
HANS BLUMENBERG AND THE CRITIQUE OF SECULARIZATION

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Abstract

The following article outlines the major points of Blumenberg's critique of secularization thesis in *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, in order to create the premises of a *rhetorical theory* of modernity. This theory allows us to see the cultural figures of modernity not as historical effects of past medieval theological decisions, but as *languages* that are mixed in complex metaphors. The case under scrutiny is that of the relation between sacred and scientific reading of nature, in Blumenberg's *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*.

Keywords: secularization, metaphor, rhetoric, concept, history

1. Introduction

In a 1959 review of Bultmann's *Geschichte und Eschatologie*, H. Blumenberg formulates the core of criticism to the concept of 'secularization', which will later be enlarged upon in *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*: "A religion which disappears leaves behind questions to which it seemed to have given answers, and thus constrains the succeeding systems of thought to give answers to these annoying questions, which can't yet or will never be able to receive answers. This re-occupying of these valences that became empty is, of course, a kind of 'succession' by the very antithesis, a formal analogy, but one that allows material heterogeneity. The 'secularisation' thesis requests in this situation more rigorous methodological insurances than those known until now." [1] In other words, as I will try to show below, the concept of secularization comes to be construed not as a process of derivation or branching of concepts, domains, statements or gestures, but as an idea rhetorically relevant, pertaining to a certain semantic coherence of a certain period. 'Secularization' is a category of 'historical injustice' which, although meant to justify the autonomy of modernity in reference to the previous period, turns the former into a mere derivation, an *appendix* of the latter: as J. Greisch [2] argues, what the theory of secularization does is to describe a modernity, which is the Middle Ages minus the faith in transcendence.

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Later on, in *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Blumenberg elaborates the critique of the secularization theory by a successive contrast to, among others, Gadamer, Löwith, Bultmann, Marquard, and Schmitt. I intend to make a synthesis of the German author's critique in order to be able to answer a double question: *How is it possible to formulate a theory of modernity only on a rhetorical foundation?* and, *How can we analyse those acts or figures which are paradigmatic from a cultural or religious point of view, and which fill a cultural space in what looks like a functional inadequacy?* The theory of secularization in its traditional version allows for an interpretation of certain transformations in traditional typologies such as: the personal development councillor is a modern avva, or the *flaneur* is the secularised version of the pilgrim. This interpretation is based on the pair *authentic-inauthentic* and it ranks the figures depending on the meaning zone (theological in this particular case) which empowers them. But what would happen if apparently contradictory acts come against each other? The space that encompasses both could no longer be described by a logic of mono-linear processes (such as secularization), nor by circular mechanisms of religious 'reinvestment' or even de-secularization of the domains 'gone astray'. A political act of de-territorialisation, an ethic of hospitality, and a formula of historical intertextuality become defining factors for the period of this encounter. The case I shall refer to, also in Blumenberg's footsteps, is that of the different manners of reading the (religious or lay) world which modernity pushes against one another. Therefore, the work *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* [3] will serve as reference point.

2. The critique of secularization

In the following, I will refer to the 1976 version of *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, which includes answers and amendments following the indirect dialogues with Gadamer and Schmitt. The subsequent *Arbeit am Mythos* offers further explanatory details [4]. Even from the first few pages – on the 'status' of the concept – Blumenberg defines the premises of this critique: the theory of secularization acknowledges the disappearance of something that, under different circumstances, would have been present, on the one hand; it also assumes the fact that this disappearance means "an evolution, a change in the attributes of a substance" [5]. If the first, empirical, statement is more or less legitimate, grounding it on the substantialism of the historical event is somewhat troublesome. With this supposition, the theory of secularization makes a step forward from a descriptive, to an explanatory level of the historical fact, from the obvious acknowledgement of a phenomenon (the decreased relevance of religious institutions in the context of modern society) to understanding it as the loss of an original, religious content, to contesting an origin, whether as an act of emancipation or, on the contrary, as a dissolution.

Thus, the theory of secularization cannot function as an 'explanation' of modern conscience as it is quite contradictory: through a contrary effect, it connects modernity to what precedes it and what actually begot it. As a last

consequence, which can be further discussed following in Blumenberg's view, it implies an inauthentic sense of being of the world (*Weltlichkeit*). If secularization means that "the world becomes more and more mundane (*Weltlich*)" [5, p. 3] and it explains this as a *loss* of the transcendent reference, then *mundanity* becomes, in turn, a mere degradation or fall from Heaven [6]. At this point Blumenberg points to an interesting observation made by H. Arendt: that the so-called modern 'gain' of the world is in fact a loss, a transformation operated by the control-oriented reason [7].

The subsequent chapters refer to Blumenberg's theses as mentioned above. One such focal point is illustrative. It is best known by the way in which K. Löwith's thesis is discussed in *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (1949): modern conscience of history is the secularization of Christian eschatology. In Löwith's view, the idea of progress proves this by the orientation towards the future it implies. However, a comparative analysis of Christian eschatology, on the one hand, and the theory of progress, on the other, leads to a different result. The modern idea of *progress* is justified, and then becomes operational by an accumulation of knowledge, or by a perfected technical reason; whereas that of Christian eschaton – by an immanent end of time [8]. Progress, as Blumenberg further argues, is made possible by a growth of knowledge which originates in curiosity but, to the Christian, the latter is a vice. There are other elements that suggest the material incompatibility between *eschaton* and *progress*. At the same time though, both views on history match in a functional sense: both of them indicate a certain meaning of the 'whole', the 'totality'. Once Christian eschatology gets into crisis at the end of the Middle Ages (Blumenberg later calls this crisis of Theology a *theological absolutism*), the idea of progress fills the vacancy. But it does so with a different vocabulary and with novel means. As Blumenberg concludes, this is not about secularization, as modern Philosophy of history is not a transformation (*Umsetzung*), but a reinvestment, or a renewed claim (*Umbesetzung*) of the theological view on the end [9].

An important consequence as to the purpose of this study is a 'weak', immanent formula [9, p. 278] to legitimate modernity. Thus, legitimating no longer implies a 'meta-narrative' with this role, but a narrower sense of "response to a local crisis" [8, p. 143]. Modernity is legitimated not by a dialectic of the spirit, nor by transcendental structures, but strictly by the crisis, or loss, of meaning determined by nominalism at the end of the Middle Ages. Thus, secularization does not function as an explanatory scheme, or as a law of history; because it is defined by its substantialist presuppositions and by its would-be heuristic value, it is re-considered as rhetoric.

3. After secularization

Modernity, as I have tried to show above, legitimates its autonomy by the fact that it represents an answer to a crisis at a time when the other answers prove to be inefficient. The self-assertion of reason represents a more important

act than its fundamentation: “Self-assertion determines the radicalness of reason, not its logic” [5, p. 97]. The question is: *How does this self-assertion occur and what does secularization mean in this case?* Blumenberg’s answer replaces, on the one hand, the historical substantialism of the classic theory of secularization with a ‘functionalism’ which makes this concept efficient from a rhetorical point of view. E. Brient explains: “Insofar as new responses are offered to old problems which had been solved differently in a previous historical period, they may be said to ‘reoccupy’ the position of the old ideas and attitudes. That is, they serve the same function, they answer the same ‘carry-over’ questions, but the answers they give in responding to the inherited problems are not the same.” [6, p. 28] At this point, the considerations in *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* are no longer sufficient. Blumenberg warns against a misunderstanding, namely replacing the historical substantialism of the answers with that of the questions. The way we describe the passage from the Middle Ages to Modernity does not imply maintaining a trans-historical question that various epochs try to answer. The sense of history does not represent a stake for the Greek, just as ‘infinity’ is continuously re-thought depending on its role in the theoretical system of an epoch. Once the ‘great questions’ hypothesis is rejected, we have to explicate functionalism: what does it mean when we say that eschatology and the theory of progress fulfil the same function despite their material heterogeneity?

Arbeit am Mythos gives an answer to this question by reformulating it in the context of Anthropology. It is the “persistent need for orientation in the world” [6, p. 37]. From an anthropological point of view, the primary function is, according to Blumenberg, *significance-symbolisation*, i.e. man faces the “absolutism of reality” expressed by the fact that “man came close to not having control of the conditions of his existence and, what is more important, believed that he simply lacked control of them” [4, p. 3]. So, the questions to which the Middle Ages or Modernity give different answers do not pertain to a limited theoretical interest, but to the (anthropological) need for orientation in a world that does not speak but manifest itself implacably. Myth, dogma, or science, are such ways of adaptation, different in their formulas and also more or less successful. The paradigm of any process of signification of this type is, as Blumenberg argues, an Odysseus myth, i.e. the way the hero finds a route in a world which is hostile to him after all. The significant mode typical of cultural achievements is characterized by a certain sense of finite, which is not the case of science with its absolute claims: “Significance is related to finitude. It arises under the imposed requirement that one renounce the ‘Vogliamo tutto’ [I want everything], which remains the secret drive for the impossible” [4, p. 67]. It is precisely the problem of the finitude in the process of significance that opens the domain of culture onto rhetorical analysis. The latter enters the stage when the process of significance of the world is joined by equivocality, the absence of the ultimate answer or of the search for an essence. In *Antropologische Annäherung an die Aktualität der Rhetorik*, Blumenberg puts rhetoric under the principle of insufficient reason: “Rhetorik hat es nicht mit Fakten zu tun, sondern mit Erwartungen” [10].

To Blumenberg, the scenarios that legitimate modernity obey the same laws of Rhetoric. They ‘enjoy’ not the univocality of Science, but the plurivocality of metaphor. In *Arbeit am Mythos*, the author gives an example: “Frivolity is only a weak derivative of all this, a means of anthropomorphic relaxation of tension vis-à-vis myth: One can do this, or say that, without being struck by lightning. It is the first stage of ‘Enlightenment’ satire, of rhetorical secularization as a stylistic technique employed by a spirit that is not yet confident of its enlightened status.” [4, p. 17] The rhetorical valences of ‘secularization’ are thus more relevant than its would-be explanatory role. Through them, modernity acknowledges its ‘anthropological soil’ as well as its parochial, historical, undecided character.

4. Secularization and the rhetorical ‘constitution’ of modernity

The situation Blumenberg envisages in the ninth section of *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* is briefly presented by J. Greisch [2]: modern world, however ‘consumed’ the Christian view of the world, carries on speaking its language. Terms, concepts, or symbols, live on (whether or not disguised, according to Eliade) subsequent to the modern ‘decision’ of secularization. Can this fact be interpreted as a debt of modernity to its Christian ancestry? Blumenberg’s answer is negative: modernity is the answer to a crisis of medieval Christianity, not a new chapter after it. The legitimacy of modernity does not show in its attempt to avoid the Christian language, just as the persistence of the latter does not mean the failure of the modernity project. Rather, the ‘habit’ created by the Christian language and the way it responds to the need for significance of the world outlive the Middle Ages just because, while formulating modernity as a solution, we also discover the crisis that generates it. “Secularization as an intentional style consciously seeks a relation to the sacred as a provocation. A considerable degree of continuing acceptance of the religious sphere in which the language originates has to be present in order to make possible such an effect, just as black theology can only spread its blasphemous terror where the sacral world still persists.” [5, p. 104] As an example (from Blumenberg), Rousseau’s *Confessions* are related to Saint Augustine’s only at a rhetorical level: there is no rule of cultural derivation between the two. With Rousseau, the title indicates a function that Saint Augustine makes visible for the first time, i.e. the discourse as a complete ‘unveiling’ of the self before an alterity. In this case, secularization does not place in logical succession two modes of this unveiling, but is only the dialogical, tense formula of the search for the self as a need grounded anthropologically.

Thus, modernity is in no debt because we cannot identify, from a historical point of view, an original ‘owner’ of a language or of a theoretical act. It can be described as a metaphor of the need to give a direction to the flow of time, or a need for a sense of all theoretical activity and of the exercise of freedom. More precisely, modernity is defined from the perspective of the ‘anthropological soil’ by the metaphor of the Copernican revolution [11]. So, to

understand modernity is to 'reduce' it to the metaphorical level of this epoch, to the 'non-conceptual' of its theoretical acts and of its cultural constructs: "The non-conceptuability is the historical result, full of consequences, of a reduction which is actually the starting point of a 'historical phenomenology'" [12].

5. Conclusions: the plurality of modernity

Once modernity is freed from the rigours of a logic of self-conscience and becomes an 'absolute metaphor', the expressions that define it inevitably become plural, intertextual. The analysis of modernity becomes one of surfaces, an empiricism of forms not dominated by an interiority. Blumenberg mentions a phrase by Montaigne in order to define the relationship a metaphor has with its 'content': "The metaphor for this meaning content of metaphor was provided by Montaigne: 'the world's face' (le visage du monde)" [13].

This concerns routes, colours and forms, not meanings; they are contradictory, insufficient and tense, and express what Husserl calls *Widerstimmigkeit* ("resistance to harmony" [13, p. 83]). In the expressions of modernity, *mundanization* makes possible an infinite immanent exoticism: "Significance makes possible a 'density' that excludes empty spaces and empty times, but it also makes possible an indefiniteness of dating and localization that is the equivalent of ubiquitousness" [4, p. 96]

In this world of 'Copernican revolution', the world is read twice. Modernity faces most of the times two important cosmological views: theological and scientific. Campanella's saying in *Apologia pro Galileo* that "God's books are in tune with one another" gives the title of Chapter VII in Blumenberg's *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* [14]. Blumenberg shows how, in order to justify the coherence of readings, Campanella starts from the idea that nature is, of course, the canvas on which are written the signs of revelation. The knowledge of 'secularized', or scientific, nature can, by contrast, highlight the 'warnings' of divinity. In another context, Descartes writes to the doctors of Sorbonne about the necessity that divine truths receive, beyond the formulation provided by the Scripture, a new one too, that of reason, addressed both to the believers and to the non-believers [15]. The multiplication of languages in modernity produces an ever more complex form of intertextuality as it does not mean the replacement of a certain vocabulary by another, but their co-existence. The two books of Revelation (nature and the Scripture) are constantly re-written, but not in an absolute manner: one of the two books, nature, is in a continuous proliferation [14, p. 87-88]. The secularization of 'nature' in the sense of the loss of religious reference is taking place now just because of the lack of symmetry in the writing of the two books: the revealed one, the Scripture, remains unchanged, while the book of nature is in a perpetual process of reformulation. The book of nature becomes in itself intertextual and languages exchange meanings among one another. The type of history of science that T. Kuhn approaches is illustrative of that [16].

The reply that religion gives to the 'end' of modernity is quite interesting. The proliferation of scientific intertextuality tends to fill the entire stage, just as the theological vocabulary did in the old days. Consequently, religion itself becomes intertextual, syncretic, dialogical, in order to be a 'conversation partner' with dominant vocabularies. Ackerman and Lee, for example [17], describe multiple situations where the religious behaviour of late modernity is essentially syncretic and soteriologically oriented. The re-appraisal of folk religiosity too, or even an intensification of the dialogue between the spiritual traditions are ways in which the religious learns how to take on an intertextual formula subsequent to its initial marginalization by Science [18].

From a strictly theological point of view, the theologies of liberation (J. B. Metz) or the theology of the death of God (J. Altizer, J.D. Caputo) describe a change in paradigm: focusing the discourse on the message of Christian love, not the traditional dogmas. This message is in turn multiplied into ethical, political, and anthropological discourses, and proves in fact a formidable communicative capacity for the vocabularies in fervently used in late modernity.

Thus, the 'rhetorical' meaning of modernity makes room for a 'weak' theory of secularization. It describes, starting from the above examples, the ability religion has to reformulate itself by intertextual discourses, and thus to get a public face. The early centuries of modernity attest to the process by which the 'book' of Science becomes more influential than its predecessor, Theology, just because of its ability to re-write itself rapidly and to put together heterogeneous metaphors. On the contrary, the end of modernity sees an extraordinary 'return' of the religious because of the way it managed, in the meantime, to reformulate itself in a dialogical manner and get a public character, learning to speak the language of different communities. The so-called 'disguise' M. Eliade mentioned [19], referring to the situation of myths in contemporary world, can be interpreted also as their extraordinary capacity of intertextual reformulation and adaptation without which the individual of late modernity could not know them. Understood in one case as a withdrawal of the divine from the stage of history, or on the contrary, seen in the other case as an immanentization of the theological meaning [20], in this study 'secularization' refers to the situation of a language, not of a self-conscience. It does not signify a loss anymore, or a way to legitimate autonomy, but a certain tense situation of the theological language and of the way it is rooted in the 'founding metaphor' of modernity.

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