

# Secularisation and Religion in a Post-secular Age

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## Abstract

This article elaborates on the conditions for secularisation in a post-secular age starting from the complications associated with the story of Columbus and how this narrative, configured among the growing controversies on knowledge between church and nation-state in the latter part of the 1800s, may be considered as part of a larger narrative—the story of secularisation. For a long time it was assumed that there was a *necessary, sine qua non* connection between modernisation and secularisation, yet this is challenged today by “the return of religion” and “the new visibility of religion”. It is argued instead that secularisation needs to be comprehended in a non-binary way, beyond the dichotomous opposition between *religion* and *secularisation*, *superstitiousness* and *scientificness*, *intolerance* and *tolerance*, *reaction* and *progress*. Furthermore, secularisation should not be considered as an opposite to, but as something produced by Christianity.

**In school,** I and subsequently many children in Scandinavia were told the story of Christopher Columbus: the hero, who courageously and defiantly crossed the Atlantic in 1492. In one and the same act, he was assumed to have realised two unprecedented achievements: he “discovered” America, and he proved to his astonished contemporaries, who believed that he would sail over the edge of the earth, that the earth was, in fact, round. The story of stupid medieval people who thought the world was flat, and how this heroic son of Genoa sailed away with his three ships towards an unknown, uncertain horizon, is one of the world’s most famous adventure stories, and has come to be an unquestionable and integral part of our cultural and scientific history. The only problem with this steep story, however, is that there is no truth in it whatsoever.

Columbus never discovered America—for the simple reason that he never understood where he had come to. In our entire history there does in all probability not exist a voyager of discovery who was more wrong in his understanding of his actual position: Columbus thought he was sailing outside the coast of China—when he was actually in the Caribbean. He wasn’t even on his way to America! His intention was to find a sea route to Asia but Columbus lived and died in the belief that he had actually come to the Asian archipelago and that it was just a matter of finding his way to the mainland. And, by seeking beyond a few more islands, to be able to visit the glistening, golden cities and the fairytale-like riches that Marco Polo had told stories about following his voyages some three centuries earlier.<sup>1</sup>

Columbus’s “discovery” is also the beginning of a process of brutal exploitation, racism, annihilation of almost an entire population,

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Bergreen, Laurence. *Columbus: The Four Voyages, 1492-1504*. New York, NY: Penguin. 2011; Kristensson Ugglå, Bengt. *Slaget om verkligheten: Filosofi—om-världsanalys—tolkning*. Stockholm/Stehag: Brutus Östlings bokförlag Symposion. 2012 [2002].

2  
Dussel, Enrique. *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of 'the Other' and the Myth of Modernity*. New York, NY: Continuum. 1995[1992]. trans. Michael D Barber. I have elaborated on this dark side of the Columbus myth in Ugglå, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-7.

3  
Wootton, David. *The Invention of Science: A New Theory of the Scientific Revolution*. London: Allen Lane. 2015. p. 57.

slave trade, colonialism, etc. If we shift our perspective from a Eurocentric concept of “discoveries”, a quite different and much darker narrative reveals itself that tells us about the violent conquest and brutal invasion of a continent where people had lived their lives long before they were being “discovered”.<sup>2</sup> We might also better understand the cognitive challenges that Columbus was faced with if we remind ourselves that the verb “to discover” had not even been invented as an established concept in his time and age yet. David Wootton, who has elaborated on the importance of “discoveries” for the Scientific Revolution, has stated: “Columbus discovered America, an unknown world, when he was trying to find a new route to a known world, China. Having discovered new land, he had no word to describe what he had done.”<sup>3</sup>

It was also not a matter of Columbus having to prove to his astonished contemporaries that the earth was round—the earth’s spherical form was something that had been clear to people since ancient times. Therefore, there were hardly any people in Columbus’s times who were so totally ignorant that they claimed that the earth was flat—so it was not a matter of a sea captain from Genoa, with his superior combination of reason and courage, being able to astonish his superstitious contemporaries in the late 1400s with the fact—and to everyone’s surprise—that the earth was round. There was quite simply no one to convince, and Columbus had neither intended, nor was it the outcome and result of his travels and voyages.

But then we must ask ourselves the question: if people in the late Middle Ages did not believe that the earth was flat, where on earth does all this talk about the flat world come from? And how is it possible that the story of Columbus is so vividly alive in our cultural heritage that it continues to be told over and over again—constantly recurring in the teaching that takes place in schools in an Anglo-European context—while it also has such an unshakable and solid position that it presented as a matter of fact? There appears to be something that is as leading as it is misleading in the power and matter-of-factness of this story.

## The Story behind the Story

Behind every story, another story always hides. As we have seen, this is also the case here due to the fact that the standard version of the Columbus narrative obscures the dark side of conquest and brutal colonisation. But every story also has a story itself. The fact is that (the medieval) earth was “flattened” in a story that took shape as late as 1828—and the earth was flattened, *good and proper*, even later, in the 1870s. So even if we include a pre-history from half a century earlier, the myth of the flat medieval world is still less than two hundred years old.<sup>4</sup>

The first time this version of the Columbus story was presented in its complete form was in Washington Irving’s bestselling book *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Rip Van Winkle*, which was part of one of his larger works, *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (1828). In line with that time and age’s many “robinsonades”, the book combines fiction and narrative in such a way that it is clearly signalled to the reader that this is meant as entertainment. It is not until half a century later that the story is to become a history connected to truth claims, and, therefore, also becomes a serious matter. It was not until the 1870s, in the wake of the controversies surrounding Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) that the relationship between science and religion took a complicated and conflict-ridden turn, and during the half century that followed, ended up in lasting conflict and mutual suspicion. It is in this situation that the story of a totally ignorant (religious) medieval flat world, and Columbus, as a modern secularised hero of rationality and science, comes into being and establishes itself as a “truth”.<sup>5</sup>

How did this happen? Columbus certainly was anything but a modern, secularised and scientific-thinking human being. On the contrary, he was medieval through and through, and he was fully and completely obsessed with the matter of the dangerous amalgam produced by mixing a thirst for God with a thirst for gold. How then could Columbus, somewhat later, be transformed into a super-hero of modernity, who was to have discovered America, and, before astonished contemporaries, was also to have proven that the Earth was round?

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Russell, Jeffrey Burton. *Inventing the Earth Flat: Columbus and Modern Historians*. New York, NY: Praeger. 1997 [1991].

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Garwood, Christine. *Flat Earth: The History of an Infamous Idea*. London: Macmillan. 2007.

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Cavanaugh, William T. *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2009.

7  
Garwood, *op. cit.*

We must understand the story of Columbus and the notion of the flat medieval world within the scope of a larger context: a history dealing with the progress of knowledge. To be more precise: behind the story of Columbus from around 1500 hide stories of a completely different nature, as well as controversies associated with the influence over a most important European institution of knowledge that took place in the latter part of the 1800s.

In the 1870s universities had begun to form themselves into institutions that demanded greater autonomy and independence. This was taking place at the same time as the tug-of-war between the church and the nation-state’s influence over this strategically important institution. The invention of the modern category “religion” may be considered as part of the transfer of power from church to the new secular nation-state.<sup>6</sup> During the second half of the 1800s it was therefore decreed that a story be written to depict the Middle Ages as an epoch, during which the lack of scientific progress, religion and dogmas dominated. Furthermore, this was also to be a story that could strengthen the status and legitimacy of science from a historical perspective, where the latter was allowed to take up the hard struggle to win its autonomy in a time when the church as a religious institution still had significant power and influence.<sup>7</sup>

## Part of a Larger Story

The story of Columbus is therefore the story of secularisation. In compliance with August Comté’s positivist story of progress, the history of mankind has developed from a religious stage, via a philosophic-metaphysical stage, to the “positive” and scientific stage of transparency and translucency that only a scientified society had been able to offer. In alignment with Max Weber’s version of this story, this is a matter of a constant and continuous process through which the world and human beings are to be *disenchanted*: from formerly having lived in a world of the spirit, and the qualities of such a world, humans are then to learn to explain the world in terms of cause and effect. Secularisation, thus, meant a transition from *mythos* to *logos*—leaving religion behind.

For a long time it was assumed that there was a *necessary, sine qua non* connection between modernisation and secularisation, where, from this kind of perspective, the process of modernisation *per se* appeared as a story about secularisation, with as consequence that the secular can only gain its meaning when seen in opposition to religion. In other words, modernisation signifies the overcoming of religion. In compliance with this story, the more modern a human being becomes, the more secularised they must become—and the more secularised a human being becomes, the more modern they can be said to be.<sup>8</sup> And to be more precise, to be religious seems identical to *not yet* having become *really* modern. Since modernisation proceeds and progresses mercilessly, the dichotomy between *religion* and *secularisation*, *superstitiousness* and *scientificness*, *intolerance* and *tolerance*, *reaction* and *progress*, is as inevitable and inescapable as it is irreconcilable and unrelenting.<sup>9</sup>

In Sweden, this secularisation story has gained particular impetus and energy because it is interwoven with the success story of the state as “the most modern country in the world”, accompanied by the never-ceasing repetition of the chorus from a Swedish song: “better and better, day by day”. In a story of this kind, religion had no part to play at all, other than as a dark historical contrast to a scientific future where light is dawning.<sup>10</sup>

The extraordinary success of this narrative, and our keen need for it, resonates with the fact that the meaning-making capacity of the secularisation story made it possible to make the meaning of life and the development of society understandable in a time of profound and brutal transformation. The secularisation story had the capacity and ability to create cohesion and mark out and indicate a future direction for people whose orientation in life and the world had been destabilised as a result and consequence of modernisation, industrialisation, urbanisation and de-traditionalisation. The social sciences that emerged and flourished during the 1800s also found their grounding in this story; religion was soon to disappear anyway, the only question was how long it would take.<sup>11</sup>

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*Ibid.*; Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*. trans. Ciaran Cronin. Cambridge: Polity Press. 2007 [2005]; Eagleton, Terry. *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press. 2009.

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Cavanaugh, William T. “The Invention of the Religious-Secular Distinction.” In William A. Barbieri Jr., *At the Limits of the Secular: Reflections on Faith and Public Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 2014. pp. 105-128.

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Jackelén, Antje. *Gud är större: Ett herdabrev för vår tid*. Lund: Arcus förlag. 2011; Gerle, Elisabeth. *Farlig förenkling: Religion och politik utifrån Sverigedemokraterna och Humanisterna*. Nora: Doxa. 2010.

11

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2007.

12

Sigurdson, Ola. *Det postsekulära tillståndet: Religion, modernitet och politik*. Göteborg: Glänta produktion. 2009.

13

Dixon, Thomas. *Science and Religion: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2008.

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Sigurdson, op. cit.; Joas, Hans. *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights*. trans. Alex Skinner. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. 2013; Joas, Hans. *Faith as an Option: Possible Futures for Christianity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 2014.

## A Crack in the Secularisation Story

However, in the course of time, the secularisation story started to crack, and its assumptions and suppositions essentially questioned. For some decades now we have experienced “the return of religion” and “the new visibility of religion”, which, in turn, has led a number of scholars to start to describe our times as *post-secular*.<sup>12</sup> It is, therefore, no coincidence that in a time when the secularisation story has reached a point where it begins to crack visibly, we have begun to take to heart the understanding of how problematic the Columbus story really is.

One can have different understandings and conceptions of what course a development is taking—and one can interpret the post-secular state of things in different ways—but the fact remains that few people today seriously believe that religion will disappear in the foreseeable future. There is, indeed, a *possible* connection between secularisation and modernisation, but the relationship is not *essential* and not *imperative*. It is easy to draw attention to examples where secularisation has taken place without modernisation, and, in the same way, we can see successful modernisation without secularisation following suit. Accordingly, the post-secular age means that we must correct and adjust our writing of history as well as our self-understanding. The history of science, not least, seems to have been written from the perspective of the secularisation thesis, and, therefore, full of surprise, we are reminded that so many leading scientists have at the same time also embraced a religious conviction.<sup>13</sup> In other words, it is so much more than a matter of, or, in fact, a question of, the position of religion that is at stake. In our times the secularisation story finds itself being constantly renegotiated, and being continuously revised and pluralised.<sup>14</sup>

Such an interpretation of the post-secular condition resides and remains in a binary order, regulated by linear developmental logics. With this interpretation of the post-secular as the point of departure it also remains unclear how so many of the people that are carried by a religious conviction still do not, for that very reason, experience themselves as less secularised than their fellow humans. In other words, the post-secular is not situated *after* secularisation. If anything, we seem to be living in a time characterised by “the return of



religion”—at the same time as the secularisation process progresses and proceeds. Ambiguity often arises here, and this must be taken seriously, especially when it signals how closely intertwined secularisation and religion in fact are.

## Secularisation as Part of a Theological History of Effects

In a time when many tend to moralise, in an unqualified way, about how secularised the church has become, we need to remind ourselves that secularisation is not first and foremost to be regarded as an outside threat—secularisation also comes from *within* Christian faith itself; it is a legitimate consequence of the Christian tradition.<sup>15</sup> To be more precise, secularisation is a child of the Christian tradition, even though many people would indeed like to regard it as an “unwanted” one.

In order to understand how religion and secularisation have become intertwined within Christianity—an intertwining that becomes more and more complicated in the Lutheran tradition—we must remind ourselves of the distinction between *the religious* and *the secular*. William Cavanaugh has argued that the religious-secular distinction is not a description of a historical reality, but rather an invention accompanied by distinctions like private-public, religion-politics, and church-state, with the aim to legitimise the liberal nation-state. In accordance with Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Cavanaugh also observes that before the Enlightenment, it was religion that included the public values that secularism later claimed.<sup>16</sup> Against this background we can also understand the close connection between modernity theories and secularisation theories. Mark C. Taylor has stated: “religion and secularity are not opposites; to the contrary, Western secularity is a *religious* phenomenon.”<sup>17</sup>

When we are confronted with questions on how secularised, for example, Sweden really is, it is important to reflect on what the question means. Does the concept of secularisation in this context refer to how many declared atheists there are in this particular society? Is this a

15 Persson, Per Erik. *Att tolka Gud idag: Debattlinjer i aktuell teologi*. Lund: Gleerups. 1971.

16 Cavanaugh, *op. cit.*, p. 34; Cf. Cantwell Smith, Wilfred. *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991 [1962].

17 Taylor, Mark C. *After God*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. 2007. p. XIII.

18 Thurfjell, David. *Det gudlösa folket: De postkristna svenskarna och religionen*. Stockholm: Molin & Sorgenfrei. 2015.

19 Mentieta, Eduardo and VanAnthwerpen, Jonathan (eds.). *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere: Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Cornel West*. intr. Eduardo Mentieta & Jonathan VanAnthwerpen. afterw. Craig Calhoun. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 2011; Williams, Rowan. *Faith in the Public Square*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. 2012.

20 This phrase, inspired by Gunnar Olsson, was the organising principle in my 2002 book, see note 1.

question of how many see themselves as secularists, that is, who claim secularisation as the norm? Is it a question of what position religion has in society or to what extent the state is non-confessional? Or is it rather a question of how disenchanted life in this society can be understood to be? This question could also be about how much “forgetting” characterises our understanding of this society. In and through the secularisation process we have become blind to the original religious background of key institutions in our society, such as schools, universities, hospitals, and so on and so forth, as they are regarded as secularised phenomena. Our entire culture is so impregnated with (more or less secularised) religion that it is in fact impossible to imagine something that could in any way liken a “purely secular society”, which is sometimes sought after. The conviction that this would mean us cutting off the branch we are sitting on is further reinforced by the fact that, in Sweden and elsewhere, religion has had a totally decisive and productive significance for the modernisation of society.<sup>18</sup>

Today, secularisation and religious conviction can therefore no longer be addressed and discussed as alternatives that exclude each other. There are, indeed, many good and theological arguments for them being understood together instead.<sup>19</sup> To be more precise, the concepts of religion and secularisation make up two sides of one and the same taxonomy, thus the one becomes meaningless without the other. In the same way as it is only by *sharing* the world that we can *share* the world with each other, it is not possible to talk about the religious if there is not also something that is not religious.<sup>20</sup> The secular only becomes understandable in and through the contrast to the religious, and vice versa. Historically, it was when monks left the monasteries, and, more generally speaking, when institutions that were formerly run under the direction of the church developed autonomously and started to pursue their activities outside the eschatological field of the monastery, that a *saeculum* (“the secular”) came into being. One could say that, in modern times, at the same time as secularisation established a sphere outside religion (“the secular”), “the religious” also becomes visible as a separate field, as an autonomous sphere alongside politics, economy, and science. Accordingly, religion can itself be said to have *produced* the secular—in the same way as it is continued secularisation that has, to a large extent, given religion a “new visibility”.

In a similar way, a secular sphere having arisen alongside the mon-asterial and ecclesiastical does not, however, appear as problematic at all, when considered from a theological point of view. This is particularly the case if one uses theological resources to affirm the secular, founded on an interpretation of our lives as part of a shared world perceived as God's creation, like Gustaf Wingren did, one of the founding figures of Scandinavian creation theology (the other two being K.E. Løgstrup and Regin Prenter). In accordance with this *Grundtvigian* recognition and reception of Luther, Christianity thus affirms secularisation by not claiming superior ethical knowledge or privileged political standpoints in favour of the church.<sup>21</sup>

This theological affirmation of secularisation is further reinforced by the fact that the concept of *saeculum* originates from within Christian theology. For the Romans, *saeculum* was not a room, but was a question of time; the word referred quite simply to the maximum length of a person's life, being approximately a "century". When the early church used the concept, it was to talk about the time between Jesus's first and second coming to Earth—in other words a time that stands in contrast to God's eternity (*saecula saeculorum*: "from ages to ages"). It is also in this sense that Augustinus uses the concept in order to talk about an era when Christians and heathens had to live and work together for the common good, a meaning that is close to a post-secular understanding. The complexity of this historical background is further strengthened by the fact that, during the Roman era, Christians were actually called atheists because of their refusal to sacrifice to other gods or to pray to the emperor as the Godhead; the Christian holy was therefore the heathen profane and the heathen holy was the Christian profane.<sup>22</sup>

## Is Secularisation in Actual Fact Christian?

It is against this background that one can understand why this distinction does not occur in non-Christian cultures, or in Byzantine Christianity even, and why it is, generally speaking, impossible to translate the modern meaning of the word "religion" into

21 Wingren, Gustaf. *An Exodus Theology: Einar Billing and the Development of Modern Swedish Theology*. trans. Eric Wahlstrom. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press. 1969 [1968]; Gregersen, Niels Henrik, Kristensson Uggla, Bengt and Wyller, Trygve E. *Reformation Theology for a Post-Secular Age: K.E. Løgstrup, Regin Prenter, Gustaf Wingren, and the Future of Scandinavian Creation Theology*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 2017.

22 Breemer, Rosmarie van den, Casanova, José and Wyller Trygve E. (eds.). *Secular and Sacred: The Scandinavian Case of Religion in Human Rights, Law and Public Space*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 2013.

23 Casanova, José. "The Two Dimensions, Temporal and Spatial, of the Secular: Comparative Reflections on the Nordic Protestant and Southern Catholic Patterns from a Global Perspective". In Breemer, Casanova and Wyller, *op. cit.*

Classical Greek. According to José Casanova, whose tracks I follow here, it was not until the Middle Ages that the temporal concept *saeculum* came to be a spatial term that established a binary distinction between "religious" and "secular". This took place through the differentiation of monastic life, the division between priests who lived in monasteries (as an eschatological place where the transcendent city of God was anticipated) and "secular priests" who carried out their duties at the diocese, in society together with ordinary laymen outside of the seclusion of the monastery. In and through the Christian church's dominance in the West and the consolidation of medieval Christianity, the secular was, accordingly, transformed from having been associated with temporality to it also being used as a spatial category within the framework of a binary classification system comprising two separate worlds: the religious-spiritual-holy world of salvation and a secular-timebound-profane world. By way of the latter, the grammar that would make it possible for modern man to develop a binary distinction between religious and secular—which was later developed into a stage theory where the secular was perceived as something that took place in the times *after* the religious—had also come into being. However, the meaning and significance of the secular had radically been displaced to being about a world (or a limited area of the world) without religion or divine presence—which was actually unfamiliar to medieval theology.<sup>23</sup> In order to protect ourselves from the great number of anachronisms that come into being when we try to use the relatively modern categories "religious" and "secular" with regard to the history of Christianity, we can remind ourselves that there is hardly a single medieval book that addresses religion as a distinct greatness alongside politics, economy and culture. Neither did Thomas of Aquino or Martin Luther regard themselves as religious in this sense and meaning of the word.

With this somewhat motley history as our backdrop we can maybe better understand the concepts that are formed, and flourish, when we are to talk about *secularisation* (as a historical and sociological process of functional differentiation) and *the secular* (as a modern epistemic category that refers to the lack of religion, or a phase after religion has been overcome), as distinct from *secularism* (in the meaning of a normative, political doctrine on a strict separation between state and church, which also requires a privatisation of religion). This

consistently becomes a question of: that which does not belong to the ecclesiastical domain, and the converting of religious people and things to secular greatnesses by way of “worldly-making”. However, the fact that in European culture we made some kind of distinction between a secular and a religious sphere of society reveals that this language and these categories have in fact come into being in a Christian imaginary world. Since the distinction as such, and already from the start, is a product of Christianity, it can neither be interpreted as a unequivocal threat to this belief, be used as a tool to understand other, non-European cultural traditions, nor be essentially associated with a state of things *after* or *without* religion. Religion and secularisation, as conviction and critique, are elements of the Christian tradition that are in fact deeply intertwined.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, it is also apparent today that key concepts of modernity, such as freedom, tolerance and universal human rights, are part of, and can be understood as a movement within the Christian tradition’s history of effects. Gianni Vattimo has also extensively elaborated on the argument that secularisation as concept and historical reality is in actual fact to be considered Christian, originating from *kenotic* thinking about the death of God and “weak thinking”.<sup>25</sup>

In Lutheran theology, especially in the interpretation tradition that had been developed within the framework of Scandinavian creation theology from Grundtvig via Løgstrup to Wingren, a concurring *sacralisation* of the world and a *secularisation* of the church has taken place. In compliance with this theological perspective, the world does not need to be Christian or in any way part of the church’s domains in order to be perceived and understood as a part of God’s life and works. Correspondingly, creation, like ethics and morality, is not to be regarded as unchangeable, but is to be handled as a practical issue that can be organised freely in order to serve people’s well-being in the best way possible, to enable the sustenance of human life, and so that the gospel may be heard as really “good news” (where the necessary horizon for understanding the gospel is the human condition—shared by all). One might say that both the world and the church be regarded from a sacred and secular perspective at one and the same time, that is, when people move between church and society, people move from God to God, according to Wingren and Scandinavian creation theology.<sup>26</sup>

24 Ricoeur, Paul. “Religion, Atheism, and Faith.” In Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 1966. pp. 57–98; Ricoeur, Paul. *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*. trans. Katheleen Blamey. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 1998 [1995]. Kristensson Ugglå, Bengt. “Ricoeur as Other”. In Ulrich Schmiedel and James M. Matarazzo, Jr. (eds.). *Dynamics of Difference: Christianity and Alterity. A Festschrift for Werner G. Jeanrond*. London: Bloomsbury. 2015. pp. 95–103.

25 Vattimo, Gianni. *After Christianity: Italian Academy Lectures*. trans. Luca d’Isanto. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 2002.

26 Kristensson Ugglå, Bengt. *Becoming Human Again: The Theological Life of Gustaf Wingren*. trans. Daniel M. Olsson. Eugene, OR: Cascade. 2016; Gergersen et al., *op. cit.*

27 Casanova, “The Two Dimensions”.

28 Wingren, Gustaf. *Luther on Vocation*. trans. Carl C Rasmussen. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock. 2004 [1942].

If one thus looks at the secular through this Lutheran theological lens, completely different interpretation possibilities appear in comparison to conventional models. José Casanova has discerned a third secularisation dynamics in Lutheran northern Europe, alongside southern European (Catholic) and American models that have long predominated discussion. This third model purports to overcome the binary relationship between the religious and the secular by integrating them within a common dialectic relationship. This in turn becomes a question of recognising an internal Christian secularisation—a process that can be said to have begun in the reform movements of the late Middle Ages, which was then institutionalised in the Protestant Reformation, and which had consciously “made spiritual” the worldly, as well as having brought religious life out of the monasteries into the secular world. One goes beyond the dualism between religious/secular by erasing the limits and confines that exist between holy and profane, with as the result of this the mutual mixing one encounters in church, nation and state in the Scandinavian countries.<sup>27</sup>

Historically, one of the consequences of the Lutheran reformation was the abolishment of the sacred canon law and the transfer of legislation from church to king, who was regarded as the only legitimate secular regent; in a modern democratic society, this would be the equivalent of parliament and government. Luther’s thought of a universal, general priesthood, signified at one and the same time a “laymanification” of priests and a “priestification” of laymen, by way of the sermon and teaching of priesthood being secularised and transformed into a secular calling among other callings, at the same time as vocations among laymen in society became a question of a divine calling.<sup>28</sup> The Protestant Reformation in which the number of sacraments was reduced could also be seen as secularisation, when, for example, marriage came to be regarded as a civil institution, instead of being a sacrament regulated by the ecclesiastic order. Accordingly, processes of secularisation and sacralisation seem to take place at the same time in Lutheran Protestantism, which also opens up to the possibility for the secular and the holy co-existing and forming a point of departure for new logics.

In this context, the often criticised (but in my opinion often underestimated) teachings on the two kingdoms of God (*Zweireiche Lehre*)

and the two uses of the law, together with the idea of *Larvae Dei* (how God works behind a mask in our everyday deeds) have promoted a theological affirmation of the secular. Thus, from a Lutheran position, the secular welfare state does not need to be perceived as a competitor to the church, but can, instead, purely and simply, appear as something that can be accepted as legitimate and recognised with heart and soul, by it being interpreted theologically as an expression of God acting—without any church or religion having been involved.<sup>29</sup>

The notion that all is holy and all is profane thus causes the traditional categories of the secularisation discourse—of religious/secular and holy/profane—to collapse. Maybe one might say that this “Lutheran secularity”—or “the hidden sacrality of secularisation”—discloses perspectives that open out onto two completely different views: either a mono-cultural Lutheran society, or a secular, multi-religious society. This may, however, mean that this model of thinking —on condition that Luther is not perceived as a rigid binary thinker, but as a master of dialectics and a master of the art of drawing distinctions—could have significant relevance in our time.<sup>30</sup> A question of vital importance for a society that is bound up with the secularisation story having such a strong grip on our thinking will therefore be how we can make use of *theology* in order to relate secularisation and religious conviction, critical thinking and belief, to each other.

## The Cathedral and the Art Museum—Post-Secular Ambiguities

*You are standing on the threshold to an old cathedral. Your body has become warm from being on the move in a warm summery Europe and you need cool and shade. That’s why you now look forward, just that little bit extra, to a pleasant moment together with the beautiful art of the medieval cathedral that you’ve already become familiar with by way of the guide book. That it’s morning and Sunday has not been something you have reflected upon so much, so that when you have actually stepped across the threshold, you are taken by surprise that lots of other people besides tourists interested in*

29  
Witte Jr., John. “God is Hidden in the Earthly Kingdom: The Lutheran Two-Kingdoms Theory as Foundation of Scandinavian Secularity”. In Breemer, Casanova and Wyller, op. cit., pp. 56-84.

30  
Cf. “the art of drawing distinctions which is at the heart of Luther’s theology”. Schwöbel, Christoph. “Promise and Trust: Lutheran Identity in a Multicultural Society”. In Carl-Henrik Grenholm and Göran Gunner (eds). *Jus-tification in a Post-Christian Society*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick. 2014. p. 33.

*art have found their way to this cathedral of cultural historical interest at the same time as you—and these are people taking part in a church service.*

*Well yes, you’ve been to church services before from time to time, but in this very moment, in this now, you are anything but a pilgrim; you are unmistakably a cultural tourist, and the friction you experience in the room when religion and art butt up against each other makes you shudder and retreat. You feel somewhat uncomfortable with this situation, but not more than you fulfil your intentions. Through the aesthetic interest of interpretation, which steers your culturally hungry holiday gaze, you now systematically transform the cathedral into an art museum. At the same time, a religious cult is going on in the room. Parallel to your cultural historical adventure, people taking part in the service are deeply sunken in devotions and prayers. But when you raise your camera to take your photographs, the people who are praying in the demarcated pews do not seem to be markedly disturbed. They are probably used to the situation. The fact remains, however, that they are there to serve, you are there to observe. The situation is not an entirely uncomplicated one, but still the equation seems to work: the religious experience and the aesthetic experience do not necessarily need to exclude each other. For the most part they can coexist very well under the high arches of a cathedral. It is, after all, not stranger than the fact that no one has really been able to steer or control what particular interpretative interest it is that has turned your gaze those times you have been to funeral or baptism services, early morning Christmas Day services and church concerts, not to mention all the end-of-term services in churches and cathedrals you have been to.*

*Some time after your return from your holiday trip you visit an art museum to experience the opening of an exhibition of icons that has attracted much attention. Once more your aesthetic desire awakens, but this time you are moving—in the double sense of the word—on home ground. You are fascinated by the icons and admire this splendid form of religious art. Discreetly you wander around the rooms of the art museum, saying hello to acquaintances with a glass of bubbly drink in your hand—a true art experience.*

*All of sudden this idyll is destroyed. Your aesthetic observation of the art is disturbed by a group of people who, collectively and unanimously, have fallen down on their knees to pray in front one of the icons. By way of the surprising way they act—which is made up of serving instead of observing —they*



*embark on as conscious as provoking a process, which, if it is carried through, seems, by extension, to be able to transform the art space into a room of religious service.*

*This won't do at all. It is noticed quite clearly that the religious cult that suddenly emerges creates a sense of uncertainty among the worldly art lovers, who, until a moment ago, moved around the room without being disturbed. The art liturgy doesn't seem to be able to do itself justice and be carried through when it must coexist with a religious cult that is staged in the very centre of the art museum. Despite the fact that the people who are praying and serving in and through their way of communication—their communion—are only reminding everyone of that which is just a matter of course and obvious—that it is, in fact, religious art that is being shown on the walls—both your and the other visitors' art experience are, in fact, marred.*

*Most of us probably feel that it is rather tiresome to enjoy and view art in a museum if we must share this with people who are praying in front of icons. And that's why you're not alone when drawing a sigh of relief as the people in charge decide to remove this disturbing, and to all intents and purposes, strange feature from the museum. The religious act is interrupted in a polite and firm way, and those taking part are discreetly asked to either make their behaviour fit the form of the art experience offered, or quite simply leave the premises. Order is reclaimed, and calm spreads across a room that is now exclusively reserved for the aesthetic experience once again.*<sup>31</sup>

How these types of dramas, which I have sketched in the two examples above, can indeed actually proceed in their respective contexts is certainly difficult to foresee, since it is usually the case that special times are reserved for those who wish to devote themselves to aesthetic admiration, while there are other times for those who wish to worship and pray before the pictures. What remains, however, is a provoking experience of contrast, which raises questions of what uses cathedrals and art museums—respectively—allow, are able to accommodate, and encourage, as well as the insight that is as astonishing as it is convincing that religious rooms sometimes (although far from always) actually seem to have a greater ability to accommodate separate experiences and interpretative interests than artistic spaces reserved for aesthetic use. For since the religious and the aesthetic experience actually seem to be able to coexist very well in the cathe-

31  
The embryos for these two scenes that came into being in the cathedral and the art museum, are inspired by the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, in an essay that reflected on what he calls the "Sant'Ivo experience". See Vattimo, Gianni. *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*. trans. David Webb. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 1997 [1994]. pp. 58-59. In retrospect, I have recognised that Vattimo only indicates vague contours for two scenes and that my own imagination has apparently taken me far beyond Vattimo's text. When I went back to reading Vattimo's text, I was a little surprised to find that the two scenes I imagined in the text were actually only one and that Vattimo only suggested the possibility of a second example in the form of an analogous, and, symmetrically, reversed situation. The dramas that occur in the cathedral and the art museum, in my mind, seem, in other words, to have lived their own lives; they have hovered in space, like two incomplete scenes in search of a common drama. But the meaning of what actually was happening in the cathedral and the art museum remained unclear to me, as it also did to Vattimo. What are these narratives trying to say? They remain narratives that I can not really comprehend. Over the course of a few years, Vattimo's incomplete thoughts have continued to trigger my imagination, provoked

my thoughts, and have regularly returned in my reflections without giving me any rest. Perhaps it is because they articulate a fundamental "ambiguity"—which is also ours.

dral—even though, as mentioned, one sometimes tries to refer them to different times—this is, without exception, contrary to the code of conduct and rules that apply to how time and space are organised in art museums, exhibition halls and galleries. I have not heard about art museums and galleries reserving special times for those who wish to pray and have a service in front of icons and religious art.

## Is It Possible to Think Differently?

The idea that a religious space, a cathedral, could in certain situations be more tolerant, and accommodate a richer expanse of interpretations than an artistic space, an art museum, is something that feels very challenging in a Western context. Why are we so surprised, and maybe provoked even, of the state of things? And how did this occur? It is probably connected to us increasingly perceiving religious conviction as something that stands for and represents intolerance and dogmatism. But can it—at the same time—be that the cathedral bears a memory of a different religious experience that is characterised by generosity, hospitality and tolerance, and an interpretation of life whose grammar and paradigm seem to have gone astray in our time and age? The shift in perspective between the cathedral and the art museum as a consequence of the astonishing contrasting of these positions, uncovers and destabilises at one and the same time some of our basic distinctions—of secularisation/religion, tolerance/intolerance, critique/conviction, public/private—which we use without thinking in order to *share* the world with each other so that they tend to become invisible to us. Is another way of sharing the world possible? And could another way of sharing the world with each other open up a new creative alliance between art and the Christian tradition—both in its religious and secular shape and form?

The dichotomic order of the secularisation story—where religion is identified by superstition, irrationality and intolerance, in comparison to the reason, rationality and tolerance of modernity—reduces religion to a dumb remnant of times past. In and through this way of sharing the world with each other, religion is robbed and stripped

of every form of inner dynamics and power of self-criticism and transformation—abilities that are instead in a one-sided way ascribed to the enlightened and critically reflecting modernity of contemporary times.

Through the strong tendency to immediately ascribe the understanding of religion, and what it means to have a religious conviction into an order sustained by opposing pairs—modernity/religion, rationality/irrationality, reason/superstition, tolerance/intolerance and, as an extension of this, public/private—not only does an unreasonable image of religion and religious conviction appear, but also an unreasonable picture of science, together with its conditions, possibilities and potential.

The time has come to question the self-evidence of this predominant understanding of what it means to have a religious belief and conviction. I do not claim that religion and theology are generally, and everywhere, to be characterised by a greater ability and power of tolerance—far from it. But I want to bring out into the light that those indicators that speak in favour of it can *also be read and interpreted* as a theological and religious tradition, and that this may actually act as a source of inspiration for the development and growth of a more tolerant and more hospitable world. Of course, for this line of argument to gain firmer footing, a hermeneutical perspective is required, which does not only act as grounding for a greater abundance of interpretations and points of view, but also develops the ability and power to actively take responsibility for such varying ways of seeing. A wealth of interpretations, in which each conviction is constantly and continuously set off against a critical act of thinking can, accordingly, act as an exercise in meeting a stranger with hospitality, as well as acting as an opening towards a more multi-faceted reality.<sup>32</sup>

The most profound reasoning in favour of the existence of tolerance, a feeling of freedom, and a culture of hospitality under the high arches of the cathedral, does not need to be the result of theological spinelessness and laxness, or a general religious lukewarm- and half-heartedness, but can be connected to that which is maybe the most important impulse behind modern hermeneutics; the experience of

32  
Kearney, Richard.  
*Anatheism, Returning to God after God*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 2010–2011.

33  
This interpretation of Luther is represented, for example, by theologians such as Gustaf Wingren (cf. Kristensson Uggla, *Becoming Human Again*) and Eberhart Jüngel. Cf. *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*. trans. Darrell L. Guder. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 1983 [1977].

34  
The substantial argumentation of this essay is, in many respects, extracted from and inspired by my previous book *Katedralens hemlighet: Sekularisering och religiös övertygelse* [*The Cathedral's Secret: Secularisation and Religious Conviction*]. Skellefteå: Artos. 2016, in which the reader may find more references and further argumentation.

*nos poni extra nos*—an experience of us *putting ourselves outside of ourselves*, a figure of thought that has strong theological roots, and that became a major theme in Luther's Reformation.<sup>33</sup> This decentring of the subject, which, in its turn, opens up for human action within a dialectic between decentring and centring, is a condition required for the interpretation of a text or an artwork that not only takes the form and shape of a distanced observing, but of an act in which one also exposes oneself to the text and the work in the form and shape of a hermeneutics of the self. If one regards the ability to put oneself outside oneself as a natural process, as an obvious part of every healthy self-identity, it also becomes clear that this approach to our identity is a prerequisite for us to become human.

In the course of its history, Christianity has not only served as a significant source of inspiration for tolerance, it has also demonstrated proof of its extraordinary ability and power to develop tolerance. It is important to reveal the freeing potential that exists in Christianity—and other religions—by exploring their memory for other more hospitable and radical orientation efforts. However, such an interpretation of Christianity is difficult to access, since it requires that one's point of departure is that it takes a tradition that has cultivated vulnerability, generosity and hospitality as starting points within the frame of an understanding of life, in which the economy of *gift* and *task*, freedom and responsibility are the focal points of theology and what makes us human. Matters of this kind are difficult to summarise in a few simple theses, certainly in a time of polarisation. I do, however, believe that it is both possible and necessary to rediscover, recapture and reclaim religion as one of the most important foundations to develop forms of life characterised by diversity, tolerance and openness—as well as the production of secularisation. In addition to greater dogmatism and moral intolerance there are traditions that have wanted to accept and recognise the enabling of different interpretations, and that have realised the inescapable connection between recognising the other, at the same time as accepting that which is also different in oneself and in one's own tradition. However, the furtherance of this potential becomes visible only when one ventures on a “detour” via hermeneutics and conflicts of interpretations, placing ourselves *extra nos*, which also requires us to put our own convictions at risk, and thus at stake.<sup>34</sup>