Pius XI declared secularism 'the plague which now infects society'.¹¹ Upon the German invasion of his native Netherlands in 1940, Europe's leading ecumenical spokesman Willem Visser't Hooft spoke of the Christian struggle with secularism as 'a war behind the war' that had begun 'long before September 1939 and will certainly go on long after an armistice has been concluded'.¹² Following such usage, this article will henceforth employ secularism to refer solely to anticlericalism and advocacy of secular worldviews.

Having established that the differences warrant separating interwar religious conflicts from their nineteenth-century antecedents, we may turn to the great discrepancy in the scholarly treatment of the two periods. Recent transnational studies of nineteenth-century culture wars have helped consolidate the scholarship of the past three decades into the central role of religious conflict in liberalism, gender norms, colonialism, and nationalism.¹³ By contrast, there have been no synthetic accounts of the history of religious conflict in the twentieth century, let alone in the interbellum, that go beyond a single, and generally the Catholic, church.¹⁴

One reason for the lack of systematic investigation of interwar secularist-religious conflicts lies in the extremely uneven way that such conflicts unfolded across the continent. Some historians have treated the unprecedented levels of anticlerical violence in Spain and the Soviet Union as an exceptional phenomenon at the margins of Europe, and pointed instead to an amelioration of many of the confessional and church-state antagonisms of the nineteenth century in the rest

10 T. Weir, 'Germany and the New Global History of Secularism: Questioning the Postcolonial Genealogy', *The Germanic Review*, 90 (2015) 6–20; J. Blankholm, 'The Political Advantages of a Polysemous Secular', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 53 (2014), 775–90.

11 Quas Primas, quoted in E. Fattorini, *Hitler, Mussolini and the Vatican: Pope Pius XI and the Speech that was Never Made* (Cambridge 2011) in particular 43.

12 J.A. Zeilstra, 'European Unity in Ecumenical Thinking, 1937–1948', PhD thesis, Utrecht University (1995) in particular 80.

13 In addition to the works mentioned in footnote 3, see also: W. Becker, 'Der Kulturkampf als europäisches und deutsches Phänomen', *Historisches Jahrbuch*, 101 (1981) 422–46; C. Clark and W. Kaiser (eds), *Culture Wars: Secular-Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge 2003); Borutta, *Antikatholizismus*; T. Verhoeven, *Transatlantic Anti-Catholicism: France and the United States in the Nineteenth century* (New York, NY 2010); J. Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich 2011); L. Dittrich, *Antiklerikalismus in Europa Öffentlichkeit und Säkularisierung in Frankreich, Spanien und Deutschland (1848–1914)* (Göttingen 2014).

14 P. Chenaux, *L'église catholique et le communisme en Europe (1917–1989) de Lénine à Jean-Paul II* (Paris 2009); J.F. Pollard, *The Papacy in the Age of Totalitarianism, 1914–1958* (Oxford 2014).

of Europe.¹⁵ Yet even in the newly formed Irish Free State, where the absence of a socialist, let alone a communist movement meant that the local ingredients for a culture war were missing, the bishops nonetheless fed the parishioners on an unrelenting diet of horror stories about Mexico, Russia and Spain, about communism and secularism.¹⁶ The murder of priests in the revolutionary periphery allowed priests elsewhere to imagine themselves to be living through the beginning of a new Diocletian age, or to draw comparisons between the Red Army and the Turks at the gates of Vienna.¹⁷

In every country of interwar Europe, press and radio transmitted information about events in faraway places. This information was interpreted and emotionalized in meetings held by churches and political parties, and it was poured into semantic constructions that were translated and shared across national boundaries. Activists collected in new international leagues dedicated to the battle. All of this contributed to the widespread perception that Europe, and extending beyond it, the whole of Christendom, was a unified space of religious struggle.

Analysing the transnational dimension of the European culture wars requires more than following the international reception of atrocities committed in Spain and Russia. Rather, linkages must be sought between countries and regions with quite different arrangements of forces. Within Europe, there were countries that experienced high levels of anticlerical violence as part of revolutionary transformations and those, such as Britain or Ireland, that provided the Christian churches a relatively secure home. In between these extremes were countries, such as Germany, Austria or Italy, that experienced such high levels of political polarization and paramilitary violence that one can speak of 'latent civil wars'.¹⁸ In such volatile public climates, religious issues were often central to fanning the flames of political passion.

Having made an initial case for applying the term culture war to interwar Europe, the remainder of this article sketches out some of the key themes and research questions animating current scholarship. These are: the relationship of revolution and anticlerical violence, the cultural impact of the Bolshevik revolution and international communism, the organization of transnational alliances, the semantics of religious war, as well as the transformation of the culture war through the intervention into it of National Socialism.

The interbellum provided searing examples of sustained anticlerical violence. This was a marked departure from nineteenth-century anticlericalism, which, with the exception of a few isolated incidents, such as the burning of church buildings in Barcelona 'Setmana Tràgica' in 1909, was largely of a rhetorical nature.¹⁹

15 M. Conway, 'The Christian Churches and Politics in Europe, 1914–1939', in H. McLeod (ed.), *Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 9 (Cambridge 2006), 169–72.

16 Fearghal McGarry's contribution to the Belfast JCH symposium has now appeared as F. McGarry, 'Catholicism and Fascism in Interwar Ireland', in J. Nelis and A. Morelli (eds), *Catholicism and Fascism in Europe 1918–1945* (Hildesheim 2015), 101–16.

17 'Die Kirche gegen den Bolschewismus', *Der Ring* (23 February 1930), 129.

18 D. Blasius, *Weimars Ende: Bürgerkrieg und Politik, 1930–1933* (Göttingen 2005).

19 L. Dittrich, *Antiklerikalismus als europäisches Phänomen: Protest und Öffentlichkeit in Frankreich, Spanien und Deutschland (1850–1914)* (Göttingen 2015).

The agents of interwar violence were seldom liberals. Generally, they were leftist revolutionaries in control of, or shielded by, the state. By 1939, Mexico and the Soviet Union had each experienced several waves of state-initiated anticlerical violence. In Mexico, the lay supporters of the Catholic Church, the Cristeros, bore the brunt of the violence, while in the Soviet Union tens of thousands of clergy, initially Orthodox, but later of other faiths, were exiled or killed. In Spain, Franco's assault on the Republican government in June 1936 precipitated a brief but massive slaughter of Catholic priests in the Republican-held territories.²⁰

Despite significant attention to the place of religion in each revolution, there has been little effort made to compare them and to attempt a general explanation of the relationship of anticlerical violence to twentieth century revolutions. In the first article of this special issue, *Julio de la Cueva Merino* examines the Mexican, Soviet and Spanish cases and their literatures, and draws our attention to several key factors that help explain anticlerical violence.

First, anticlericalism proved to be a standard feature of revolutionary culture. A settling of accounts with the state churches lay within the horizon of expectation of what socialist revolution (as opposed to non-violent parliamentary reform) would bring. This was expressed by indignation of a female Republican at the lack of resolve of an antifascist committee during the Spanish Civil War: 'Well, what does revolution mean? Didn't we agree that we had to kill all of [the priests]?'²¹

Second, war created conditions for religious violence. Historians have drawn connections between the existential threat to the national community engendered by hostilities at the front line and violence in the rear directed at political enemies (as in *la Terreur* of the French Revolution) or at perceived national, ethnic or racial enemies (as in the many examples of modern genocide).²² Particularly in the case of the Spanish Civil War, war anxiety also correlated to violence against a purported clerical 'fifth column'.

A third contributing factor to anticlerical violence was the desire of many leftists to quickly eliminate the remaining structures of the Christian state. Despite the overall tendency towards separation, in nearly all European countries the state churches had retained key privileges, particularly in education, until to the end of the First World War. With the elevation of the secular nationalist republic to the international norm for modern states after 1918, many Europeans came to see these arrangements as an obstacle to progress.²³ One of the only revolutionary acts of a socialist government official during the German revolution of 1918 was the soon-to-be-reversed declaration of a radical separation of church and state in Prussia by the freethinking Independent Socialist Adolph Hoffmann. Yet not all revolutions

20 On Spain, J. de la Cueva and F. Montero (eds), *La secularización conflictiva: España (1898–1931)* (Madrid 2007); on Mexico: M. Butler (ed.), *Faith and Impiety in Revolutionary Mexico*; (New York, NY 2007); on the USSR: D. Peris, *Storming the Heavens: the Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca, NY 1998).

21 Cited in de la Cueva's article in this issue.

22 E.D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton, NJ 2003).

23 A.J. Steinhoff, 'Christianity and the Creation of Germany', in S. Gilley and B. Stanley (eds), *Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 8 (Cambridge 2006), 282–300.

led to the removal of churches from public power. The Irish Revolution brought with it the clericalization of broad realms of public life. Worthy of further study are the acts of violence against secularists, which accompanied the successful counter-revolutions in Hungary in 1919, Germany in 1933, and Spain in 1939.

De la Cueva's overview makes clear that the historiographical literatures of the Spanish and Soviet revolutions have developed different methods and sets of research questions. This is particularly true of investigations of the place of religion in revolutionary culture. Whereas investigations have shown the rich traditions of popular anticlericalism in Spain, the reigning scholarly opinion in Soviet history is that the Bolshevik regime's commitment to secularism as a cultural project was weak – this despite the fact that the most sustained effort to eradicate religion in world history took place there between 1929 and 1938. Historian Daniel Peris has argued that there was little substance behind the vastly inflated membership rolls and bombastic propaganda of the League of the Militant Godless. Founded in 1925 to lead the antireligious front, this was a construction of the state with little real impact.²⁴ The lack of commitment to secularism was revealed following the German invasion of July 1941, when Stalin disbanded the League and gave the Orthodox Church a new lease on life and special role to play in wartime nationalism. Most historians of Soviet secularism hence treat the interwar cultural work of the League of the Godless as chimerical and focus instead on the promotion of 'scientific atheism' under Khrushchev as the more serious effort by the Soviet state to create a secularist culture.²⁵

Given the abrupt reversals of Soviet religious policy in the twentieth century, anthropologist Catherine Wanner has argued that anti-religion was merely one tool in the Soviet repertoire, and that secularization should best be viewed as 'process of intensifying and relaxing religious expression' driven by the interests of state power in suppressing or harnessing the resources of traditional religion to further its constructions of the sacred state.²⁶ This finding fits with the main thrust of the aforementioned postcolonial and political science literature, which treats secularism as an aspect of statecraft. In his article, *Igor Polianski* reveals how the Soviet state, through its antireligious campaigns of the 1920s, had a tremendous galvanizing effect in one scientific field: medicine. At the same time, however, Polianski demonstrates the discursive shifts in medicine were not arbitrary, but rather embedded in a variety of sources that stretched back to the nineteenth century. This raises the question of whether secularist culture was really as marginal to Bolshevik culture as Wanner and others have suggested. Perhaps they have been too quick to accept the Bolshevik party line that religion was epiphenomenal to the

24 Peris, *Storming the Heavens*; D. Peris, 'The 1929 Congress of the Godless', *Soviet Studies*, 43 (1991), 711.

25 S.A. Smith, 'Introduction', in: P. Betts and S.A. Smith (eds), *Science, Religion and Communism in Cold War Europe* (London 2016), 1–31; V. Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton, NJ 2018).

26 C. Wanner (ed.), *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine* (New York 2012), 8.

material driving forces of history. Polianski's article identifies the need to give a closer look at the roots of secularist culture in early Bolshevism. After all, Lenin was aware of its power and devoted his most serious philosophical work *Empirio-Criticism* to the refutation of monistic theories propagated by some of his colleagues.²⁷

Recent studies have drawn attention to the importance of international networks, and the exchange of images and texts across national borders during the nineteenth century Kulturkampf.²⁸ In the interbellum the number of transnational actors multiplied and their infrastructures deepened. Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests transported the lessons of Spain, Mexico, and Russia to the rest of Europe. In 1927, for example, the Bishop of Durango travelled to Germany and France, giving speeches on the horrors being visited upon the church in Mexico and gathering donations for his diocese. These events had local repercussions. In the wake of the bishop's visit, a leading German church apologist, Konrad Algermissen, proposed to his cardinal that the Mexican case should lead to a revision of the Catholic teaching prohibiting violence against the state. Algermissen soon became the German church's point man in the struggle against Freethought and communism.²⁹

Many of the core initiatives of the modern papacy were undertaken to ward off the threats of secularism. To retaliate against encroachment by the secular Italian state Pius IX (1846–78) had issued his 'non expedit' prohibiting Catholics from participating in Italian politics, and he struck at scientific modernism in a number of doctrinal documents of which the *Syllabus errorum* (1864) was the most infamous. Secularism also occupied a central place in the policies of Pius XI (1922–39). He strengthened the Pontifical Oriental Institute and created a Commissio pro Russia to respond to the opportunities and threats created by the Bolshevik revolution. His motto, 'Pax Christi in Regno Christi', expressed the theological concept of Christ's Kingship, around which he built a strategy for reasserting church power in a world threatened by both secularization and secularism.

Pius XI was lukewarm about Catholic political parties. Instead he proposed that Catholic Action serve as the agent for delivering Christ's Kingship. Catholic Action was a global lay movement under episcopal supervision that specifically excluded Catholic politicians. Although it emerged with significant national variations, in all cases secularism was a key target.³⁰ In his article, *Klaus Große Kracht* shows how Catholic Action was rolled out in Germany. Initially introduced in 1928, it was the

27 In addition to his article in this issue, see also, I.J. Polianski, 'Between Hegel and Haeckel: Monistic Worldview, Marxist Philosophy and Biomedicine in Russia and the Soviet Union', in T. Weir (ed.), *Monism: Science, Philosophy, Religion, and the History of a Worldview* (New York, NY 2012), 197–222.

28 See the special issue of the *Journal of Religious History* on transnational anticatholicism (2015, no. 1).

29 Letters and reports to Cardinal Michael Faulhaber on the subject of the persecution in Mexico reveal the important intermediary roles played by Mexican clerics in Europe and by German clerics in Mexico. Archive of the Archbishopric Munich and Freising, Faulhaber Papers, no. 2008.

30 J. Pollard, 'Pius XI's Promotion of the Italian Model of Catholic Action in the World-Wide Church', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 63 (2012), 758–84.

threat of communism and domestic Freethought that led the church to further push Catholic Action in 1930. In August of that year, a report at the German Bishops' Conference claimed that if Russian children were being turned into 'apostles of Bolshevism' and the godless were organizing cells and chapters, then the Catholic Church must use 'the same means' and begin to educate and organize the laity through Catholic Action. As *Große Kracht* shows, Catholic Action further weakened Weimar democracy by creating a platform for conservative Catholics to militate for an authoritarian solution to the parliamentary crisis and to the culture war.

Protestants and Orthodox reactionaries also organized transnationally. In 1924 the Swiss lawyer Théodore Aubert and Russian exile Georges Lodyginsky launched the *Entente Internationale Contre la Troisième Internationale*, which sought bring together Christian conservatives in an international ecumenical alliance to exert pressure on their respective governments. In 1933, these men founded a further organization, *Pro Deo*. Their fascist affinities led to cooperation with Joseph Goebbels's *Anticomintern*.³¹

A new factor in the interbellum was the presence of a transnationally organized political movement in the form of the Communist International. Communist parties outside the USSR picked up the antireligious propaganda generated in the USSR and transmitted it as their own. Thus, when the former president of the Comintern Nikolai Bukharin blasted the Pope's crusade of prayer in March 1930, his speech was reprinted on the front page of *L'Humanité*.³² Images from the journals of the League of the Godless found their way into the communist press across Europe. One indication of the centrality of the Soviet Union in the culture wars was the fact that Marx's 1844 phrase calling religion 'the opium of the people' was only widely popularized after the Russian Revolution. In fact, German sources erroneously quoted the phrase as 'opium *for* the people', following the Russian usage found in Lenin's antireligious tracts rather than the German original. This mistranslation stuck because it corresponded to the Communist message that religion was tool for befuddlement, rather than a comforting illusion seized upon by the people to alleviate its own suffering.³³

The Comintern was not the only transnationally organized anticlerical institution. Modern Freethought had achieved a transnational organization in 1880 with the founding of the International Federation of Freethinkers in Brussels. This association had formed a bridge between liberals, radicals and socialists, and was dominated by French and Belgian members. In the interwar period, the centre of Freethought shifted eastward, and socialist or 'proletarian' organizations grew enormously. In May 1925, an International of Proletarian Freethinkers (IPF)

31 Roulin, *Un credo anticommunist*. On other international organizations, Chenaux, 50–6.

32 N. Bukharin, 'La bacchanale commence...ou la déclaration de guerre du pape', *L'Humanité* (1 April 1930).

33 On the Leninist origin of the German mistranslation of Marx's citation after 1918, see M. Rudloff, *Weltanschauungsorganisationen innerhalb der Arbeiterbewegung der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt am Main 1991), 88.

was created with an initial corporate membership of 143,000 German, 21,000 Czechoslovakian and 100,000 Austrian Freethinkers. In December 1925, the Russian League of the Godless (*Soyuz bezbozhnikov*) with a nominal membership of 145,000 joined the organization but remained initially inactive. By the end of the decade, the German and Soviet sections could each claim memberships of over a half million. The Proletarian Freethinkers imagined themselves as the third pillar of a revolutionary working class, alongside unions and parties, tasked with the 'realization of classless collective culture uniting all people and races' and the 'destruction of religious and bourgeois ideologies in the heads of the proletariat'.³⁴ Although communists and socialists initially cooperated in the IPF, in 1928 the Comintern directed communist Freethinkers to usurp control of the IPF from its social democratic leadership. Following the failure of this attempt, communists formed their own parallel Freethought organizations.³⁵

Despite the socialist dominance over many Freethought associations, anticlericalism was by no means a point of unity on the non-communist left. In his investigation of the religious politics of British Labour and German Social Democracy, *Stefan Berger* challenges the received view that Labour remained a party of low-church dissenters, while the SPD was antireligious. He shows that the German party leadership supported the rights of Freethinkers to anticlerical expression, but, unlike the rival Communist Party, refused to officially endorse anticlerical activism. This left the freethinkers a noisy minority within German socialism prone to buck the party line, particularly when it came to compromises with the SPD's frequent coalition partner, the Catholic Centre Party. A complicated relationship to religion also characterized Italian socialism. Echoes of Antonio Labriola's lenient view of religion were manifested in the postwar policies of the Italian Communist Party, which were more tolerant of religion than those of most other communist parties.³⁶

One of the signs of the generative power of the interwar *Kulturkampf* was the creation of a number of novel concepts and political theories in the crucible of the apologetic struggle. These concepts and theories have had a chequered career in politics and in scholarship, and their interwar context has sometimes been forgotten. 'Secularism', for example, is today one of the leading terms in cultural studies, political theory, and postcolonial critique. Although it originated around 1851 in the British Freethought movement, it was popularized and modified in the interwar period largely by religious actors, who also expanded its scope. At the 1928 Jerusalem conference of the International Missionary Council, the American

34 *Protokoll der Konstituierenden Sitzung der 'Internationale Proletarischer Freidenker' (I.P.F.) in Teplitz-Schönau, am 31. Mai und 1. Juni 1925* (Vienna 1925), 11–14; *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des II. Kongresses der Internationale Proletarischer Freidenker (IPF) in Leipzig, 30. und 31. Januar 1926* (Leipzig 1926).

35 J.-C. Kaiser, *Arbeiterbewegung und organisierte Religionskritik: proletarische Freidenkerverbände in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart 1981) in particular 187–230; T. Weir, 'Säkularismus (Freireligiöse, Freidenker, Monisten, Ethiker, Humanisten)', in L. Hölscher and V. Krech (eds) *Handbuch der Religionsgeschichte im deutschsprachigen Raum* (Paderborn 2016), 189–218.

36 See the article by Daniela Sarasella in this issue.

Quaker Rufus Jones argued that Christianity in the West was now threatened by 'secular civilization'. Jones proposed that Christians could and must reconcile with elements of the secular, such as modern science, but urged them to fight 'secularism', which was understood to mean active anti-religion and naturalism. Yet, this distinction between secularization and secularism was lost on many members of Jones's audience. German missionaries conflated the two and began to circulate the term 'Säkularismus' back in Germany to sum up all the forces arrayed against religion.³⁷

The notion that secularization was a pathology caused by secularism was articulated in the German concept of 'cultural Bolshevism' (*Kulturbolschewismus*) then being advanced by Catholic and Protestant theologians and conservative politicians.³⁸ 'Cultural Bolshevism' is too tainted a term to have scholarly relevance today, however a related term, 'political religion', continues to be employed. This concept was developed in large part by Catholic apologists struggling against communism and Nazism. Like cultural Bolshevism and secularism, political religion assumed that there were religious impulses behind the antireligious forces of the age. Often, the authors of these theories saw in the totalitarian states a modern version of a perennial heresy and they borrowed from eschatological prophecy, when they spoke of 'the battle of unspirit against spirit' or simply the Antichrist. Uncovering a purported religious core underneath political ideology is still the key operation of the theory of political religion.³⁹

Some of the terms of the interwar *Kulturkampf* reveal the semantic interplay between secular and religious actors. Referencing Clausewitz's notion of *Wechselwirkungen* in war, historian Stanley Payne has proposed that 'the reciprocal interaction of the combatants' in twentieth-century civil wars resulted 'in new tactics or policies, and sometimes in mutual radicalization'.⁴⁰ Such interactions can be detected between combatants on the apologetic front as well, for example, in their joint elaboration of the term *Weltanschauung* (worldview). The term was popularized during the long culture wars of the nineteenth century and by the First World War became identified also with the Catholic Centre and Social Democratic parties. In 1919, Max Weber warned liberals not to embrace worldview, yet, by the late Weimar Republic worldview parties had come to dominate parliament and the newspaper headlines. In his contribution to the special issue, *Todd Weir* investigates how Adolf Hitler developed his notion of worldview out of a study of Germany's nineteenth and twentieth century *Kulturkämpfe*. The measuring stick for worldview was, for Hitler, its ability to unite the German people. Christianity had once fulfilled this requirement, but the confessional rivalry that split the

37 K. Nowak, 'Zur protestantischen Säkularismus-Debatte um 1930', *WPKG* 69 (1980) 37–51; Weir, 'The New Global History of Secularism'.

38 T. Weir, 'The Christian Front Against Godlessness: Anti-Secularism and the Demise of the Weimar Republic, 1928–1933', *Past & Present*, 229 (2015), 201–38; B. Laser, *Kulturbolschewismus!: zur Diskurssemantik der 'totalen Krise' 1929–1933* (Frankfurt am Main 2010).

39 W. Hardtwig, 'Political Religion in Modern Germany: Reflections on Nationalism, Socialism and National Socialism', *GHI Bulletin* 28 (2001), 3–27.

40 S.G. Payne, *Civil war in Europe: 1905–1949* (Cambridge 2011) in particular 164.

nationalist camp meant that Christianity had to step aside for National Socialism, the new German worldview. National Socialism promoted 'positive Christianity' to avoid the quagmire of confessional rivalry and fulfil the widely shared yearning for a spiritual unification of the nation. Yet its worldview would have to be secular, because its foes – Marxism, liberalism and 'Jewish' materialism – all represented secular worldviews.

National Socialism disrupted the relatively binary organization that the transnational culture war had achieved in 1930 when the antireligious offensive of the Soviet Union had reached a high point and been answered by the Pope's call for a 'crusade of prayer'. Hitler's revanchist foreign policy abroad and the anticlerical measures taken at home led the culture war into a more triangular arrangement of forces. As the essays by Paul Hanebrink and Daniela Sarasella indicate, 1936 and 1937 were pivotal years in this development. In 1936, the Popular Front government of France had signalled the possibility of an antifascist realignment and the Communist party had 'extended its hand' to the Catholic Church. The following year, the Vatican issued paired encyclicals blasting National Socialism and Communism respectively.

The deep divisions that Hitler's anticlerical policies created within global Protestantism is explored by *Paul Hanebrink* in his investigation of the debates surrounding the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State, which met in 1937 and was an important forerunner to the postwar World Council of Churches. Rather than uniting around joint opposition to Soviet godlessness, as many of the German Protestants had hoped, the church leaders focused their critical attention on National Socialism.

Opposition to National Socialism (and the ongoing effects of the Great Depression) also prepared the ground for a deeper engagement with socialism by many Christians. In France and Belgium, leaders of Catholic Action began to act as 'worker priests', who argued that one could support socialism without supporting secularism.⁴¹ Key Catholic thinkers, such as Jacques Maritain and Karl Winter, reimagined the relationship of the Church to society and to the Jews. Until then, Jews had been largely excluded from interwar interreligious alliances, in part because many Christian leaders linked Jewish emancipation to both secularism and communism.⁴² Although these remained limited experiments in overcoming antisemitism and renegotiating the relationship of Christianity and Marxism, they were important for the later theological innovations of the Second Vatican Council.⁴³

In her article *Daniela Saresella* explores the origins of the Italian movement of *cattocomunismo* (Catholic-Communism), which formed a crucial vector through

41 G.-R. Horn, *Western European liberation theology 1924–1959* (Oxford 2008).

42 T. Weir, 'The Specter of "Godless Jewry": Secularism and the "Jewish Question" in Late Nineteenth Century Germany', *Central European History*, 46 (2013), 815–49; D.I. Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews: the Vatican's role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York, NY 2001).

43 J. Chappell, 'Unraveling Judeo-Bolshevism: Jacques Maritain, Ernst Karl Winter, and the Nature of Catholic Anti-Racism in the 1930s', unpublished conference paper, JCH Belfast conference 2015.

which many Italian Catholics entered the postwar communist movement. Although this group would be galvanized by the German invasion of Italy in 1943, its origins lay in the 1930s, when most of its leaders participated in Catholic Action. They politicized the social conscience fostered in Catholic Action and at the same time sought to separate Marxism from its association with antireligion.

By way of conclusion, I would like to consider the implications that an analysis of the interbellum as a period of culture war could have for the shape of twentieth century European history. Historian Mark Mazower has argued that the dynamics of the interwar period that culminated in the catastrophes of the Second World War need to be integrated into, rather than bracketed out of the history of European modernity.⁴⁴ Similarly, an awareness of the interwar *Kulturkampf* entails rethinking the history of twentieth-century religion and secularism.

The secularist thrust of political radicals and revolutionary states marked a deep trauma for the major churches. The responses of clergy and laity to this trauma were varied. Some loaned support to authoritarianism and fascism. Others sought to cut existing ties between church and state or between church and the dominant classes, precisely in order to sever the bond between Marxism and secularism. Although the Second World War brushed many domestic culture wars under the carpet, the language of religious war continued to play a major role in international relations. Whether analysing Eastern or Western Europe, historians of religion must take seriously the deep impact of secularism on religious thought and politics.

Accepting the thesis of an interwar *Kulturkampf* also necessitates a revision of the contemporary assumptions surrounding secularism and secularization. In the absence of synthetic studies of religion and politics in the twentieth century that do justice to events of the interwar period, many scholars now contemplating 'the secular age' have sketched a line between the widely accepted conclusions about the nineteenth century and the problems facing secular governance today. This has led them to assume that liberalism maintained a hegemonic position throughout recent history. Yet, as was stated above, secularism and liberalism were often at loggerheads, and, in the interwar period, liberals largely eschewed the label of secularism, because it was associated with advocacy of immanent, materialist worldview and anticlericalism. Future studies may reveal secularism and revolutionary political movements to have been overlapping yet separate cultures. In the minds of many church leaders prior to the late 1950s, however, they were seen as being largely identical, and, as such, a greater threat to European Christianity than the impersonal process of secularization.

44 M. Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York, NY 1999).

Biographical Note

Todd H. Weir is Associate Professor of History of Christianity and Modern Culture and Director of the Centre for Religion and Heritage at the University of Groningen. Until 2016 he worked at Queen's University Belfast. He is the author of *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession* (Cambridge 2014), which won the 2016 Jacques Barzun Prize for Cultural History of the American Philosophical Society, and he edited *Monism: Science, Philosophy, Religion, and the History of a Worldview* (Palgrave 2012). He is currently completing a book on secularism and socialism in Germany between 1890 and 1933, and developing a future project on the conceptual history of Weltanschauung/worldview.