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MODERNITY AND THE PROBLEM OF ITS CHRISTIAN PAST: THE *GEISTESGESCHICHTEN* OF BLUMENBERG, BERGER, AND GAUCHET

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen the rise of "post-secularism," a new perspective that criticizes the dominant secularization narrative according to which "modernity" and "religion" are fundamentally antagonistic concepts. Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Gianni Vattimo are the most prominent defenders of such a post-secularist account. But though post-secularism presents itself as a necessary rectification of the secularization story, it has not been able to come up with a credible and generally accepted alternative account. In this article I will explain why, arguing that the use of "essentially contested concepts" such as "Christianity" and "modernity" rest on normative standpoints of the narrators that are incompatible with one another. To show this I will analyze the position of three older voices in the debate, namely those of Hans Blumenberg, Peter Berger, and Marcel Gauchet. These authors seem to agree in understanding the modern disenchanted worldview in relation to Christian transcendence, but I will show that beneath their similar narratives lie incompatible normative beliefs on which their use of the concepts of "Christianity" and "modernity" is founded. After having laid bare the roots of the contemporary debate by exploring these three fundamental positions, I will finally argue that we should not take their accounts as objective, historical descriptions but as what Richard Rorty has called "*Geistesgeschichte*": a speculative history that is aimed at conveying a moral, in which essentially contested concepts play a constitutive role. Each author draws his own moral, and consequently each author will construct his own corresponding history. This lesson can then be applied to the contemporary debate on secularization. The value of the debate does not lie in its historical claims but in the visions of the protagonists; at the end of this article I will explain how we can capitalize on this value.

Keywords: secularization, post-secularism, disenchantment, critique of modernity, Christianity, essentially contested concepts

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and modernity has always been difficult. Indeed, in contemporary societal and academic discourse it is commonly accepted that "religion" is a concept that is basically antagonistic to "modernity," and hence that "secularization" not only describes the decline of religion but also the origin of the modern age. A popular variety of this secularization narrative is the positivistic argument according to which scientific reason forms the vanguard of modernization and religion constitutes a restrictive and harmful force. Richard

Dawkins, for instance, stated that "[f]aith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence . . . ," and he expresses the hope, shared by many, that one day this allegedly detrimental tendency will disappear.[1]

However, in recent years this dominant narrative has been severely criticized in the form of the so-called "post-secularism" discourse. Most famously, Jürgen Habermas argued that we have entered a "post-secular age," which entails conceding that religion is here to stay.[2] Adherents of this new post-secularist perspective—featuring other prominent philosophers such as Charles Taylor and Gianni Vattimo—criticize the universality that Dawkins and others have attributed to secularization. They reject in particular the notion of secularization as the simple "overcoming" of religion.[3] Habermas and other proponents of post-secularism argue that this new perspective is essential for understanding not only the multicultural issue and the place of religion in modern society but also for comprehending modernity itself in a global perspective.[4]

But if it is not a simple process of "overcoming," how should we understand the relation between modernity and its religious past? Despite its relative success in criticizing the self-evident status of the positivistic variety of the secularization narrative, post-secularism has not been able to offer a broadly acceptable answer to this pressing question. This is for several reasons. First, as Fred Dallmayr has shown in a recent article, post-secularism harbors an array of different positions, ranging from religious conservatism to liberal agnosticism, an array of positions that precludes any possibility of positing a single, generally acceptable alternative account of "secularization."[5] Furthermore, the fact that the debate encompasses various academic fields might contribute to its being rather diffuse. Second, this inability seems also to be caused by a more fundamental problem that appears not only in this contemporary debate, but also in the philosophical tradition in which post-secularism is embedded. This is the problem that such a debate is necessarily centered on what Walter B. Gallie called "essentially contested concepts," that is, normative, open-ended concepts on which universal agreement cannot be attained, such as "modernity" or "secularization."[6] It seems therefore impossible to construe an account of modernity's relation to its religious past that is comprehensive *and* generally acceptable at the same time.

In this article I will argue that we can only begin to understand this seemingly protean character of post-secularism if we look at the philosophical tradition that

1. Richard Dawkins, "Lecture from the 'Nullifidian'" (1994). http://old.richarddawkins.net/articles/89 (accessed July 1, 2014).

2. Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001), 9-15; Philip S. Gorski and Ateş Altinordu, "After Secularization?," *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008), 56.

3. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. S. Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

4. Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, ed. E. Mendieta (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002), 155-156.

5. Fred Dallmayr, "Postsecularity and (Global) Politics," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 5 (2012), 963-964.

6. Walter B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56, no. 1 (1956), 167-198.

forms the background of the current debate. I will therefore focus not so much on post-secularism itself but explore three important voices in this philosophical background, namely Hans Blumenberg, Peter Berger, and Marcel Gauchet, who each in his own way has thought deeply about the relation between religion—and Christianity more particularly—and the modern condition. These thinkers are representative of what we may call the "the critique-of-modernity tradition." Important notions that feature in their accounts are "disenchantment" and "transcendence"; we will see that each author offers a different account of how Christian transcendence assumedly played a crucial role in the origin of the modern, disenchanted worldview. They argue that the emphasis on God's transcendent otherness within Christianity in fact "de-divinized" the world, which made it possible to conceive the world as an independent, immanent sphere. However, whereas at first sight their positions seem to converge, it turns out that on closer analysis significant disagreements emerge, which, as I will explain, arise from the different use they make of the "essentially contested concepts" that are at stake. In investigating these authors, it is possible to circumvent the diffuseness of the contemporary debate so that the *underlying* problem of dealing with essentially contested concepts—which also determines the contemporary secularism debate—can be exposed and analyzed more clearly.

But rather than resting the case here, I will demonstrate that these differences, which sometimes look unbridgeable, tell us something important about such efforts to understand modernity and the place of religion in modern society. These efforts, as I will further argue, should be understood as what Richard Rorty called "*Geistesgeschichte*," that is, a kind of speculative history with a moral.[7] And as each of the authors discussed in this article draws his own moral, so to speak, each will give a different content to the essentially contested concepts in question, and construct their own corresponding history. By using this concept of *Geistesgeschichte*, I argue that these histories are not meant to be objective descriptions of history—*wie es eigentlich gewesen*—but that their intended use and function lie elsewhere. *Geistesgeschichten* possess an added value, provided that they, as I will finally suggest, meet certain discursive requirements.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE ON SECULARIZATION

The "Subtraction Theory"

Before analyzing Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet, it is necessary to give an outline of the contemporary debate on secularization that forms our point of departure. We begin with the theory that is criticized by post-secularism: the secularization narrative that regards the disappearance of religion as a beneficial process and that sees a fundamental opposition between religion and modernity. For the sake of conceptual clarity, I will refer to this secularization narrative as

7. Richard Rorty, "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres," in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 49-75.

the "subtraction theory," borrowing a term from Taylor. He describes the "subtraction stories" that he subsequently criticizes in *A Secular Age* as:

> stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process—modernity or secularity—is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside.[8]

By referring to such a narrative as the "subtraction theory" rather than "*the* secularization theory," or, for instance, "*the* Enlightenment narrative," I can avoid the suggestion that its opponents unambiguously refute the concepts of secularization or Enlightenment, which is not necessarily the case. Moreover, the use of this term also has the benefit of elucidating the unfavorable attitude of such secularization narratives toward religion.

The origin of this negative attitude toward religion in the "subtraction theory" can be traced back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when intellectuals began to notice that the findings of modern science contradicted traditional religious beliefs. French *philosophes* began to see a basic opposition between the forces of science and progress on the one hand and religion and retrogression on the other. In the nineteenth century this perceived opposition developed in philosophies such as Comte's and Mill's, according to which scientific reasoning would gradually replace religious belief. Indeed, "secularization" was regarded as coterminous with "modernization" itself. It was believed to be an inevitable and universal historical process that is beneficial to humankind, since it would liberate individuals from the clutches of superstition and would allow for the reign of reason and freedom.[9]

Taylor's notion of "subtraction" brings out the fact that Comte and his contemporaries regarded religion as a superfluous element that hinders the development of an essential feature of human nature, the liberation of which marks the origin of the modern age. As such, these subtraction stories are, however, not necessarily based on a "scientistic" outlook. It could also be argued, for instance, that religion impeded the autonomy of the individual and that the entrance into modernity entailed the casting off of the shackles of theocracy. In either case, a fundamental opposition is assumed not only between religion and (scientific) rationality or individual freedom, but also between the religious past and modernity itself. Although contemporary "subtractionists" such as Daniel Dennett are less optimistic than Comte or Mill about the inevitability of religion's demise, they all concur that secularization is a universal process that will refute false beliefs.[10]

8. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.

9. Steven Seidman, "Modernity, Meaning, and Cultural Pessimism in Max Weber," *Sociological Analysis* 44, no. 4 (1983), 170; Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 60-95; Georg G. Iggers, "The Idea of Progress: A Critical Reassessment," *American Historical Review* 71, no.1 (1965), 3-5.

10. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (London: Penguin, 2006), 34-40.

Post-Secularism and "Essentially Contested Concepts"

In recent years, however, this "subtractionist" narrative has been under attack by post-secularism. Philip Gorski and Ateş Altinordu note that Habermas's aforementioned proclamation of the "post-secular age" in 2001 is especially important, since it meant that someone who had previously been regarded as a champion of secular rationality had now joined the ranks of the critics of the dominant secularization story.[11] And indeed, Habermas went on to claim that we ought to abandon the secularist dream of a religion-free world and should rather reserve a place for religion within the public sphere. Moreover, in concurrence with Taylor, he claims that Western modernity is not the result of a universal process of reason prevailing over faith and superstition, but rather that it is the outcome of a specific and contingent history that can be understood only in relation to Christianity. Both Habermas and Taylor argue that modernity came into being *through* Christianity rather than in spite of it.[12]

In the last decade, post-secularism has developed into a broad debate that now encompasses numerous academic fields, including philosophy, sociology, anthropology, international relations, and literary theory. What unifies this widespread debate is its rejection of the simple subtractionist interpretation of secularization. Instead, the concept of "secularization" is heavily attenuated and/or complicated. Sometimes it is even downright rejected, as we see in Rodney Stark's work, which argues that the idea of religion's inevitable demise simply does not follow from the empirical evidence, which rather suggests a global religious upheaval.[13] In any case, all post-secularist accounts share in the conceptual problematization of "secularization" and argue that it should no longer be perceived as an inevitable process or the simple overcoming of religion by the evaporation of a collective illusion. Subsequently, some post-secularists make the empirical claim that traditional religions will not disappear, while others predict that religion will take on new forms in modernity.[14] Either way, modernity and religion are no longer regarded as necessarily antagonistic concepts.

Another common feature of the post-secularist accounts is that they display a certain normative discontentment with what Taylor calls the exclusivity of the "immanent frame," that is, the modern conception of the world as a closed system with no place for transcendence or a secure foundation for meaning or identity.[15] Post-secularism's uneasiness with immanence appears, for instance, in pleas for new forms of transcendence that befit a modern society, or, as Woei-Lien Chong and André van der Braak propose, for a "post-religious religiosity."[16] And in their *The Future of Religion* (2005), Rorty and Vattimo argue in favor of *post-metaphysical* forms of religion that forgo their transcendent orientation and,

11. Gorski and Altinordu, "After Secularization?," 56.

12. Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, 148-149; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 8-22.

13. Rodney Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P.," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999), 249-273.

14. Respectively: Aleksandr Kyrlezhev, "The Postsecular Age: Religion and Culture Today," *Religion, State and Society* 36, no. 1 (2008), 21-31; *Het religieuze na de religie* , ed.Woei-Lien Chong and André van der Braak (Kampen: Ten Have, 2008).

15. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 539-591.

16. Chong and van der Braak, eds., *Het religieuze na de religie*, 7-20.

instead, become immanent meaning- and identity-giving devices.[17] Despite their different outcomes, what underlies such accounts is the critique that the subtraction theory ignores the negative aspects of the modern condition, namely that "meaning" and "identity" become problematic in a fully disenchanted world.[18] These accounts thus assume that individual and collective life somehow requires a foundation, be it transcendent or otherwise, and that comprehensive disenchantment endangers such foundations.[19] We will return to this normative argument in the analysis of Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet, but for now it suffices to say that a certain "discontentment with disenchantment" is an important motive for post-secularist theories.[20]

Thus, post-secularism presents itself as an important new perspective, one that finally rectifies the account of modernity's relationship with religion and that offers essential and new insights into important issues such as multiculturalism or globalization—as Aleksandr Kyrlezhev, for example, claims.[21] What is often omitted among such confident claims, however, is the acknowledgment that post-secularism has not been able to offer a generally acceptable alternative to the dominant secularization narrative. Dallmayr points out this problem when he writes that "underneath the seemingly irenic phrase [of post-secularism], the older animosities and resentments still persist; behind the facade of a hyphenated term, traditional culture wars continue."[22] He detects an animosity between the liberal agnostics, who regard post-secularism as a concession to "deviant nonconformists including religious people," and conservative theists, who regard the alleged end of secularism as the "correction of an errancy."[23] It could be added that there are considerably more positions within this debate, ranging from the neo-republican agnosticism of Gauchet on the right to Taylor's communitarian theism on the left, not to mention the variety that exists within these categories, where, for instance, either post-religious religiosity or post-metaphysical religion can be promoted. Hence, it can be argued that, given this wide divergence in positions, post-secularism is unlikely to succeed in offering a single generally acceptable account of modernity's relation to religion.

This protean character of the post-secularism debate is not only a result of its multidisciplinary diffuseness, but more fundamentally of its centeredness on "essentially contested concepts." Gallie, who introduced this notion, meant the phrase to denote normative, complex, and open-ended concepts that have a central and indispensable place in public and academic discourse, but on which no universal agreement can be obtained since "it is . . . impossible to find a *general principle* for deciding which of two contestant uses of an essentially contested concept really "uses it best."[24] These concepts necessarily yield incompatible

17. Rorty and Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, 55-82.

18. Kelly Besecke, "Speaking of Meaning in Modernity: Reflexive Spirituality as a Cultural Resource," *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 3 (2001), 365-366.

19. Marcel Gauchet, "What Have We Lost with Religion," *Diogenes* 49 (2002), 38-40.

20. Besecke, "Speaking of Meaning in Modernity," 365.

21. Kyrlezhev, "The Postsecular Age," 20-31.

22. Dallmayr, "Postsecularity and (Global) Politics," 964.

23. *Ibid*.

24. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," 189.

definitions, but are nonetheless deemed important enough so as to resist the temptation of abandoning them altogether. Gallie himself mentions "art," "social justice," and "democracy" as examples, but more important, he also refers to "Christianity" as a typical essentially contested concept.[25] To this, we might add "modernity" as well as "secularization," that is, central concepts around which both "subtractionist" and "post-secularist" accounts revolve.[26] This shows that the debate on secularization should be regarded as a struggle between incompatible normative standpoints, in which the positions that are taken—ranging from conservative theism to progressive atheism—determine the definition of the essentially contested concepts that are used, which in turn defines the wide variety of empirical claims that are made within the debate.

THREE EXAMPLES OF CONCEPTUALIZING CHRISTIANITY'S RELATION TO MODERNITY

The assumed advantage of investigating Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet in relation to the contemporary debate on secularization rests on a threefold proposition, which is that (1) post-secularism can best be understood against the philosophical background of "the critique-of-modernity tradition," (2) these three authors are representative of this background as well as of post-secularism, and (3) it is expedient to analyze their accounts because they provide a case study of the use of essentially contested concepts within the genre of "*Geistesgeschichte*."

To elaborate on these claims: first, this "critique-of-modernity tradition" signifies a type of (post-)Romanticist philosophy that perceives "modernity" in terms of what Charles Turner calls "epochal consciousness." This means that the modern age is regarded as an *epoch*, something that possesses its own identity and concomitant worldview, instead of as the end result of a progressive Enlightenment.[27] As regards post-secularism's relation to this background, it is important to recognize that within this philosophical tradition one can find a wide array of different theories—from Heidegger to Foucault—on the relation between modernity and its religious past, all of which oppose the subtraction story.[28] For instance, Vincent Pecora demonstrates in *Secularization and Cultural Criticism* that the aforementioned claim made by Taylor and Habermas, that modernity emerged *through* rather than *despite* Christianity, is already foreshadowed by the likes of Nietzsche and Weber, two important names within this tradition.[29] Peter

25. *Ibid*., 167-168, 180.

26. Indeed, the concepts "modernity" and "secularization" seem to meet the seven conditions that Gallie lists on pages 171-180. Concerning the last two conditions, in which Gallie refers to one shared "exemplar" to which various definitions of the concepts must refer, it can be argued that this also applies to these two concepts if one regards, for instance, the Reformation or the French Revolution as exemplars. See also David Collier *et al*., "Essentially Contested Concepts: Debates and Applications," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11, no. 3 (2006), 219-220.

27. Charles Turner, *Modernity and Politics in the Work of Max Weber* (London: Routledge, 1992), 9-12.

28. *Ibid*., 8-32.

29. Vincent P. Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 9-11, 44, 60. Furthermore, Pecora himself also places Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet within this tradition of what he calls "cultural criticism."

E. Gordon and Jonathan Skolnik note that the post-secularist idea that modernity cannot simply "overcome" religion had already been anticipated by Karl Löwith, who believed that modernity is defined by both its derivation and alienation from Christianity.[30] Hence, since its genesis in Romanticism, the critique-of-modernity tradition has provided numerous accounts of how modernity came into being as a result of a *cultural transition* between worldviews and not because of a victory of reason over religion. It is evident, from this perspective, that post-secularism is a contemporary manifestation of a broader philosophical discourse and that its perception of modernity—as a cultural phenomenon that must be understood in relation to its Christian past—is not restricted to this current debate.

Second, as for the exemplary status of Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet for post-secularism and its philosophical background, it should be noted that these three authors can be related to the current post-secularist discourse more specifically than other possible candidates from the critique-of-modernity tradition. This will be demonstrated in the following paragraphs. And third, I have selected these three authors, and not other post-secularist authors such as Habermas and Taylor, because their accounts can be better appropriated in this study of essentially contested concepts in "*Geistesgeschichte*." This is due to the fact that whereas these accounts display a strikingly similar *structure* in their explanation of modernity's relation to Christianity—namely by ascribing it to "transcendence" and "disenchantment"—the divergence in the *content* they each attribute to these concepts yields greatly differing conclusions. Hence, this dynamic between the similarities and the differences in their accounts illustrates how essentially contested concepts determine the construction of their narratives.

Blumenberg

Hans Blumenberg (1920–1996) is nowadays perhaps best known for his part in the so-called "secularization debate" with Karl Löwith.[31] The central question of this debate, which revolved primarily around Löwith's *Meaning in History* (1949) and Blumenberg's response, *Legitimität der Neuzeit* (1966), was how modernity's relation to its Christian past must be conceived. Whereas Löwith argued that modernity is primarily a derivative form of Christianity, Blumenberg sought to defend modernity's legitimacy, on the one hand, while also eschewing a simple subtraction story, on the other.[32] Blumenberg is significant to us because his debate with Löwith is regarded as paradigmatic for the current post-secularism discourse by authors such as Gordon, Skolnik, and Stijn Latré.[33] I focus on Blumenberg's

30. Jonathan Skolnik and Peter E. Gordon, "Editor's Introduction: Secularization and Disenchantment," *New German Critique*, no. 94 (2005), 6.

31. I treat the authors chronologically, based on the publication of their primary works: Blumenberg wrote his *Legitimität der Neuzeit* in 1966, Berger his *Sacred Canopy* in 1967, and Gauchet his *Le désenchantement du monde* in 1985. On the Löwith–Blumenberg debate, see, for example, Robert M. Wallace, "Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate," *New German Critique* 22 (1981), 63-79.

32. Robert B. Pippin, "Blumenberg and the Modernity Problem," *Review of Metaphysics* 40 (1987), 548; Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, transl. R. M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 113.

33. Gordon and Skolnik, "Editor's Introduction," 6; Stijn Latré, "De erfenis van het Löwith-Blumenberg debat," in *Radicale secularisatie?*, ed. Stijn Latré and Guido Vanheeswijck (Kalmthout: Pelckmans, 2013), 9-25.

work rather than on Löwith's because it was Blumenberg who emphasized the role of Christian transcendence in relation to disenchantment, which is also the focal point of the other two authors who will be discussed here. Here, I will show how modernity relates to Christianity in Blumenberg's account, while focusing especially on the role of transcendence and disenchantment, after which those aspects of his theory—especially his definition of "Christianity" and his conception of history—that set him apart from Berger and Gauchet are addressed. (This line of argument, *mutatis mutandis*, will moreover be used in the discussion of the latter two authors.)

As mentioned, Blumenberg's primary purpose was to assert modernity's legitimacy in response to Löwith's accusations to the contrary. In doing so, Blumenberg argued that Medieval Christianity, as a worldview or belief system, was in fact fraught with internal pressures that inevitably caused it to collapse. He goes on to claim that the principal characteristic of modernity, which he calls "self-assertion"—the characterizing proactive stance of the modern individual vis-à-vis a world that is devoid of pre-given meaning and purpose—emerged as the only possible response to the problems that the Medieval system had created for itself. Hence, Blumenberg's core argument is that Medieval Christianity established the necessary preconditions for the passage into the modern age, but could not bring about the genesis of modernity by itself.[34]

Blumenberg states that the internal pressures that caused the Medieval system's inevitable demise were the result of Christianity's inability to overcome its principal counterpart, Gnosticism. This inability came to the fore in the problem of the "theodicy," an irresolvable question lying at the heart of Christianity—which is: why is there evil in a world created by a benign and omnipotent God? Unlike Gnosticism, orthodox Christianity was never able to simply reject the world altogether, which would have solved the problem of the theodicy, since it had to adhere to the idea of a creation created by a good God. In trying to take a more affirmative stance toward creation and distance itself from Gnosticism, Medieval Christianity attempted to integrate elements from neo-Platonism or Aristotelianism. It was, however, never successful in achieving a genuine synthesis, according to Blumenberg, due to the conceptual incompatibility of Greek cosmology and Christian soteriology.[35]

Blumenberg goes on to describe late-Medieval philosophy's fervent attempts to solve this problem. Eventually, revisiting and extrapolating Augustine's earlier solution to this issue, it attempted to safeguard God's status as both omnipotent *and* benevolent while still acknowledging the existence of evil, by disassociating God from both the world and from humankind. This, however, meant that humanity received the full blame for the existence of sin, and that the world became regarded solely as a stage for evil. That is, the disconnection of Creator from creation entailed an irreversible devaluation of both the cosmos and humanity's status in it. Where previously the cosmos was regarded as permeated with a divine Logos, and human reason was perceived as participating in this

34. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 28-80, 175-178.
35. *Ibid*., 53, 67-68, 128-135.

constitutive force, the world was now seen as devoid of this divine presence.[36] Not without irony, Blumenberg conceives this degradation of the world and of humanity in late-Medieval and Protestant thought as a recurrence of Gnosticism's world-rejection that orthodoxy had tried—in vain—to conquer.[37]

The result of this disconnection was that the world became "de-divinized," thereby causing a crippling sense of anxiety for the individual believer, because he/she was now bereft of any kind of existential guarantee or foundation other than *faith*, which, in turn, became problematized by the doctrine of predestination.[38] However, for proto-modern thinkers such as Descartes, it was precisely such a state of uncertainty that formed the precondition for a new conception of individuality.[39] This is the stance of "self-assertion," the proactive attitude of the modern individual toward a meaningless and purposeless world. The disenchanted world became the stage for an individuality in which a person projects his/her own meaning onto the world and construes his/her own purposes, instead of relying on divinely pre-given directions. Blumenberg defines this notion of modern individuality in opposition to the anxiety of the late-Medieval Christian, by stating that "self-assertion" means "an existential program, according to which man posits his existence in a historical situation and indicates to himself how he is going to deal with the reality surrounding him and what use he will make of the possibilities that are open to him."[40]

Let us now focus briefly on those elements in Blumenberg's theory that will distinguish him from Berger and Gauchet. First, it is important to bear in mind that Blumenberg's account was conceived through a disagreement with Löwith, who had maintained that modernity—and especially the modern idea of "progress"—is the product of the "secularization" of Christian eschatology. Blumenberg especially rejected the "substantialism" that he detected in Löwith's argument, which denotes the underlying idea that one phenomenon ("Christian eschatology" or "Christianity" in general) becomes transformed into another phenomenon ("modern progress" or "modernity"), but that the substance of the former somehow remains present, although in alienated form. This "substantialism," Blumenberg argues, is uncalled for in a post-metaphysical historical account of modernity's origin.[41] Rather than perceiving modernity as a direct derivation of Christianity, therefore, Blumenberg opted for a more sophisticated conception of history, in which modernity forms a *response* to the problems created in a previous epoch. Elizabeth Brient calls this conception of history a "dialogical model of historical change."[42]

Blumenberg's dialogical conception of history is intrinsically connected with how he defines the essentially contested concept of "Christianity." Indeed, to assert the legitimacy of modern self-assertion as a response to the problems of the

36. *Ibid*., 137-140.
37. *Ibid*., 135.
38. *Ibid*., 137, 154.
39. *Ibid*., 178-183.
40. *Ibid*., 138.
41. *Ibid*., 16-29, 48; Elizabeth Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite: Hans Blumenberg and the Threshold of Modernity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 17-37.
42. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 48; Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite*, 8.

past, it was necessary for Blumenberg to identify the Medieval worldview exclusively in terms of the problem of theodicy and Gnosticism, which he holds to be both unavoidable as well as irresolvable for Medieval thought.[43] Hence, in affirming the legitimacy of modernity, Blumenberg not only defines the Medieval system solely in terms of this alleged intrinsic problem, but he also suggests that the collapse of Medieval thought proves the unviability of a Christian worldview in general. This makes modern self-assertion primarily a post-Christian form of individuality.[44] Incidentally, Brient has noted in this respect that by identifying the Medieval worldview solely with this problem, Blumenberg fell prey to the same reductionism in his portrayal of the Middle Ages that he himself abhorred in Löwith's depiction of modernity.[45]

Berger

In *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), sociologist and theologian Peter Berger (1929) also connected the "transcendentalization" of God to disenchantment, although he uses a different approach than that of Blumenberg. As for his significance to the current debate on secularization, it should be noted that it was only recently that Berger explicitly joined the post-secularism debate with his *Desecularization of the World* (1999). However, it is in his older *Sacred Canopy* where we find an important argument that relates to both the critique-of-modernity tradition as well as to post-secularism. In this work he claimed that secularity and Christianity are not antagonistic concepts but that secularization in fact emerged from within Christianity. Hence, in agreement with the later post-secularism debate, he problematizes the subtraction theory's notion of "secularization" while also rejecting the latter's optimistic evaluation of this process, as we will see later. Moreover, since Berger draws heavily on Nietzsche and Weber, he makes a suitable representative of the critique-of-modernity tradition.[46]

Contrary to Blumenberg's account, which reads *prima facie* as a history of philosophy, Berger's argument is designed as a theoretical basis for sociology. As such, it first expounds on certain philosophical ideas concerning the nature of humanity and its being-in-the-world. Berger argues that society is formed by humans who create meanings, objectivate them in reality, and then reappropriate them once again; in other words, a dialectic of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. This creation of meaning and placing oneself in a meaningful order is the most important goal of human beings, according to Berger.[47] A meaningful order necessitates stability, and the most effective way to provide this stability is to *alienate* these meanings from their original source, that is, to ignore that they derive from the human activity of externalization. Instead, these meanings were perceived as pre-given by the cosmic order and hence as unchangeable. Religion, of course, has always been the most powerful agent in this endeavor of alienation. Since prehistoric times, it has sanctified social patterns to make them

43. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 125-235.
44. *Ibid*., 138.
45. Brient, *The Immanence of the Infinite*, 50.
46. Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism*, 9-12.
47. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1967), 3-19, 58.

appear as divine laws and has legitimated power structures by regarding them as reflections of the cosmic hierarchy.[48]

This process of "religious alienation" is responsible for the construction of "the enchanted world." Berger depicts this situation as one in which humans have sacrificed the awareness of their ability to change the world in return for the safety and stability of living in a static meaningful whole. Hence, they surrendered their freedom in favor of a sense of belonging. Eventually, however, this enchanted world of comprehensive alienation disintegrated due to a process of "de-alienation" or disenchantment, in which individuals again came to realize that they are responsible for the creation of the social world.[49] Here Berger makes an important claim, which is that the seeds for this disenchantment—and hence for secularization and modernization—were already present in Judeo-Christian monotheism. He argues that "the confrontation of the social order with the majesty of the transcendent [Judeo-Christian] God may also relativize the social order to such an extent that one may validly speak of de-alienation—in the sense that, before the face of God, the institutions are revealed as nothing but *human* works, devoid of inherent sanctity or immortality."[50]

It is this emphasis on transcendence in Judaism and Christianity that makes the world appear as fundamentally other from God, which means that it can be perceived as an "immanent sphere" of objectivity without intrinsic meaning. However, according to Berger, this seed for disenchantment became fully manifest only after the Reformation. It was only after the Protestant rejection of all forms of mediation—except for grace and scripture—between the transcendent God and the "fallen world" that the world was sufficiently de-divinized to bring about the modern, scientific worldview.[51] Or, as Berger succinctly puts it: "A sky empty of angels becomes open to the intervention of the astronomer and, eventually, of the astronaut."[52]

It is here that the connection among transcendence, disenchantment, and secularization becomes apparent. The process of the "transcendentalization of God" effectively furthered the divide between transcendence and immanence, thus causing disenchantment, while simultaneously narrowing the individual's relation to the sacred. Eventually, this disconnection of the two spheres entailed that the inner religious beliefs were no longer reflected by the outside world, thereby making the former gradually lose their plausibility.[53] So although Protestantism sought to vindicate God's sovereignty by dissociating Him from the world, this had the unintentional result of making the immanent domain increasingly self-sufficient and the transcendent sphere potentially redundant. Consequently, secularization springs forth from a development that was initially inspired by religion; that is to say, that "Christianity has been its own gravedigger."[54]

48. *Ibid*., 33.
49. *Ibid*., 86.
50. *Ibid*., 98-99.
51. *Ibid*., 111-113.
52. *Ibid*., 113.
53. *Ibid*., 99, 125.
54. *Ibid*., 127.

At first glance, Berger's theory of transcendentalization and disenchantment seems to be more or less in line with Blumenberg's account. However, when taking a closer look at the definition of the contested concept of "Christianity," it becomes apparent that their accounts diverge considerably. Whereas in Blumenberg's theory secularization was only the indirect result of the inevitable implosion of the Christian worldview, Berger claims, as mentioned, that the seeds for disenchantment and secularization were already present in Judaeo-Christian monotheism, although they only truly became manifest after the Reformation. What this furthermore implies, however, is that in this process of disenchantment through transcendentalization Berger regards Medieval, Catholic Christianity as a "step back" toward "re-enchantment."[55] Initially, this claim appears to fit the standard Protestant evaluation of Catholicism as an "impure" form of Christianity, tainted with "magic" and superstition. Considering Berger's background in Lutheran theology, this would not come as a surprise.[56]

However, at second glance, Berger's evaluation turns out to be more ambiguous. Not only does he claim that the Catholic tendency to mediate between God and individual by means of the Church and the saints entails re-enchantment, but also that re-enchantment is just as inherent to Christianity as is its counterpart disenchantment. He explains this by referring to the "Incarnation," a doctrine that he perceives as the paradigm of mediation, as something that dilutes the initial radical transcendence of the Judaic God. He argues that "it is not surprising that the . . . notion of incarnation brought in its wake a multiplicity of other modifications of transcendence, the whole host of angels and saints with which Catholicism populated religious reality."[57] As for Protestantism, Berger claims that it released the disenchanting potential that had been present in Judaism but was suppressed by Catholicism, because of the Protestants' renewed attention to the Old Testament. Hence, it appears that Berger identifies the Old Testament and the Judaic conception of a *transcendent* God with disenchantment, whereas he associates the New Testament and its core idea of Incarnation with re-enchantment, due to its alleged *weakening of transcendence*, which would make Protestantism a sort of neo-Judaism.[58] That this is not the only possible way of relating the Incarnation and Protestantism to disenchantment will become apparent in our analysis of Gauchet, whose interpretation of these concepts runs counter to Berger's.

Regardless of whether Berger's evaluation of Protestantism is plausible, what is interesting in his attribution of both a disenchanting and re-enchanting tendency to Christianity is that it reflects his conception of history. Whereas Blumenberg emphasizes the discontinuity between Christianity and modernity, and Gauchet—as will become apparent in the next section—rather asserts a structural continuity between them, Berger tries to occupy an intermediate position. He argues, on the one hand, that the potential for disenchantment and

55. *Ibid*., 122.

56. On his theological background, see Gary Dorrien, "Berger: Theology and Sociology," in *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion*, ed. L. Woodhead *et al*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 26-39.

57. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 121.

58. *Ibid*., 124.

secularization was already present in Christianity, hence concurring with Löwith and Gauchet. But on the other hand, contrary to these authors and in agreement with Blumenberg, he warns that it "is an altogether different matter to say that, 'therefore,' the modern world . . . must be seen as some sort of logical realization of Christianity."[59] Instead, Berger wields what he calls an "ironic" conception of history, according to which history is driven primarily by the *unintentional* consequences of the actions of historical agents, without implying any historical necessities.[60] Hence, Protestantism's unintentional preparation of Christianity's demise—by making transcendence potentially superfluous—was not necessarily the only possible outcome.

Gauchet

Le désenchantement du monde (1985), written by the French political philosopher Marcel Gauchet (1946), has become a well-known work within the post-secularism debate, especially after its English translation in 1997.[61] Moreover, drawing conclusions from his earlier work, Gauchet has recently become actively involved in the current debate himself by contributing to the French discussion on *laïcité*.[62] Hence, Gauchet's significant status for post-secularism needs no further demonstration. And as regards his suitability for our purposes, it can be argued that Gauchet equally represents the philosophical tradition in which Blumenberg's and Berger's works can be placed. First, Gauchet draws explicitly on the Weberian-Nietzschean thesis of modernity's indebtedness to Christianity in general and Protestantism in particular, as does Berger.[63] Moreover, Warren Breckman noted that Gauchet's argument is closely affiliated with Löwith's account of secularization, which means that the former can also be related—in a dialogical sense—to Blumenberg.[64] One can concede, therefore, that Gauchet forms the link between the philosophical tradition of Blumenberg and his predecessors, on the one hand, and the current debate on secularization, on the other.

To give a brief reconstruction of Gauchet's argument, we have to begin with his philosophical conception of human nature. Here we find an idea that resembles Berger's theory, which is that humanity is faced with the fundamental choice between accepting its power to change the world, which has the detrimental effect that the world would appear as too contingent and too changeable to attribute any durable meanings to it, or sacrificing the consciousness of this ability in favor of

59. *Ibid*., 107.

60. *Ibid*.

61. André Cloots, "Het christendom en de onttovering van de wereld," in *Radicale secularisatie?*, ed. S. Latré and G. Vanheeswijck (Kalmthout: Pelckmans, 2013), 103-124; Victoria Kahn, "Introduction," *Representations* 105, no. 1 (2009), 1; Gorski and Altinordu, "After Secularization?," 58; Gordon and Skolnik, "Editor's Introduction," 6.

62. Marcel Gauchet, "What Have We Lost with Religion," *Diogenes* 49 (2002), 38-40; Gauchet, *Religie in de democratie*, transl. J. Beerten (Amsterdam: SUN, 2006), 38-40.

63. Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, transl. O. Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 78; Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism*, 11-12.

64. Warren Breckman, "Democracy between Disenchantment and Political Theology: French Post-Marxism and the Return of Religion," *New German Critique* 94 (2005), 103; In their article, Gorski and Altinordu relate Gauchet more directly to Blumenberg. Gorski and Altinordu, "After Secularization?," 58.

a sense of belonging to a pre-given meaningful order, that is, "enchantment."[65] Gauchet argues in this respect that mankind is characterized primarily by the power of "negation," which implies "a confrontational posture toward things as they are, making it structurally impossible for humans to entrench themselves and settle down, and steadfastly condemning them to a transformative nonacceptance of things. . . ."[66] Whereas this quintessential power of negation enables mankind to alter the world, it also implies an existential homelessness or absence of belonging.[67] The initial solution to this problem is to "negate humankind's power of negation." This move nullifies the uncertainty that is concomitant with negation and enables humanity to attribute stability to its constructed world by projecting every meaning or social pattern onto the cosmos. Gauchet calls this surrendering of negation "dispossession," which corresponds with Berger's notion of "alienation."[68]

A consequence of this initial choice for certainty and stability, brought about by alienation, was that this enchanted world precluded any kind of individual liberty, since this enchanted belonging is contingent on the full dispossession (that is, alienation or surrender) of humankind's transformative powers. Naturally, this is not the end of the story. The entire history that follows from this situation, then, is described by Gauchet as the gradual transition from comprehensive enchantment and dispossession to full-blown disenchantment through what he calls "a progressive reappropriation of what was initially removed."[69] In other words: "disenchantment" entails the undoing of alienation/dispossession. An important feat of this theory is that this process of reappropriation is assumed to occur *through* religion, namely by a process called the "dynamics of transcendence."[70] This notion implies that in the development of religion from "primitive" to advanced systems, the idea of "transcendence" becomes increasingly intensified. This, in turn, entails a separation of the transcendent from the immanent sphere, which releases the world from its permeation by the spiritual domain and hence discloses room for human freedom. Gauchet argues by this logic that there is "a law of human emancipation through divine affirmation . . . [that is] the greater the gods, the freer humans are," meaning that mankind gradually reappropriates its powers by widening the distance between transcendence and immanence.[71]

Although Gauchet describes the entire history of religion in terms of the dynamics of transcendence, he does reserve an essential role for Christianity in the ultimate "escape from religion" that is the final conclusion of disenchantment. He argues that merely emphasizing transcendence is not sufficient for creating a sustainable immanent world that is free from spiritual permeation. It is also necessary to attribute an independent reality to this immanent world, because if this is omitted the assertion of radical transcendence would entail solely an escapist world-negation of the Gnostic variety, according to which the world is merely

65. Gauchet, *Disenchantment*, 10, 22, 205.
66. *Ibid*., 22.
67. *Ibid*., 203-206.
68. *Ibid*., 7-15, 23-25.
69. *Ibid*., 34.
70. *Ibid*., 47-66.
71. *Ibid*., 51.

an illusion. What is hence needed to bring about a conception of a self-sufficient immanent world is a religion that balances between world-affirmation and world-negation. According to Gauchet, this religion is Christianity.[72]

Gauchet argues that Christianity's distinguishing feature is the doctrine of the Incarnation, which plays a crucial role in his account. However, his interpretation of the Incarnation differs greatly from Berger's. Gauchet claims that it is the doctrine of the Incarnation that makes Christianity "the religion for the departure from religion," which signifies the decline of the religious worldview and the final undoing of mankind's self-dispossession.[73] This decisive role consists in the idea that Christianity affirmed and intensified God's radical transcendence while the Incarnation precluded full-blown world-negation as an option for its believers, since this doctrine dictates that the world, though corrupted by the Fall, was still worthy of salvation. Thus, the Christian believer was inhibited from regarding the world as purely wicked or illusory, while the assertion of the transcendent character of God also prevented him/her from being too involved with the world since it could no longer be held to possess any intrinsic sanctity. Gauchet suggests, therefore, that this balance between world-negation and world-affirmation, captured in the doctrine of the Incarnation, is best illustrated by the notion of Protestant "inner-worldly asceticism" that Weber introduced.[74] Eventually, it was this attitude of asceticism that created the modern worldview and modern individualism, and which made the immanent sphere self-sufficient and a transcendent orientation ultimately superfluous.[75]

Proceeding now to the distinguishing features of Gauchet's narrative, we see that whereas he agrees with Blumenberg and Berger that religious transcendentalization makes the creation of a self-sufficient immanent sphere possible, he wields a very different definition of Christianity and its role in this process. That is to say, whereas Blumenberg defines Christianity exclusively in terms of its intrinsic contradictions, and whereas Berger's definition of this central theme is more equivocal, oscillating between its disenchanting and re-enchanting potential, Gauchet defines Christianity so that the transition to comprehensive disenchantment and the final disappearance of the religious world appears to be almost seamless. He is able to assume such a degree of continuity through his interpretation of the Incarnation as a doctrine that affirms the autonomy of the immanent world, while simultaneously continuing the intensification of transcendence until its final dissipation.[76]

72. *Ibid*., 76-78.

73. *Ibid*., 101-106.

74. *Ibid*., 78, 85-86; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, transl. T. Parsons (London: Routledge, 2005), 73-74.

75. Gauchet, *Disenchantment*, 86, 101.

76. *Ibid*., 1-12, 104. Gauchet himself claims that he also allows a place for contingency and discontinuity in his narrative, but given the preeminence that he attributes to the "logic of transcendence" over superficial contingencies, it can be argued that continuity gains the upper hand over discontinuity in his conception of history. As Breckman notes in his "Democracy between Disenchantment and Political Theology," 96: "It is as if, in the rush to shed all trappings of the Marxian model, Gauchet ends up with an unapologetic idealism and his insistence on historical contingency is over-ridden by the unfolding logic of an idea."

Furthermore, in this assertion of continuity between Christianity and modernity, we see Gauchet's conception of history coming to the fore. In a review, Jean Elshtain refers to Gauchet as a "structuralist" and criticizes him for the fact that his historical narrative is exhibited "in a maddeningly ahistorical manner."[77] This "structuralistic" nature of his theory is caused by the fact that Gauchet distinguishes the "structural order from the order of events"—that is, the logical structures from superficial contingencies—and focuses primarily on the former.[78] This structural order is conceived as a transition from enchantment to disenchantment that encompasses the totality of history and in which Christianity constitutes the final chapter in the "departure from religion."[79] Hence, it becomes apparent that Gauchet's definition of the essentially contested concept of "Christianity," which in his case focuses on the pivotal role played by the Incarnation, serves as a vehicle for his underlying conception of history, namely as a structural, continuous, logic-driven affair.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Rorty's Conception of "Geistesgeschichte"

After analyzing the accounts of Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet, we can establish that their stories indeed diverge significantly, and that this divergence can be attributed primarily to their differing evaluations of the essentially contested concepts of "modernity" and "Christianity." This once more suggests the fundamental difficulty of constructing a narrative about modernity and religion that is both comprehensive *and* generally acceptable. Critics such as Turner and Jonathan Rée have argued in this respect that it would be better to refrain from such grand narratives about the origin of "modernity" altogether. Turner, for instance, argues that attempts to define "modernity" as an epoch usually amount to subjective projections that serve as vehicles for partisan opinion-making rather than proper scholarship, whereas Rée believes such grand historical speculations can lead only to self-affirming complacency, since they can yield only what we project onto them.[80]

As mentioned in the introduction, I wish to argue to the contrary. But first, we need to investigate these speculative narratives of Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet from the perspective of Rorty's conception of *Geistesgeschichte*. By applying this notion to our subject matter, we can attain a further understanding of the nature and function of such narratives as well as of their intrinsic limitations and problems. This will eventually allow me to argue in favor of the added value of such theories. Assuming the exemplary status of the accounts investigated here for post-secularism, this methodological reflection, as we will see below, will also elucidate the contemporary debate on secularization. I will first

77. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "After Paganism. Review: Disenchantment of the World by Gauchet," *The New Republic* 2 (1998), 39.

78. Gauchet, *Disenchantment*, 104.

79. J. S. Preus, "Review: The Disenchantment of the World by Gauchet," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 2 (1999), 481-484.

80. Turner, *Modernity and Politics in the Work of Max Weber*, 11-12, 31-32; Jonathan Reé, "The Vanity of Historicism," *New Literary History* 22, no. 4 (1991), 969-973.

expound on Rorty's theory, while occasionally adding some elements from the fields of hermeneutics and narrative theory.

Rorty elaborated on the notion of "*Geistesgeschichte*" (a term he borrowed from German historicism) in his 1984 article titled "The Historiography of Philosophy." Here, he distinguishes four genres within the history of philosophy, which are "doxography," "rational reconstruction," "historical reconstruction," and "*Geistesgeschichte*."[81] Only two genres are relevant for our discussion, namely "historical reconstruction" and "*Geistesgeschichte*." Historical reconstruction signifies the enterprise of modern, professional historians to understand, as objectively and nonanachronistically as possible, the past in its own terms. Rorty states that since historical reconstruction maintains this ideal of objectivism, it seeks to achieve scholarly consensus regarding a shared conception of historical reality.[82] Using Donald Polkinghorne's narrative theory, it can be argued that this objectivist aim entails that a historical account can be "verified" to some extent, if it can be supported by historical "facts" that are recognized as such by the academic consensus. It also means that an account can be "falsified" if it can be demonstrated that relevant historical data are willfully omitted or are interpreted too subjectively.[83] Rorty demonstrates that the function of historical reconstruction is not only to understand the past "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*," but also to gain "self-awareness" of the present. This means that, since historical reconstruction confronts us with the "otherness of the past," it enables us to recognize the historicity and contingency of our present situation.[84]

"*Geistesgeschichte*," on the other hand, treats history "philosophically" rather than purely "historically." Moreover, it attempts to understand *the past in terms of the present*, and hence serves an entirely different function. *Geistesgeschichte*, Rorty argues, is not concerned with attaining self-awareness, but is instead after "self-justification."[85] This means that *Geistesgeschichte* takes the author's own evaluation of the present condition as the point of departure, and serves the purpose of attributing persuasiveness to this diagnosis by constructing a historical narrative that supports it. Hence, rather than seeking to gain an objective understanding of the past, as historical reconstruction does, the author of a *Geistesgeschichte* attempts to show what the past would look like in light of the author's proposed evaluation of the present situation.[86] To this it can be added, again using a term from Polkinghorne, that this persuasiveness of a *Geistesgeschichte* depends on the "explanatory power" of the approach that is proposed by the author, which means that the convincingness of a narrative corresponds with the range of different phenomena that can be explained by such

81. "Doxography" and rational "reconstruction" signify respectively the "the history of Western philosophy" genre, and anachronistic-analytic reconstructions of great philosophers in accordance with modern standards. See Rorty, "Historiography," 52-54, 61-65.

82. *Ibid*., 50-55.

83. Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing in the Human Sciences* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 64-67, 170-176. He argues that these terms, "falsify/verify," should not be interpreted in a strong positivist sense but rather in a weak sense, as applicable to the humanities.

84. Rorty, "Historiography," 51, 61, 68.

85. *Ibid*., 55-61.

86. *Ibid*., 57-59.

a perspective.[87] In short, what a *Geisteshistoriker* does, according to this ideal-type, is convey a certain story with a moral and construct a historical narrative accordingly.[88]

Beyond Rorty, *Geistesgeschichte*'s self-justificatory function can be broadened to signify a positive hermeneutical understanding of the present condition. In line with the hermeneutics of Gadamer, *Geistesgeschichte* should be regarded as an attempt to obtain self-understanding *through* historical understanding.[89] That is, whereas historical reconstruction emphasizes the "otherness" of the past, according to which we can achieve self-understanding only in a negative sense—which Rorty calls self-awareness—*Geistesgeschichte* can also achieve *positive* self-understanding, by explaining how the present situation in which we are embedded came to being.[90]

This aspect of *Geistesgeschichte*, however, also relates to an inherent problem of this genre, which is that such narratives are necessarily subjective because they depend on the author's particular interpretation of the present situation. Whereas historical reconstructions have an objectivist aim and are hence concerned with interpreting the historical evidence without distortion by the author's own prejudices, these *Geistesgeschichten*, in contrast, are actually determined by such "prejudices." These "prejudices" are in the case of *Geistesgeschichte* a priori evaluations of the present condition that precede historical inquiry and thus fall beyond the reach of falsification by historical evidence.

An important inference can be made from this, which is that "essentially contested concepts" necessarily play a central and constitutive role in *Geistesgeschichte*. That is, whereas historical reconstruction typically strives toward bracketing its author's normative viewpoints as much as possible and hence tries to eschew fixed definitions of contested concepts, the propagation of the author's definition of such concepts rather forms one of *Geistesgeschichte*'s primary objectives. It is inherent to *Geistesgeschichte*'s function that the message that the author seeks to convey is intertwined with the author's own definition of the essentially contested concepts that are at stake, which thus determine the rest of the narrative. Hence, *Geistesgeschichte* yields a situation in which essentially contested concepts constitute incompatible historical narratives, coexisting alongside one another, each based on normative viewpoints that cannot be directly disproven by others.

This gives rise to the problem that it is impossible to judge whether one *Geistesgeschichte* approximates "historical reality" better than another, since they cannot rely on a shared conception of historical reality that is warranted

87. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing in the Human* Sciences, 172, 176; Frank Ankersmit, "Een moderne verdediging van het historisme: Geschiedenis en identiteit," *Low Countries Historical Review* 96, no. 3 (1980), 463.

88. Rorty, "Historiography," 72.

89. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2006), 278-304.

90. This addition is justified because Rorty's and Gadamer's conceptions of historical understanding can be regarded as complementary to each other, according to Steven Bouma-Prediger, "Rorty's Pragmatism and Gadamer's Hermeneutics," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57, no. 2 (1989), 313-324.

by scholarly consensus.[91] Consequently, one might ask how one can determine the value of such *Geistesgeschichten*. Rorty offers one criterion for making such an evaluative distinction. Aside from the fact that the persuasiveness of a *Geistesgeschichte* determines the success of a narrative, Rorty introduces the notion of "honesty" as a normative criterion. This entails that authors must acknowledge that *Geistesgeschichten* do not offer objectivist descriptions of the past, but that they are rather subjective narratives that attempt to convey a moral. Using a more Gadamerian terminology, one might add that honesty entails accepting that in any attempt to broaden one's own horizon by relating it to the past there will always remain an irreducible element of subjectivity.[92] "Honesty," Rorty argues, "consists in keeping in mind the possibility that our self-justifying conversations are with creatures of our own phantasy rather than with historical personages. . . ."[93] Adhering to such a notion of honesty would thus lead to a "self-conscious" *Geistesgeschichte*, one that is aware of its own epistemological limitations.[94]

Analysis of the Three Accounts in Terms of "Geistesgeschichte"

The accounts of Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet must indeed be regarded as *Geistesgeschichten*, that is, as normative accounts that promote the author's particular diagnosis of the present situation. Rorty's concept thus gives us a methodological perspective from which it is possible to deepen our understanding of the nature and the purpose of their accounts.[95] Here, I will further demonstrate that the divergence between their accounts should in fact be explained in relation to their adherence to *Geistesgeschichte*, which, in turn, signifies the inherent limitations of this genre.

We can see *Geistesgeschichte*'s normative-diagnostic function at work in Blumenberg's, Berger's, and Gauchet's accounts. For instance, the three narratives are constructed in opposition to a simple subtraction story; instead of arguing that secularization merely signifies the removal of a superfluous element, the authors maintain that secularization is a cultural phenomenon that can only be understood as emerging from within Christianity. Moreover, they imply that the entrance into modernity involves the sacrifice of some kind of existential certainty, thus reflecting the "discontentment with disenchantment" that currently prevails in the post-secularism debate. However, I have also noted that such a diagnosis necessarily becomes intertwined with the essentially contested concepts that are used, because they serve as vehicles for the normative message that a *Geistesgeschichte* conveys. In other words, convincing the audience of how these contested concepts—in our case, primarily "modernity" and "Christianity"—*should* be interpreted is a crucial part of these stories *as Geistesgeschichten*. This can be illustrated by once again turning to these three accounts.

91. Rorty, "Historiography," 53.
92. Bouma-Prediger, "Rorty's Pragmatism and Gadamer's Hermeneutics," 322-323.
93. Rorty, "Historiography," 71.
94. *Ibid*., 61.
95. *Ibid*., 72; Rorty mentions Blumenberg as an example of a *Geisteshistoriker*.

Let us first look at the moral that these accounts get across and how it determines the essentially contested concept of "modernity" in the three accounts. In the case of Blumenberg, it can be argued that his account is determined by the wish to vindicate his interpretation of "modernity" as a legitimate project over against the accusations that it is merely a derived form of Christianity. In order to make a convincing point, however, it was necessary for him to identify Christianity solely with the Medieval belief system and to argue that the latter was destined to collapse due to internal discrepancies. In this way, modern self-assertion can be portrayed as an independent response to the problems of the Christian worldview, which means that it cannot be a mere derivation. This independent origin ensures, according to Blumenberg, not only the justification of modern individualism but also the legitimacy of modernity itself.[96] Berger, on the other hand, constructs his account to substantiate his own diagnosis of modernity, namely as a condition that is characterized primarily by ambivalence. To him, modernity's merit is that individuals can again take responsibility for their creations instead of alienating them, but the drawback is that individuals are also burdened with an irreducible sense of uncertainty as a consequence. Hence, Berger evaluates modernity in terms of both loss and gain; that is, we have gained an "ethic of responsibility," but have lost an unconditional sense of belonging.[97] Gauchet's narrative, in turn, is determined by his own evaluation of the modern condition, one that appears to be the bleakest of the three. At the end of his book, he suggests that the final undoing of dispossession does not result in total "repossession" but rather in an irreducible existential insecurity. He claims that "[t]his society is psychologically draining for individuals," because it no longer supports them when they are continuously confronted with fundamental questions concerning one's purpose or identity.[98] And especially in later articles he infers from this account that the utter contingency of the world that is the disappointing end result of disenchantment makes it increasingly difficult for the individual to identify with anything, since identification requires the kind of meaningful order that has been left behind.[99]

Furthermore, it can be demonstrated that the evaluation of "modernity" is connected with the interpretation of the essentially contested concept of "Christianity," which in turn is intertwined with the underlying conception of history that is wielded by each author. Note, for instance, how Blumenberg's conception of history as characterized by discontinuity is associated with his conception of modernity's defining capacity to overcome the problem that the Christian system could not solve, whereas Gauchet is evidently not concerned with vindicating the legitimacy of modernity and hence rather argues that modernity is the logical conclusion of Christianity's tragic self-abolition. Finally,

96. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 139.

97. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 125. I allude to Weber, to whom Berger is indebted, and to the former's "ethic of responsibility," which denotes a tragic-heroic conception of individualism.

98. Gauchet, *Disenchantment*, 206-207.

99. *Ibid*., 166-167, 191, 204-207; Gauchet, "What Have We Lost," 38-40; Gauchet, "A New Age of Personality: An Essay on the Psychology of our Times," *Thesis Eleven*, no. 60 (2000), 36-41. On Gauchet's pessimism, see Samuel Moyn, "Savage and Modern Liberty," *European Journal of Political Theory* 4, no. 2 (2005), 164-187.

Berger's equivocal identification of Christianity—as containing both a disenchanting and re-enchanting potential—is also connected with *his* idea of history, in that it enables him to occupy a middle ground between the "structuralism" of logical continuity in Gauchet's account and the overemphasizing of historical discontinuity that we can find in Blumenberg.

It is in this manner that a *Geistesgeschichte*'s use of essentially contested concepts becomes intertwined with both the story's moral as well as with the underlying conception of history that is wielded. It is therefore not surprising that the accounts of Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet, although possessing a similar explanation structure, contradict one another with regard to *how modernity should actually be evaluated* vis-à-vis its Christian past. Indeed, it becomes apparent that this divergence is even inherent to *Geistesgeschichte*, a genre that allows incompatible viewpoints to bring forth their own corresponding historical narratives.

Evaluation of the Debate

After having analyzed the accounts of Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet in terms of their purported *geistesgeschichtlich* character, it is time to provide an *evaluation* of the debate and to argue in favor of the added value of such *Geistesgeschichten*—granted that they meet the requirement of Rorty's "honesty-criterion." It is thereby possible to broaden our scope by also reflecting on the contemporary debate on secularization, not only because of the assumed exemplary status of these three accounts for post-secularism, but also because it can now be inferred that the ideal-typical "subtraction story" can equally be regarded as a type of *Geistesgeschichte*.

To elaborate on this last claim, we must bear in mind that the subtraction narratives assume that "modernity" is above all defined by its overcoming of religion and superstition through progressive enlightenment and the concomitant advance of freedom and reason. To substantiate this diagnosis of the present condition, the subtraction narrative constructs a conception of history accordingly. Thus, the explanatory power of the subtraction theory resides in its capacity to mobilize a large amount of historical "data" to impart the suggestion that throughout history, religion has always functioned as a restrictive force and that rationality and individual liberty always had to be fought for at the expense of religion. However, what is not always transparent in such accounts is that these "historical facts" become meaningful only once they are situated in a pre-given "plot"—such as the conception of history as progressive Enlightenment—which is determined by a priori philosophical ideas regarding the nature of humanity or reality.[100] Instead, such presuppositions are often concealed and the account in question is rather presented as derived from facts or common sense. Indeed, Taylor's notion of "subtraction theory," serving as a common denominator for the theories he himself attacks, signifies such an implicit philosophical presupposition. That is, it denotes a positivistic or essentialist conception of reality or of human nature, the approximation of which becomes possible only as soon as the superfluous

100. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing in the Human* Sciences, 171-174.

and distorting element of religion is removed. Once again, this illustrates how essentially contested concepts are often vehicles for the underlying ideology of a narrative.

The same, of course, applies to the narratives of Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet as well as to the more contemporary post-secularist accounts. Their approach—as embedded in the critique-of-modernity tradition—admittedly possesses its own explanatory power in that it can explain certain phenomena that remain anomalous in the subtraction theory, such as the typically modern sense of anxiety or existential "homelessness," as Berger calls it, that can be related to the problematization of ontological foundations, that is, the aforementioned discontentment with disenchantment.[101] So whereas the subtraction theory focuses mainly on the optimistic side of secularization, the alleged liberation of the individual and rationality, the three "modernity critiques" discussed in this article might be regarded as persuasive because they *can* explain the commonly perceived problem of existential anxiety. By gaining currency, these accounts can gradually diminish the self-evident status of the subtraction story, as is currently the case in post-secularist studies.

Regardless of whether it succeeds in undermining the self-evidence of the subtraction story, it becomes clear why post-secularism cannot be expected to yield a commonly acceptable alternative account of how modernity should be related to its Christian past. After all, as we have seen in the analysis of the exemplary cases of Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet, a similar philosophical background and the adherence to a similar explanation structure is not enough to bring about a more or less incontestable alternative story. Indeed, once we move beyond the general characteristics of such accounts—namely a rejection of the simple subtraction story and the assumption of a more hermeneutical and culturally determined conception of secularization—and arrive at the argument on how the relation between modernity and Christianity *should* be understood, these stories become too dependent on partisan interpretations of the essentially contested concepts to yield generally acceptable portrayals. As long as a debate such as the one about post-secularism contains adherents of more than one normative viewpoint, and as long as contested concepts are involved, it cannot produce a single alternative story to the subtraction theory.

Is this, however, necessarily a problem? I would argue that it is not, as long as the participants in the debate acknowledge the intrinsic limitations of such a *geistesgeschichtlich* endeavor that involves talking about essentially contested concepts. First, as I have already noted, the practice of *Geistesgeschichte* is valuable because it allows us to attain positive hermeneutical self-understanding. However, in line with Rorty's argument, it should be stated that there needs to be a dialectical relation between the positive self-understanding of *Geistesgeschichte* and the negative self-awareness that is obtained by historical reconstruction. The latter ought to remind us of the fact that the *geistesgeschichtlich* attempts to interpret the past in terms of the present are different from an interpretation of the *past in its own terms*, which thus entails "the possibility that our self-justifying

101. Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, "Homeless Minds Today?," in *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion*, ed. Linda Woodhead *et al*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 43.

conversation is with creatures of our own phantasy."[102] This self-awareness, brought about by historical reconstruction, can also counter the pitfall that Rée addressed, namely that of *Geistesgeschichte* becoming a vehicle for mere self-serving complacency.[103]

Hence, based on Rorty's notion of "honesty," *Geistesgeschichte* can be regarded as a legitimate endeavor to further our self-understanding, on the one hand, while always remaining an open-ended exercise, on the other. This open-ended character is an irreducible feature of this enterprise, since it can never disclose the past objectively and because it is necessarily contingent on the continuously changing perception of the present. To comply with such an idea of honesty would entail that *Geistesgeschichten* not be presented as following directly from the "facts" or "common sense," since that would imply a dishonest concealment of presuppositions.

Finally, concerning the use of essentially contested concepts within such a debate, Gallie proposes something similar to Rorty's concept of "honesty," namely that it is beneficial for the discussion that its participants recognize that the debate indeed revolves around concepts that are essentially contested:

> Recognition of a given concept as essentially contested implies recognition of rival uses of it (such as oneself repudiates) as not only logically possible and humanly "likely," but as of permanent potential critical value to one's own use or interpretation of the concept in question; whereas to regard any rival use as anathema, perverse, bestial or lunatic means . . . to submit oneself to the chronic human peril of underestimating the value of one's opponents' positions.[104]

In addition, this not only applies to the use of essentially contested concepts but also to *Geistesgeschichte* in general. That is to say, an awareness of the epistemological limitations of *Geistesgeschichte*—as being centered on normative viewpoints that are not verifiable by "facts" but rather depend on persuasion—and the recognition of the irreducible openness of such a hermeneutical enterprise might lead to a less antagonistic and a more constructive and self-critical *geistesgeschichtlich* debate.

CONCLUSION

It should be emphasized, in conclusion, that the debate on modernity and its Christian past—such as the one currently going on between the subtraction theory and post-secularism—is an important one because it is concerned with a central question, namely our self-understanding as modern beings. The narratives of post-secularism, the subtraction theory but also of Blumenberg, Berger, and Gauchet can be seen in this respect as attempts to understand what it means to be

102. Rorty, "Historiography," 71; he in fact pleas for this kind of dialectical relation between "intellectual history" (an additional genre that suddenly pops up near the end of his article) and *Geistesgeschichte*, but since "intellectual history" is very similar to "historical reconstruction," this means that the latter can arguably serve the same function.

103. I concede that due to its subjective and normative character, *Geistesgeschichte* will remain self-serving to a certain degree, but a "self-conscious *Geistesgeschichte*" would possess a reflexivity that prevents it from becoming a vehicle for complacency.

104. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," 193.

a modern individual in a secular age. However, if the contestants within such a debate do not incorporate a self-critical stance of epistemological humility, then it will be never be anything other than an irresolvable conflict between mutually exclusive grand narratives, each laying claim to absolute truths. It is precisely this image of the current debate that would justify the criticism of nonparticipants like Turner and Rée that this irresolvability proves that one must rather avoid discussing concepts like "modernity" altogether.

If, however, "self-conscious *Geistesgeschichte*"—that is, a *Geistesgeschichte* that is aware of its being a philosophical form of writing history that is necessarily dependent on nonevident beliefs and a concomitant use of essentially contested concepts—is indeed maintained as a discursive paradigm, as I recommend, then this alleged irresolvability will appear more favorable, namely as a pluralistic situation in which several narratives are engaged in civil rivalry aimed at persuading their audiences. In this situation, each narrative possesses its own explanatory power but also has its own blind spots. Indeed, such an image would correspond with Gadamer's conception of hermeneutical self-understanding as an endeavor that is perpetually open-ended, but which is driven by the common goal of *Bildung* and attaining mutual understanding (which is not the same as "agreement").[105] Arguably, if such a debate were to be lifted out of the sphere of antagonism and entrenched partisanship and into one of civil rivalry, then the pluralistic situation can be regarded as an advantage, because it would allow one to explore a wide range of interesting windows to the past. This could amount to a richer and more nuanced understanding of both the history and the contemporary condition that forms us.

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105. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 3-38; Bouma-Prediger, "Rorty's Pragmatism," 322-324.