Interpreters of religion are continuously updating secularization theory. One of the consequences of the secularization thesis is that religious belief has turned into one of many options for individuals today. Hence, for many prominent interpreters, religion is not a constitutive factor of modernity with normative influence on human development. For them, belief seems to be one possible mode for understanding life and gaining orientation in life. In their opinion belief is driven by an irrational obedience to a God who is understood as a heteronomous factor in the life of believers. Believing is merely one option that exists alongside the option of not believing. Not believing means understanding life as something immanent, without religious reference point but with the challenge of autonomy and rational self-determination.

There are various religions and options for belief as well as different ways of non-believing. This situation of ideological pluralism is even more confusing than secularization theory itself. For the secular differentiation between, on the one hand, ‘the religious,’ regardless of specific orientation, and ‘the secular’ on the other, remains attractive and is used by prominent interpreters of religion to support a theory of religion that frames religion as an orientation to a transcendent dimension and obedience to God’s law. Dominant throughout is the secular opinion that sees the world within an immanent framework and proclaims the rationality of ethics and of civil society.

This view of the modern cultural situation may seem convincing, but it is based on a highly problematic differentiation between a religious and a secular sphere: between faith and rationality, between believers and non-believers, between God’s law and civil law. The aim of this article is to demonstrate why this secular differentiation creates problems for understanding modernity and the transformed presence of religion.

The Secular Differentiation

Well-known diagnosticians of the ‘Zeitgeist’ repeatedly propose secular differentiation theories, which are positively received. This is clear when we con-
sider Charles Taylor, the Canadian social philosopher, who proclaims the “Secular Age,”¹ or for example Jürgen Habermas, who refers to a post-secular society.² Or consider Hans Joas, who recently presented Christian belief as ‘one’ possible option for the interpretation of individual life in his book Zukunftsmöglichkeiten des Christentums.³ In fact, these definitions of religion are put forward with very different intentions. Habermas, arguing for a post-secular late Modernity, tries to present religion as a possible resource for moral motivation. Taylor’s secularization thesis describes secularization as a loss for modern society because people leave their religions and churches and as a religious-ideological individualism. In contrast, Joas wants to assure religious people that they should be afraid neither of other religious orientations nor of secular alternatives. He claims that the optional character of belief and membership liberated from strong social pressure adapts and reinforces personal faith certainty. He refers to a contingent certainty of faith, no longer based on absolute truths or communal plausibility supported by society’s majority, but becoming stronger and more stable in personal confession.

Despite the different interests pursued by these prominent contemporary diagnosticians in their discourse about religion, they have one aspect in common. For all of them, modern societies place religion and religions in a precarious position. Modernity’s modes of power, set free by enlightenment—modes such as the separation of religion and politics, inexorable progress in science and technology and the all-determining authority of economy—have driven religion into private realms and turned it into a matter of personal decision. Religions nevertheless do reach the public’s attention; they become assigned in the secular differentiation as phenomena of an anti-modernist modernity. They can be understood as a protest movement against modernity’s achievements which intends to reverse those achievements. At the same time, they are accused of losing the increased freedom that modernity achieved against authoritative social formations. In these prominent contemporary diagnoses religion is in no way a normative factor, constitutive either of modernity or of further human development.

Non-believing became the most popular option in contemporary society for the contemporary diagnosticians mentioned above. This should not merely be an observation of sociological facts. It is combined with the proposal that there

² Jürgen Habermas, Nachmetaphysisches Denken II: Aufsätze und Repliken (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012).