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The Rhetoric of Secularization

Daniel Weidner 1

Reading Gershom Scholem in Context: Salomon Maimon's and Gershom Scholem's German Jewish Discourse on Jewish Mysticism

Amir Engel 33

Palintropos Harmoniê: Jacob Taubes and Carl Schmitt "im liebenden Streit"

Bruce Rosenstock 55

The Distinction between Mythic and Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" from the Perspective of "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*"

Alison Ross 93

Wobei: Becoming Arigona Zogaj in (Anti-) Immigrant Austria

Jutta Gsoels-Lorensen 121

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The Rhetoric of Secularization

Daniel Weidner

The history of secularization, of the vanishing of religion in modern society, seems to be one of the last great narratives: it is simultaneously self-evident and indistinct. Everyone understands references to secularization—but everyone understands them in a different way. The consensus is that modernity is an age of secularization; even if at present there is general talk of a return of religion, the implication here is that it previously vanished, and indeed usually that in returning it has changed, since every return represents a distortion.

The term's resuscitation is clearly symptomatic. Renouncing it would almost necessarily imply no longer speaking about religion at all, as if it were the latter's supplement. When religion is no longer rigidly defined as reason's other, while also not being consigned to silence or locked into its own language game, then the talk is of "secularized religion." Through such supplementation, open and harmless in its indeterminacy, those doing the supplementing can make clear they are speaking both of religion and of something else. Thus they can play with religion's status and aura without, in the end, really taking off their gloves.

Such vague usage of *secularization* may be justified from time to time. But then the potential that resulted from the polemical sharpening of the concept in the past debates is lost. For that potential's sake, and for the sake of the concept's concision, I would like to reconsider the debates and take the "great narrative" at its word: that is, both seriously and with close attention to the literality of those texts expressing, asserting, and discussing secularization.

The strength and coherence of the secularization concept (hence what ties its variants together) is made comprehensible precisely through this rhetorical-literary elaboration. The main concern here is thus not with the historical or philosophical accuracy of the different theses on secularization, but with the concept itself and its rhetorical characteristics. Although I am not proposing a *new* sense of the concept for use by historians, I do hope to clarify its strengths and weaknesses to open new perspectives for further detailed study. After recapitulating the often-commented problems tied to the concept and clarifying what I understand by the “rhetoric of secularization,” I test this idea through a look at Max Weber’s study of Protestantism, for this approach is fundamental to most of the current debates on secularization.

One reason for the fuzziness of present discussions of secularization is the existence of highly varied discursive strands tied to the term. Studies centered on sociology and the history of religions, research in social and cultural history, and approaches grounded in philosophy and theology all take up the term in different ways. Beyond this, over the past twenty years a clear difference has emerged between the relevant European and American debates that reflects the different status of religion in the United States, where traditionally the state is religiously neutral while individually religiosity appears to have steadily increased, as opposed to Europe, where state-supported religion contends with diminishing personal piety. Correspondingly, the American discussion focuses largely on setting up a model of religion’s present role, including its relationship to the state, while research in Europe tends to treat secularization as a historical phenomenon. In the first case, a simplistic and one-dimensional grasp of the process has given way to more complex models: for instance, those distinguishing between privatization and a decline of piety, or that consider the interplay of various forms of the religious shaping of institutions and identities, or that even confirm an ongoing deprivatization of religion. There also has been a discussion of whether the latter model implies a basic questioning of a previously postulated “theory of secularization” drawing on Talcott Parsons.¹ On the European side the concept has usually remained unproblematic

1. For a modified confirmation of the secularization thesis, see Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); more critically, David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979). The ongoing debate has been spurred above all by the diagnosis of a contemporary deprivatization of religion; see Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

among sociologists,² while historians have subjected it to long-standing criticism as poorly differentiated, using instead such terms as *de-Christianization* and *modernization*.³ However, in art history, literature, the history of ideas, and other humanities disciplines, the term still plays an important role.⁴

Secularization has also become a philosophical theme on both sides of the Atlantic. In his most recent book Charles Taylor, for instance, has cast the entire self-understanding of Western modernism under the sign of secularism, in the process criticizing what he identifies as modernity’s “narrative of subtraction”: the assumption that religion is merely a sort of gloss composed of false consciousness, on whose erosion reality as such has become visible. Against this construction Taylor asserts that “our societies in the West will forever remain historically informed by Christianity.”⁵ It is important, he repeatedly argues, to reflect on these Christian origins, because acknowledging the path taken allows us to perceive our own position; correspondingly, he presents his own monumental narrative of how we have become secular. Within European philosophy, secularization became prominent as a term and as a problem. In an influential lecture, Jürgen Habermas defines proper secularization as the central task of reflexive modernity, once again making clear how closely the concept is tied to modernity’s self-understanding.⁶ More broadly, over the past few decades, an entire series of efforts—by Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, Gianni Vattimo, and Jean-Luc Marion, and before them Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Lévinas—has become manifest to no longer conceive religion as the “other” of European modernism: no longer as an ideology or apogee of metaphysics, hence what Martin Heidegger and then early Derrida formulated as “ontotheology,” but as something open and visible only when metaphysical categories such as eternity and transcendence have been

2. See Detlef Pollack, *Rückkehr des Religiösen? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland und Europa*, vol. 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009). Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), argues from a markedly different, cultural-historical perspective.

3. On the debate among sociologists and historians, see Hartmut Lehmann, ed., *Säkularisierung, Dechristianisierung, Rechristianisierung im neuzeitlichen Europa* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1997). In his article in the volume, Lehmann suggests differentiating the concept and furnishing it with corresponding counterconcepts (318).

4. On the present state of research within literary studies, see Sandra Pott, *Säkularisierung in den Wissenschaften seit der Frühen Neuzeit*, vol. 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 11–45. An exemplary and highly influential study is Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (Munich: Beck, 1990).

5. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 514. On the “subtraction narrative,” see *ibid.*, 26–29.

6. Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001).

left behind. As suggested in the subtitle of a recent book by Nancy, what this approach requires is a “deconstruction of Christianity,” the genitive here conveying both of its possible meanings.⁷ On the one hand, what is at stake is freeing Christianity (in the connected debates, the point of reference is usually “Christianity,” sometimes the “Judeo-Christian tradition,” less often “monotheism”) from anachronistic categories and dichotomies such as the opposition between Athens and Jerusalem. On the other hand, Nancy asserts that the deconstructive movement itself is in a certain sense Christian, emerging from a Christian tradition, and from a Christian gesture that undermines the oppositions between pagan and Jewish, divine and human, sacred and profane. And this argument points directly, albeit tacitly, to classical theories of secularization that understand what is specifically modern in terms of Christian origins—a thesis represented most prominently in the 1950s by Friedrich Gogarten, who argued that the very impulse of the distinction between the secular and the profane emerged in Christianity, namely, in the writings of Paul and Luther.⁸

However, this line of argument is contested from yet another perspective: in the current American debate, a decidedly political argument broadens the dominantly Christian discourse toward postcolonial categories. Talal Asad stresses the paradox in the debate on secularism that the category of religion is a product of enlightenment thought, whereas the idea of the secular originates in theological debates.⁹ In an influential essay Gil Anidjar pushes one step farther, arguing that in the current confrontation between Islam and the West, the position of secularism is essentially Christian: “Secularism is a name Christianity gave itself when it invented religion, when it named its other or others as religions.”¹⁰ Politically speaking, the construction of a Christian genealogy of modernity, undertaken by the different authors mentioned above, is far from being innocent, for it involves a process of othering that is not reflected in most cases.

In his essay Anidjar refers to Karl Löwith to validate the proximity, if not identity, of Christianity and secularism. Already in the 1940s Löwith has

argued that the modern idea of progress is a secularized form of Christian salvation history.¹¹ Anidjar’s reference thus highlights that current debates are not unprecedented—on the contrary, they do relate, more or less openly, to postwar discourses, when the question of secularization was debated among such authors as Löwith, Eric Voegelin, Carl Schmitt, Hans Blumenberg, and Jacob Taubes. To understand the ambiguities and paradoxes implied in the category today, it is essential to take these earlier discourses into account, namely, the substantial critique of the concept of secularization in Blumenberg’s magisterial work *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, which is still the most elaborated and influential discussion of the problem.

Initially, Blumenberg criticized Löwith’s thesis as a misconception of the modern idea of progress; farther on, he generalized and expanded his critique to the entire philosophical-historical discourse. Correspondingly, the first two chapters of *Legitimacy* try to demonstrate that other theories of secularization are themselves grounded in a thesis resembling Löwith’s. Hence before beginning his critique, Blumenberg constructs a unified *thesis* of secularization.¹² What is decisive here is his distinction between two meanings attached to the use of the term *secularization*:

There is after all a difference between, on the one hand, saying that in a particular state the “secularization of the countryside” is very advanced and that this is indicated by empirical decline of obligations owed by village communities to the church, and, on the other hand, formulating the thesis that the capitalist valuation of success in business is the secularization of “certainty of salvation” in the context of the reformation doctrine of predestination.¹³

A general fading of religion (an entity is secularized) thus must be distinguished from an object that undergoes transformation (an entity is secularized *into* something)—in the first place we could speak of an intransitive usage, in

11. See Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications for the Philosophy of History*, trans. Hermann Kersting (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

12. See Ulrich Ruh, *Säkularisierung als Interpretationskategorie: Zur Bedeutung des christlichen Erbes in der modernen Geistesgeschichte* (Freiburg: Herder, 1980). In substance Karl Löwith already criticizes this procedure while repudiating the reproach of substantialism. See Löwith, “Besprechung des Buches *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* von Hans Blumenberg,” in *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Klaus Stichweh, 9 vols. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1981–86), 2:452–59.

13. Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 10. Blumenberg calls the Weber thesis “a model one for theorems of secularization” in this context (*ibid.*). He also hints at the distinction between transitive and intransitive secularization without explicating it (4–5).

7. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); on this development in general, see Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

8. Friedrich Gogarten, *Despair and Hope for Our Time* (1953), trans. Thomas Wieser (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1970).

9. See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

10. Gil Anidjar, “Secularism,” *New German Critique*, no. 33 (2006): 62.

the second of one that is transitive. For Blumenberg, the second use asserts a kind of immutable ideational substance: "Only where the category of substance dominates the understanding of history are there repetitions, superimpositions and dissociations—and also, for that matter, disguises and unmaskings."¹⁴ Theology, he argues, embeds itself in this substantialism, which identifies the foundational archetype with the unsurpassable and inalienable religious origin of modern ideas. In the face of this origin, the modern age is denounced as unoriginal and dependent on a Christian origin it denies. Secularization is thus, according to Blumenberg, an *Unrechtskategorie*, a category of injustice, expressed in the historical origin of the term, which denotes first and foremost the appropriation of the church's property for profane needs.

In a range of contexts, Blumenberg correctly emphasized that the secularization concept hovered between historical and theological usage: it can, in fact, equally designate a historical process and the proper relation of faith to the world. But he himself constantly honed this ambivalence on its theological side, and this side in turn to foreground the controversy over the modern age's legitimacy, as if theology had no other task than calling modernity into question. Nonetheless, even if we do not wish to share Blumenberg's suspicion of theology, we need to acknowledge that in many cases of older intellectual history, the objection of substantialism is justified. Here it is often referred to as the "transmission," the "transformation," and not least of all the "secularization" of ideas, not recognizing that these ideas are themselves constructions, whereas, in concrete historical studies, it is scarcely possible to delineate how such "transformative" processes—Hans Jonas here aptly referring to an "alchemy of ideas"—took place.¹⁵

However, what does follow from Blumenberg's critique? Does it force us to give up the category altogether or at least limit us to the seemingly nonproblematic intransitive understanding of secularization? To leave aside the question as to whether this allegedly neutral use is indeed as harmless as depicted, it does not seem to be an option to abandon the transitive use altogether.¹⁶ For even if it were possible to replace secularization in sociology or history with

more-differentiated concepts such as de-Christianization and desacralization, this would fail when applied to cultural texts. For here the purpose is not to classify phenomena by certain indexes but to decipher complex systems of signification. When these systems refer to religion, profanity, and secularization (if not directly to the term, then to the concept), this cannot a priori be considered a mere reflex of social processes of de-Christianization or a differentiation of functional systems but rather has to be scrutinized in all its complexity and ambiguity.¹⁷ Consequently, in the framework of research on both literature and culture, it is hardly possible to completely dismiss a strong notion of secularization. In fact, in its ambiguity and openness, the concept appears well suited for interdisciplinary labor involving paradigms from various scholarly realms: in the concept of secularization, the phenomena at work in transforming religion, taken apart through historical and sociological analysis, are still conceived together.

Against that backdrop, it is no coincidence that Blumenberg assigns secularization a certain subordinate right within the realm of literature. For especially in early modernity, according to Blumenberg, the "Rhetoric of Secularization" played an important role: either religious language furnished names for newly emerging phenomena, or religious speech was put to blasphemous use.¹⁸ But for Blumenberg, what was manifest here was not an appropriation of the thing itself but simply language or, more precisely, simply words and metaphors. For strikingly, in his book's section on the rhetoric of secularization, Blumenberg examines only individual *topoi* like creation, incarnation, and symbol, without subjecting any individual texts to a close reading. Moreover, his critical treatment of rhetoric contrasts his general interest in "metaphorology," that is, the epistemic importance of metaphors in scientific and philosophical discourse.¹⁹ Here, however, he seems to identify rhetoric with nonliteral speech, on the one hand, and strategic, ideological intentions, on the other, which is to say, with the interest in the defense or disputing of the modern age's legitimacy, to which he quickly turns.

17. In Niklas Luhmann's theory of social system, modernization is conceived as functional differentiation. Importantly, Luhmann is himself careful enough to use the term *secularization* for processes only *within* the religious system: it designates the effects of functional differentiation on religion or represents the category through which functionally differentiated religion observes its environment. See Luhmann, *Funktion der Religion* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), esp. 225–71.

18. See the chapter "Rhetoric of Secularization" in Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 103–21.

19. See Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, trans. Robert Savage (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

14. *Ibid.*, 9.

15. Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1924), 36–37.

16. Blumenberg's example of the decline of church attendance is indeed far from unproblematic and is strongly discussed in the sociology of religion of the 1960s; see Thomas Luckmann, *Invisible Religion: The Transformation of Symbols in Industrial Society* (London: Macmillan, 1967). At issue here is an implicit definition of religion that can scarcely claim neutrality; in reality, the problems involved in defining religion seem to correspond to those involved in defining secularization.

Thus the procedure is repeated through which, already at the start, Blumenberg constructed a general secularization thesis buttressing a wide range of discourses. But in actuality, we do not need to assign the various discourses of secularization either a clear intention or a clear and massive *thesis*. Rather, we can ascertain a series of argumentative figures, which by their figural nature and even opaqueness point to the concept's fundamental obscurity, which is more than a strategic dissimulation. Thus, to reflect on secularization after Blumenberg, we need to take his justified critique seriously, in particular avoiding substantialism when we use the concept. But we also need to avoid its philosophical-polemical constriction to achieve a more profound conception of the importance and meaning of the rhetoric of secularization.

There is a telling gap in Blumenberg's *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*: he mentions "Max Weber's thesis of the historical origin of capitalism from Puritanism" only once, a thesis to which, he observes, the "response of historians" was "predominantly negative," while "that of theologians was predominantly positive."²⁰ In alignment with Edmund Husserl's *Krisis* text and Sigmund Freud's cultural psychology, he presents Weber's famous essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, first published in 1905, as an effort to rationalize modern discontent whose sweeping construction hides an underlying discontent. This marginal position is all the more surprising because Weber has a central role for discourse on secularization, both transitive and intransitive. For not only does he set the agenda for a modern sociology of religion, but his writings deeply influenced those intellectuals who express their discomfort with modernity in terms of religion. Georg Lukács, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno further think through the ambivalence of Weber's "disenchantment" formula, which can be understood, intransitively, as a vanishing of magic and, transitively, as a "disenchancing" of something (through counter magic). They formulate the secularization concept "dialectically": modern disenchantment is renewed enchantment.²¹ Mediated through this reception, we can trace the concept's course in the postwar period back to Weber's particular constellation of religion and modernity. In not attempting a detailed engagement with Weber in *Legitimacy*, Blumenberg

20. Ibid., 118.

21. On Weber's role in the ideas in Lukács, Bloch, Schmitt, Benjamin, and Adorno, see Norbert Bolz, *Auszug aus der entzauberten Welt: Philosophischer Extremismus zwischen den Weltkriegen* (Munich: Fink, 1989). A grappling with Weber also plays an early, crucial role in the thinking of Löwith, the initial opponent of Blumenberg; see Karl Löwith, *Max Weber and Karl Marx* (1960), trans. Hans Fantel (London: Routledge, 1993).

thus avoids just that point where the concept's transitive and intransitive usages intersect.

To be sure—and this is the reason he so rarely appears in Blumenberg—Weber developed no strong *concept* of secularization. To the contrary, an overview of his writing reveals very rare use of the term (about twenty times), and then as a rule in the totally nonmetaphorical sense of an expropriation of ecclesiastical property, more seldom in the general sense of decline of religion.²² He uses the term transitively only as an exception, and then in quotation marks: the Dutch Calvinists, for example, "secularized" the religious value of poverty to mean that "the mass of men only labour when necessity forces them to do so."²³ Weber thus did not apply the general interpretive category of secularization in the self-evident sense of many of his contemporaries. Significantly, in the reception of *The Protestant Ethic* there was quick recourse to the term—above all by Julius Rachfahl, who used it in a very general sense that is then not addressed in Weber's rejoinders.

Moreover, the alternative concept of disenchantment—*Entzauberung*—likewise only conditionally has the status of a basic concept in Weber's writing. This term as well is rarely used and hardly ever developed conceptually: Weber does speak of the "great religious-historical process of the disenchantment of the world," as a step-by-step elimination of magical forms of healing,²⁴ but such formulations are present only in summaries or added belatedly to the material historical studies, where they are rare. Weber does not describe the relationship between capitalism and Protestantism as one of "disenchantment," and the development of world religions is explained not through the concept (as if there were an autonomous logic of disenchantment) but through concrete

22. Weber thus speaks of "secularization" of antique temple holdings or of monasteries in the Frankish Empire, less often, in the derived sense, of "secularization of legal ordinances" or, more broadly, of "secularization" of life or thought. In all cases, the meaning is privative and intransitive in the above sense: when in view of the loss of significance of sects in America, Weber speaks of the "characteristic process of 'secularization,' to which in modern times all phenomena that originated in religious conceptions succumb" ("The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Heinz H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills [New York: Oxford University Press, 1964], 307), he means a fading of religion, its adaptation to worldliness, and thus loss of a pronounced religious character.

23. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, ed. R. H. Tawney, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner, 1958), 177. There are only a few other passages in Weber's work showing such "transitive" usage. Weber thus names the entailed estate a "secularized copy of an Arabic institution" (Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978], 644); he likewise designated clubs in America as a "product of the secularization process." Whether the reference here is to vanishing of significance or to transformation remains uncertain.

24. Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 105 (translation modified by Joel Golb).

examinations of competing group interests.²⁵ Beyond this, Weber almost always speaks of “disenchantment” in the privative sense mentioned above, but offers exceptional references to something being disenchanted *into* something. The most well-known location is in his famous lecture “Science as a Vocation”: “The many old gods, disenchanted and thus taking the form of impersonal forces, ascend from their graves; they strive to gain power over our lives and again take up their eternal mutual struggle.”²⁶ Weber here seems to be thinking of a kind of reenchancement, thus confirming an interpretation along the lines of a “dialectic of enlightenment.” But is this passage really meant by Weber as a key to his work or as merely the rhetorical climax of a talk? Weber’s text leaves the answer open, refraining as elsewhere from an explicit and well-formulated theory of disenchantment.

It is striking that two ongoing readings of the passage stand directly opposed: Weber is read, on the one hand, as a theorist of modernization—something usually tied to a “rational reconstruction” of his arguments—and, on the other hand, as a bourgeois anti-Marxist who glorifies capitalism as fate.²⁷ Where within the first reading the struggle of the gods is merely an inapt stylistic flourish, the second takes it literally as the sign of a mythological conception of history. But both readings overlook not only the passage’s rhetorical nature—which cannot be either taken literally or ignored—but also the fragmentary element in Weber’s work, which, as suggested, offers neither a systematic analysis nor a complete history of disenchantment. Weber’s broader opus comprises a series of essays and needs to be read as such. Their mode of expression does not present itself as either terminologically precise or as the simple ornament of a theory, but simply the expression of something that cannot be said in another way.²⁸ On account of its vagueness, Weber’s diction has

25. That is, for example, the case in Weber’s essays on ancient Judaism where the explanatory key is not, as with many of Weber’s contemporaries, an autonomous process of “spiritualization” but a conflict between urban and rural leading groups in Israelite society; see Eckart Otto, *Max Webers Studien des Antiken Judentums* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002).

26. Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation” (1919), in Gerth and Mills, *From Max Weber*, 149 (no translator indicated; translation modified by Joel Golb).

27. For the first position, see, e.g., Wolfgang Schluchter, *Religion und Lebensführung*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988); on the metaphor of the battle of the gods, see 1:346–51. For the second position, see Jacob Taubes, *From Cult to Culture: Fragments toward a Critique of Historical Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 258–61. Taubes takes the citation entirely literally as a resuscitation of the antique theory of fate, beneath which in the end rule and mythic violence are hidden.

28. On Weber’s essayism, see Philippe Despoix, *Éthiques du désenchantement: Essais sur la modernité allemande au début du siècle* (Paris: Harmattan, 1995). Despoix, however, draws Weber’s way of writing too closely to that of true essayists such as Landauer and Lukács, which overlooks that Weber was also writing as a professional historian—not, to be sure, as a theorist or philosopher.

developed into a kind of jargon of secularization, taken up by everyone. Weber’s particular intellectual function is thus to furnish the language in which secularization is discussed without having formulated his own clear thesis.

Weber is also a historian; his historical writing forms part of the *premises* for the secularization thesis considered by Blumenberg. We can here schematically separate the *secularization thesis* as a general historical-philosophical statement from *secularization formulas* that diagnose various historical cases of secularization. Debates on secularization have repeatedly circled around a small number of such formulas: “human rights are a secularization of Christian freedom of conscience”; “sovereignty is a secularization of divine omnipotence”; “the working ethos is a secularization of the Protestant need for salvation”; “the idea of progress is a secularization of salvational history,” to name the most important. Weber’s assertions—his succinct, repeatedly presented secularization topoi—do not necessarily amount to “implementations” of a general concept of secularization; on the contrary, this very concept appears to owe an essential part of its plausibility to these formulas. This means, then, that the historical examination of individual phenomena first produces evidence of secularization, which then serves as the basis for philosophical and theological theses. It also means not only that his *concept* of secularization is inherently rhetorical as a result of being borrowed from the juridical sphere, but that his entire discourse of secularization works through *rhetorical evidence*, in other words, through the example.

Furthermore, the secularization formulas are rhetorical in a more precise sense, because they mostly rest on intuitive similitude. We can understand them as rhetorical figures, more precisely as tropes, since what we are consistently facing here is, in fact, the relationship between two terms. The simplest form in which this can be circumscribed is with the word *actually* or, in terms of rhetoric, *literally*: “actually” the idea of progress is (secularized) salvational history; “literally” the spirit of capitalism is that of the (secularized) puritan ethic; and so on. The topoi’s succinctness is grounded in the relation between the two terms not being rendered explicit, as is the case with metaphors: when we say that attributes of divine omnipotence are “transferred” to the universe, this means that a particular metaphorical expression can be articulated, for example, that the universe is “reigned” by the laws of nature.²⁹

29. The rhetoricity of secularization here applies to evidence of secularization *discourse*; it thus does not necessarily imply an assertion that the process also unfolded through metaphor *historically* (this is the thesis of August Langen, “Zum Problem der sprachlichen Säkularisation in der deutschen Dichtung des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts,” *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 83 [1963]: 24–42).

To conceive a “rhetoric of secularization” does not imply that the discourse of secularization is *merely* rhetorical, that it covers, distorts, or hides another argument, as Blumenberg tends to assume. Nor is this metaphorical transfer necessarily “substantialist” in the way that Blumenberg criticizes transitive models of secularization. To understand the structure and force of the rhetoric of secularization, we must depart from a theory of figures that sees in metaphors nothing else than a replacement of something actual by what has been transferred. In actuality, metaphors consist not only of an exchanged word but of the tension between the metaphorical expression and its *context*.³⁰ Secularization formulas can themselves be considered examples of such tension, with the context and the inserted “metaphorical” element—technically speaking, tenor and vehicle—being functionally interchangeable: it is possible to both work a modern word into a religious sentence (Christians are the communists of antiquity) and do the reverse (communists are the Christians of modernity). The individual motif is thus understandable only in the context in which it is elaborated, and, as a rule, the context is not of a logical or argumentatively explicit nature—hence no secularization thesis in the above sense—but rather involves a linkage of rhetorical, narrative, and argumentative procedures. The analysis of these techniques has an important mediating function. Before *theories* of secularization develop from single *formulas*, these join to form *texts* whose coherence is likewise implicit. Secularization is here not (or not only) directly expressed but represented with complex procedures that become *literary* where form and contents converge: where the statement prescribes a specific form and the form supports the statement and renders it plausible. Such complex texts both bar unambiguous interpretations and evade the interpretive power of their authors; consequently, they can be neither translated into a clear, authentic meaning—whether theological or secular—nor reduced to their authors’ strategic intentions. Hence in the face of Blumenberg’s denunciation of secularization as an inauthentic and illegitimate concept, the present discussion is aimed at understanding the irreducible role played by the form in which it is put forward.

The historical dimension of secularization, the concept’s inclination and capacity to become the center of a great narrative, has distorted our view of these complex semantic processes. To really understand the concept of secularization, we must thus “read” its textual representations and rhetoric. Such a rhetorical-literary perspective might allow a new approach to emerge, follow-

30. On the theory of metaphor and the idea of an innate tension within metaphorical constructions, see Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies in the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (London: Routledge, 1975), esp. the discussion of I. A. Richards, Max Black, and Monroe C. Beardsley.

ing Blumenberg: an approach taking up his critique but going beyond the concept’s philosophical and ideological-critical fixing. This involves a double displacement: from the secularization thesis to statements of secularization, and from the ideological criticism to literary rhetoric. It is the very movement from the rhetoric of the word *secularization* to the rhetoric of secularization as a specific genre, that is, as a literary interaction of a group of themes and forms of argumentation.

Now we can consider the rhetoric of secularization by way of Weber’s work, as elided from Blumenberg’s discussion. That can be undertaken in this discussion only through selected examples, with no claims to doing justice to Weber’s oeuvre or saying something new about its genesis or intellectual-historical context, since focusing on rhetoric requires a consciously superficial reading within whose framework relationships on the textual surface are crucial for understanding the structure and contents of its argument.

Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is a complex text and by no means reducible to the figure of capitalism as “actually” being Protestantism. Already considered at first glance, the text consists of the interconnection and fusion of two forms of relationship between capitalism and Protestantism: structural similarity and genetic origin, hence rhetorically metaphor and metonymy. It is the connection between these two elements that complicates the text’s argument and prevents it from being read straightforwardly.

Weber begins with the similarity between capitalism and Protestantism, albeit on an external level: as a statistical correlation of confession and choice of vocation. In the pages that follow he *criticizes* all other possible manifestations and actual claims of direct similarity. Protestantism, he argues, is neither simply hostile to tradition—it in fact founded a new tradition—nor marked by “secularity”; on the contrary, Calvinism emphatically criticizes the profane world. For Weber, the relation between Protestantism and capitalism must involve a third entity: the “spirit” of capitalism, representing a specific ethos tied to both vocation and asceticism. Weber introduces this spirit cautiously and critically, as the “‘spirit of work,’ of ‘progress,’ or however else it is described, whose awakening tends to be ascribed to Protestantism,” then adding the caveat that it is “not to be understood, as is usually now the case, as ‘worldly joy’ or otherwise in any ‘Enlightenment’ sense.”³¹ This “spirit” is not

31. Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 44–45 (translation modified by Joel Golb). I use parenthetical page numbers to refer to this text. Weber’s critique of the repeated assertion by cultural Protestants of a “natural affinity” between Protestantism and modernism is what furnishes his position with its dialectic strength, a quality rendering it a touchstone for later “dialectic” secularization discourse.

a concept but a character, something that Weber calls a "historical individual," which cannot be defined formally but "must be gradually put together out of the individual parts" (47).³² Moreover, Weber stresses this spirit's paradoxical nature, that economic earning "is thought . . . so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational" (53). Capitalism interchanges means (work) and ends (life): "This reversal of what we should call the natural relationship, so irrational from a naïve point of view, is evidently as definitely a leading principle of capitalism" (53). Hence the agent of Weber's history, the "spirit of capitalism," is by no means the spirit of rationalism, Weber thus narrating not simply its single, linear history, as prevailing, say, against traditionalism. On the contrary, the "spirit" is a "deep" character precisely because of its paradoxical nature, and as such, it is a predestined agent of a multilayered and even ironic story: apparently so mechanically rational, capitalism in reality contains a "spirit." Precisely this "unnaturalness" demands an explanation, for which Weber will have recourse in religion, which likewise postulates an ethos beyond concepts of utility.³³

The paradox of an irrational rationalism forms the basis for Weber's description and the core of a tragic plot. What is manifest here is not only a logical paradox but also a temporal one: after emphasizing the "unnatural" "inversion" of the capitalist spirit, Weber further emphasizes that *present-day* capitalism no longer needs that spirit, for economic behavior within developed capitalism is nothing more than adaptation to the market. The "spirit of capitalism" has thus taken on historical individuality only in that it has *become historical*. Its paradox is visible only when we compare the past with the present. Without that historical narrative, without the description of *how* the spirit develops and changes, Weber's text would hardly be plausible. The spirit and the argument have thus to be explained narratively, which is to say integrated

32. The "spirit" here appears not as a theoretical construct but as an actor that we demonstratively see before we comprehend: as a "provisional description" of the spirit of capitalism (48). Weber here cites Benjamin Franklin's "Advice to a Young Tradesman"; we only really understand the example when he returns to Franklin's text in his study's last pages.

33. The unnatural inversion of the modern spirit corresponds to a complex idea of rationalization, "an historical concept which covers a whole world of different things" (78), so that Weber can also speak of rationalization into an irrational mode of life. On the inversion of means and ends, see also Löwith, *Max Weber and Karl Marx*. The opening of Weber's narrative is no less paradoxical than its end: the radical theory of predestination by no means leads inherently to its capitalist consequences; to the contrary, it seems to offer no spurs to action whatsoever. Only the inversion of the relationship between the state of grace and action—the latter no longer being a result but rather a sign of the former—makes the theory potentially effective.

into a structure of meaning, without being subsumed to general laws. Because this integration is not only qualitatively indeterminate, the unity of meaning itself remaining fragile, such explanations are always complex. Consequently the narration is never simply a form of chronological enumeration but is also a form of structuring through perspective, specific temporality, and other narrative means.³⁴

Weber's narrative is in its turn complex, distinguished by numerous leaps and great flexibility of temporal steps and modes, easily moving from early Christianity to Reformation and modernity or vice versa, and combining past and present tenses in the narration, a method not always represented in the English translation. Moreover, Weber's narration is repeatedly interrupted. The depictions of circumstances are far more frequent than those of actions; beyond this, reflective methodological or general explications are regularly inserted into the narration. Following long preliminary comments on the dissimilarity of Protestantism and capitalism, the paradox of the irrational-rational spirit, and the approach to vocation as an ethic, the narration begins when Weber introduces the characters of his plot, the different forms of ascetic Protestantism. But less than two pages later he turns to methodological problems centered on theology's motivational significance. After this excursus, he returns to Calvinism as one of the characters, before then abruptly turning from considerations of plot to description, more precisely, to a paraphrase of the doctrine of predestination:

The Father in heaven of the New Testament, so human and understanding, who rejoices over the repentance of a sinner as a woman over the lost piece of silver she has found, is gone. His place has been taken by a transcendental being, beyond the reach of human understanding, who with His quite incomprehensible decrees has decided the fate of every individual and regulated the tiniest details of the cosmos from eternity. God's grace is, since His decrees cannot change, as impossible for those to whom He has granted it to lose as it is unattainable for those to whom He has denied it. In its extreme inhumanity this doctrine must above all have had one consequence for the life of a generation which surrendered to its magnificent consistency. That was a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual. (103–4)

Weber has no problem with speaking of the "Father in Heaven" (instead of a "belief in God"). He depicts a replacement of gods; in the third sentence,

34. See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), esp. 5–11.

changing to present tense, he directly quotes the doctrine of predestination without any distinction between the quoted theology and the quoting sociologist. But then, quite abruptly, the text turns from description to plot, namely, to the consequence, before it continues to describe the condition of loneliness on the following pages, once more in commenting and paraphrasing form. The actual plot of Weber's study thus unfolds in the interface between descriptions, developing backward, as it were, in the summaries and prospects they offer.³⁵

That Weber presents us with no linear narrative is inherent to his method: contrary to most contemporary, "historicist" writers of history, he knows no "natural" agents, but these must be repeatedly constructed and reflected. No fixed causality or natural development exists between the ideal types composed in this manner, but only an elective affinity, in other words, a definable and explicitly assignable correlation, for instance, between the urban middle class and a certain ethic of work. But beyond this specific justification on the level of typological causality, a certain type of narrative also renders the plot plausible: Weber *motivates* his story through both rhetorical underpinning and narrative representation, involving a topographical logic of opposition, along with symbols, allusion, and anticipation. What is explicitly described only as a (typologically) probable sequence of contingent events is rendered into an increasingly "necessary" development—one that could unfold "in no other way."³⁶

The motivational process takes effect on various levels. First, on a purely compositional level, *The Protestant Ethic* is always motivated when the narrated (hi)story runs parallel with the narrating text, for example, when a discussion of "isolation" surfaces at the very moment it becomes potent in the narrative. The motivation intensifies when it is prepared. We thus find Baxter's Puritan time-saving anticipating the phenomenon as manifest in capitalism: "It does not *yet* hold, with Franklin, that time is money, but the proposition is true

35. Similarly, Weber sets a personified form of asceticism into play: "Now it strode into the marketplace of life, slammed the door of the monastery behind it, and undertook to penetrate just that daily routine of life with its methodicalness" (154). The abstract and generalized observations of the introduction and the "Intermediate Reflections" of Weber's *Economic Ethic of the World Religions* represent a similar phenomenon.

36. On motivation as explanation integrated into the narrative, see Gérard Genette, "Vraisemblance et motivation," in *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), 71–101. Because motivation fluctuates between the perspective of the actor and that of a narrator overseeing the text's events, it often leads to characteristic ambivalences. Weber's concept of "elective affinities" itself has distinct literary connotations in Goethe's novel.

in a certain spiritual sense (158; my emphasis). Here similarity is the kernel of a development whose history will itself be motivated through similarity: it simply confirms what the comparison already anticipated.³⁷

But, second, the wealth of Weber's description itself already renders the plot likely: during the long paraphrase of Calvinist doctrine, the action, as it were, accumulates, expectation for its progress intensifying: the doctrine, presented so thoroughly, "has to" now lead to individual and social isolation. And Weber's contextual descriptions are extraordinarily rich; quite often the main argumentative line vanishes beneath a plenitude of corollary observations strengthening an impression that everything being narrated is connected. Especially in the notes, many descriptions and commentaries are not related directly to the matter at hand yet increase the likelihood of what is being described through their vivid quality. Weber thus offers highly concrete, personally colored "primal scenes" of the Protestant spirit—often these are travel experiences, hence actually stem from the observer's estranged perspective—with an incisiveness not easy to forget. We thus read of the ascetically frugal businessman who does not wish to accept expensive medical treatment; of the American who steers his business as a sport, in contrast to his distinction-conscious German son-in-law; or of the baptism of an American sect that confirms its members' integrity and financial soundness.

Weber also appears to motivate his plot through virtuously manipulated paraphrase. For the most part, he introduces historical examples through indirect speech or quote-introducing verbs.³⁸ The changing temporal structure and perspective allow him not only to describe external positions from the outside but even to furnish them with their own voice. In the above-cited passage on the effects of the doctrine of predestination, Weber's paraphrase of the Calvinist idea of grace seems to lead "naturally" to its effects, namely, to the isolation of the believer. In other passages, the presence of different levels of paraphrase or citation allow a smoothed-over transition from the description of outside

37. A leaping between temporal levels is very typical. For instance, in the midst of his explanation of seventeenth-century asceticism, Weber leaps to the present, maintaining that "the emphasis on the ascetic importance of a fixed calling provided an ethical justification of the modern specialized division of labour" (163), although such specialists did not yet exist at the time of the action.

38. Similar blendings of direct and indirect discourse are above all found at the climaxes of Weber's account and in the context of a theme Weber finds especially appealing: divine will as incomprehensible or only partly known. We thus read as follows: "We can only hold to these fragments of eternal truth. Everything else—the *meaning* of our individual fate—is surrounded by dark secrets; fathoming them is impossible and presumptuous" (103; translation modified by Joel Golb). The successive vanishing of temporal marking, starting on the page before, is striking.

views to his own commentary, endowing the argumentation with coherence and necessity.³⁹

In any event, *The Protestant Ethic* is above all motivated by a system of correspondences structuring its narrative beneath the explicit level of elective affinities. Again and again, Weber compares the events and actors he is describing to modern phenomena: the arrangement of time in capitalism corresponds to monastic practice; the Puritans' sexual morality resembles that manifest in rational sexual hygiene; the standardization of products corresponds to the increasing uniformity evident in modern ways of living. The distinction, decisive in Weber's text, between Calvinism and Lutheranism is itself clarified through a comparison with the present: Calvinism corresponds to the English ascetic character, Lutheranism to the cordial national character of the Germans. Or somewhat differently, Calvinism is the religion of businesspeople, Lutheran pietism a religion for the leisure class. For Weber, these relations neither are causal nor have a typological function such as the elective affinity between the middle class and asceticism—an affinity whose development Weber sees as explicit and reflective. In contrast, the interconnections at work here have a figurative rather than an argumentative function. They are in a way "not meant entirely seriously"; rather, they emerge in passing in the framework of the narration and historical argument.

Through these and similar procedures, Weber's (hi)story gains a forceful and necessary character, without making explicit the nature of causality at work here. The strength of this sort of narrative explanation rests in the possibility of leaving the foundations of one's own argumentation, one's own standpoint, in the dark. Weber thus sometimes seems to be using a kind of historical psychology while explicitly denying psychology competence for the relationships he is describing.⁴⁰

39. The already cited sentence on Calvinist pastoral care is again typical: "In the place of the humble sinners to whom Luther promises grace if they trust themselves to God in penitent faith are bred those self-confident saints whom we can rediscover in the hard Puritan merchants of the heroic age of capitalism and in isolated instances down to the present" (Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 111–12). Weber here initially speaks in unmarked fashion of humble sinners in Luther's name; he then speaks in marked fashion of self-certain saints; and finally apparently in his own name of the merchants of the past and present.

40. In the Protestantism text, with "spirit" as its central theme, this psychology is still very present. Weber speaks of "inhibitions and passions" (131), much more than the similar accounts of his colleague and contemporary Ernst Troeltsch (e.g., in *Protestantism and Progress: A Historical Study of the Relation of Protestantism to the Modern World*, trans. W. Montgomery [Boston: Beacon, 1958]).

A typical structure for narrations of secularization seems present in the problems and solutions highlighted in Weber's Protestantism text. For these narrations consistently wish to say two things: that something else has developed from religion, but that this something else remains religious in a certain way; that religion resembles modernism but is still, after all, radically different from it. Both the paraphrasing and the narrative topography of correspondences allow a text to emerge in which religion and capitalism are aligned and can explain each other. The narration thus resorts again to metaphor, with metaphor inversely being possible precisely because it is a function of narration. Similarity and sequence, metaphor and metonymy point to each other in order to represent the impossible transition from the doctrine of predestination to the commercial spirit. A typical narrative problem, crossing an uncrossable border, is thus solved in a typically narrative manner: by combining narrative and literary-rhetorical "motivation."

Secularization can thus be understood as narrative, more precisely as motivated narrative. But a narrative is not simply the presentation of a story; it also always implies a relationship between what is narrated and the account itself, between the story's contents and the *narration*—that is, the instance implicit in a narrative text that seems to have generated it. This instance can be abstract to the point of vanishing, as usually is the case in historical scholarship, where events are generally settled in a distant past, whereas a relationship to the present is established at the most in a foreword or similar paratext. The narrative has no distinct perspective—it knows everything, even what occurs later—its voice representing the indistinct voice of science.⁴¹ Weber's text, however, is much more dramatic in that it continually relates past and present, implying changing forms of perspectives.

This is most manifest in the story's temporal structure. As I have shown, for Weber the spirit of capitalism is the fleeting spirit of a seventeenth-century transition—that century in which the post-Reformation doctrinal development joins the heroic phase of capitalist primary accumulation. But the story does not stop here, Weber concluding with the question of what became of the religious-capitalistic ethos in the centuries that followed. At this point, where

41. On the standard form of "smooth" historical narration, see Roland Barthes, "Le discours de l'histoire," in *Le bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 163–77; on the relationship between historiography and the historical institution, see Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), esp. 56–113.

the narrated history approaches the narrative present, the mode of narration changes: instead of long situational descriptions, the narrative is rapidly accelerated. Weber's complex description of the correspondence between religious and profane spheres now giving way to a linear movement facilitated at several points through a metaphor of *Absterben*, "dying out." We thus read that the capitalist spirit established itself only "after the peak of the purely religious enthusiasm was past. Then the intensity of the search for the Kingdom of God commenced gradually to pass over into sober economic virtue; the religious roots died out [*starben ab*] slowly, giving way to utilitarian worldliness" (176).

Here the opposition between "nature" and "spirit" through which Weber initially developed the specific irrationalism of capitalism (the capitalism now manifest to us as nature was previously spirit) is given another turn. A natural relation of "dying out" now complements the "spiritual" exchange relation between religion and ethos; the "spiritual" logic of transformation is displaced into a "spectral" logic of fading and haunting. For—and this, as is well known, constitutes the tragic fable of Weber's narrative—only the dissolution of religious ties completes the change undergone by spirit, but this change simultaneously dissolves spirit, allowing capitalism to become what it is for us at present, nature. Consequently, Weber's secularization cannot be understood as religiosity turned profane but only in terms of an ambivalent entity interlinking two entirely different types of transformation, and two entirely different modes of narrative: a narrative of spirit and a narrative of nature. In encapsulated form, Weber already establishes the above-mentioned juncture between transitive and intransitive secularization at this point in his text.

The significance of this second, dying-out movement becomes especially clear in the text's famous conclusion, where Weber again summarizes his thesis and closes his argumentative arc, returning to his initially cited text of Benjamin Franklin and asking, above all, what has and will become of the spirit of capitalism. The passage merits extensive citation:

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. . . . In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the "saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment." But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage. Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. Today the spirit of religious asceticism—whether finally, who knows?—has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer. The rosy blush of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems

also to be irretrievably fading, and the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfillment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, or when, on the other hand, it need not be felt simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all. In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport. No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved." But this brings us to the world of judgments of value and of faith, with which this purely historical discussion need not be burdened. (181–82)

Weber here intertwines his idea of the birth of the spirit of capitalism from Christian asceticism with a cultural-critical reflection on this capitalism's present and future. Where up to now he has reported on a history that has transpired—while, it is true, repeatedly intimating that more is at stake here—the (hi)story now catches up with the narration and proleptically reaches out for the future. The time of the narration, until now simply implicit, emerges precisely through this overtaking: the previously hidden locus of the text's presentation makes itself manifest at its very conclusion.

The text in any event masks this surprising turn through highly subtle transitions. To develop his famous description of the modern social and economic order as an "iron cage," Weber balances citation and paraphrase, the image initially introduced by the "cloak" of which Baxter spoke. Weber then comes back to spirit, which has now left the cage, does not have a proper place anymore, and "prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs." Thus asceticism no longer animates capitalism but haunts modernity in posing all the questions about the future the text raises in its end.

At this point in Weber's text, we are again confronted with a form of motivation—this time, to be sure, less narrative than "poetic," hence tied to the associative logic of the images on the textual surface. Their correspondences allow readers to forget hard gaps and thematic changes; their coherence bestows the same necessity on the text as the fatality of which it speaks. In the forceful logic of its conclusion, its object increasingly vanishes: "spirit" turns into a ghost. But the expiring text also remains open: through the multiple

nigh-apocalyptic conjuring of a menacing future—the escaping of spirit and arrival of either a new prophet or the last human beings—the narrative remains in suspension. Even Weber's final comments are ambivalent. In leaving behind the heroic age, Weber now confronts the whole process once again from the outside, asking what sense and fate capitalism has as such. In one more associative chain—no one knows the future; no one knows if entirely new prophets will be among us; or else spiritless specialism will dominate the future—Weber's text increasingly transforms itself from a historical treatise to a prophecy at whose end not Weber himself but a Nietzschean voice seems to be speaking. Actually, it is a pseudo-Nietzschean voice, an imitation rather than a citation of Friedrich Nietzsche in whose work we do not find the exact sentence Weber uses. The text's different levels—history and prophecy, direct and indirect discourse—seem to collapse, the argument seems to run away from itself, dissolving itself ever more from what it was before breaking off—and precisely this break-off marks the gulf about to open between text and author.

This conclusion has a decisive function for the “literary” character of *The Protestant Spirit*. We have already considered the text in terms of its diction, hence of a certain form of narration. But what is its status in respect to that other typical characteristic of literary discourse, fiction, technically the invention of a voice ascribed to what is being reported? For what is simulated in literary narrative is less the facts being reported—within the fiction, they are real—than the authority that speaks of these facts: the narrator, distinguishable from the author. As I have shown, citation, paraphrase, and Weber's own speech are often hard to separate, so that it is then hard to tell who is actually speaking. At the study's end, not only is the narration temporally manifest in the arrival of its own time, but a difference also becomes evident between the text's increasingly independent voice and the author, who finally interrupts that voice metaleptically. Although this is not fictional in the actual sense, what is at work here is clearly removed from the null level of scientific discourse. Using a term of Michel de Certeau's, we can refer to the gap between text and author, hence between text and (scientific) authority, as a “theoretical fiction.”⁴² The fictional text does not speak of a fixed, transcendental-invisible place of science but constructs this place within itself—which means that it is authorized only in a paradoxical and fragile way.

This fictionalization has decisive epistemological consequences that are fundamental for the entire discourse of secularization. At the very moment “the” scientific disciplines no longer speak about “the” religious discourses,

42. Certeau, *Writing of History*, 308–9.

the discursive authorities get mixed up. “Science” and “religion” are no longer antagonistic blocks then, and no longer predetermined loci in which discourse simply needs to settle, but form a tense field, within which discourse has to first generate its own locus. Secularization here emerges no longer as an objective process, a history of religion that historians can either confirm or dispute, but as a theoretical speech act. Thus only the question of fiction opens the possibility of treating Blumenberg's question of legitimacy in another framework than that of the history of philosophy and the critique of ideology: namely, as a question of the legitimacy of one's *own* discourse, which must be repeatedly fictionalized and rendered rhetorically plausible. Secularization is here no category of substantive content but one of discursive forms; we can see this with a concluding look at Weber's scientific self-reflection.

Weber's magisterial “Science as a Vocation” outlines his idea of science; at the same time, it shows most clearly his technique of constructing a theoretical voice. From the first, the talk evades direct localization. Weber indicates that he will speak on his theme according to what his student audience “wishes,” but he returns with “pedantry” to his specialized field, the economic situation of scholars.⁴³ He takes up the intended theme only later, once again in the name of his audience: “But I believe you wish to hear of something else, namely, of the inward calling for science.”⁴⁴ Weber thus does not take up the possibility that such a public address offers scholars: to express oneself generally, directly, and completely subjectively. In fact, his observations about the scholar's “inner calling” begin with a sharp polemic aimed at the “idols” of “personality” and “personal experience.”⁴⁵ Mediated by his audience's professed wish, he can explicate not only the question of the scientist's vocation (*scientist* here understood in the same framework as German *Wissenschaft*) but also that of the “vocation of science within the total life of humanity.”⁴⁶ Reservation and hesitation thus allow him to speak simultaneously from within science and about science.

This literally excentric position is also expressed in his theory of values. Again and again Weber stresses that facts and values have to be kept apart and that science has to limit itself to facts. However, Weber does not refrain from

43. Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 129. See the very similar beginning of Weber's “Politics as a Vocation”: “This lecture, which I give at your request, will necessarily disappoint you in a number of ways” (*From Max Weber*, 77).

44. Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 134.

45. *Ibid.*, 137 (translation modified by Joel Golb).

46. *Ibid.*, 140.

talking about values altogether, as one might expect, but continues to speak about the divide in a mythological figure:

I do not know how one might wish to decide "scientifically" the value of French and German culture; for here, too, different gods struggle with one another now and for all times to come. We live as did the ancients when their world was not yet disenchanted of its gods and demons, only we live in a different sense. As Hellenic man at times sacrificed to Aphrodite and at other times to Apollo, and, above all, as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city, so do we still nowadays, only the bearing of man has been disenchanted and denuded of its mystical but inwardly genuine plasticity. Fate, and certainly not "science," holds sway over these gods and their struggles.⁴⁷

In this passage the image of the struggle of the gods is more than a mere illustration, for beyond hints and initial suggestions, Weber actually never developed a full-fledged doctrine of values. Even though he asserted the heterogeneity of the different value spheres, he largely remained silent on both the values' logical nature and arrangement, together with the relationship between the spheres.⁴⁸ The allegory of the struggle of the gods thus *replaces* a missing theory of values with a "pictorial," almost dramatic representation in which values appear as mythical beings, their descriptive quality corresponding to the inescapability Weber asserts they have: they are always already there and cannot be evaded. In this way, the text already points to the dialectic of enlightenment: to a return from the rationality of theory to intuition-grounded myth.

In alternating artfully between persons—we, they, one, I—Weber draws readers into his allegory, which gains momentum as the text proceeds. Already at the end of the cited passage, Weber states that modern pluralism of values is like antique polytheism, only "in a different sense": where the ancient Greeks offered sacrifices to one or another god, what prevails in the modern world is a *struggle* between the gods whose deadly, uncompromising seriousness

Weber consistently emphasizes. For this reason, the difference between science and religion is tied to another difference as the text progresses—that between monotheism and polytheism:

According to our ultimate standpoint, the one is the devil and the other the God, and the individual has to decide which is God for him and which is the devil. And so it goes throughout all the orders of life. The grandiose rationalism of an ethical and methodical conduct of life which flows from every religious prophecy has dethroned this polytheism in favour of the "one thing that is needful." Faced with the realities of outer and inner life, Christianity has deemed it necessary to make those compromises and relative judgments, which we all know from its history. Today the routines of everyday life challenge religion. Many old gods ascend from their graves; they are disenchanted and hence take the form of impersonal forces. They strive to gain power over our lives and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another.⁴⁹

A theory of values is here tied to a history of values that, in the final sentence, brings the allegory of divine battle to its dramatic apogee. Monotheism initially appears in Weber's text only as an interim phase—as a masking of the genuinely polytheistic nature of values, surfacing again at Christianity's end. But this return is not a simple act of repeating. For the theory's actual ethos, the appeal to the *decisive* choice between God and devil, corresponds to a Manichaean dualism rather than to the plural world of the antique gods. Present in Weber's theory of values are not merely (polytheistic) mythic entities but also (monotheistic) ethical duties: we are *meant* to believe in them; the individual is *obliged* to decide. Hence it is not the struggle of the Greek heroes that Weber sees as paradigmatic for the human situation, but the inner struggle of the doubting, sundered Puritans who, despite everything, applied themselves to their professions.⁵⁰

The monotheistic/polytheistic overdetermination at the heart of his approach to values allows Weber not only to take up various relevant images but also to speak descriptively about the large range of values and appellatively

47. Ibid., 147–48.

48. On Weber's approach to values, see Schluchter, *Religion und Lebensführung*, 1:288–96. Because the value theory is presented only in rudimentary form, Schluchter indicates, it has to be "rationally reconstructed." For Löwith, the lack of a true doctrine of values in Weber reflects his nominalism: since he sees only the individual as real, the concrete elaboration of such a doctrine is unimportant. See Karl Löwith, "Max Weber und die Wissenschaft," in *Sämtliche Schriften*, 5:439–41. According to Leo Strauss, Weber rejects the perceptibility of the normative realm to likewise reject the truth of revelation; see Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950). Strauss thus correctly underscores the religious-political conflict present in Weber but considers it only on the explicit level, thus overlooking the function of Weber's religious allusions, citations, and fictions.

49. Weber, "Science as a Vocation," 148–49.

50. Strauss interprets Weber's value theory in general as a combination of atheism and monotheism: "The strife-torn world demands a strife-torn individual. The strife would not go to the root of the individual. . . . [Weber] had to combine the anguish bred by atheism (the absence of any redemption, of any solace) with the anguish bred by revealed religion (the oppressive sense of guilt). Without that combination, life would cease to be tragic and thus lose its depth" (*Natural Right and History*, 65–66).

about the necessity of decision. Explicitly, he insists on separating science and valuation; implicitly the tense image of the battle of the gods allows him to speak simultaneously from inside and outside science—to pursue both a science of values and a doctrine of life. But in the process the discursive authorities again become unstable: it is no longer certain that Weber speaks “about” religion or mythology as a scientist, from a secure distance. For here religion and mythology themselves stand for science, and to the extent that this figuration gains its own weight beyond a purely illustrative function (to the extent, then, that the allegory takes on independent reality), science can also be understood as religion. It is then no longer absolute but becomes one object among others; it is no longer the invisible place out of which the text itself speaks but one among various places from which we can take distance: it is now only “science.”

In this respect, Löwith has rightly spoken of an “excessive use of quotation marks” as characteristic for Weber’s style: “Someone who puts common words within quotes thereby designates them as ‘so-called,’ meaning that they are generally used in this way by others. This implies that I use them in a distanced way, with reservations or, more directly, really with another meaning of my own.”⁵¹ At the same time, the quotation marks also simulate an orality of discourse manifest as recorded emphasis, the spoken authority’s imprint in the text. What speaks in Weber is no longer the transcendental voice of science but a certain voice that, although never easily identifiable (Weber always speaks emphatically but never openly), clearly has its own qualities, its own idiosyncrasies. The quotation marks lead to a distance from text, author, and the authority of truth; because this distance is not openly stated—the quotation marks themselves have no interpretable meaning—it remains indistinct.

The effect of this technique becomes even clearer in the case of actual citations. We have already seen that the “citation” of Nietzsche at the end of Weber’s Protestantism study has an important compositional function in that it introduces an outside voice while fixing a closure. Likewise, a citation plays an important role at the end of “Science as a Vocation,” one of the most incisive passages in Weber’s oeuvre. Here again Weber issues a warning about new salvational doctrines: it is necessary, he insists, to be clearly aware that

for the many who today tarry for new prophets and saviors, the situation is the same as resounds in the beautiful Edomite watchman’s song of the period of exile that has been included among Isaiah’s oracles: “He calleth to me out

of Seir, Watchman, what of the night? The watchman said, The morning cometh, and also the night: if ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come.” The people to whom this was said has enquired and tarried for more than two millennia, and we are shaken when we realize its fate. From this we want to draw the lesson that nothing is gained by yearning and tarrying alone, and we shall act differently. We shall set to work and meet the “demands of the day,” in human relations as well as in our vocation. This, however, is plain and simple, if each finds and obeys the demon who holds the fibers of his very life.⁵²

This text, as well, simulates its own end: the gods become demons, illusory beings between ghost and spirit. Their hybrid nature realizes the aporia of Weber’s theory of values for a last time: the demand to decide, no matter how. The values are here neither described from the outside nor actually evaluated, but rather represented as values—fictionalized, simulated, however we wish to put it. This is realized not through figurative language but through the citation called up by Weber in the arc of his text’s last climax. He is here not only concerned with the specific passage from Isaiah 21:11–12. For the argumentative coherence of his text, the concrete explication of the passage, with its play of question and answer, in fact has no importance, and the same is the case for the framework in which he introduces the citation, a watchman’s song from the time of exile. Rather, the passage points to another “text”—that of prophecy and its specific pathos. Such a reference is inherent in the citation form as such: because a citation always hovers between expressing something and mentioning it, it not only repeats a statement but also refers to an external speech act. We thus do not know whether with his citation Weber is laying claim to prophetic pathos for his own text—this seems suggested by the citation’s emphasis—or whether, to the contrary, this pathos is merely the mentioned object of the text.⁵³ Because the citation is both realized expression and repeated speech act, it encapsulates the possibility of a contradiction endowing it with a pronouncedly “dialectic” function: it is no longer merely controlled “evidence” but really interacts with the text, transforming it into a dialogue of several voices in which there is no longer a place where the author’s meaning or intention is explicit.

In actuality, the function of the Isaiah quotation is even more complex, because Weber draws on it to warn against false prophets: it is paradoxical

52. Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 156.

53. On citation as a relationship between two signification systems, see Antoine Compagnon, *La seconde main, ou le travail de la citation* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), esp. 55–57, 76–82.

51. Löwith, *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, 88.

prophecy of nonprophecy. Where the Nietzschean prophecy is interrupted at the end of the Protestantism text, here it is juxtaposed with another prophecy, since the only thing that helps against one prophet is another—against Nietzsche only Isaiah. This criticism is conveyed not so much by the expressive act itself as by the way it is cited. For the text's coda, Weber's clearly antiprophetic final word to the effect that what is needed is not hope but action does not take up the argumentation of the—actually already completed—essay; rather, it carries forward the prophetic text, that is, the context of the cited passage. The exile, from which the watchman's song stems, leads Weber to the Jewish people and to a warning that presents the Jewish fate of political powerlessness to a German audience in 1918.

Moreover, as the Nietzschean citation was not a citation proper, the citation from Isaiah is problematic too. Weber actually cites Isaiah's dark saying in accordance with the Luther translation, as "If you wish to ask, come again and ask," thus stressing the need to wait, whereas the English translation according to the King James version presents "If you wish to inquire, inquire: return, come," which might be read as a call not to defiant endurance but to conversion. But Weber also "translates" his citation by identifying it as an "Edomite watchman's song." This contemporary interpretation, which even presumes a "scribal failure," reduces the problems posed by the text (one of the most obscure passages in Isaiah) by giving it a known literary context. Weber thus does not insert the citation unaltered into the profane context but renders it understandable in a "rough translation."

In this way, he makes manifest a prominent trait of all forms of discourse on secularization: the religious "origin" they assert as the starting point of the secularization process is not immediately present to them, but in a certain way is already preconstructed, usually by historical disciplines such as the history of religion or, as in Weber's case, biblical criticism. But that very scholarship is modern and displays a secular self-understanding. The secularization asserted here always has "secular" premises; it is dialectic because the object it posits as its other is always already conceptually modern.⁵⁴ If the narrative of secularization and the methodology of the history of religion are thus intertwined, the appearance of the pagan and monotheist "gods" at the center of the doctrine of

values seems only consequent. Here it is manifest that the discourse of secularization has been intertextual all along, whether as a relation between modern and sacred texts or by assimilating sacred citations into one's own modern discourse. Weber's texts are not framed by secularization because they are oriented toward a disenchanted world or, on the other hand, continue to follow religious categories but because they draw their import from the intertextual or interdiscursive relationship between profane and religious discourse.

We can now more clearly understand the particular role Weber's texts play vis-à-vis the discourse of secularization and its dialectic. They establish a simultaneously complex and ambiguous way to speak about the relationship between religion and modernity, about religion within modernity, and about the modernity of religion. Through both historical examples and terminology, they produce condensed formulations that are concise and—in one or another direction—interpretable at once. The fascination exercised by Weber's great thesis of the world's disenchantment becomes comprehensible only when we understand it as both an objectively true or false historical assertion and a certain "style" and view of the world and one's own position toward it: a style that is essential when it comes to the substance of Weber's texts, since in them form often expresses what remains implicit in the argument. Thus Weber's statements on secularization do present not so much theses—explicit judgments—as (sometimes new) descriptions of the phenomenon: "The modern age is secularized Christianity" is less an assertion than a certain way of seeing that age. As this reading of Weber has argued, such "seeing as" can border on fiction, on a "seeing as if."⁵⁵

Although this style has been consequential, it has hardly been examined. The present discussion may perhaps encourage a look at the rhetorical dynamic of other classical texts centered on secularization: at the way a text's mode of narration projects both the unity and difference between its beginning and end; at how the text figuratively presents the locus of its own expression; and finally at how it uses citation or translation to represent the origin it speaks of. With such a new perspective, secularization is also considered differently. As I have shown, the substantialist secularization concept criticized by Blumenberg can be understood as a specific form of rhetoric—metaphor conceived in terms of the theory of substitution. In this sense, secularizing something means transferring it from the (authentically) religious to the (inauthentically) profane.

54. Considered schematically, each approach to secularization contains at least one translation of one of the two terms *sacrality* and *profanity*, the basis of its being confronted by the other term in the first place. It is thus possible for the modern period to be translated into theological concepts (deification of creation, freedom of faith) in order to be comprehensible theologically; this is the case with Gogarten. What is of course more widespread is the above-described inverse movement. See also the chapter on translation in my book *Bibel und Literatur um 1800* (Munich: Fink, 2011).

55. On "seeing as," see Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 207–10; see also the analogy of model and metaphor, *ibid.*, 239–44.

In the present reading, in contrast, secularization is no longer a simple displacement of meaning from transcendence to immanence or inversely a projection of immanence to transcendence, hence in the end a zero-sum game. Rather, it can now be understood as a productive phenomenon: one that in its tension steadily generates meanings going beyond those of the familiar signifiatory system. Just as a metaphor emerges through insertion of a word into a context alien to it, secularization here consists of something known entering a new context and gaining a meaning both previously nonexistent and that cannot be otherwise expressed. Through this process, the rhetoric of secularization can underscore precisely the cultural dimension of religious change.

As suggested, other interpretive models of secularization can be derived from the rhetorical model. We could also describe secularization as citation: as the literal repetition of a statement that does not fuse with its new context but instead bears marks or traces of its origin. For the discourse on secularization seems to imply that while a second meaning overwrites a first, this takes place in such a way that the first meaning is still visible. The assertion that modern art is a secularization of the sacred means not only that it has superseded the sacred but also that in such art something of the sacred can still be seen. Consequently, the romantic religion of art not only transfers theological material into artistic doctrine but consciously plays with religious connotations—romanticism cites Christianity. As Weber already saw, the transition from the citation in the narrow sense to related referential forms—indirect speech, paraphrase, allusion—is fluid. Like metaphor, secularization functions intertextually, as a tense relationship between a religious text and another, modern text. Even more than circumlocution and superscription, the dynamic of citation, with its direct encounter between cited and citing text, renders this tension explicit; it leads to signs with a double reference such as, for instance, Weber's "spirit," inconceivable without either religion or social psychology. The rhetoric of secularization is concentrated within such figures—if we wish to go so far as to acknowledge poetic overdetermination, we could here formulate the main outlines of a "poetics" of secularization.⁵⁶

Secularization can also take figurative shape as translation—an approach to the process I have only hinted at in respect to Weber. Similarly to metaphor, this figure has a spectrum corresponding to different concepts of secularization. If we think of translation as simply the transport of conceptual content from one language to another, then the idea of human dignity, for instance,

may certainly have been transferred from religious to profane discourse. Inversely, if we understand translation as the consistently doomed effort to do justice to an auratically stamped original, then secularization appears to be the merely degenerative manifestation of an originally sacred entity. However, if we think of translation as the reconstruction of a message in a different semantic system, we can then see how discourses on secularization repeatedly try to reconfigure the difference between sacred and profane through other differences: between public and private or what is one's own and what lies in an outside realm. Finally, if we interpret translation as original bilingualism, then we will emphasize secularization always speaking in two languages as it wishes to present religion as modernity's other within modernity.

In this way metaphor, citation, and translation not only unfold within discourses of secularization but also are models for the secularization process itself. They demonstrate that secularization, as well, engages in a *mise en abyme*—that the process and discourse about it are not different things. In the end the historical process of transmitting certain religious contents or ideas itself proceeds through translation, citation, metaphorization. For such ideas are actually a construct; in historical reality they are always linked to words, the words to sentences, the sentences to texts, and texts to discursive authorities. Here there is virtually no firm signifiatory substance, just figurations, but precisely these figures allow a presentation of "transitive" secularization beyond the substantialism criticized by Blumenberg.

To reiterate: this does not mean that *secularization* is a mere word without content, but only that the phenomena described by the word have always been borne in mind. The complex difference between the religious and the profane used to describe secularization can be shaped so that the idea of "secularization" operates through a precarious border that the idea cannot itself substantiate. Conceived in this way, the idea loses its massive objective and historical-philosophical character. Rather than designate a unified process manifest in the world, *secularization* thus now serves as a broad term for meaningful constellations that play with the tension between sacrality and profanity. The "rhetoric of secularization" here emerges as a field of possible readings—an open series of possible *figures* of secularization, only several of which could be considered here through the example of Weber.

Translated by Joel Golb

56. See Daniel Weidner, "Thinking beyond Secularization: Walter Benjamin, the 'Religious Turn,' and the Poetics of Theory," *New German Critique*, no. 111 (2010): 131–48.