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Reimagining the Secular Imaginary: A Theological Turn

Neil Turnbull

neil.turnbull@ntu.ac.uk

Department of English, Linguistics and Philosophy | Nottingham Trent University



Abstract

In this paper, I interrogate some of the key assumptions of contemporary secularism in order demonstrate the presence of a concealed sacrality *within* the secular. My aim is to show that what philosophers and social theorists refer to as 'secularity' is simply a theological mutation within the Christian theological imaginary; one that we can, in its dis-incarnational rejection of the sacrality of nature in favour of grace, following Voegelin, position as 'Gnostic' (see Voegelin, 2012). In this vein, I will suggest that the sacred within the secular is fundamentally acosmic; residing beyond the realm of nature, which is now handed over to the dark fate of impersonal mechanism; as a series of causes within a larger order of causal necessity. In its radical separation of the sacred from the cosmos, I will claim that the secular relocates the sacred within the infinitude of the subject; within a realm of radical freedom, where the self no longer has any spiritual communion with things but only with other selves to the extent that politics itself takes on a spiritual dimension (see Jonas, 2001). In making this claim, I will endeavour to show what, at first glance, appears to be the waning of sacrality of modern contexts, in reality is simply an effect of a hard-to-discern *transformation*: from a conception of sacrality primarily located in the outer realms of people and things, to one found in the relative immateriality of political discourse - from 'the invisible in natural things' to 'the visible in political words'.

My approach is deliberately and self-consciously 'theoretical'. In the present era, when various forms of bland empiricism and the ideology of scientism blind us to any need for new ideas and alternative ways of imagining the social-historical, it is essential that work in the Humanities again begins to move along critical and speculative paths. For 'facts without theories are blind' – and it is only the vision of the theorist that is able to transform the crises of our age into something thought-worthy and, ultimately, to render our responses choice-worthy. In so doing, I will make the theory-driven claim that in the passage to modernity the sacred was



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sublimated into a new form: abstracted and further esoterised as it was uprooted from its cosmological groundings and rearticulated into the modern imaginaries of politics and law. My key claim will be that within modern contexts the 'sacrality of the secular' ultimately resides within a new type of political textuality – in the idea of a sacred constitution that manifests itself in the utopian recognition and obligation of a people with/to itself and to all other peoples. In other words, I will suggest that in modern contexts, the sacred becomes disembedded within the futurity of political symbolic orders and is therefore neither diminished nor diluted but simply relocated and rearticulated within founding political texts – texts that possess quite specific ontological, world-transforming, effects. In this way, I claim that within secular modernity the sacred emerges as a geo-political ideal of universal freedom that presents itself as necessary *a priori* political truth that applies universally to all peoples, all places, and for all time. It is in this sense that the modern sacred retains its link with the *eschaton* via its implicit connection to the ideal of an end of history, the time when the moral and political obligations of the founding political text will be fulfilled and realised for all peoples. By way of conclusion, I will suggest that recognition of this requires a new 'theological turn' in contemporary Philosophy and Social Theory.

Keywords

Modernity | Gnosticism | Political Constitutions | Theology | the Sacred

Introduction: The Sacred within the Secular

According to the current paradigmatic understanding of the origin and significance of Western modernity, multiple processes of modernisation effectively inverted the traditional hierarchical ordering of ‘the secular’ (the ordinary, worldly, and the profane) and ‘the sacred’ (the extra-ordinary, the holy, and the venerated). This inversion, it is claimed, was established in the wake of a profound ‘metaphysical shudder’ that fractured the moral, cultural and political foundations of key European social formations in the period between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Prior to this, in pre-modern contexts, human life conceived of itself in hierophantic terms; the *hieros* being deemed both ontologically and epistemologically foundational, with the secular positioned as a secondary phenomenon; restricted and theologically conditioned in the context of Christianity as a lesser juridical reality within Augustine’s fallen ‘City of Man’.¹ In modernity, however, secularity is seen as having thoroughly profaned itself; achieving for itself a new autonomy in the attainment of an ontological, world-forming and informing, potentiality in its own right. Within modernity, it is claimed, the secular emerges as the force of history; as ‘time liberated’ for human purposes and plans. In modernity, secular time is no longer the time between the incarnation and the *eschaton*. On the contrary, in modernity the secular now presents itself as the new infinitude of ‘historical progress’ founded upon the radical opening of the time horizon; as an empty, undecidable, yet projectable and malleable, human-centred, futurity. As such, within secular temporality, the distinction between an unalterable (but knowledge-worthy) past and an open future occupies the place once occupied by the immanent and the transcendent, of a ‘here’ and a ‘beyond’ (see Kossellneck, 2005: 212).

However, this, orthodox, conception of secularity is itself founded upon a series of often unquestioned and unquestionable assumptions. In this paper, I intend to interrogate some of these assumptions, in order reveal the presence of a concealed sacrality *within* the secular. Indeed, I aim to show that what philosophers and social theorists refer to as ‘secularity’ is simply a theological mutation within the Judeo-Christian theological imaginary; one that we can, in its dis-incarnational rejection of nature over grace, following Voeglin, position as ‘Gnostic’ (see Voegelin, 2012). In this vein, I will suggest that the sacred within the secular is fundamentally acosmic; residing beyond the realm of nature, which is now handed over to the dark fate of impersonal mechanism, as a series of spiritually blind causes within a larger order of

¹ However, in pre-modern contexts, although it is widely argued that the sacred was primary both ontologically and politically, the sacred and the profane were deemed to be conceptually and existentially inseparable domains; with the secular being defined in terms of the sacred, the former being viewed as a degenerate albeit outgrowth of the latter. This can again be seen in Christianity, where the sacred was no longer located in people or things, but in the dimensions of time, to the extent that the secular itself was understood as simply the time between the two historical sacralities of the incarnation and the *eschaton*.



causal necessity. In its radical separation of sacred from the cosmos, the secular relocates the sacred within the infinitude of the subject, within a realm of radical freedom, where the self no longer has any spiritual communion with things but only with other selves, to the extent that politics itself takes on a heightened spiritual dimension (see Jonas, 2001). In making this claim, I will endeavour to show that what at first glance appears to be the waning of sacrality of modern contexts, in reality is simply an effect of a hard-to-discern *transformation*. From a conception of sacrality primarily located in the outer realms of people and things, to one found in the relative immateriality of personal and political discourse - from 'the invisible in natural things', to 'the visible in political words'.

In what follows, my approach will be deliberately and self-consciously theoretical. In the present era, when various forms of bland empiricism and the ideology of scientism blind us to any need for new ideas and alternative ways of imagining the social-historical, it is essential that work in the Humanities again begins to move along critical and speculative paths. For 'facts without theories are blind' – and it is only the vision of the theorist that is able to transform the crises of our age into something thought-worthy and, ultimately, able to render our responses choice-worthy. In so doing, I will make the theory-driven claim that in the passage to modernity the sacred was sublimated into a form where it became abstracted and further esoterised as it was uprooted from its cosmological groundings and rearticulated into the modern imaginaries of politics and law. My key claim will be that within modern contexts the 'sacrality of the secular' ultimately resides within a new type of political textuality – in the idea of a sacred constitution that manifests itself in the utopian recognition and obligation of a people with/to itself and to all other peoples. In other words, I will suggest that in modern contexts, the sacred becomes disembedded within the futurity of the symbolic orders of the political and is therefore neither diminished nor diluted but simply relocated and rearticulated within founding political texts – texts that possess quite specific ontological, world-transforming, effects. In this way, I will claim that within secular modernity the sacred emerges as a geo-political ideal of universal freedom that presents itself as necessary *a priori* political truth that applies universally to all peoples, all places, and for all time. It is in this sense that the modern sacred retains its link with the *eschaton* via its implicit connection to the ideal of an end of history, the time when the moral and political obligations of the founding political text will be fulfilled and realised for all peoples - as the political eschaton's full worldly realisation.

Beyond Weberian Orthodoxy

Within modernity, it is widely alleged that the sacred in any traditional sense suffers at the hands of a deflationary logic, as human existence is no longer founded on the idea that humans possess any transcendent, supernatural, orientation and



destiny.² In this respect, within European contexts especially, the diminishing of the sacred is seen as manifested itself in a transformation from Church to the Market-State as the central founding, world-bestowing, institution.³ This conception of modernity we can position as broadly Weberian. As is well known, for Weber, the removal, often deliberate, of all supernatural, magical and sacred qualities (by means of state-led forms education and scientific 'enlightenment') was conceived as a process of *Entzauberung* - the 'disenchantment of the world'. What this implies is that as the secular world appeared, as we entered modernity, the world was transformed into a banal 'immanence'; transfigured into an inert domain for humans to measure, control and exploit as they saw fit within a new reign of quantity and efficiency. In this scheme, the sacred realities and conceptualities of the pre-modern world are reduced to what Max Stirner (and following him Karl Marx) understood as 'the spectral' (see Newman, 2001).

Weberianism has formed both the methodological crux and the philosophical basis of the doctrine of 'secularism' - the belief that the only world possible for humans to inhabit is thoroughly anthropocentric; their own historically situated human world, managed by means of a thoroughgoing instrumental rationality. According to this orthodox view, the Reformation and its intellectual progeny the Enlightenment spawned a quintessentially European intellectual and social movement that advocated a radical rationalisation of the European *weltanschauung*; inaugurating new post-sacred political orientations and economic cultures entirely focussed on the efficiency and effectiveness of the practices of 'this world'. In this scheme, in the process of 'eventing the modern', the European social movements of the 17th and 18th centuries not only destroyed traditional feudal forms of life, but also legitimised the quotidian dimensions of culture; the everyday and its banalities, relegating experiences of the sacred to the status of emotive marginalia. For Weberian thinkers the best that can be said is that in secular modernity the sacred is reduced to an aspect of culture, 'defined within cultural as opposed to institutional realities' (see Luckman, 2005: 82). Here, religion-as-culture is tolerated rather than celebrated; as, for advocates of secularism, the very idea of the sacred supports a childish, irrational and superstitious mode of thinking that humanity needs to move beyond if it is to progress and mature intellectually, morally and politically as a



² This claim, as we will see, fails to recognise that the distinction between the natural and supernatural aspects of being did not exist to any significant degree in pre-modern contexts. In pre-modernity, nature was deemed to be 'super-nature' and it was on this basis and only on this basis deemed worthy of emulation and knowledge. When Christ asked his followers to imitate 'the lilies in the field' he was articulating a fully integrated theological vision of nature, in relation to which human nature was deemed a microcosm.

³ In the pre-modern world, the Church was seen as the highest form of human organisation. States and their rulers had to bow to its authority (often reluctantly and begrudgingly) and genuflect to the moral force of its sacred teachings; precisely because if a ruler did not, the eternal beatitude of their people in heaven was deemed to be put at risk.

species.⁴ For the modern Weberian, intellectual and political childishness can have no part to play within mature forms of public reason. Weberianism thus presents a picture of modernity as determined by the objectivity of scientific facts and the arbitrary realms of free-floating values – the latter whose connection to the sacred is nothing more than a residual ‘Protestantism’.

The Secular Imaginary: Questioning the ‘Secularist Thesis’

Orthodox Weberian account forms the basis of what we might term ‘the secular imaginary’. This term is as a variation on what Charles Taylor has referred as ‘the modern social imaginary’, understood as the ways in which modern individuals ‘imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations (see Taylor, 2007: 171). When viewed in this way, the secular imaginary presents social existence as self-organising and self-maintaining; thereby positioning the human future as an open temporality against the forces of tradition that have put the individual in a position of unnecessary subordination and tutelage.⁵ In the secular imaginary, the only form of sacrality possible resides in an idea of ‘autonomous art’ that was to reach its apogee in the aesthetic modernism of the early 20th century – and here the sacrality of art resides precisely in its ‘shock value’; in its ability to profane, to reduce the sacred to nothing. More generally, in modernity, it is assumed that human life takes place entirely within what Taylor refers to as an ‘immanent frame’ (see Taylor 2007, 542ff). In the secular imaginary the only life that there can possibly be for humans is ‘this life’ - and to this degree, the only possibilities available to humans are the possibilities that humans can create for themselves. As such, in this context, the imaginary of the self also takes centre stage – the self, in its ‘buffered’ separation from the world and others being viewed as both an epistemological foundation (as in Descartes’ philosophy) and a source of potentially infinite meaning and value (in modern Romanticism). This takes us to an important characteristic of the secular imaginary referred to briefly above. In the secular imaginary, any sense of metaphysical hierarchy has been lost. The secular world is thus fundamentally imagined as an (ontologically) horizontal world - and this why, politically, secularists



⁴ In this context, it is assumed that, what we refer to ‘modern philosophy’, was initially one of the prime agents of secularization, in its quest to support the emergence of a radically new worldview and type-of socio-political arrangement based around state-centric and marketized conceptions of human agency conceptualised as ‘individual rights’. In this account, modern philosophy assisted in uprooting the person from its wider social and cosmological relations transforming the person into a solitary individual that viewed itself as sovereign, as a power that reigns over (but does not, yet, govern) its own world.

⁵ It is indeed interesting to observe that in modernity secular moderns are still frightened of ghost, the ghost of the sacred in particular that presents itself in modern contexts with a nun-like uncanniness.

value the literalness and linearity of democracy over and above the analogical and recursive nature of pre-modern ontologies are their closely linked forms of political rule.

The secular imaginary, therefore, carries with it a very significant implication for modern forms of political philosophy. For if, as the secularists suggest, the only world that there can be for humanity is an immanent world of purely human significance, the key historical task of modernity is to create political institutions that reflect and support this levelled-out state of affairs. In the secular imaginary, the liberation from the sacred is the condition of personal and political freedom, modernity's highest political ideal. This is the basis of modern individualism as it is imagined that within the secular condition, where each individual is 'alone with their freedom' to make their own plans and choices, regardless of objective constraints. This freedom has no relation to the sacred and in ontological terms is deemed empty - for Kant it is noumenal; for Sartre, it is nothing whatsoever.

However, reflection on the importance that secularity places on the interiority of the subject and its capacity for knowledge and freedom allows us to discern more than a trace of the sacred within the secular. For essential to the secular-modern outlook is the absolute value of individual freedom, of sovereign selfhood and the corresponding ideal of 'political rights': the belief that each individual should be free to develop according to their own path. In modern philosophy, this interiority becomes a mystical cloud of unknowing, something uncanny and in need of exploration and re-founding. In this way, within the secular imaginary, the purely human arena of free individual decision and choice replaces the idea of the sacred as the location of a 'mysterium tremendum' (Taylor, 1992: 12; Otto, 1958).

How is this new form of sacrality, the sacrality of the individual designated 'as free' and 'uncontaminated' by worldly traces, possible? My claim is that this is rendered possible via a reformulation of the sacred in the form of new types of foundational political text - that both ground it and legitimise it. Such discursive forms, standing in a nodal position within modernity's sacred realms of politics and law, especially as they have been articulated in relation to modernity's political constitutions, are what guarantee and secure the freedom of the individual from the ancient forces of heteronomy (those of a sacralised nature in particular) that threaten to overwhelm it.⁶ Thus what is not recognised in orthodox accounts is that 'sacred individuality' - a phenomenon that has become so extensive in the political landscapes of modernity that its totemic dimensions (as well as the taboos that protect it) have been obscured

⁶ However, with the advent of modernity the state increasingly replaces the church as the primary political organisation involved in the regulation and co-ordination of human life. The state is no longer subordinated to the church - it achieves a new autonomy and is separated from it. And this is another way through which we can differentiate the sacred from the secular. In sacred worlds, institutions are needed to protect, maintain, regulate (typically through ritual) people's access to the sacred. In Christianity this institution was the Church. However, the idea of the sacred is diminished, new institutions emerge that separate themselves out from the church - in this case the modern state, with its lawyers, bureaucrats, armies of civil servants - and so forth.



into seemingly banal realities – is only possible via a significant re-sacralisation of the political realm, of the City of Man. In other words, the sacrality of the modern individual receives its significance from the sacrality of politics. Of course, the archetypal founding sacred texts in this scheme are the French revolutionary constitution of 1791 and the American Declaration of Independence of 1776. (One could also consider other modern ‘revolutionary’ political documents such as the UK’s Bill of Rights linked to the ‘glorious revolution’ of 1688). Here, the question of what we now ordinarily value and valorise as ‘a political constitution’ is positioned at the centre of human existence in ways that provide moral and existential path-orientations. As the discussion below addresses more explicitly, the central positioning of such texts within secular imaginaries reveals their sacred aspect. Here, older sacralities are taken ‘into the written word’ – one that speaks not to this world but to another, future world; into a utopic condition, a political beyond. Here the sacred becomes a negation of extant social reality, an ideal that points humanity towards a form of life ‘beyond any world that has ever actually existed’.⁷ In this context, the universal ideal of individual freedom takes on a ‘revelatory’ aspect as a self-evident axiom that all humans will immediately assent to and on this basis aim to realise in history by dint of the simple force of its truth.⁸ Moreover, as I discuss more fully below, recognition of this becomes the basis for a new theological turn in philosophy, political sociology and the social sciences more generally.



Eliade’s Challenge to the Secular Imaginary

Even the Weberian secularist recognises that the attempt to secure ‘meaning’ and ‘human significance’ has become difficult for most moderns to muster and maintain. The secular demand that each live their without a sacred centre threatens many into feeling lost, alone and existentially bereft. However, importantly, recognition of this lack opens the way for a critique of the orthodox view of secular imaginary. More specifically, once the human need for some form of meaning-bestowing centre and existential extraordinariness is recognised as an anthropological fact, a counter-claim

⁷ Especially important is the position of a founding text and its erstwhile universal values and ideals in the relation to the creation of not only publics but also the quasi-messianic theologico-political stance of entire nations whose polities are so founded.

⁸ In this context, the ultimate evil is no longer moral but political – that which obstructs such rights, ‘tyranny’. More generally we might say that in the light of the US founders’ spiritual innovations tyranny occupies the space formerly occupied by the ‘demonic’. Importantly however (as recent juridical and political controversies regarding the meaning of the US constitution attest) even here in this attempt to secularise the sacred residual forms of the older sacrality remain. This can be discerned in reference to divine providence in US civil religion and in vestigial theological elements that continue to condition American cultural self-confidence, such of the idea of American political culture as a ‘manifest destiny’ for all human beings.

can be formulated. Although the traditional conception of the secular imaginary represents a plausible *theoretical* understanding of the modern world, *practically* it is an unliveable ideal – and therefore unsurprisingly a closer look at the cultural, political and economic landscape of modernity reveals a myriad forms of sacrality that the ideology of secularism disguises. Humans, it can be argued, will always seek some kind of ‘metaphysical centre’ or ontological world-bestowing focal point linked to a foundational narrative, or social metaphysics. For without such a sacred centre to human life nothing seems inherently meaningful/valuable: life becomes a void, a nullity that as Weber famously put it, of ‘sensualists without spirit, sensualists without heart’ (see Weber, 2012 [1905]). Human society withdraws. When the secular is understood as a dispirited and dispiriting context where everything is deemed merely mechanism and all values are, in the last analysis, subjective/instrumental/functional/technological, the sacred presents itself not as a spectre but as a profound absence and deeply felt human need and an anxiety that triggers searches for new forms of sacrality and sociality located in new existential locales. With this limitation of secularism in mind, in the 20th century there was a growing recognition amongst philosophers and theorists of religion that the sacred continues to exist and indeed must exist in a modern ‘secularized’ form, albeit often in a ‘degenerate’, acosmic, mode. To this extent, *homo religiosus* did not disappear in the passage to secular-modernity but simply ‘mutated’ – indeed from the point of view of the secular imaginary it could be permitted to acknowledge that the sacred had simply ‘evolved’.



Typically, this recognition has articulated itself as a post-secular theory of sacrality typified by the work of Carl Jung, Emile Durkheim and Ludwig Wittgenstein - but most importantly by the work of the phenomenologist of modern sacrality Mircea Eliade. Eliade recognised correctly that modernity wrought a profound Gnostic internalisation and subjectivization of the sacred. More specifically, for Eliade, from his European vantage point in the 20th century, the sacred remained a key element within all forms of human *consciousness*. For Eliade, to be human, to exist fully in the modern world, still requires the discovery of something absolutely real and meaningful; for him, humans could not exist otherwise. Consciousness of this thing, person, event or idea will vary from culture to culture, perhaps even from sub-culture to subculture, and, perhaps necessarily, from individual to individual - but it must be present and active for human life to be lived meaningfully and significantly. For Eliade therefore, within modernity, the sacred will always be present in some form by dint of anthropological necessity and therefore still carries with it a meaning-bestowing power. Each individual is now tasked to discover this mode of subjective (and inter-subjective) experience and, once discovered, it becomes the centre of life through which individuals and groups position themselves in relation to modernity's hidden soteriology. Thus for Eliade, in modernity, regarding *la grande situation humaine* of the modern individual, the secularist:

ignores what he considers to be sacred but, in the structure of his consciousness, could not be without the ideas of being and the meaningful. He may consider these purely human aspects of the structure of consciousness. What we see today is that man considers himself to have nothing sacred, no god; but his life still has meaning, because without it he could not live; it would be chaos. He looks for being and does not immediately call it being, but meaning or goals; he behaves in his existence as if he had a kind of centre. He is going somewhere, he is doing something. We don't see anything religious here; we just see a man behaving as a human being. But as historian of religion, I am not certain that there is nothing religious here...I think that unconsciously this man still behaves as the *homo religiosus*' (Eliade, 1973: 104).



For Eliade, then, modern life, by dint of its inability to sever connection to the human desire for meaning, retains a sacred centre, its own 'hidden gods' – gods that it must disguise in order to camouflage modernity's continuity with the ancient order of things. However, Eliade (unlike Jung, at least in this regard) has very little to say as to where this sacrality might be generally and collectively located – he simply recognised its potential for a new infinitude once it is liberated from its traditional cosmic contexts. But for Eliade, the primary implication of the new interiority of sacrality is clear – that within in modernity the sacred will be multiply founded and multiply located, as it now takes on a significance conditioned only by the multiple desires and logics of specific individual, social, cultural and economic interests. However, the more general political (and juridical) question remains hidden from his view– the question of the role of the sacred not just in continuing to provide a phenomenological centre for individuals and groups, but in regulating and coordinating their existence more generally by functioning as a religion in the secularist's own sense, in binding free individuals into functional collectivities. By Eliade's lights, we can view the secular imaginary as allowing for a promiscuous sacrality, where a variety of new forms of the sacred exist alongside established religions (here secularity witnesses a vast expansion of sacrality as opposed to its disappearance). However, this sense of spiritual dispersal and multiplicity fails to recognise that the sacred centre of modernity is not just a matter of the position of the sacred in relation to individual and group phenomenologies. What is missing from Eliade's account are the collective dimensions of modern sacrality, dimensions that reopen its connection to modern politics and its technics (see Rennie, 2017) – where the position of the sacred in relation to flags, currencies, military, civil technological innovations, but most especially politically constitutions, looms large.

By Eliade's lights the modern sacred is polytheistic. At the micro-systemic level, the modern sacred resides at the level of individual and small group experience. Similarly, at the meso-level, we could perhaps locate the modern sacred within various modern practices and institutions, such as: sport (football in particular); film, media and popular music (with their pantheon of 'stars'); consumerism (with its various cargo cults and secular Cathedrals); sex and its various profane ecstasies;

drugs (with their ability to engender instant, if artificial, grace, enlightenment and modes of self-transcendence) and aesthetic counter-cultures more generally. However, what is forgotten here is that the macro-systemic level possesses more fundamental forms of sacrality of its own – modernity's 'meta-sacralities' as it were – that in hidden ways maintain a significant influence over these 'lesser modern gods'. Indeed, modern polytheism is rendered possible only by means of the freedom guaranteed by the foundational political text – to the extent that the everyday polytheism of the modern masks a secret monotheism; the hidden Gnostic God of the political.

Therefore, in order to fulfil the promise of the Eliadean initiative, we must consider the higher-level macro-sacrality that conditions this modern 'infinitezation' of sacred meaning. It is this foundation that allows modernity's polytheism to emerge at all; and in order to begin this task we need to recognise the esoteric sacrality of the modern political sphere; of the technics of the state as such and of the juridical framework within which the modern dispersion of the *hieros* is rendered politically possible.

Gnostic Modernities: Immanence and Eschaton

The idea that the secular imaginary is the product of a revolutionary political re-articulation of quite specific theological orientations is one of the key theoretical claims of the contemporary Israeli social theorist Shmuel Eisenstadt. According to Eisenstadt, Western modernity is founded upon a theological imaginary with strong 'Gnostic components'; more specifically, on a 'concretization of the heterodox political potentialities' of the transcendental visions inaugurated during the Axial-age transformations of the first millennium BCE (see Jaspers, 1948).⁹ In his view, the modern revolutionary Gnostic political programme advocated new ontological visions that demanded the immanent institutionalisation of the religious visions promulgated by axial age civilisations (see Eisenstadt, 2006).

By these lights at the end of the mediaeval period a new theological imaginary emerged that attempted to further politicise and immanentise its *eschaton*; to bring about as an earthly realisation of transcendental visions of political perfection that, in axial-age contexts, were only available to philosophers, mystics, and seers. Eisenstadt's thesis is that the secular imaginary is thus essentially and radically

⁹ Jaspers' analysis of axial age civilisations claims that these civilisations represent a break from a cosmological understanding of value to a differentiated metaphysical conception (this 'historical trauma' in his view caused a profound semantic relocation of meaning). This period of history is associated with the emergence of Buddhism, Zoroaster, the Greek philosophical awakening and the Jewish Prophets. These religious innovations gave rise to the separation of religion from political structures and the birth of personal piety and the categorical separation of the politics from the divine. This amounted to the birth of a transcendental politics with a 'covenant theology'. The mosaic distinction – between 'true' and 'false' religion – being exemplary of 'the axial breakthrough'.





theological, as it is the bearer of a new Gnostic theologico-politics grounded in a transcendental religious vision of a new spiritual political order – a desire for a messianic utopia of heaven on earth, founded upon a secular popular sovereignty mediated by the texts and practices of activist state. For Eisenstadt, however, what is uniquely different about the theologico-political visions that underpin (and continue to maintain) Western modernity is their openness to the future, a shift that discloses a new messianic relationship to time as history. The present, in this context, emerges as something disconnected from its ancient relation to eternity; time enlarging and opening out into a redemptive future that demands an attitude of radical uncertainty in relation to the value and significance of any specific moment, event or place. Being here becomes unstable and its meaning is determined only in its openness to other possibilities, something that has ensured that ‘secular modernity’ is always on the move, both temporally and spatially and in a way that ensures that modernity always exists in multiple locales (see Eisenstadt, 2001). This immanentization of older transcendental visions in the present was in effect an attempt realise the political perfection of the Augustine’s City of God *hic et nunc*, thereby expanding the sphere of the religious into every nook and corner of human life. This, in one important sense, had the consequence of transforming the entire Western world into a giant monastery, in the way that Luther, that great heterodox Augustinian and spiritual moderniser, had explicitly desired (see Eisenstadt 2005, 168).

Manifestly, this conception of modernity calls into question of one they key assumptions underlying the secular imaginary that assumes that modernity connotes an event that inaugurated a radical break with what moderns refer to as ‘religion’ and its sacred traditions. Thus against the thesis of the secularist philosopher Hans Blumenberg, Eisenstadt shows that it is simply misleading to claim that in the history of world nothing like quite like modernity has ever existed before (see Blumenberg, 1985). Such claims are called into question in that the novelty of Western modernity resides not in its break with pre-modern sacrality but simply its courage to attempt to realise by political means the transcendental visions of the West’s founding theological and philosophical ideals. The modern lowering of sacrality, from metaphysical transcendence into political immanence required a corresponding shift from a concern with the sacrality of things (functioning as points of passage into higher transcendent realms) to the sacrality of ‘abstract values’ embodied in texts, narratives and technics (that functioned as a passage into the transcendence of the future). Key to the social and political processes associated with this politicisation of transcendental visions was the emergence of a typographic scriptural economy that allowed for the mass encoding and textual distribution of sacred political ideals contained within these visions, and their articulation into this-worldly, statist, political and juridical forms. In this perspective, the state takes on a theologico-political dimension that brings about not a thoroughgoing secularisation (as in the orthodox view) but rather a significant re-sacralisation – the re-sacralisation of the political (and its textual technics) as exhibited through the sacred ideal of the autonomous will of the individual and its collective political formation into a ‘sovereign people’. In this counter-view, the

modern state emerges as something quite different and in stark opposition to the pre-modern *ecclesia*. Whereas the latter had viewed itself as a Pauline *katechon* - as that which holds back the end of the world - the modern state views itself as its harbinger and facilitator, as a meta-organizational force for the transformation of older sacred ideals into a series of eschatological values that reside beyond 'merely personal' issues.¹⁰ The modern state becomes the mechanism for the realisation of a social and political condition of perfection on the earthly plane, for the completion by means of human agency of what religion in its more orthodox forms had located in a providential 'super-nature'.

In this vision, the sacrality of the state is revealed quite clearly in the central and focal role that modern political institutions play in relation to the creation and embedding of modern secular imaginaries. Here the original religious truths first formulated in *illud tempus*, in a 'time of origins', to use Eliade's phrase, become mobilised and re-imagined as a fully-fledged version of popular political sovereignty seen as way of ensuring a return to an Edenic state of immanent super-nature where freedom and equality reside. It is this sense of the sacrality of 'an ancient constitution' that formed the basis for the centrality within the secular imaginary of 'the voice of the people', 'truths that are self-evident', and conceptions of human life justified via an idealised conception of natural law, right, and metaphysics (see Taylor, 2004: 110). States - laws - rights - political constitutions - these represent the fourfold basis of the modern sacrality. Here the sacred object venerated and constitutive of the spiritual realm in ancient societies - say, in Christianity, the body of Christ that united all things and 'made all things new' - transmutes and disincarnates itself into a foundational political textuality that is equally existentially constitutive. This is a move that amounted to a further radicalisation of the basic creed of the reformation that truth exists *sola scriptura*.

The secular imaginary is thus an imaginary based upon a sacralisation of the textualities of politics and their powers to constitute the freedom of those subject to it. In a sense, this involves an abduction of the sacred into a juridical arena that sublimates the sacred into a heightened level of abstraction from everyday experience. The important point here is that the sacred becomes available to all as a universal political phenomenon. It becomes the means through which the ordinary is positioned as both ordinary and extraordinary (and *vice versa*). As Jean Luc Nancy has shown, it is not that in modernity the sacred becomes dissolved in the triumph of ordinary, everyday, life. It is rather, that the sacred becomes more widely available, in ways that collapse the very distinction between the immanent and the transcendent in ways that render the ordinary extraordinary (see Nancy, 2013). Seen thus, as the ordinary is fundamentally a space conditioned by the meaning of words, within the

¹⁰ Here, an alternative 'liberal' theology, is that it is the market is that the technics most capable of realising axial transcendental visions, though an invisible hand that miraculously transforms all personal vices into collective virtues. Although, even here, in this economic and monetised vision of the modern sacred, the technics of the market is seen as radically insufficient vis-à-vis its theologico-political task and requires that state to 'watch over' the market as 'watchman'.



secular imaginary there is a tacit acceptance of the suture between the sacred and universal propositional truth. More specifically, it is through a new kind of language, the oracular word of political textuality, that the suturing of the truth value of the sacred-secular with human culture is secured. It is through this same aspect that it is rendered available within the ordinary and rendered capable of being multiply conditioned and positioned by dint of its interpretive flexibility. The high, almost sacred value, placed on general forms of literacy (as opposed to any specific literature) in modern contexts is clearly testimony to this – for the access to the modern sacred requires an ability to decipher its significance in the medium of ‘ordinary language’.

A Theological Turn?

Recently, the critique of secularity has become a habitual starting point for work in Philosophy, Social Theory and Cultural Studies. By these lights, it has become increasingly clear that the orthodox interpretation of the secular imaginary offers a view that is a later historical rationalisation and simplification of the theologico-politics of the early and defining moments of the modern era. As such, it has obscured the influence of religious and neo-religious factors in the eventing of the modern, especially the influences of Judaic and Christian Cabalism alongside other Gnostic influences (see Sutcliffe, 2003). Moreover, given the recent emergence religious fundamentalism and varieties of ‘Messianic militarism’ (as can be seen in the politics of Putinism) as both *modern* and *modernising* political forces at the start of the twenty-first century the secularist research programme (and the secular imaginary that it supports) looks somewhat degenerative, narrowly parochial and insufficiently post-colonial. For the contemporary re-emergence of religion within modernity not only points to the limitations of the secular imaginary in a world as seemingly religious and sacred-full as it ever was, it also lays bare the significance of a submerged religiosity and experiences of the sacred at its heart.

In opposition to Weberian orthodoxies, then, any philosophy or social theory adequate to its times will need to excavate and examine the hidden theological premises of, and influences upon, modern political formations and movements, as well as the political concerns and strategies of contemporary religious movements and institutions. Here, secular modernity will be need to re-hypothesised, re-theorised, and ultimately re-imagined as a sublimation of deeper world-transcending/world-affirming orientations with their own sacralities and mythic forms of narration and interpolation. In order to avoid the *aporia* of secularism, secular opponents of the sacred, who are simultaneously terrified of religion’s political power yet dismissive of its ontological significance, need to recognise the fundamental role of an often-veiled sacrality when considering alternative ways that modernity might be both lived and conceived (see Rosati, 2014). Once achieved, this will demonstrate the extent to which attempts to theorise the sacred again need to be situated at the nave of Philosophy and Critical Social Theory.



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