

**THE RELIGIOUS AND THE SECULAR.  
SEMANTIC RECONFIGURATIONS OF THE RELIGIOUS FIELD IN GERMANY  
FROM THE EIGHTEENTH TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURIES**

*by Lucian Hölscher*

The religious field has changed and is continuing to change in the modern world. What religion is, what secularity is, is under discussion and – especially when discussed in the framework of an intercultural comparison of many “religions” – is only clear as long as we do not try to define it. Religious studies usually try to deal with this awkward fact by giving definitions which are made to include as many “religious” and “secular” phenomena as possible. But this does not work, as we know from a long list of definitions given in the last half century.<sup>1</sup> And also, giving definitions of religion fails to ask what people mean by calling something ‘religious’ or ‘secular’ (disregarding our own opinion whether it should be called in that way).

Hence, it makes sense to deepen the question how and why these terms were used in the past: What kind of distinction did people want to establish by using terms such as ‘religious’ and ‘secular’, what kind of structural alternative did they want either to establish or promulgate?<sup>2</sup> Looking in that way at the employment of the terms ‘religious’, ‘secular’ and other related concepts in the historical sources, one may well come to a structural understanding of past discourses – and even more: of past mentalities, institutions, social groups etc. The analysis of religious discourses gives wide and privileged access to how past actors structured their own way of looking at the world. The method of conceptual analysis does not supersede the approach based on our own analytical concepts, but it gives historical analysis a pragmatic dimension.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Volkhard Krech’s article in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> For the concept of conceptual history cf. Koselleck, “Begriffsgeschichte und Sozialgeschichte”; Koselleck, “Sozialgeschichte und Begriffsgeschichte”; for the English reader cf. Hölscher, “The Concept of Conceptual History (Begriffsgeschichte) and ‘Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe’”.

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Before I go into detail I would like to present the general idea of my argument: Today people are accustomed to thinking of the secular as opposed to the religious. 'Secularization' is a relational concept very often defining the process of fading away of religion (but also the opposite: defining the realization of something divine). By using this concept many people try to distinguish a sphere of everyday life, of empirical perception, of material reality from a sphere of transcendence, which they may call "God" or "heaven". But this distinction is not very old. Looking back to the past, we find that the semantic dichotomy of 'the religious' and 'the secular', as it is used today in many discourses all over the world, is a relatively recent way of organizing the mental world.

Not until the middle of the nineteenth century was it established as a semantic pattern, and even then it was limited to a small part of the public discourse of religion, that is, the discourse of radicals on both sides of the religious spectrum: orthodox Christians on the one side, socialists and freethinkers on the other. It was only after World War One that the dichotomy of 'religious' and 'secular', i. e. the opportunity for institutions, people, mentalities to be either religious or secular, became popular with the wider public.

It is true that there was a period of preparation and transition, when from the late seventeenth century onwards agents of the radical enlightenment began to collect arguments against religion. But they usually argued not for a world without religion, but rather for another kind of (enlightened) religion. Hence, what later turned out to be antagonism between religious and secular people was first seen as rivalry among various forms of religion.<sup>3</sup>

Why is all this important? First, 'secularity' is not only a concept alien to cultures and societies outside of Europe but it is also alien to pre-modern societies in Christian Europe. This is an important fact for construing the relationship between Christian and non-Christian, European and non-European cultures. It makes not Christianity as such the exceptional case, but European modernity.<sup>4</sup> Second, the modern antagonism between 'religious' and 'secular' grew out of a semantic field specific to Christian societies in early modern Europe. In describing these origins and semantic shifts throughout modern history I shall

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<sup>3</sup> A different view is offered in the article by Heiner Roetz in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jaeschke, "Säkularisierung", 9 f.

concentrate on German sources, occasionally indicating similar or contrasting developments in other European countries and languages.

But the semantic turn of the mid-nineteenth century was not the only one in the recent past: As I shall demonstrate in the last chapter of this article, after World War Two the concepts 'religious' and 'secular' came together again, intermingling to form new blends of religious secularity and secular religion. A new age of secularity began to dawn, which only very recently may have come to a new crisis. Perhaps it is because of such a feeling of general uncertainty that a new discussion about the future of secularity has begun in recent times.

### ***I. The Spiritual and the Temporal***

For many centuries, from the late Middle Ages up to the nineteenth century, religious discourse and conflicts have been based on the semantic distinction of 'the spiritual' and 'the temporal': The German equivalents are "geistlich" and "weltlich".<sup>5</sup> There were spiritual and temporal powers ("geistliche und weltliche Herrschaften"), symbolically embodied in the Pope and the Emperor respectively; spiritual and temporal laws, songs, books and so on. The whole world was divided into two realms, the spiritual and the temporal.

Neither the English term 'secular' nor the German 'weltlich' clearly represents this basic structure of the pre-modern world. They both refer to the concept of temporality in the sense of "belonging to this world" in opposition to "the other world", "eternity". But they have been used in various meanings: beside "temporal" they might equally well be translated as "lay" or "mundane" (often with the negative tone of something sinful).<sup>6</sup> In the early modern debates about religion and secularity this was an important and much exploited ambiguity. It was a point of dispute, which side of the concept was stressed more: Some

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<sup>5</sup> The literal German translation of 'temporal' would be 'zeitlich', which was also used in German sources. But 'weltlich' was much more important in political and theological discourses, pointing to "this world" in contrast to the "other world".

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 2, s. v. 'secular'; Sheridan, *A General Dictionary of the English Language*, s. v. 'secular'; *Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 9, 1933, 365 f., Zedler, *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexikon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, vol. 54, 1747, 1831.

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authors used it to discredit the influence of clerics or lay people; others used it for the allocation of things to “this” or “the other” world. And most often all these aspects of secularity were linked, as if they were two sides of the same coin. “Secular” things could be appreciated as being important for man’s orientation in this world (as for instance science, laws, morals), but also discredited as being unimportant for orientation in the other world.

But however this was handled, the concepts of ‘the spiritual’ and ‘the temporal’ complemented one another. Despite their rivalry in many political affairs the sphere of the spiritual and the sphere of the secular belonged together, they could not do without one another. For instance, when a craftsman had offended against the civil law civil, authorities would punish him as much as the church: the one by exclusion from the guild, the other by exclusion from the sacrament. And the same kind of cooperation worked when somebody had offended against the ecclesiastical law, for instance, by being constantly absent from Sunday services. Church and state, spiritual and temporal power formed an entity in the political and mental map of pre-modern observers.

This cooperation did not end with the Protestant Reformations of the sixteenth century, it was even intensified in Protestant countries. And even when at the end of the eighteenth and in the early nineteenth centuries church and state in many European countries began to be organized in separate constitutional bodies, they were not seen as antagonistic institutions, but rather as working together in a kind of division of labor: Both institutions were said to have their own sphere of relevance. But in doing their job they should cooperate with and not contradict each another.

It is true that this division of labor did not always work effectively. Especially in France at the end of the eighteenth century a growing part of the enlightened intelligentsia, people like Voltaire and his followers for instance, declared the Catholic Church to be irrational and authoritarian. Also, the Revolution dispossessed the Catholic Church of most of its estates, turning priests into civil servants and dissolving the Church as a public institution. But still the state was not declared to be “secular” in the modern sense of “non-religious”, but rather to be the only relevant public power in temporal affairs, impartial towards the

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private religious cults. Sometimes republicanism was seen as the new civil religion, but this kind of religion (if it could be called a 'religion' at all) did not interfere with the eternal concerns of life beyond death.

Only in the second half of the nineteenth century, when secularism was proclaimed to be an alternative to religion, did the situation change. It was at this point that religious antagonisms of the past could be declared to have paved the way towards the modern secular society.<sup>7</sup> Only then, looking back on the development of modern science and philosophy, of public constitution and many spheres of social life, such as church activities in the late eighteenth century, secularists observed that for a long time "the secular" was no longer complementing, but rather disempowering religion, that rivalry had slowly turned into replacement. It was an observation *ex post*, which turned the enlightenment into the beginning of a world without religion.

Looking back, the French Revolution now seemed to mark an early and most aggressive stage in the process of secularization. Evidence of this was found in many aspects of eighteenth and nineteenth century life: The spiritual power had lost much of its former constitutional power, a growing number of citizens was turning away from participation in church activities, history and the natural sciences had proved the biblical account of creation to be wrong. In daily life also the authority of religious institutions had been lost: In France, for instance, the biblical calendar of the world, which counted the years from creation in 4000 BC, was replaced in 1792 by a new revolutionary calendar. In short: The religious influence on life diminished, a new secular age began to dawn. The French Revolution of 1789 was seen a watershed in world history.

But looking at the semantic evidence, we find that this is an *ex-post* narrative of secularization, established not before the second half of the nineteenth century. Contemporaries in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did not think in such antagonistic categories as 'religious' and 'secular', or to be more

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<sup>7</sup> This perspective was first elaborated by the confessionalist neo-Lutheran orthodoxy of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but was later taken up by socialist authors such as Franz Mehring. Following the writings of Ernst Troeltsch the concept of secularization began to be a dominant interpretation of protestant history in Germany (cf. Schnabel, "Wege der Verweltlichung", 279 ff.). In England Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the nineteenth century* paved the way for many modern historical interpretations.

precise: They used these terms, but in a very different sense and semantic relation. When describing their religious constitution, they adhered to the old categories of ‘spiritual’ and ‘temporal’. What we today call ‘secular’, in German ‘weltlich’, is different from what they meant in those days. This is less evident in the English language, where the term ‘secular’ was used throughout the centuries, though its meaning slowly changed from “temporal” to “non-religious”.<sup>8</sup> The German term ‘weltlich’ underwent the same semantic change, but was finally replaced by ‘säkular’ in early twentieth century discourse. Hence, the German ‘säkular’ clearly has the meaning of “non-religious”, whereas the English ‘secular’ may also refer to the older meaning of “temporal”, even today. But what is most important in our context is the fact that the semantic change from “temporal” to “non-religious” did not happen in the age of the French Revolution but much later in the second half of the nineteenth century. There is a clear temporal gap between the timing of the established secularization narrative and the semantic evidence.

This can easily be demonstrated by looking at the German encyclopedias and dictionaries of the time. Still in the mid-eighteenth century encyclopedia of Johann Heinrich Zedler “*Universal-Lexikon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*” (1732-1750) the Latin term ‘saecularis’ and the German term ‘weltlich’ were used as semantic equivalents:<sup>9</sup> ‘Saecularis’ also covered the ecclesiastic meaning of “laypersons” (‘Weltliche’ vs. ‘Geistliche’) and the negative sense of “worldly”.<sup>10</sup> ‘Secularization’ (Säkularisierung, Säkularisatio) was translated “making things or goods secular (weltlich), which had originally been spiritual (geistlich).”<sup>11</sup> But when the Latin term ‘saecularis’ was incorporated into German as a loanword it was reduced to either the ecclesiastical meaning of laity (“Säkular-Geistlicher=Welt-Geistlicher”) or to the temporal meaning of ‘saeculum’: A ‘Saekular-Feier’ was a “centenary”, a ‘Saekular-Ausgabe’ an

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 9, 1933, p. 365 f.

<sup>9</sup> “saeculares causae: weltliche Rechts-Sachen”, “saeculares imperii status: die weltlichen Reichs-Stände” etc. Cf. Zedler, *Universal-Lexikon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, vol. 36, 945 f.

<sup>10</sup> “saecularis: seculier, weltlich gesinnet; dem Weltwesen ergeben; desgleichen ein Laye, ein Welt-Mann, der in keinem geistlichen Amte oder Orden stehet”. Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

edition after one hundred years. The term was not adopted in the sense of “belonging to this world”.

Instead of ‘säkular’ the term ‘weltlich’ was used when the opposite of church was at stake. It covered all aspects of secularity: Johann Christoph Adelung in his classical dictionary “Wörterbuch der Hochdeutschen Mundart” (1774-1786, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1793-1801) distinguished three aspects: “1. belonging to the world, in opposition to the church; 2. in theology belonging to the present life, to external happiness; 3. In the narrow sense, earthly, carnal, fleshly.”<sup>12</sup> From the negative connotation of the latter the term ‘Verweltlichung’ (secularization) was often used when referring to a presumed sense for earthly and sensual affections,<sup>13</sup> whereas the term ‘Säkularisation’ or ‘Säkularisierung’ was limited to the expropriation of ecclesiastical goods by the state.<sup>14</sup>

This did not change throughout the nineteenth century. It was only at the very end of the century when a new concept of ‘Weltlichkeit’ (secularity), opposed to religion, emerged, that the German term ‘weltlich’ (secular), and with it the term ‘säkular’, began to take on an anti-religious meaning.<sup>15</sup> The religious discourse had changed in the meantime, where there had been cooperation of church and state, of spiritual and temporal worldviews there was now hostility: first only in the arguments of freethinkers and socialists, but later and gradually throughout the early twentieth century also of liberals and conservatives.

## *II. The religious (religiös) and the secular (säkular)*

In the philosophical writings of German idealism we find how what today is called ‘secularism’ as a modern Weltanschauung was gradually excluded from theological and religious discourse in the first half of the nineteenth century. There is much evidence that secularism was not a counter-position to religion

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<sup>12</sup> Adelung, *Grammatisch-kritisches Wörterbuch der Hochdeutschen Mundart*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 4, 1483.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Krug, *Allgemeines Handwörterbuch der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 4, 485.

<sup>14</sup> Lehmann, *Säkularisierung*, 36-56; Lübbe, *Säkularisierung*.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Meyers Lexikon*, vol. 10, 866, s.v. säkular; Brockhaus, *Enzyklopädie*, vol. 19, 38, s.v. säkular;

from the very beginning, but rather after a long period of rivalry about the true understanding of religion. Hence, in the following chapter I shall demonstrate how 'secularity' turned from being a heretic form of Christianity into a counter-position to religion as such:

1. In his famous "atheist" article of 1798 "Über den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung" (About the Reason why we Believe in a Divine Regiment) the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte argued that it was not the moral duty of man to believe in a moral world regiment or a God, but only to act *as if* he believed in such a regiment.<sup>16</sup> On the threshold of the nineteenth century, to deny the existence of God as an agent was sufficient reason for dismissing Fichte from his professorial chair at the University of Jena.

Today it is fair to take this affair as an early example of irreligiosity. However, looking at the semantic structure of his argument, one has to admit that Fichte did not leave the traditional semantic field of religious discourse. He simply defined religion in a way different from the orthodox understanding of theism, i. e. in terms of reason and morality. For him the world was not an assemblage of empirical data and natural laws but – taking up the theological description of God - an "*absolute being*": "The world is an entity which constitutes and justifies itself, a perfect and organized and therefore organizing whole ...". To deny the idea of a personal God in favour of the identification of God with nature (*Deus sive natura*), qualified Fichte to be a follower of Spinoza's pantheism. But this does not mean that his philosophical system was not religious, at least in the eyes of those who embraced it.

At the time, to call Fichte's concept of God an "atheistic" concept was an orthodox, (but?) not undisputed strategy to narrow the concept of religion to the belief in God as a person separate from the world. And indeed, this is what happened in the following decades: All kinds of pantheism and even of deism, which were the dominating features of religiosity in the educated German middle classes of the late eighteenth century, were expelled from the Christian

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<sup>16</sup> Fichte, "Über den Grund unseres Glaubens".

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churches. The concept of 'religion' was limited to theological concepts based on the belief in a personal God.

2. Another supporter of Spinoza's pantheism, who was suspected by the theological orthodoxy of being an atheist, too, was the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in Berlin. In his "Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion" (Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion), held four times in the 1820s, he unfolded a dialectical process of the idea of religion. Here for the first time in German philosophy the semantic pattern of "geistlich/weltlich" (spiritual/temporal) was transformed into the new semantic paradigm of "religiös/weltlich" (religious/secular):

Hegel argued that on a first level religion was inside the heart of man only, something different from and hostile to the world: Secularity and religiosity have an external relation to one another, but they have to connect with one another (Weltlichkeit und Religiosität bleiben einander äußerlich und sollen doch in Beziehung zueinander kommen).<sup>17</sup>

In Hegel's argument the term 'Weltlichkeit' (secularity) referred to reality, 'Religiosität' (religiosity) to unreality. Hegel saw religion as something not real because it is separated from reality, hence something that had to be reconciled with reality. On the other hand, secularity was not yet seen as a kind of counter-reality to religion, but rather as the crude expression of reality as long as it was not reconciled with religion in morality ("Sittlichkeit").<sup>18</sup> Hence, by the early nineteenth century the term 'weltlich' could be used for something different from religion, but only in a religious perspective. Following Hegel's philosophical idea of the movement of the spirit the philosophical dialectic on God and the world

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<sup>17</sup> Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, 331. The transformation was possible because in German the expression for spiritual: "geistlich" is very similar to "spirit": "Geist", which is a key concept in Hegel's philosophy defining the absolute entity of God or the world.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Jaeschke, "Säkularisierung", 10; Jaeschke, *Die Suche nach den eschatologischen Wurzeln*, 312 ff.

produced a concept of 'Verweltlichung' (secularization) in the following decades which could be read as a change for both better and worse.<sup>19</sup>

3. By the 1840s the Christian churches had already lost most of their former support by the enlightened middle classes. Disappointed by the churches' alliance with reactionary governments, many former liberals had turned away from orthodox Christianity. By the revolution of 1848 alternative religious systems such as the "Deutschkatholiken" (German Catholics) and the protestant "Lichtfreunde" (Friends of the Light) held a great appeal for opposing social groups, which later came together in the Liberal and the Social Democratic parties. Secular ideologies such as the Weltanschauung of Goethe and Schiller, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche or of the various branches of the life reform movement (vegetarians, naturists, dress reform movement etc.) were widespread among members of the middle classes.

As early as the 1830s, a growing number of radical left-wing intellectuals such as Karl Marx, Ludwig Büchner, Ernst Haeckel and others had denounced Christianity as immoral, irrational and outdated. 'Materialism' was the new keyword for many of them in search of an alternative. They were opposed to clericalism as much as to religiosity as such. But for all of them the term 'Weltlichkeit' (secularity) was not a relevant concept, because it was not used in the negative sense of the pietists but in the positive sense of Hegel. None of their writings dismissed or replaced the semantic structure of spiritual/temporal.

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<sup>19</sup> To give but two examples, one for each of these changes: When in 1829 Johann Christian Heinroth, professor of psychotherapy in Leipzig, tried to explain the difference between "Weltgeschichte" (world history) and "Offenbarungsgeschichte" (history of revelation) he argued that in world history everything would become more and more secular: "Kurz, was der Mensch immer angreift und betastet, was immer er zu seinem Eigentum macht; er verweltlicht alles ... sogar das in dieses Geschlecht der Menschen eintretende und sich ihm verwählende Göttliche (werde) gleichsam unter ihren Händen verweltlicht (In brief: whatever man touches, whatever he makes his property, he secularizes everything ... even the divine, which enters the family of man being united with it, is secularized almost without doing). (Heinroth, *Pisteodicee*, 204.) - Another example of this dialectic connection between God and the world was explained by the theologian Hermann F. W. Hinrichs in his work on Schiller in 1837: "Während die alte Kirche das Göttliche und das Weltliche einander streng entgegengesetzt ... hebt die neue Kirche diesen Gegensatz auf, das Göttliche im Weltlichen anerkennend ... In dieser Verweltlichung des Göttlichen ist das Weltliche dem Göttlichen gemäß, und der Geist frei (While the old church made the divine and the secular absolute opposites ... the new church remedies this opposition acknowledging the divine in the secular ... In this secularization the secular is in harmony with the divine, and the spirit free). (Hinrichs, *Schillers Dichtungen*, 209.)

To make this more explicit it is useful to go deeper into the organization of these anti-clerical groups. There were two fractions of opposition to church-Christendom in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century: One was the group of the “Freireligiöse” (the free-religious). David Friedrich Strauß, the famous author of “Das Leben Jesu” (1835/36) and one of the freethinkers’ protagonists, may be taken as an example: In his book of 1872 “Der alte und der neue Glaube. Ein Bekenntnis” (The Old and the New Doctrine. A Confession) he contrasted the “alter Kirchenglaube” (old church doctrine) to the “new” or “modern Weltanschauung”, based on historical and scientific knowledge.<sup>20</sup> The new doctrine, Strauss argued, would replace the old one, but Strauss defined it again as to be “religious”, not as to be “secular”.

The same is true of Ernst Haeckel’s “Die Welträtsel” (The Enigmas of the world), a free-religious bestseller of 1899. There is no doubt that Haeckel was most serious about the hostility between Christianity and modern science. But nevertheless Haeckel did not use the term ‘weltlich’ (secular) for this non-religious state of reason:

Wirklicher Friede kann erst eintreten, wenn einer der beiden ringenden Kämpfer bewältigt am Boden liegt. Entweder siegt die >allein selig machende Kirche<, und dann hört >freie Wissenschaft< und >freie Lehre< überhaupt auf ... Oder es siegt der moderne Vernunftstaat ... (There can be no true and enduring peace until one of the combatants lies powerless on the ground. Either the Church wins, and then farewell to all ‘free science and free teaching’ ... or else the modern rational State proves victorious...).<sup>21</sup>

The other fraction was the group of the freethinkers, who led by Ludwig Büchner, had founded the German section of the Internationale Freidenker-Verband in 1881. Many social democrats were also members in this

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<sup>20</sup> Strauss, *Der alte und der neue Glaube*, 40 ff.

<sup>21</sup> Haeckel, *Die Welträtsel*, 427. Haeckel, *The Riddle of the Universe*, 335f. Cf. also another key book of the materialistic philosophy: Ludwig Büchner, *Kraft und Stoff* (1855), which did not use the concept of ‘secular’.

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organization. Following the writings of Karl Marx and other members of the Hegelian school, they embraced a scientific worldview which was opposed to religion. But they, too, did not make use of the term 'weltlich' (secular). August Bebel's bestseller of 1879 "Die Frau und der Sozialismus" (Woman and Socialism) may be taken as a popular example: Being a private concern of man, Bebel argued, religion will fade away for enlightened people. "Permanent human progress and pure, unbiased knowledge will be their banner".<sup>22</sup> But even for socialists the term 'weltlich' (secular) was not free to be used for their own ambitions. In expressing their "secularistic" position they did not make use of the term – up until 1890, when suddenly the situation changed.

### **III. The case of the secular school (*weltliche Schule*)**

It is difficult to find a more radical concept of 'Weltlichkeit' pointing to opposition to religion as such before the First World War. One of the most prominent fields for the development of such a concept was school reform. In this field one of the first and best known usages of the concept in the modern sense is the political program of the Social Democratic Party of 1891, the so-called "Erfurter Programm". In point 7 the program demanded

Weltlichkeit der Schule, obligatorischen Besuch der öffentlichen Volksschulen, Unentgeltlichkeit des Unterrichts, der Lehrmittel und der Verpflegung ...“ (secularity of schools, compulsory public primary schools, teaching and meals free of charge).<sup>23</sup>

In order to understand the formula in the given context, it is necessary to consider the history of secular schools in Germany. The establishment of "weltliche Schulen" (secular schools) goes back to the reorganization of the educational system in Prussia in the 1760s.<sup>24</sup> In his "Methodenbuch für Väter

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<sup>22</sup> Bebel, *Die Frau und der Sozialismus*, 486.

<sup>23</sup> *Deutsche Parteiprogramme*, 352.

<sup>24</sup> Lachmann, Schröder, *Geschichte des evangelischen Religionsunterrichts in Deutschland*.

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und Mütter der Familien und Völker“ of 1771<sup>25</sup> the Prussian educational reformer Johan Bernhard Basedow (1724-1790) designed the model of a “weltliche Schule”, which was intended for students of all religious denominations. It established a form of religious teaching underlining only the common features of all religions and not their confessional peculiarities. Of course, such schools could only be run by the state, hence they were much opposed by the Christian churches, which by tradition were in charge of primary school education as much in Germany as in other European countries. At the time, the term ‘weltlich’ still referred to the “temporal” power of the secular government (as opposed to the “spiritual” power of the clerics); it did not stand for an anti-religious school program.

After the reorganization of the German territories from the 1790s onwards, the idea of a primary school system organized by the state remained a favored concept of the educational reform movement in the early nineteenth century, since Catholics and Protestants now had to live together in many states. However, these schools were not usually called “weltliche Schulen”,<sup>26</sup> but “öffentliche Schulen” (public schools) – as far as public authority was involved, for instance in the “Allgemeine Landrecht für die Preussischen Staaten” of 1794.<sup>27</sup> Schools that provided education for students with different religious backgrounds were called “Simultanschulen” (simultaneous schools). Due to the mobility of the population in the course of the agrarian and industrial revolutions the need for such “Simultanschulen” grew in the following decades, but due to the increasing tension between Catholics and Protestants they were extremely controversial in public discussions. Hence they were only seldom installed, apart from in Silesia in 1801 only in Nassau in 1819.

In the 1820s the debate about the religious character of primary schools escalated when the reform bureaucracy of the Prussian ministry for education held onto the established system of “Simultanschulen”, whereas the Christian church authorities called for “Konfessionsschulen” (confessional schools). Most

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<sup>25</sup> Basedow, *Das Methodenbuch für Väter und Mütter*.

<sup>26</sup> The term ‘weltliche Schule’ was seldom used in 19<sup>th</sup> century writings, usually referring to the public authority of the temporal power.

<sup>27</sup> Zwölfter Titel: Von niedern und höhern Schulen, § 9 ff.

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radical clerics, such as pastor Friedrich A. Krummacher from Elberfeld, used to argue that public schools were on the way “zu verweltlichen” (to becoming secular) in the negative sense which this term still had in the Christian discourse of the time.<sup>28</sup>

Unsere Schulen verweltlichen und werden nur als Anstalten betrachtet, die Jugend zu irdischem Gewinn, Erwerb, Genuss abzurichten (Our schools are becoming secular and are seen only as institutions that train youth to gain and pleasure).

The main difference between Simultanschulen and Konfessionsschulen was that Konfessionsschulen were governed by clerical committees (“geistliche Schulaufsicht”), which ensured the employment of confessional teachers and adherence to confessional principals in all subjects of the school program, whereas the state bureaucracy still aimed to professionalize the training of teachers in state seminars. However, these teachers’ seminars were dominated by liberal reformers who were mostly critical of the churches and many of whom had even been protagonists of the revolution in 1848 .

That is why after the revolution the conservative Prussian ministry of education began to support the “Konfessionsschulen” albeit without giving up the claim for state authority: The Prussian constitution of 1850 declared primary school teachers to be civil servants, and clerics were said to govern primary schools only “on behalf” of the state. In fact, however, they were able to give these schools an orthodox confessional program.

In the following decades conservatives in Prussia were in a difficult position regarding the secular character of the primary school system: On the one hand, they wanted to maintain state authority without giving too much power to the churches; on the other hand, they wanted to ensure the basically religious nature of the primary schools. And fighting for such a religious education they were divided into two fractions: Many conservatives from a protestant background demanded a non-confessionalist, but protestant teaching, whereas

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<sup>28</sup> Krummacher, *Die christliche Volksschule im Bund mit der Kirche*, 3.

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others wanted confessionalist clerics to govern the schools. In their confessionalist understanding they were sympathetic towards the Catholic position, but of course they differed in supporting the idea of a basically protestant domination.<sup>29</sup>

After 1871 the National Liberals' position was similar: They wanted the school system to be liberated from church denomination (both Catholic and Protestant), but to remain religious: not religious in the sense of the confessionalists, who identified religion with the church doctrines of each Christian denomination, but religious in a general Christian sense, a kind of overarching Protestant civil religion. Between both, the national liberal and the conservative understanding of public education, the primary school system in Germany oscillated up to the end of World War One.

Against this ideological background the social democratic demand for a "weltliche Schule" (secular school) in the "Eisenacher program" of 1891 reveals its specific profile. The program explicitly demanded that the attendance of public primary schools ("öffentliche Volksschulen") should be compulsory for all and that teaching, teaching materials and food should be financed from public funds. But, as Wilhelm Liebknecht made clear in his presentation of the program in Erfurt, the term 'weltlich' also meant that the influence of church authorities should be excluded.<sup>30</sup>

... In Verbindung mit diesem Passus fordern wir: 'Weltlichkeit der Schule'. Das heißt, dass die Religion mit der Schule absolut nichts zu tun hat (In connection with this passage we demand 'secularity of the school', i. e. religion has absolutely nothing to do with the school).

The term 'weltlich' signaled that now much more was at stake than another equilibrium between the spiritual power of the churches and the temporal power of the state: The intention was to exclude religion from public school teaching

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. the parliamentary debate about the school reform of minister von Zedlitz in the Prussian Landtag in 1892.

<sup>30</sup> *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen*, 530.

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and to replace religious worldviews by solid historical and scientific knowledge and practical abilities.

This was more than what the liberal reformers of the revolution of 1848 had asked for. When in the constitutional assembly of Frankfurt the fundamental laws of the future German constitution were discussed some members demanded the separation of church and state, some even the transformation of the churches into private associations.<sup>31</sup> But nobody at all thought of excluding religion from school teaching.

Up to the revolution the exclusion of religion from school education had not been on the agenda of any social group. In the pre-revolution era even communists such as Wilhelm Weitling, the head of the working class “Bund der Kommunisten”, in his sketch of a future communist society in 1842, had not gone beyond the liberal demand for general, non-confessional teaching.<sup>32</sup>

In der Schule sollte darum auch die Religion nur so allgemein gelehrt werden, dass sie alle die verschiedenen religiösen Parteien befriedigen; keine Religion darf ausschließlich hervorgehoben werden (In schools religion should be taught only in such general terms that all religious parties are satisfied; no religion should be emphasized exclusively).

But in the course of the revolution the position of the radical liberals began to change. The “Deutscher Lehrerverein” (German teachers’ association) for instance called for a “bekenntnisfreie” or a “religionsfreie” Schule (a school free from confessional or religious influence).<sup>33</sup> Their primary concern was to end the direct influence of the churches when, for instance, teachers were accountable to the local pastor. But the more “religion” was identified with “confession”, i. e. an exclusive right of the churches to define what religion is, the more their opponents were inclined to demand the exclusion of religion from school education altogether.

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<sup>31</sup> *Stenographische Berichte*, 1646 f.

<sup>32</sup> Weitling, *Garantien der Harmonie und Freiheit*, 243.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Heinrich Schulze, *Die >Weltliche Schule< und ihre Geschichte*, ed. Arbeitskreis Arbeitende Jugend Bochums vor 1933, issue 4.

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However, the term 'weltliche Schule' was, as far as I can see, not used for this more radical demand.<sup>34</sup> The first document using the term which I have found so far, is a report on school reform in England, which was published twenty years later, in 1869.<sup>35</sup> The debate in England was very similar to the German discussion during and after the revolution: The commission installed by the House of Commons in 1864 had declared that parents wanted their children to be "religiös gebildet" (to have a religious education) – especially reading the Bible seemed to be important. But parents did not expect much from the "Confessionell-Dogmatischen" (of confessionel-dogmatic aspects). The solution of this problem, as the author of the article reported, would neither be found "in exklusiv-confessionellen Schulen" (exclusively confessionel schools) nor in "rein weltlichen Schulen, die allen Religions-Unterricht ausschließen" (in purely secular schools, which exclude all religious teaching). Together with the "report of her Majesty's Commissioners" the author conceded that it was awkward to draw a line in practice between "was in der Schule weltlich und was religiös ist" (what at school is to be secular and what is to be religious).

The semantic antagonism between 'religious' and 'secular' in this document makes it clear that in the period after the revolution the semantic field had begun to change: School debates no longer centered exclusively on the question who would run the schools (the "secular" power of the state or the "spiritual" power of the church), but also how much religion should be included in school teaching at all. In the 1860s the demand for "weltliche Schulen" (secular schools) was still an extreme position in this debate, which only few people propagated, but at least it was in the debate.

A very similar discussion can be identified in France at the same time. As Sylvie LeGrand has demonstrated in her contribution to this volume<sup>36</sup>, the new concept of an 'école laïque' came up in the beginning of the Third Republic providing a

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<sup>34</sup> According to Giese, *Quellen zur deutschen Schulgeschichte*, 29, the demand for a "weltliche Schule" was already expressed at the Arbeiterkongress of 1848, but this could not be proved so far. As an example of the traditional understanding of the term 'weltliche Schule' in 1848 a passage from the debate of the Austrian diet in the province of Steiermark may be cited: "Auch in den weltlichen Schulen haben die kirchlichen Grundsätze Einfluß" (In secular schools also ecclesiastical principles have influence). Cf. *Verhandlungen des provisorischen Landtags der Herzogtums Steiermark am 8. Aug. 1848*, p. 71, § 76.

<sup>35</sup> Hollenberg, "Die Grundzüge der in England beabsichtigten Reform höherer Schulen".

<sup>36</sup> Cf. also the excellent article "laicization, laïcisme, laïcité" in *Catholicisme*, 1643-1666.

public education which was free from religion: In the legislation of 1879 and the following years not only clerics were excluded from public teaching and school government, but also religion was excluded from school programs.

The term 'laïque' as such is older. It can be found for example in the debates of the Second Chamber on the Loi Falloux in 1850, when the radical republican delegate Edgar Quinet asked on July 19:<sup>37</sup>

fonder l'école sur la principe qui se trouve au fond de tous nos lois ...  
séculariser la législation, séparer le pouvoir civil et le pouvoir  
ecclesiastique, la société laïque et l'Eglise (build the school on the  
principle underlying all our laws ... secularize the legislation, separate the  
civil and the ecclesiastic power, the secular society and the Church).

However, Quinet did not argue against religious education at school as such but only against confessional teaching (l'enseignement confessionnel). His book "L'Enseignement du peuple" (1850), often called "the bible of the republican party", had great impact on the founders of the école laïque in the 1870s Ferdinand Buisson and Jules Ferry. As a Unitarian, Quinet's protestantism offered a kind of republican religion, a "religion laïque" and "religion de l'avenir", as Jules Clamargerou had called it in the *Revue de Paris* in 1857.

In accordance with this new type of "religion laïque", Ferdinand Buisson, who was very much responsible for the school laws of the years following 1879, asked for a new "foi laïque". In his "Manifeste du christianisme libéral" (1869) Buisson had called for a Christianity without dogma open for theists, pantheists, positivists and materialists. They should all come together in a "union du christianisme libéral". So what he called "seculariser la religion" was still designated to form a new religion. Only gradually was the idea of laïcité radicalized in the following decades, slowly abandoning the reference to some kind of new religion.

When the anti-religious radicals among the freethinking social democrats in Germany adopted the idea of a public education excluding religion in the

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<sup>37</sup> Cit. Mayeur, *La question laïque*, 30.

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Erfurter program of 1891, they fused it with the Marxist critique of religion, which aimed to get rid of religion altogether. Hence, compared to the French “*école laïque*” the “*weltliche Schule*” of the Social Democrats in Germany was even more anti-religious, because here religion and morality, religion and science were seen as incompatible.

How new this concept of ‘*Weltlichkeit*’ (secularity) was by that time in Germany may be deduced from the fact that within the next years almost nobody transferred it to another political agenda. Not until 1906 was a “*Bund für weltliche Schule und Moralunterricht*” founded on the initiative of some freethinkers.<sup>38</sup> The Bund was soon integrated into the “*Weimarer Kartell*”, a broad coalition of all organizations opposed to the public influence of the established Christian churches. The liberal protestant encyclopedia “*Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*” summarized its aspirations in 1912:<sup>39</sup>

1. Freie Entwicklung des geistigen Lebens und Abwehr aller Unterdrückung (Free development of the spiritual life and defense against suppression,)
2. Trennung von Schule und Kirche“ (separation of school and church),
3. Vollständige Verweltlichung des Staates (total secularization of the state).

Expressed by many left-wing organizations even in the years before the war, the demand for a “*religionslose weltliche Schule*” (a secular school free from religion) became a prominent point on the political agenda of social democrats, who tried to put it into effect after the war in the constitution of the Weimar republic.<sup>40</sup> But despite some support in countries like Saxony they failed to establish the “*weltliche Schule*” as the normal school. Only as an exception established in response to the demand of a certain number of parents the “*weltliche Schule*” was accepted, but not very often realized. Up until the 1960s the normal type of school in the German primary education system was the *Konfessionsschule* (confessional school) run by church authorities.

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Groschopp, *Dissidenten*, 76 ff.

<sup>39</sup> Lempp, “*Weimarer Kartell*”, 1863 f.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Giesecke, “*Zur Schulpolitik der Sozialdemokraten in Preußen und im Reich*”.

At this point it is not necessary to follow the history of public schools in Germany any further. Important for my argument is the new idea of secularism behind such demands as “secular schools”, “secular education” etc.: It was the idea of a society free from the public influence of religious organizations and the religious education offered by them in state schools. The idea that clerical influence should be reduced in a secular society had already been popular among critics of religion in many European countries for a long time. But only in the second half of the nineteenth century was a public order conceptualized, which was based on a worldview alternative to religion.

#### *IV. The rapprochement after World War Two*

In the early twentieth century the idea of secularism had taken a different shape in various Christian countries. The German case was different from the French as much as from the American: Compared to France before and after the First World War the constitutional system in Germany was much more open to liberal religiosity, if religion did not imply ecclesiastical confessionality. Only the pre-war social democrats and a handful of extreme liberals argued for the radical elimination of religion from public life, nobody else. And in the 1920s even social democrats began to accommodate themselves to their clerical opponents, in the common opposition of the 1930s to National Socialism even forming a new platform for political cooperation with the churches. It is true that, compared to the United States, German religious culture was more hostile to the public influence of religious organizations. But on the other hand even after World War One the political system gave the established churches more scope for assuming public responsibility within the constitutional framework of a “Korporation des öffentlichen Rechts” (public law corporation).

Nevertheless, summarizing developments on the level of semantic structures the early twentieth century established an antagonistic system of the religious versus the secular. Secularism was defined as the death of religion, religion as the death of secularity. There was very little compromise and cooperation

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between both sides. Hence, in terms of religious ideologies modern societies with a Christian cultural background were divided into two parts: a secular and a religious group. They spoke different languages, the one avoiding religious vocabulary, religious symbols and practices, the other using them.

A semantic indicator for that shift to aggressive secularism or antiseccularism can be seen in the use of the term 'secularization':<sup>41</sup> It was first used by freethinkers who supported the idea that modern culture was characterized by the exclusion of church authorities from secular government, of religious dogmas and traditions from scientific explanation of the world, of religious morals from secular education. Influenced by the discussion about the dialectics of "Weltlichkeit" and "Religiosität" in the Hegelian tradition,<sup>42</sup> the term was accepted by Ernst Troeltsch, Max Weber and others signifying a positive direction in historical development also in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century.

But following the concept of anglo-American missionaries after World War One the concept assumed a negative connotation, making secularization equal to 'secularism' as a catchword for the dechristianization and moral decline of the modern world. Used by committed Christians, secularism and secularization were accused of being the cause of all the ills of modern society. In their hands the concepts turned out to be a major tool in fighting against the influences of the "secularists". Even today two concepts, bound to the same word, are in conflict with one another.

The secularists and their religious opponents do not agree in what they call 'religious' and what 'secular'. That is why the relation of religion and the secular can be described from two sides: From the perspective of a religious subject secularity is the field of action within this world, but truth can be found only with God. From the perspective of a secular subject truth is a thing of this world. Religion may be seen as one part of social organization and mental activities, but it is a social institution, nothing else.

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Lübke, *Säkularisierung*; Zabel, *Verweltlichung/Säkularisierung*; Ruh, *Säkularisierung als Interpretationskategorie*; Strätz and Zabel, „Säkularisation, Säkularisierung“; Hölscher, „Säkularisierungssängste in der neuzeitlichen Gesellschaft“; Barth, „Säkularisierung I“; Jaeschke, „Säkularisierung“.

<sup>42</sup> See above note 18-20.

However, after World War Two the situation began to change again.<sup>43</sup> In all modern Western societies Christians and secularists were forced to cooperate and to rely on one another. In Germany both, the Christian churches as much as the socialist secularists, had suffered from the ideological antagonism of the 1920s and the totalitarian religious policy of National Socialism after 1933. After the war they had to win back the credit that had been lost by approving the democratic constitution of the secular society. Expressed in semantic terms, the antagonism between the 'religious' and the 'secular' languages gradually relaxed: In the religious discourse of the churches the languages of both were bound together producing a kind of "secular religion" or "religious secularity", expressed by Catholic and Protestant theologians and church officials.

On the side of theology the input of two protestant theologians was most important for this new rapprochement between church and secular society: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Friedrich Gogarten. Bonhoeffer, in his last period of imprisonment, had propagated a Christianity without religion.<sup>44</sup> Gogarten, a former friend and combatant of Karl Barth in the 1920s, in his widely read book "Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit" of 1953 argued for a positive theological concept of 'secularization': According to him the highly stigmatized idea of a world being progressively corrupted by "secular" forces was to be replaced by the idea of God's incarnation in the world, leaving the idea of a world without God to those "secularists" who had no hope for a better future.

This positive concept of secularization was willingly adopted by many Catholics<sup>45</sup> and Protestants in the 1950s and 1960s who tried to break out of their growing isolation within secular society.

To give but one example of this kind of diction: In the protestant journal *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik* the director of the Protestant Academy in Wuppertal Oskar Hammelsbach argued in 1964 that the protestant church should, in solidarity with other religions and Christian denominations,

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<sup>43</sup> For this last part cf. Hölscher, "Europe in the Age of Secularisation"; Hölscher, "Die Säkularisierung der Kirchen".

<sup>44</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung*.

<sup>45</sup> The catholic concept of 'Weltlichkeit' had another theological background but came to a similar conclusion, cf. Metz, *Zur Theologie der Welt*.

engage “in der säkularisierten, in der mündigen Welt” (in the secularized, politically mature world); secularization would pave the way for cooperation with atheists and communists as much as with other churches; the “säkulare Vision” (secular vision) would rely on the belief that “Gott in Christus die Welt mit sich selbst versöhnt hat.” (that God had reconciled the world with itself through Christ).<sup>46</sup>

In the reform period of the 1960s the churches were open for the social and political agenda conceding that up to a certain point secular agenda had an “Eigengesetzlichkeit”, their own logic and necessity. In order to break free from the chains of the established idiomatic formulas of religious discourse, church officials began to plead for a “secularization” of language, avoiding the “language of Canaan”, as this artificial language of the nineteenth century was called in the ecclesiastical milieu. Instead they strived for a common, ordinary language to be spoken and, if for theological necessity religious terms had to be used, for these to be combined with secular concepts: Thus, ‘world’ and ‘society’, ‘creation’ and ‘environment’, ‘charity’ and ‘solidarity’ were taken to be interchangeable; obedience to God was translated to social responsibility and so on. Again to give just one example, in 1960 an article in *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik* declared:<sup>47</sup>

Im vorliegenden Zusammenhang bedeutet >Welt< die geschichtliche menschliche Gesellschaft ... Gottes Liebe zur Welt (verbindet) Kirche und Welt miteinander” und ruft “die Kirchen zum Dienst an der Gesellschaft (In the given context world means the historical human society ... God’s love to the world (connects) Church and World with one another (and calls) the churches to the service of society).

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<sup>46</sup> Hammelsbeck, „Säkularisation“.

<sup>47</sup> “Aufgaben und Möglichkeiten kirchlichen Handelns im raschen sozialen Umbruch. Ergebnis einer internationalen ökumenischen Studienkonferenz,” *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik* 4, 1960, p. 257.

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In doing so, the churches proclaimed a new political and social relevance of the Christian gospel for society as a whole. Secular religion was a message to all men, but called for the special engagement of Christians within all kinds of political and social institutions. Christians should not preach society what it had to do but rather they should stand at the forefront on all issues of this world.

Looking back to the last decades, we are aware that this type of secular religiosity had its climax in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s, due to some disappointment about the failure of religious reform and religious revitalization in the past the concept of a secular religiosity seems to have declined, making room for a new turn to spirituality and concern for the inner life. Already in 1986 the Catholic theologian Eugen Biser considered secularization to have passed its climax, giving way to a "post-säkularistische Zeit" (a post-secularist age). A "Trendwende" (trend reversal) was on the way.<sup>48</sup>

So again the religious discourse may today be on the point of producing a new semantic paradigm: In this paradigm secular religiosity may be linked with liberal political positions and opposed to fundamentalist religiosity. Unlike the antagonism between the religious and the secular, the new fracture cuts through religion itself. This is an indication that the pattern religious/secular (which in the last decades was most characteristic of all kinds of secularization theories) may today be exhausted.

What can we learn from all these changing semantic patterns?

1. Religion and secularity are relational terms. They unfold in changing semantic dichotomies: spiritual/temporal, religious/secular, fundamentalist/ liberal and so on. There is no continuity in defining the identity of religion, but rather a transitory set of semantic patterns.
2. Secularity in its modern anti-religious meaning is a typical feature of twentieth century society, not only in Germany. In the age of secularity society defines religion as being opposed to secularity, and secularity as being opposed to religion. Today, at the end of this age, it is no longer important whether or not we are in the process of secularization, rather,

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<sup>48</sup> Eugen Biser,

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we are faced with multiple secularities at different times and in different religious cultures.

3. Finally, this article should underline the importance of semantic patterns and the productivity of semantic analysis for describing changing religious life in modern societies. In a time when big institutions such as the Christian churches are becoming eroded, modern citizens in Germany and many other European countries no longer identify themselves primarily by their religious confession or their membership in religious institutions but rather by using certain languages, which may be identified by contemporaries or later observers as being religious or non-religious.

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