

**Legitimacy of
modern concepts:
hope, progress and meaning**

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Abstract

A considerable part of Löwith's book *Meaning in History* is a defense of his thesis that our modern concepts such as *progress*, *hope* and *meaning* are in their essence residues of the past and that we, modern men, have no solid reason to believe in them. In this paper I'll argue the opposite. Relying on Blumenberg and Habermas, I'll argue that progress and hope are reconcilable with modernity as long as they are understood in a modern non-Christian sense. This is as far as Löwith's secularization-thesis is concerned. The second part of the paper is more concerned with the sociological secularization-thesis which generally holds that religion is losing its function in proportion to the advancing modernization. I will argue that modernity, as conceived by early Habermas, presupposes a religion if it is ever to succeed in its goal. This can also, to a certain extent, be seen as a modern defense of meaning (preserved in religion) which, as Löwith rightly argued, is forever affected by Christianity.

Modernity according to Löwith

The main theme of *Meaning in History* is a historical analysis of “philosophy of history”¹, with an interrelated goal of explaining our modern historical consciousness.² Löwith’s ambition is to show “that philosophy of history originates with the Hebrew [prophecy] and Christian faith in a [future] fulfillment and that it ends with the secularization of its eschatological pattern.” (Löwith 1949, p2) In this one sentence I see the key aspects that Löwith ascribes to our modern consciousness. I will discuss each of them in the following pages. Modern conception of progress, hope and meaning are interrelated with them.

Prophecy

Prophecy is more decisive in Löwith’s exposition on philosophy of history than he gives it credit in the aforementioned citation. As I have tried to show in my presentation concerning Joachim of Fiore, the link between secular history and sacred history is only possible from the Jewish apocalyptic writings of which Apocalypse of John³ is a late articulation, and which Joachim uses as a foundation for his theological historicism.⁴ Löwith’s acknowledgment of the importance of prophecy one can find throughout his book.⁵ Probably the best illustration of this importance is his saying that in the Christian

¹ Löwith’s main concern is to sketch the genesis and explain the success of philosophies of history in the 19th century. He does this by tracing it’s roots back to early Christianity, and following its development to 19th century philosophers such as Hegel, Marx and eventually Burckhardt. Contrary to Blumenberg, who thinks that the existential questions remained the same, but got a different modern answer following the developments of nominalism and the feeling of abandonment by God, Löwith sees in Joachim of Fiore the first initiative of secularized thinking and the origin of our modern consciousness and philosophy of history.

² We might even read it, in the context of common literature of those days, although maybe wrongly, as an answer to the origins of modern consciousness that led to the WOII. (cf. Löwith 1949, Appendix I and footnote 1) It’s not about history of salvation as much it is about *Heilsgeschichte*, or better *Heilsgeschehen*. Otherwise, we can read Löwith in a much more narrow way, as solely explaining the success of philosophies of history in the nineteenth century.

³ It is indeed the only true apocalyptic book that is part of the New Testament and which was, throughout the history, the object of much debate concerning its proper interpretation. (cf. my presentation summary)

⁴ Term, coined by Grundmann (i.e. first modern commentator of Joachim) to signify the genius of Joachim’s thought, as cited by Löwith (Löwith 1949, p156)

⁵ For example in the fact that “an expectation [in the ultimate meaning] was most intensely alive among the Hebrew prophets” (Löwith 1949, p6) or that “the Church Fathers developed from Hebrew prophecy and Christian eschatology a theology of history focused on the supra-historical events of creation, incarnation, and consummation” (Löwith 1949, p19), or in citing Cohen in saying that “the concept of history is a product of prophetism [...]” (Löwith 1949, p17), or lastly when he says that “within the biblical tradition,

Gospels he “cannot discover the slightest hint of a "philosophy of history"” (Löwith 1949, p191). This makes it clear for me why the prophetic element of Apocalypse of John was the stimulus for Christian thinkers to ‘discover this slight hint’ for a philosophy of history.

Christianity

Christianity plays a double role in Löwith’s discourse. First off, it opens the door to a new view on meaning in history; a view which still has consequences for our modern understanding of meaning. He argues that such view is mainly based on purpose. Something has its meaning of being something “in the fact that it indicates something beyond its material nature.” (Löwith 1949, p5) Hence “history, too, is meaningful only by indicating some transcendent purpose beyond the actual facts. But, since history is a movement in time, the purpose is a [transcendent] goal,” (*ibid.*) which signifies a decisive intervention in which God will close the history and the whole historical struggle between good and evil. Throughout the history this view enabled “the believer to cope [...] with "the terror of history".” (McGinn, p53) The only difference with the modern meaning now is that the goal is made immanent.

He contrasts this with the view of ancient Greeks. For although they did not see any transcendent goals, they did conceive historical facts meaningful, in political sense⁶ or at least as complying with “the cosmic law of growth and decay.” (Löwith 1949, p4 or Scipio's famous saying at p8) Their life was meaningful in so far as it complied with the flow of the cosmos. An other, similar understanding could be Nietzsche’s. Are there any other options for understanding the universe and our place in it? Although Löwith nowhere explicitly says so, he does give hints that no third option exists.⁷ On the question

the Jewish prophets alone were radical "philosophers of history" [... whereby] the historical destiny of Christian peoples is no possible subject of a specifically Christian interpretation of political history, while the destiny of the Jews is a possible subject of a specifically Jewish interpretation.” (Löwith 1949, p194-195)

⁶ “To them [Greeks] history was political history and, as such, the proper study of statesmen and historians.” (Löwith 1949, p4-5)

⁷ “It seems as if the two great conceptions of antiquity and Christianity, cyclic motion and eschatological direction, have exhausted the basic approaches to the understanding of history.” (Löwith 1949, p19) or “If the universe is neither eternal and divine, as it was for the ancients, nor transient but created, as it is for the Christians, there remains only one aspect: the sheer contingency of its mere "existence" [which should

whether the modern man can understand the history like the ancients did, and like Nietzsche wants, Löwith, according to his second appendix, argues that man can not. That is because the modern man needs the will to embrace his fate (i.e. Nietzsche rather forces it on modern man), whereas the Greek man never had an option to choose (i.e. they embraced it as if it were their own nature). So Löwith seemingly rightly concludes that there is no going back for the modern man.

Secondly, although it could be said that our meaning in history is determined, at least in part, by Christianity, Löwith argues that the Christian conception of history is a mistake too. Only Jewish history can be interpreted as a religious history. They as a people consider themselves as chosen people in their God's divine plan of history. Christians as a historical people do not exist. They are merely the people who thought the Messiah has come, time has stopped, and Judgment day was imminent. (cf. St. Paul) Only Christian Church was subject of history in later Christian exegesis⁸, even so when it became evident that nothing has changed since the coming of Christ.⁹ Hence, Löwith's conclusion "that a Jewish theology of secular history is indeed a possibility and even a necessity, while, Christian philosophy of history is an artificial compound." (Löwith 1949, p196)

Secularization

Secularization, as a historical term, was used as a juristic act for expropriation of ecclesiastical goods (i.e. secularization of goods) from 1648 onward. (Blumenberg 1976, p19) Later the term got its more common meaning as "detachment of spiritual or ecclesiastical ideas and thoughts" (Blumenberg 1976, p23), which Blumenberg argues is metaphorical¹⁰ in nature. (cf. Blumenberg 1976, p19) Löwith uses secularization in this

signify our modern conception of history, but it does not!]" (Löwith 1949, p201; cf. also the practical implications of Löwith's conclusions in Wallace, p79)

⁸ Cf. Löwith, 167 for Augustine, who introduced the idea of Church in history.

⁹ Even Joachim, who broke with the tradition on many issues, could not choose not to see in the Apocalypse of John "a vision of the whole course of history, past, present, and to come, one that was no other than the history of the Church, the *regnum Dei, quod est mater ecclesia*." (McGinn, p156)

¹⁰ More specifically, the concept was formed through a process Blumenberg calls "background metaphoric". (cf. Blumenberg 1976, p22-23) It means that the legal connotation of the term played a role in concept-genesis, but is no longer present (probably not by coincidence) in the concept itself.

late meaning and almost like a synonym for modernity.¹¹ First actualization of it he traces back to Joachim of Fiore who, "like Luther after him, could not foresee that his religious intention — that of desecularizing the church and restoring its spiritual fervor — would, in the hands of others, turn into its opposite: the secularization of the world which became increasingly worldly by the very fact that eschatological thinking about last things was introduced into penultimate matters." (Löwith 1949, p158) So modernity originates from this secularization process that was started by Joachim. Hence, secularization presupposes some holiness (i.e. spiritual ideas) to 'secularize' from. Löwith identifies this holiness in the Christian eschatological outlook of the New Testament that opened the perspective toward a future fulfillment¹² — "originally beyond [i.e. genuine Christianity]¹³, and eventually within [i.e. by Joachim], historical existence." (Löwith 1949, p197) Löwith's theory restated in Blumenberg's terms: Modernity, just like Christianity, is the form of an underlying unchanging religious substance. This underlying substance is left unchanged and unexplained, but the forms it takes (Judaism,

¹¹ "Secular progress" (Löwith 1949, p2 or p189) signifies our modern view of progress that has lost its theological goal and sort of progress that is much more pronounced than it was in ancient or Christian times. "Secular interpretation of history" aims again at the modern view of history that Löwith describes as "the empirical method of Voltaire." (Löwith 1949, p1) which he contrasts with the Christian sacred view on history, and ancient political view on history. (Löwith 1949, p4-5)

¹² He notes this on various occasions. One of the best examples is: "We of today, concerned with the unity of universal history and with its progress toward an ultimate goal or at least toward a "better world," are still in the line of prophetic and messianic monotheism; we are still Jews and Christians, however little we may think of ourselves in those terms." (Löwith 1949, p19)

¹³ McGinn asks just this question: "How far might Jesus be said to have shared in an apocalyptic view of history?" (McGinn, p54) He contrasts two views: The first being "a long tradition in modern biblical criticism stretching from H. S. Reimarus to Albert Schweitzer and beyond [that] saw in Jesus a fervent apocalyptic preacher whose message centered on the announcement of the imminence of the apocalyptic new aeon, the Kingdom of God." (*ibid.*) The other is the "past generation of German and American biblical scholars [that] campaigned against this [aforementioned] view and tried to distance Jesus from full-blown adherence to apocalyptic eschatology." (*ibid.*) Further he says that "no one denies that Jesus made use of the themes and symbols of apocalyptic eschatology in proclaiming the Kingdom of God and the necessity for moral decision, but there is little agreement on how to relate the present and future aspects of the possibly authentic sayings about the Kingdom." (McGinn, p55) The situation is that "while a number of prominent New Testament critics tend to mute the imminent aspects in Jesus' proclamation, others, such as the Swedish scholar Lars Hartman, [argue] that such overtly apocalyptic texts as the famous "Little Apocalypse" (Mk. 13, Mt. 24-25, Lk. 21) really do reflect his preaching." (*ibid.*) What is certain is the fact that "the first Jewish Christians interpreted their central belief that Jesus had risen from the dead in apocalyptic terms as the beginning of the new aeon and the definitive sign of God's intervention bringing history to a close; but once we try to become more specific about these beliefs, and as soon as we begin to proceed beyond the initial Palestinian community, the picture becomes more complex, and controversy ensues." (*ibid.*) The point of this is to illustrate that the authentic Christian belief in future transcendent fulfillment, as meant by Jesus himself, is very problematic, while Löwith uses it as obvious.

Christianity, Modernity, ...) we can see throughout history. (cf. Blumenberg 1976, p29) I would say that that this characterization of Löwith's theory, although a beautiful description of Löwith's intention to show how forms (i.e. conceptions) change throughout history, misses an important aspect of Löwith's intention; namely that the ideas themselves that transform throughout history get their meaning, not from the religious¹⁴ substance (as they should)¹⁵, but from the original ideas they were secularized from. This way Löwith's theory, which only has descriptive value (cf. Wallace, p67), also encompasses an illegitimate judgment¹⁶ which goes beyond its descriptive power. In the end, his theory, although strongly descriptive in nature, doesn't prove what he wants it to prove.¹⁷

Hope in future fulfillment

Hope, he argues, is an illusion, as from our modern rational view on history we have no reason to hope. Still, we do so. We are inclined to think that after a catastrophe things will fare better. Even more paradoxically, sometimes when we know that something will never happen on rational grounds, we are still inclined to hope for a miracle and tend to organize our life accordingly.¹⁸ The question that Löwith ask is: from where does this unquestioned belief come from? His answer again: Christianity. This is where we got our "belief in a meaningful goal and a "progressive revelation" of divine truth in history"

¹⁴ Blumenberg argues Löwith's substance is biblical (cf. Blumenberg, p46) or theological (*ibid.* p192), and 'religious' (*ibid.* p28-29; Wallace, p69) [this last one not explicitly]. I read it as merely meaning that the substance isn't material: you can not make a chair or table from it, but only (religious) ideas.

¹⁵ This is, I think, what Blumenberg would say. (Although he never explicitly says so: he uses the substance theory exclusively to characterize Löwith's theory. On the other hand, I agree with Löwith that Blumenberg's interpretation is also a substance theory. (cf. Löwith 1968, p454)) Blumenberg could say that Christianity and modernity are different but partial views of the same underlying substance, each thus having their unique self-supporting meanings. Just like you can not make a chair of gold and one of silver if your substance is only silver, you can only make one of gold and other of silver if your substance was composed of both. Same with Modernity and Christianity.

¹⁶ i.e. the fact that all modernity is completely in debt of Christianity

¹⁷ Formally we can explain this in the following way: let M stand for modernity, S for secularization and H for holiness, \wedge for "and", \vee for "or" and finally \rightarrow for "material implication". Löwith argues that the following holds: $M \rightarrow S \wedge S \rightarrow H \wedge H$. The conclusion from this is merely that $\neg M \vee M$ holds when we take S for granted (i.e. secularization doesn't prove the necessity of modernity). Even worse: the fact that H holds (in context of an *escaton* or Kingdom of God) is disputable as noted in footnote 13.

¹⁸ I'll call this sort of hope 'Modern Christian hope' (i.e. a Christian hope under modern framework). (cf. footnote 27)

(Löwith 1949, p16) from.¹⁹ But the strange thing is now that we do not believe anymore in divine plans of history, nor in ultimate goals, but we do still hope and believe in progress.²⁰ While the Christian hope in a goal and progress towards it was based on Christian doctrine, we modern men still hope and believe in progress, but have neither a religious doctrine nor an eschatological outlook on which to base this belief on. “The modern mind has not made up its mind whether it should be Christian or pagan. It sees with “one eye of faith and one of reason,” (Löwith 1949, p207) which is the consequence of a “mistaken [i.e. secularized] Christianity that confounds the fundamental distinction between redemptive events and profane happenings, between *Heilsgeschehen* and *Weltgeschichte*.” (Löwith 1949, p203)

Interlude

Eventually, one cannot but agree with Löwith that our Modern age is in some way a derivative of Christianity. Or as Blumenberg puts it, “the modern age is unthinkable without Christianity.” (Blumenberg 1976, p30) Even without their reasoning it would be hard to believe in a completely genuine modernity knowingly that it emerged after a thousand year of Christian reign. The question these authors ask is in what *way* those two are related. Löwith’s illustration of the genesis of modern hope, meaning and progress fills this trivial but inexplicit relation between modernity and Christianity in a specific way. But for my purpose of legitimization here it doesn’t matter what the nature of their relation is: be it that modernity is completely (or partly) in debt of Christianity or that

¹⁹ According to McGinn, who refers to Bultmann, the germs of the sense of progress [as] developed in subsequent Christian theologies of history lay in the difference between the “immanent development implied by the Christian view of the Old Testament as the promise of the New, [contrary to] the apocalyptic mentality [which] had insisted on the strong division between the two aeons.” (McGinn, p59) Augustine further argued that to “look for progress in the events of this observable history is useless: the progress that does exist in the building up of the *Civitas Dei* is visible to God alone.” (McGinn, p64) Joachim of Fiore is one historical figure who made the conception of progress visible to humans by his view of the world as progressing towards its permanent transformation in the eighth day of eternity, “but his notion was still not in the sense of something that is the product of human effort or that is an advance coming for the whole of humanity.” (McGinn, p190) This last citation rather describes the distinctive modern notion of progress (cf. Chapter ‘Hope and progress’, p1)

²⁰ Löwith argues that because of this secularization process the Christianity has been undone of its authenticity and our “modern historical consciousness has discarded the Christian faith in a central event of absolute relevance, yet it maintains its logical antecedents and consequences, viz., the past as preparation and the future as consummation, thus reducing the history of salvation to the impersonal teleology of a progressive evolution in which every present stage is the fulfillment of past preparations.” (Löwith 1949, p186)

there is something new and genuine in it. What does matter is whether those three modern concepts are legitimate from the modern point of view. And contrary to Löwith who argues that those concepts are illegitimate²¹ and an illusion, I'll argue (in similar line as Blumenberg) that they are reconcilable with modernity and therefore legitimate. For that purpose I will first need a clear picture of modernity on which to base my exposé. That I find in Habermas theory of communication. From its post-modern questioning, and Whitehead as its solution, I'll argue that all three concepts can be incorporated and their legitimacy defended. Furthermore, towards the end it shall also become clear, that to defend meaning (in its general meaning) I will have to distance myself from the rather academic Löwith-Blumenberg debate, and focus more on the more practical consequences of sociological secularization in our multicultural societies of which Habermas's lecture was an incentive.

Defense of modernity

Modernity according to Habermas²²

So let us start with Habermas. His book, *The Theory of Communicative Action* is best known for the perspective it provides on how to understand modernity. It is a continuation of his project, started twenty years earlier, based on his belief that a rational basis for collective life can only be achieved if social relations are organized "according to the principle that the validity of every norm of political consequence be made dependent on a consensus arrived at in communication free from domination."²³ His theory is based on "communicative competence" displayed by all speakers of natural languages, because "insofar as actors wish to coordinate their action through understanding rather than force or manipulation, they implicitly take on the burden of redeeming claims they raise to others regarding the truth of what they say, its normative rightness, and its sincerity." (White, p7) For this he developed a "more comprehensive"

²¹ Wallace rightly points out that "'Legitimacy' [in this context] need not imply only innocence of theft, of living on stolen capital; it can also refer to the consciousness of drawing a justified conclusion of taking a step which is appropriate in the circumstances." (Wallace, p77)

²² Mainly based on White, 'Reason, modernity, and democracy', p3-18

²³ (White, p6: White citing Habermas)

conception of reason,²⁴ the structure and rules under which a rational *diskurs* should take place. His conception of this new founding framework and "communicative rationality" is the means to criticize and validate various norms and claims that persist in a modern society because the essence of modernity is the maintenance of a critical stance toward one's foundations.

Hope and progress²⁵

It might reasonably be said that the modern goal of a better society has its roots in the moralistic critique on history, not in Holy Scriptures. "It is history, Habermas is quite clear, that has given us "moral universalism"."²⁶ From the injustice done in the past one strives for a better future. One hopes for it in the modern sense, but not in a Christian sense.²⁷ Whereas Christians hope gets its meaning from the anticipation of the future, the modern hope gets its meaning by striving to that future. Christian hope is led by God, while modern is led by human hands, independent of God. The main difference between modern and Christian presuppositions is the fact that Modernity presupposes a "rational, demiurgic, or even creative subject," a subject who replaces the Christian passive subject and it's demiurgic God. (cf. Blumenberg 1976, p33-34) In modernity, God is dead and his place replaced by man. In modernity, eschatologism turns into utopianism.

Something similar we can say about progress. First off, it has two meanings. On the one side we have progress as continuation, which merely signifies an aspect of human condition (i.e. the arrow of time). On the other side we have progress as improvement, signifying the ambiguous term to which Löwith alludes and which he argues is a Christian residue. The first meaning is obvious, but the second requires explanation. It

²⁴ i.e. not object-oriented like instrumental or strategic reason, but subject-oriented, namely communicative reason.

²⁵ For much of the following I was inspired by Blumenberg & Habermas.

²⁶ Furthermore: "Indeed, such universalism is the result of human *struggle* and *action* [my emphasis], and philosophy would "do well to avoid haughtily dismissing these [sociopolitical] movements and the larger historical dimension from which they spring." (White, p265-666: Strong & Sposito citing Habermas)

²⁷ Point here (and the rest of the paragraph) is that while early Christians had only one sort of hope (i.e. 'Christian hope'), modern man has two sorts: the 'modern hope' that seems legitimate and the 'modern Christian hope' that seems illegitimate. Sort of 'modern Christian hope' that was described under chapter 'Hope in future fulfillment' (p1) might rightly be considered a Christian residue.

might well be that the source of its meaning is Christian eschatology,²⁸ but that might not imply that it is illusive or illegitimate. Just like it is the case with hope, its modern interpretation is different and fundable in modernity. Modern notion of progress is thoroughly influenced by scientific progress. According to Blumenberg, the early modern age brought scientific models of progress by itself, like progress in astronomy (Blumenberg 1976, p30; Wallace, p70), self-comparison with authorities of antiquity (Blumenberg 1976, p32), etc. which gradually replaced the Christian²⁹ conception of providence. According to Blumenberg, it is this new science, and the incorporation of human actions in their framework, that led to the idea of rational progress-making in history.³⁰ So it came that man-made history became predictable and the idea of progress the “only regulative principle that can make history humanly bearable.” (Blumenberg 1976, p35)

Meaning, the problem

Our place and meaning in the universe is apparently forever affected by Christian and Jewish eschatological thinking, something from which we cannot undo ourselves from. (cf. p4) The question then is whether to drown in our modern contingency and pointlessness of mere existence,³¹ or whether to try to construct some universal goal that can give meaning to our lives and that is also reconcilable with our communicative rationality. Modern conception of history, understood from the perspective of a moralistic critique on history, seems to reasonably imply that we should strive to a Utopia. The question then is whether a Utopia is possible, assuming the communication theory and departing from our multicultural Western societies. Habermas argues it is, but I’ll argue that reason alone is not enough.

²⁸ See footnote 19 and chapter ‘Hope in future fulfillment’ (p1).

²⁹ ‘Christian’ is crucial here. Notable is that the Stoic conception of providence is reconcilable with the modern, as it allows being rational and predictable, whereas the Christian notion of eschatology is inherently impenetrable and unfathomable, but for the all-knowing God. (cf. Blumenberg, p34 & p38-39)

³⁰ cf. “The principle [...] that knowledge of history is the precondition of the rational and thus progressive making of history, so that the idea of progress is a regulative idea for the integration of actions, could no doubt only have been derived from the model of the integration of theoretical actions in the new science.” (Blumenberg 1976, p34)

³¹ cf. footnote 7.

Meaning, in broader understanding, is traditionally seen as being conserved by religions, and religions and their norms as bearers of meaning. But at first sight it seems as if Habermas's communication theory doesn't allow any public space for religions and their norms. In so far as they aren't rationally substantiable, they are merely a lingering symptom from the past.³² So, according to Habermas, we should rationalize everything, because that which is not rationalizable is probably subject to some communication restriction which withdraws it from all doubt and which is imposed by some higher authority.³³ To the contrary, I will also try to show that his communication theory, seen from post-modern perspective, presupposes a religion.

Limits of rationality³⁴

The actual *diskurs* by which we, according to Habermas, should validate our norms and claims should be force-free, presuppose an ideal *diskurs*, incorporate all interested parties,³⁵ and be based on communicational rationality. The goal of this actual *diskurs* is not an external object, but a shared concept or mutual understanding. The means is language. Habermas would use this model in any domain of human conduct. Applied to the domains of religion and politics, Habermas would plea for rationalization of any goal or norm that has never been the product of an actual *diskurs*. Presumably, Löwith would cheer this sort of thinking.³⁶ "Away with all those irrational Christian residues." Problems arise when we try to contemplate his theory from a more practical point of view: our multicultural societies where we are constantly confronted with supposed 'ignorance'. There are innumerable examples of which I will take only one to exemplify.

A secular man in a newspaper's opinion-column³⁷ describes himself participating with his little son in the Holy Communion. When they both appear in front of the priest to

³² For example, all kinds of taboos, like the incest taboo, which isn't suitable for of is recalcitrant to rationalization.

³³ cf. Visker, p113

³⁴ Much of what follows is based on Visker's *Lof der zichtbaarheid*.

³⁵ An ideal *diskurs* should incorporate even those interested persons who aren't born. As no ideal *diskurs* can be a real *diskurs*, Habermas is satisfied with a real *diskurs* that aspires to be an ideal *diskurs*.

³⁶ Remember that his critique on modernity is that we are neither completely pagan, nor completely Christian. We see "with one eye of faith and one of reason." (Löwith 1949, p207)

³⁷ The example is based on De Graeve, Sam, 'De kerk', *De Standaard*, 29/09/2008 and the reaction to it: Anonymous, 'De Kerk', *De Standaard*, 02/10/2008 with subtitle: "De column van Sam De Graeve (DS 29 september) heeft me pijn gedaan."

receive a host, the priest gives one to the man, but kindly rejects to give one to the anticipating child. (Presumably because the child looked too young to have done the First Communion, and so wasn't allowed a host by the Christian tradition.) Thereupon the man describes himself breaking his own host in two, giving one part to his son, and asking the priest whether he considers this as "brotherly sharing". A few days later, a woman writes in the same opinion-column how she feels offended by the man's actions, that he desecrated her Christian beliefs and that he should never do such things again.

The examples to which I am alluding here all have one thing in common: there is a reduction of some thing "X", *meaningful* for person "M", to something merely with *meaning* for person "W". Understanding "X" implies grasping the *meaning* of "X". But the essence of *meaningfulness* of "X" always escapes one's understanding. It has more to do with 'sympathizing with'. The fact that Allah is a God, is understandable. But putting it in a row with other Gods, like a secular man would do by saying "that Allah is only one of the many", is desecrating the *meaningfulness* of a Muslim's concept of Allah. The key issue here is that a secular man can only understand, but not sympathize with the Muslim's concept of Allah (i.e. he can grasp the *meaning* of Allah, but not the *meaningfulness* of Allah). Same reasoning could be used with any other religion, be it Christianity (cf. supra), Judaism, etc. or meaningful object, subjective experience, etc. But the interesting part is that this discrepancy between our understanding but not being able to sympathize with, can be linked with Foucault's theory of *discours*. Consider for example the popular Paracelsus's explanation of the fact that mercury is a treatment for syphilis.³⁸ Looked from our western modern *discours* at his western medieval *discours* we can argue that his reasoning is mainly based on similarity.³⁹ But although we understand his reasoning, we can not sympathize with it. "Paracelsus's *discourse* is incommensurable with ours, because there is no way to match what he wanted to say against anything we want to say. *We can express him in English, but we cannot assert or*

³⁸ "Diens verklaring voor de behandeling van syfilis gaat als volgt: kwikzilver is het aangewezen middel, want de Latijnse naam daarvan is mercurium, dat verwijst naar de planeet Mercurius, tevens de Latijnse naam van de Griekse god Hermes, die de god van onder meer de markt was, precies de plaats waar veel mensen samenkomen en de kans syfilis op te lopen dus groot is!" (Visker, p121-122) Mercury is indeed a possible treatment for syphilis, but still we say that his discovery is a fluke.

³⁹ cf. Foucault's qualifications of various *épistèmes* in *Les mots et les choses* (1966)

deny what is being said [my emphasis].” (Visker citing Ian Hacking, p22) Especially this fact that sometimes “we cannot assert or deny what is being said” is something we do not find in Habermas’s theory of communication. For him, there is only “yes”, “no”, or “please continue justifying your validity claims”. Nonetheless, in case of postponing, the answer will eventually result in a “yes” or “no”. Now, with Foucault’s notion of *discours*, the door is opened for a fourth answer such as “I do understand, but I can’t sympathize with your arguments.” Such complications Habermas doesn’t anticipate because of his presupposition of endless possibilities of human reason.⁴⁰ Yet, I think that right here his theory breaks. It is a post-modern insight that not *all* things are rationalizable to the bone. Neither Paracelsus, nor the Muslim can convince the modern secular man to think the same way (i.e. to grasp not only the meaning, but also the meaningfulness). We seem to be relative absolutists⁴¹ as we see the relativity of our own medicine and our own religion, but we still aren’t indifferent to it (i.e. we are absolute towards our own). Other medicines and religions are no option for us, although they seem as mere options (and thus relative) from a rational point of view. Even stronger: other enough different cultures are no option for us. Our *discours* determines as much as restricts our liking, thinking and truth independently of us.

Practical implications

From the last reasoning one can infer consequences for recognition and intersubjective encounters. Consequences for recognition we can divide in three classes. Formal, substantive and monumental. Formal recognition is a liberal one and is misplaced.⁴² Substantive recognition is only possible for people under the same horizon⁴³, otherwise is misplaced as it reduces the meaningful to barely something with meaning. Tolerance, it

⁴⁰ In his recent lecture at Tilburg Habermas seems aware of this fact by associating it with the “radical multicultural” point of view. But he seems to shuffle it too easily away by saying that those radical interpretations of multiculturalism are often the cause of discrimination of cultural minorities by majorities. He doesn’t consider any possible solution that might emerge from this view. (cf. Habermas, p12)

⁴¹ i.e. relativists and absolutists at the same time, i.e. framework relativism

⁴² You don’t want your sensitivity for the sacred recognized, but the sacred itself (i.e. meaningfulness).

⁴³ See footnote 51.

could be argued,⁴⁴ falls under this category. Eventually, monumental recognition could be a solution.⁴⁵

What concerns the intersubjective encounters (in the light of *diskurs*-theory) we can distinguish four outcomes based on the aforementioned discrepancy and dependant on our understanding of its failure. If we understand the failure in a privative way, we might say that either the other is stupid as he cannot understand (i.e. fundamentalist or individualist position), or that we must continue as the failure is only temporary (i.e. Habermas's way). If we assume that the failure is essential, then we can either opt for conservation of our own horizons (i.e. Taylor's position) or we might opt for special public coding that has conciliatory symbolic function (i.e. Visker's position).

Departing from the post-modern assumption that our ability to understand each other is limited (i.e. failure is essential), we are left with two options: conservation and public coding. Conservation I can not take into consideration here. Public coding, although the best candidate for a solution, can only be used as a mediator. Whitehead, on the other hand, offers a core solution in his metaphysics he dubs "rationalism", more specifically a component of it: his rational religion.

The founding block of the ideal communication society⁴⁶

First off, Whitehead's metaphysics doesn't go much further than Parmenides' insight that reality is of such nature that it cannot be thought not to exist. In a sense, nothing new as any non-skeptical thinker accepts the existence of reality. Question is what qualifications we can ascribe to it. Interesting qualification in this context is religion. Whitehead is convinced that metaphysically one cannot assert (let alone prove) the existence of God,

⁴⁴ "Het tolerantieprincipe kan pas van de verdenking dat het niet méér is dan een arrogant gedogen worden bevrijd, wanneer de partijen in een conflict het op basis van gelijkwaardigheid *met elkaar* eens worden. [...] Tolerantie houdt in dat mensen met een verschillend geloof of zonder een geloof elkaar wederzijds overtuigen [...]." (Habermas, p7) The question is under which circumstances this "eens worden" and "overtuigen" is possible.

⁴⁵ Monument (i.e. not sign that signifies something else, but as symbol that constitutes something on its own) as a way of commemoration of that which is unthinkable (i.e. meaningful). Like, for example, the *Mahnmal* monument for the commemoration of the Holocaust. Its form explicates that what is symbolizes is unthinkable. In general: By means of symbolization grasping that which is ungraspable.

⁴⁶ Much of what follows is based on Braeckman's classes of Whitehead. My goal here is not to elaborate on his rational religion, but only to take from it what I find relevant for the given context.

certainly not a Christian one with ‘evangelical’ predicates. (cf. Descartes) Hence his appeal to religious experiences. Only from them we can extract a religion. But whatever the religion, it must not fall out of metaphysical discourse.⁴⁷ Follows that “the dogmas of religion are the attempts to formulate in precise terms the truths disclosed in the religious experience of mankind,” (cf. Whitehead, p65) and they are acceptable, from a rational point of view, as long as they do not contradict with the objectivity of the universe. So we see that from a rational point of view, we do not necessarily have to dismiss religion, as Habermas seems to suggest. Rather, as Whitehead shows, we can acknowledge its importance and frame its range of application.

Secondly, what Whitehead wants to emphasize is the essential dynamics in the evolution of religions towards more rationality, universality and cosmopolitanism. The evolution from Christianity in the past two centuries was towards more rationality. So modern Christianity we might call to a certain extent rational Christianity. In Whiteheads sense it is not worse than the ‘genuine’ one.⁴⁸ As a matter of fact, there is no genuine Christianity. Dynamics is essential to it. Reason is that if you want to uphold a religion, you have to constantly rethink it.⁴⁹ The essence of religion is its search for general principles to express the things which are given in personal experiences. (cf. supra and Whitehead, p52) The goal, in line with Habermas’s conception of modernity, is “to make the common life the City of God that it should be.” (cf. Whitehead, p45) According to Whiteheads commentator Jan Van der Veken, Whiteheads originality consists in his

⁴⁷ Some may claim that religion has its own autonomy led by its own rationality. Question is what this rationality is. Emotion? Particular reasoning based on thoughts of religious leaders? History teaches us (i.e. a modern perspective) that such rationalities are more dangerous than good and therefore dismissible on modern grounds. (cf. chapter ‘Modernity according to Habermas’, p1) Whitehead’s view is interesting for the sole reason that it bases the religion on our discursive rationality.

⁴⁸ “Genuine Christianity” is Löwith’s term which he relates to the original biblical view. (cf. L, vii; 169; 200-201) Whitehead would probably say that our current Christianity is even better than the ‘genuine’ one as far as it is more rational, universal and cosmopolitan.

⁴⁹ For example, in our modern age you can not uphold a view that there is a God who is at the same time almighty and just. It is easy to show that it leads to contradictions. For example, our media floods us with calamities throughout the world. Consequently, we can not uphold the view that all those suffering people are bad because otherwise our almighty and just God would intervene. Still, this view could have been upheld in small pre-modern communities. Because in the medieval conception of reality worldview and Godview were profoundly intertwined, it seems inevitable that when medieval worldview staggers, the Godview staggers too. Because our worldview has changed a lot since the medieval times, so is the Christian religion apt for revision too. (cf. Whitehead, p90) Hence the dynamics in religions. We can find this reasoning on various occasions in *Religion in the making*. For example, “[...] Religion is world-loyalty”. (Whitehead, p67)

claim that God as “ideal companion” is the possibility-condition for Habermas’s ideal communication-society.⁵⁰ (Whitehead, p32) Of course, Whitehead doesn’t speak in terms of *discours* or *épistème*, horizon or end vocabulary,⁵¹ although he does give us a sense that he is aware of the already introduced discrepancy.⁵² What he offers is this badly needed shared horizon in the form of rational religion, which is lacking in Habermas’s communication theory. And it is also this core-understanding that allows us to efficiently communicate and understand each other.

Meaning, the solution

So it seems that modernity too needs a religion. And not only because of the recent spiritual re-emergence in the public sphere after a long time of ‘suppression’. As I argued, modernity, if it is ever to succeed in its goals, would need an underlying religion because of its own intrinsic structural reasons. As long as we are all secular people, embedded under the same secular horizon, it *could* go well. But the fact is that we are not, and many of our modern societies are pluralistic in nature. This fact is not a problem that modernity can solve by reason, as it, as shown from the post-modern perspective, seems as a structural problem. The better question is how to cope with it, or even better: how to dissolve it. One way, as mentioned, is by public coding. Other, more profound way, is by rational religion. We might, to some extent, call this latter the “complementary process” to which Habermas is alluding in his recent lecture. (cf. Habermas, p13)

⁵⁰ It might seem that I am making an anachronism by putting Whitehead, a modern thinker, in postmodern reasoning. But I do think (see also footnote 52), that on this occasion Whitehead is a postmodern thinker, where Habermas is not. And the fact that modern/post-modern distinction is not based on time we see in the common distinction between Foucault’s archeological faze (which has post modern characteristics) that came before his genealogical faze (which has modern characteristics) (cf. Visker, p126)

⁵¹ *Discourse*, horizon or end vocabulary are respectively Foucault’s, Taylor’s and Rorty’s terms alluding to one and the same thing. (cf. Visker, p16-17), at least in the given context

⁵² “You can only speak of mercy among a people who, in some respects, are already merciful. A language is not a universal mode of expressing all ideas whatsoever. It is a limited mode of expressing such ideas as have been frequently entertained, and urgently needed, by the group of human beings who developed that mode of speech.” (cf. Whitehead, p37) We see here limits of intrinsic human speaking ability and trails of *discours*. Or on the limits of reason: “[...] mothers can ponder many things in their hearts which their lips cannot express. These many things, which are thus known, constitute the ultimate religious evidence, beyond which there is no appeal.” (Whitehead, p77) Furthermore, the reason why modern man is godless is partly the blame of traditional theology that can not speak about God in terms that the modern man understands. (cf. Van der Veken, p5 and footnote 49)

The meaning of our existence can also be given from the vision of the aspired Utopia. Both Whitehead and Habermas give a similar goal (the City of God and respectively the ideal communication society) as an answer to "the terror of history". The only difference is that the one is more fundamental than the other.

Secularization

Secularization, whether legitimate or not, I leave unanswered. All we can do is describe the evolution. Löwith does this by referring to genuine Christianity and Joachim of Fiore. Blumenberg, with which I better agree on this part, describes it by the continuous procrastination (and therefore historicization) of *escaton* and subsequently the nominalistic *discours*-shift. They are both in a sense correct descriptions, but not proofs. Human interactions and development of human spirit are probably too complex to be grasped in simple law-like propositions. In this sense is maybe Whitehead's notion of fundamental dynamics in religions the best explanation of secularization we can hope to give.

Conclusion

I must admit that the idea which I got a few months ago, and which I presented here, after putting it on paper seems as if aiming too high. It seems as if I only touched upon the surface and that there is much left open about the possible implications. Anyway, the primary endeavor was to argue against Löwith that although our view on progress, hope and meaning is influenced by Christianity, it doesn't have to be 'wrong', 'irrational' or less worthy, as Löwith seems to suggest. Modern conceptions of hope and progress seemed easy to defend. In both Habermas and Blumenberg we find their modern authentic meanings which are, although in some way influenced by Christianity, not wholly reducible to it. In sum, they are groundable within modernity as long as we do not stick blindly to their old Christian meanings. Historical meaning and meaning in general, proved more recalcitrant from the modern point of view. Eventually I found a gap and argued that meaning too is reconcilable with modernity in so far as modernity acknowledges its limits of rationality.

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Excerpts