

A Strange Dispute at the Deathbed of Religion: Blumenberg and Löwith Cross Swords

The Background

The intellectual trajectory that this book aims to reconstruct has not been linear and, as I suggested in the introduction, contains some unexpected turns that it is useful to bring to the surface as soon as possible. It makes sense, therefore, to proceed obliquely and to open this chapter devoted to the beginnings of the philosophical dismantling of the theorem of secularization by going back to a world that no longer exists and that is even hard to conjure up today.

We are in the autumn of 1962, in Münster, in what was then West Germany, where the Seventh German Congress of Philosophy is being held. The main theme of the conference is “philosophy and the question of progress”.¹ The choice of the subject was timely. Less than twenty years after the end of the bloodiest war in the history of humankind, the world is experiencing the dawn of a brief but unforgettable spring. We are in the midst of a European economic boom. There is optimism everywhere: the Beatles have just recorded their first record; John Fitzgerald Kennedy is President of the United States and, on 11 October, Pope John XXIII officially declares the Second Vatican Council open.

But 1962 was also the year of Marilyn Monroe's suicide and the Cuban Missile Crisis, which pushed the two atomic superpowers of the time, USA and USSR, to the brink of nuclear apocalypse. The symposium, skilfully orchestrated by its grey eminence, Joachim Ritter,² is a faithful mirror of the ambivalence

1 The materials of the conference were collected and published in a volume edited by Kuhn, Helmut/Wiedmann, Franz (eds.), *Die Philosophie und die Frage nach dem Fortschritt*, Munich: Anton Pustet 1964. Apart from this collection of essays and reports of the discussion, there are – as far as I know – no other textual or visual testimonies of the event.

2 Cf. Lübke, Hermann, *Zustimmungsfähige Modernität. Gründe einer marginal verbliebenen Rezeption Eric Voegelins*, Occasional papers (XXXIV), Eric-Voegelin-Archiv Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich 2003, p. 30 (http://www.gsi.uni-muenchen.de/forschung/forsch_zentr/voegelin/publikationen/papers/op_34.pdf, date of last access: 11.04.2022); Lübke, Hermann, *Die Religion und die Legitimität der Neuzeit. Modernisierungsphilosophie bei Eric Voegelin, bei Hans Blumenberg und in der Ritter-Schule*, in Hermann Lübke, *Modernisierungsgewinner. Religion, Geschichtssinn, Direkte Demokratie und Moral*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2004, p. 72.

with which the rising confidence in progress was regarded by the members of an elitist fraternity such as the *Allgemeine Gesellschaft für Philosophie in Deutschland* was before the watershed of 1968. The names of the two thinkers invited to open up the conference with their *Hauptvorträge*, Karl Löwith and Theodor W. Adorno, are sufficient to certify this undecided attitude. The latter is the author, together with Max Horkheimer, of perhaps the most caustic work against progressive ideology ever written by a member of the left-wing intelligentsia: *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*.³ The former, on the other hand, opted for a not accidentally oxymoronic title for his paper: *Das Verhängnis des Fortschritts* (The Fatality of Progress).⁴

Given the aims of this chapter, let us narrow our focus on Löwith. The recognition bestowed on him in Münster is not only a late reward for his exemplary story as a German Jew persecuted for racial reasons and expatriated first to Italy, then to Japan and finally to the USA. The author of *From Hegel to Nietzsche*,⁵ I mean, does not take the floor as a victim and direct witness of the European catastrophe, but presents himself as one of the most implacable diagnosticians of the bankruptcy of modern philosophical discourse. In his most renowned work, *Meaning in History*, he set himself the objective of unmasking the ultimately “theological” or pseudo-religious character of unconditional faith in the progressive destiny of humanity.⁶ What Habermas recently described as one of the most influential books of his generation⁷ had indeed succeeded in transforming a paradoxical and iconoclastic thesis into a kind of intellectual common sense within a few years. And it was with the self-confidence of one who is convinced of having said the final word on the

3 Cf. Horkheimer, Max/Adorno, Theodor W., *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by E. Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002.

4 Cf. Löwith, Karl, “Das Verhängnis des Fortschritts”, in Helmut Kuhn / Franz Wiedmann (eds.), *Die Philosophie und die Frage nach dem Fortschritt*, pp. 15–29 (an English translation of the essay appeared as “Progress: A Fatality”, in: Helen S. Hogg (ed.), *Man and His World/Terres des Hommes: The Noranda Lectures*, Expo 67/les Conférences Noranda/L’expo 67, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1968, pp. 83–94).

5 Cf. Löwith, Karl, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, transl. by D.E. Green, New York: Columbia 1991 (revised edition).

6 Cf. Löwith, Karl, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 1970 (the German edition, published under the title *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*, saw the light of day only in 1953).

7 Cf. Habermas, Jürgen, “Religion and Postmetaphysical Thinking: A Reply”, in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II: Essays and Replies*, trans. by C. Cronin, Cambridge: Polity Press 2017, p. 88. The generational impact of *Meaning in History* is also emphasized by Joas, Hans in “The Contingency of Secularization: Reflections on the Problem of Secularization in the Work of Reinhart Koselleck”, in: Hans Joas/Barbro Klein (eds.), *The Benefit of Broad Horizons. Intellectual and Institutional Preconditions for a Global Social Science*, Leiden: Brill 2010, p. 94.

subject that Löwith presented himself before his colleagues: a stellar audience that included, among others, scholars of the stature of Arnold Gehlen, Eric Voegelin, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, Hans Blumenberg, Odo Marquard, Dieter Henrich, Éric Weil, Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, Ludwig Landgrebe.

Meaning in History

How can one explain with hindsight the planetary and enduring success of a work that is anything but subversive or magniloquent? A down-to-earth explanation would call into question external factors. In particular, I would stress the occasional synergy between the need for sense-making that prevailed among the survivors of the historical cataclysm of totalitarianism – the need, that is, to make intelligible a catastrophe so gigantic that it made any linear correlation of cause and effect implausible⁸ – and an intellectual intuition so simple and powerful that it could be applied to the most disparate, even antithetical, purposes and agendas. From this point of view, *Meaning in History* was an ideal product, since it reiterated the theoretical radicalism of post-Hegelian philosophy within a sober, whispered, almost apathetic argumentative framework. The book's main claim was simple, essential, bordering on reductionism – so blatant that it could be offered to readers in a form that was more illustrative than explanatory: “the irreligion of progress is still a sort of religion, derived from Christian faith in a future goal, though substituting an indefinite and immanent *eschaton* for a definite and transcendent one”.⁹

We can detect the Humean-Weberian assumption about the primacy of passions and delusions over lucidity and reason in human existence at the

8 For a methodological reflection on the problems connected to understanding totalitarianism, cf. Arendt, Hannah, “Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)” and “On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding”, both in Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954*, edited by J. Kohn, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company 1994, pp. 307–360.

9 Cf. Löwith, Karl, *Meaning in History*, p. 114. See also Donaggio, Enrico, *Una sobria inquietudine. Karl Löwith e la filosofia*, Milan: Feltrinelli 2004, p. 118: “In one of the most celebrated achievements of Western awareness Löwith saw a devious form of self-deception. In the philosophical distillation of the modern attitude towards the course of events he did not see the victory of a disenchanted reason, but rather the mask behind which religious illusion continued to thrive within the confines of a knowledge that boasted of having banned it. In the cult of the absolute relevance of what is relative par excellence – the course of human events –, he saw the ‘last religion’ of men, whose scepticism was too weak to give up any form of faith”.

heart of Löwith's argument. This realization is then translated theoretically into a meticulous search for traces of these primordial, demonic forces, even within apparently rationalist systems of thought, such as the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophies of history. At the origin of Löwith's investigative attitude, therefore, lies the suspicion that religion constitutes a special propulsive force in the sphere of ideas and that it is precisely its persistence even within an apparently de-Christianized civilization such as the modern one that explains the latter's tendency to degenerate, that is, to produce results contrary to the intentions of its protagonists.

Given these premises, what follows is almost self-evident. Löwith's historical account starts from the idea that the decisive caesura for understanding the present is not the break dividing the medieval times from the modern age, but the gap between the ancient/classical world and the world shaped by Christianity. Hence, the real alternative in terms of world images is to be sought in this spiritual quantum leap: therein lies the source from which even the modern secular mentality continues to draw, without realizing it. Specifically, the fundamental insight that separates the two stages of human development is the historicization of the concepts of truth and nature: the replacement, that is, of a cyclical vision of time with a chronic linear imaginary, oriented towards a historically unprecedented future. The problem is that, despite its being powerful and vital, this *Lebensanschauung* is, for Löwith, banally false: that is, it can be absorbed fideistically as the content of a revelation, but cannot be justified rationally. In this sense, the faith in progress, activism and optimism of the modern spirit are the fruit of a sacrifice of the intellect no smaller than the one made by the first Christian apologists in the name of their granitic faith in the divine nature and salvific power of Jesus Christ. The only difference lies in the tacit and unconscious process of transfiguration that he does not hesitate to identify with the phenomenon, taken for granted, of 'secularization' (*Säkularisierung, Säkularisation, Verweltlichung*), with the transposition, that is, of the *eschaton* into profane time.¹⁰

Observed from this perspective, then, the anthropological and cultural vitality of universal religions – in this case Christianity – shows (with the benefit of hindsight) its destructive potential especially when its illusory content is (unwittingly) tried out under the guise of a worldly, rather than otherworldly, emancipatory force. Once unmasked as religions or theologies in disguise, the modern philosophies of history are pressed to reckon with the degenerative and destructive dangers of illegitimate filiation, that is of a variety of cultural

10 Cf. the "Conclusion" in Löwith, Karl, *Meaning in History*, pp. 191–203. For an accurate reconstruction of Löwith's viewpoint see Donaggio, Enrico, *Una sobria inquietudine*, pp. 117–123.

hybridization that unleashes on earth the motivational force inherent in any boundless expectation of personal redemption.

Once again, it is worth stressing the radicality of an argumentative move whose ultimate outcome is the reversal of the self-understanding of modern consciousness. While the latter sees itself as a subjectivity emancipated from a previous condition of spiritual submission and open to an indeterminate future, the secularization tale forces it to become aware of the non-original, derivative, parasitic character of its cult of freedom, of scientific, moral, political progress and of the search for individual and earthly happiness. This is no small claim, indeed. Evidently, only the trauma caused by the exorbitant proportions of the intellectual and civil shipwreck of post-Enlightenment European civilization could make plausible the task of unmasking the burden that the religious past has put on humanity's unfinished process of self-clarification and mundanization, of which Marx, with his materialistic (or pseudo-materialistic) millenarianism was only the most striking example.¹¹

In light of this background, it is easy to see how Löwith could experience his own intellectual operation as a basic exercise of self-reflection that, albeit being historically sophisticated, was at the end of the day banal. All the more so since his interpretation of the results of his deconstructive work did not push him either in the direction of a sterile lament on the decline of humanity or towards a sort of (impossible) farewell to the modern form of life and a mere return to the old.¹² On the contrary, the main aim of his efforts to derive a meaningful pattern from the two-thousand-year history of Christian Europe was to reach a more complete and true form of secularization, which in the end amounted to a sceptical and stoic resistance to any form of consolation or religious or para-religious escape from intellectual responsibility.

The Unexpected Backlash

It does not take a great effort of imagination to figure out Löwith's difficulty in coming to terms with the impatience towards this *weltanschaulich* (political-cultural)¹³ use of the category of secularization shown by two leading figures of the new generation of German philosophers such as Hermann Lübbe and,

11 Cf. Löwith, Karl, *Meaning in History*, p. 45: "Historical materialism is essentially, though secretly, a history of fulfilment and salvation in terms of social economy".

12 Cf. Donaggio, Enrico, *Una sobria inquietudine*, p. 122; Fazio, Giorgio, *Il tempo della secolarizzazione. Karl Löwith e la modernità*, Milano/Udine: Mimesis 2015, p. 229.

13 On this aspect of Löwith's take on the topic, see Barash, Jeffrey A., "The Sense of History: On the Political Implications of Karl Löwith's Concept of Secularization", in: *History and Theory* (37/1998), pp. 69–82.

above all, Hans Blumenberg.¹⁴ From both their responses to Löwith emerges their dissatisfaction with the reductive, simplistic and “dogmatic” character of the meta-narrative of secularization, which understands the modern age as Christianity’s shadow, the evanescent reflection of the religious substance to which the history of the West after the fall of the ancient world is improperly reduced.¹⁵ In particular, the tacit accusation of having lent himself to a superficially ideological and non-scientific operation hurt the pride of Heidegger’s rebellious pupil. It is not surprising, therefore, that a feeling of both indignation and bewilderment suffuses the review of *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* that Löwith wrote at Gadamer’s request a few years after the Münster conference.¹⁶ The essay, as Blumenberg bitterly observes,¹⁷ more than a *Besprechung* actually is a late and yet still piqued reaction to his 1962 paper, and its tone, at times

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- 14 Lübbe is the author of one of the most influential study on the concept of secularization (mentioned above in note 4), whose core claims were presented at the Münster conference. Cf. Lübbe, Hermann, “Säkularisierung als geschichtsphilosophische Kategorie”, in Kuhn, Helmut/Wiedmann, Franz (eds.), *Die Philosophie und die Frage nach dem Fortschritt*, pp. 221–239. A detailed reconstruction of the theoretical and personal querelle between Löwith and Blumenberg is contained in Joe Paul Kroll’s still unpublished doctoral dissertation, *A Human End to History? Hans Blumenberg, Karl Löwith and Carl Schmitt on Secularization and Modernity*, Princeton 2010, chapter 3. On this topic, see also Wallace, Robert M., “Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate”, in: *New German Critique* (22/1981), pp. 63–79; Monod, Jean-Claude, *La querelle de la sécularisation*, part. III; Brient, Elizabeth, *The Immanence of the Infinite: Hans Blumenberg and the Threshold to Modernity*, Washington (DC): The Catholic University of America Press 2002, pp. 13–38; Svenungsson, Jayne, “A Secular Utopia: Remarks on the Löwith-Blumenberg Debate”, in Elena Namli/ Jayne Svenungsson/Alana Vincent (eds.), *Jewish Thought, Utopia and Revolution*, Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi 2014, pp. 69–84.
- 15 Cf. Blumenberg, Hans, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. by R.M. Wallace, Cambridge (MA): MIT Press 1985, p. 27. In his writings on the subject, the concept or theorem of secularization is presented by Blumenberg now as a “commonplace” that has become “fashionable” (see “Rudolf Bultmann: ‘Geschichte und Eschatologie’. Rezension”, in: *Gnomon* (31/1959), p. 165), now as a phenomenon that has taken on the “features of a natural event” (“Säkularisation’: Kritik einer Kategorie historischer Illegitimität”, in: Helmut Kuhn/Franz Wiedmann (eds.), *Die Philosophie und die Frage nach dem Fortschritt*, p. 240: “Einkleidung eines Naturereignisses”), now as a “dogma” (“On a Lineage of the Idea of Progress”, in: *Social Research* (41/1974), p. 5).
- 16 Cf. Löwith, Karl, “Besprechung des Buches *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* von Hans Blumenberg”, in: *Philosophische Rundschau* (15/1968), pp. 195–201 (now in Karl Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. II: *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*, Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler 1983, pp. 452–459).
- 17 In a letter to Gadamer of 3 October 1968 cited in Joe Paul Kroll, *A Human End to History?*, p. 149. See also Blumenberg’s letter to Carl Schmitt of 7 August 1975, in Blumenberg, Hans/Schmitt, Carl, *Briefwechsel 1971–1978 und weitere Materialien*, edited by A. Schmitz/M. Lepper, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2007, p. 134 et seq.

defensive, at times indignant, half conciliatory, half contemptuous, represents an exemplary testimony of a passage in time. Even on a superficial reading, it is evident that the real issue at stake in the dispute was who should get the burden of proof with respect to an interpretative scheme or grand narrative that aspired to become the doxastic core of a diagnosis of the present time.

How, then, does Blumenberg's view differ from Löwith's?

As a matter of fact, neither in his *Vortrag* at the German Congress of Philosophy, nor in the first part of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (which would merge, suitably reworked, into a more manageable volume, *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung*, in 1974),¹⁸ does Blumenberg dare to challenge the factual core of the secularization thesis, which, in his vocabulary, becomes the “descriptive” and “intransitive” side of the theorem.¹⁹ What also remains undeniable for him is the fact, attested to by experience, that in the course of the last few centuries there has been a contraction, a perceptible decrease (the German term used by Blumenberg is *Schwund*) in the weight of religion, or transcendence, or otherworldly references, in people's daily lives:

Everyone is familiar with this designation for a long-term process by which a disappearance of religious ties, attitudes to transcendence, expectations of an after-life, ritual performances, and firmly established turns of speech (*Wendungen*) is driven onward in both private and daily public life.²⁰

In this narrower sense, the modern world is to all intents and purposes a more secular world than its predecessor, with which it tends to identify itself contrastively. What is less obvious is how this difference should be framed theoretically, in other words how it should be conceived and explained. Here the theoretical divergence with Löwith becomes apparent. For Blumenberg, modernity should not be thought of only in terms of a negative genealogy – i.e., as something that is “unthinkable without” something else²¹ – but under the umbrella of an affirmative one. This, in particular, should be capable of detecting and describing the original solutions that the modern mind was able to devise in response to a momentous intellectual challenge. For at stake at the end of the middle ages was no less than the margin of initiative granted to human beings in the midst of a creation that, after the collapse of the

18 Cf. Blumenberg, Hans, *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1974.

19 Cf. Blumenberg, Hans, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 4 and p. 23.

20 Cf. Blumenberg, Hans, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 3. On the intricate biographical and intellectual itinerary that led Blumenberg to the “recognition of the death of God” see Kroll, Joe Paul, *A Human End to History?*, pp. 57–64.

21 Cf. Blumenberg, Hans, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 30.

theological voluntarism of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, appeared boundless and hopelessly opaque.

So, to sum up, for Blumenberg too one of the legitimate ways of describing the modern age is in terms of its distance from religion. But this disengagement is to be understood neither as an inexplicable phenomenon (a sort of quantum leap or sudden reversal of polarity between the 'sacred' and the 'secular') nor as the superficial metamorphosis (*Umsetzung*) of an immutable substance. It is, rather, a complicated and original process of reoccupation and reworking (*Umbesetzung*) of the available range of solutions to dilemmas partly inherited and partly exasperated by Christian theology, in the wake of the *sine die* postponement of the Parousia.²² For the latter had not only brought about an overall reassessment of the role of the worldly sphere in the history of salvation, but had also exacerbated the need to tame the taxing theoretical riddles inherent in any creaturely vision of the relationship between an infinite source of life – God – and the imperfect reality arising from such absolute power.

Thus, for Blumenberg, the chief problem is not how to assess the historical relevance or the civilizing scope of the process of emancipation of individuals from ecclesiastical control over their intimate, social, political and intellectual lives, but rather how to interpret the deeper meaning of the intellectual turning point that, on the one hand, made this revolution possible and, on the other hand, laid the foundations for the rise of an original and self-sufficient form of life. Within this theoretical horizon, the legitimacy of the secular age is defended by the prolific German author in an articulate, sophisticated, non-Manichean manner. The process of secularization, once its existence in the above minimal sense is recognized, is described as an interweaving of many stories in which one has to disjointedly track ups and downs, steps forward and steps back – local progress, challenges tackled intelligently or obtusely, badly posed questions, real innovations, etc. – and where there is room for a conspicuous dose of contingency and for eccentric trajectories with respect to the standard patterns of development.

22 On the conceptual dyad, *Umsetzung* and *Umbesetzung*, see Greisch, Jean, "Umbesetzung versus Umsetzung: Les ambiguïtés du théorème de la sécularisation d'après Hans Blumenberg", in: *Archives de Philosophie* (67/2004), pp. 279–297. The topos of "reoccupation" (*Stelle besetzen*), in relation to the theme of progress, had already cropped out in the Bultmann review cited in note 32. Kroll (*A Human End to History?*, pp. 46 et seq., 69) traces the birth of the idea back to an essay on Kafka published in 1952: "Der absolute Vater", in: *Hochland* (45/1952), pp. 282–284.

New Scenarios

If we were to schematically summarize Blumenberg's complex argumentative strategy, we could distinguish at least six layers of reasoning.

At the base (1), there is the contestation of any reductionist or "genealogically destructive" interpretations²³ of the modern age, which are rejected as the expression of a substantialist or essentialist view of history that is untenable both in general theoretical terms and in detailed historical accounts. Aside from the allusive power of an explanatory scheme that gratifies the reader's ideological expectations, there actually is no plausible reason to attribute an oversized causal role to the "religious element", i.e., to the "belief in being created in the image of a Creator-God, the hope in a future Kingdom of God, and the Christian command to spread the gospel to all the nations for the sake of salvation".²⁴

In lieu of such breakdown of secular confidence in progress into its supposed theological presuppositions, an alternative style of historical research is suggested (2). This procedure aims at reconstructing a thick web of different, local, sectorial histories, in which a progressive view of history does not spring from a generic salvific expectation, but (i) from specific experiences of epistemic success (for example in the field of astronomy), (ii) from the claim to creative freedom in the arts (as happened in the famous *querelle des anciens et des modernes*) or (iii) from the steady transformation of curiosity from vice to virtue in the modern bourgeois mentality.²⁵

These local histories, in turn, (3) converge in a grand narrative based on a different form of pattern-recognition than the negative genealogy favoured by Löwith. For the horizon that encompasses and relates the different cultural developments does not consist in the metamorphosis of a "powerful and influential tradition", but in the radicality of the intellectual challenge bequeathed to Christian theology by the Gnostic heresy and made even more aporetic by the theoretical choices of Duns Scotus' and Ockham's theological voluntarism.²⁶

The founders of modern culture (4) responded to the uncertainty deriving from a higher sense of contingency and from the intensified opaqueness of the universe in an activist key, inventing a new way of being a person under the

23 Cf. Donaggio, Enrico, *Una sobria inquietudine*, p. 131.

24 Cf. Löwith, Karl, *Meaning in History*, p. 202 et seq. (in the German edition, the word *Ferment*, not *Element*, is employed; cf. Löwith, Karl, "Die theologische Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie", in Karl Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften II*, p. 217).

25 Cf. Blumenberg, Hans, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, part 3.

26 Cf. Löwith, Karl, "Besprechung", p. 454 ("wirkungsmächtigen Tradition").

mark of self-assertion, not of humility or resignation. The blatantly undetermined, in many ways unpredictable character of the modern solution to the crisis of confidence in the human capacity of getting in tune with the inscrutable will of a radically *absconditus* God clarifies to what extent Blumenberg's understanding of historical change relies on a conceptual constellation dominated by metaphors of disequilibrium, uncertainty, contingency, openness, even structural imperfection.

In this type of historical transition, however, the promoters of change (5) are always exposed to the risk of becoming entangled in the bridge questions from which they had sought to emancipate themselves. Thus, the modern champions of progress, instead of settling for the pragmatic attitude of people who have once and for all discarded the search for the absolute, often succumbed to the allure of the promises of redemption of the great universal religions and ended up demanding from human self-affirmation the same level of self-fulfilment without side effects propagated by eschatological myths.²⁷

This risk of regression, however, does not exhaust the range of attitudes that moderns have taken towards their historical antecedents. In addition to cultural subservience (which justifies the narrower and restrained uses of the concept of 'secularization'), oblique or ironic allusions to religious models are also frequent (6), in which it is reasonable to spot a sign of the independence of the secular mentality rather than evidence of its derivative character. For Blumenberg what prevails both in the case of the rhetorical reference to a prototype of self-presentation (Rousseau's *Confessions*) and in the appropriation of a paradigmatic episode of liberation (the biblical exodus) is not the "objective cultural debt", but the extent of the rearrangement. Once we have adopted this inverted interpretative key, we cannot fail to be struck by the audacity with which moderns have related to Christianity as a historical religion and as a symbolic repertoire functional to purposes that change according to circumstances: challenge, self-clarification, quotation out of context, expressive need, ironic reversal, purely verbal homage, etc.²⁸

In short, with his overall reconfiguration of the research field, Blumenberg was able to defuse the explanatory power of the secularization theorem by unmasking its doxastic rather than epistemic nature. As is often the case with common sense statements, its apparent matter-of-factness dissolves into thin

27 Cf. Brient, Elizabeth, *The Immanence of the Infinite*, pp. 30–37.

28 Cf. Blumenberg, Hans, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 114. A clear formulation of the question is already present in the first reflection on the "explanatory value of the concept of *secularization*" developed in his review of Bultmann's book on history and eschatology. See Blumenberg, Hans, "Rudolf Bultmann: 'Geschichte und Eschatologie'. Rezension", p. 165 et seq.

air when the spokespersons of the alleged truism are pressed to explain its truth content analytically. In light of this, it is not surprising that the rebuttal strategy adopted by the author of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* was largely indirect, and made its ultimate success perhaps less evident than it actually was.²⁹ The result, however, does not change. The general tenor of the discussion had been reversed and the ground was now set for another kind of discussion in which the acknowledgement of a critical historical change could go hand in hand with a substantial dose of uncertainty about its true meaning and the most reliable interpretations of its origin, nature and future.

29 In his "Review Essay on *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*" (in: *History & Theory* (24/1985), pp. 183–195), Martin Jay bluntly argued, though, that Blumenberg "dealt a death blow to the [secularization] thesis in its strong form" (p. 192).