

Confessing Secularism

(Unpublished Review of Todd Weir's *Religion and Secularism in Nineteenth-Century Germany* for Marginalia/Los Angeles Review of Books)

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The history of theology could be told through theologians' reaction to war. In times of war, theology's debates over seemingly inconsequential distinctions come face to face with the lived reality of religious communities' encounters with power and powerlessness. War is when we discover how truly dangerous theology can be. The history of modern theology is, sadly, replete with reminders of theology's capacity to legitimate violence. The most traumatic case of such legitimation came in the run-up to the first World War. The theologian and church historian Adolf von Harnack led the ill-fated and ill-conceived effort to defend the war to the 'civilized world' of European academics and churchmen. Harnack stood for, as Rowan Williams has suggested, the supreme achievement of German culture. Harnack, who was arguably Germany's most prominent academic personality, argued, through the lips of Kaiser Wilhelm II, that Germany had a 'moral case' for going to war in 1914.

The effect on a young Karl Barth was dramatic. In a famous correspondence with Harnack published in the *Christliche Welt* in 1923, Barth remarked that a Christian faith that is 'awakened by God will never be able to fully avoid the necessity of a more or less "radical" protest against *this world*'. For Barth to publically write this to Harnack was tantamount to a declaration of war on nineteenth-century theology. Theology's place within the German university was always a contested matter, but its taming by the methods of *Wissenschaft* in the nineteenth century made it acceptable, so it might seem, to the broader university community. In the aftermath of the first World War, this acceptance by the academic elite was not appreciated by some who saw in this capitulation to secular *Wissenschaft* the beginnings of the surrender to the modern state and its war-making agenda. Indeed, Barth clarified the matter succinctly: 'Nineteenth-century theology no longer held any future'. In other words, 'worldly' *wissenschaftliche Theologie* should be buried with the dead of the Great War.

The story of how Christian theologians thought of themselves as essentially in protest to the world is long, arguably reaching all the way back to the Gospel of John's proclamation that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world. This otherworldliness is understandable. The Christian community began life as a persecuted minority in the midst of declining imperial strength. But with the conversion of Constantine and the centuries long process of Christianizing the Roman Imperium, the emphasis on otherworldliness was on the wane (with the occasional flare-up during moments of cross-cultural encounter). But in the nineteenth century theologians – often of a conservative variety – began to detect a re-emergence of Christian alienation from the politics, society, and culture of the German elites. Despite the hegemonic status of Christianity in nineteenth-century Germany, some scholars have detected in this context the beginnings of secularization, the process of decoupling social and religious norms.

But as with the Christianization of the Roman world, the rise of secularism is not a simple narrative of the philosopher's progress and the theologian's regress. In his *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession*, Todd H. Weir offers us a picture of how complex the rise of secularism is, and how it is intimately bound up with the fate of religious confessions. Expanding upon Kurt Nowak's suggestion that Germany's religious history has to be told as a 'triconfessional history' – Protestant, Catholic and Jewish – Weir extends this framework to include secularism. Through an innovative use of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of a 'field', Weir takes Nowak's triconfessional model a step further and baptizes secularism as a fourth *Konfession*. Weir's 'quadricongfessional field' in nineteenth-century Germany helps to explicate how secularism existed outside the two official confessions of Protestantism and Catholicism, but nonetheless acted within 'the field of juridical, social and political relations structured by the category of confession'. In spite of its anti-confessional polemics, then, secularism was inadvertently habituated into that very German social formation, a *Konfession*.

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Theological narratives of secularism are commonly told through the *longue durée* of modernity. Typical of this approach is Michael Allen Gillespie's *The Theological Origins of Modernity* as well as pretty much anything John Milbank has written. In both cases, the origins of the modern mentality or 'imaginary' lie somewhere in the late medieval period when the twin forces of

nominalism and individualism became prominent features of the intellectual landscape. The societal ills that nominalism and individualism are claimed to have committed is, to say the least, arresting. Capitalism, modern antisemitism, faceless bureaucracy, fascism and communism are all rumored to be unimaginable without said intellectual errors. It is thus unsurprising that for many of the anti-moderns the combined horrors of the Soviet and Nazi regimes, which killed 14 million people in what Timothy Snyder calls ‘a zone of death between Berlin and Moscow’, are the practical effects of such metaphysical shifts.

When we probe why nominalism and individualism are such egregious errors, we often discover a worry about the relativization of religion’s place in society. Were it not for the embrace of nominalism and individualism, so the argument goes, Christianity would have retained its genuinely *Christian* character. But by attempting to swim in these philosophical waters, Christianity was pulled under by the rip current of a philosophical *novum*. The panic some theologians experience is real, and can lead to a particularly intense form of self-loathing. As the Notre Dame historian Brad Gregory writes, perhaps in a moment of melancholy, ‘medieval Christendom has failed, the Reformation has failed, confessionalized Europe has failed, and Western modernity is failing’. At root for Gregory, as for Gillespie and Milbank, who each in their own way responds thoughtfully and with verve to religion’s fate in modernity, is an anxiety about secularism’s *positive* agenda: to eliminate religion and its expression in a free society that emerged from religion itself.

Today’s most contested form of secularism – France’s doctrine of *laïcité* – illustrates European secularism’s latent religiosity. A term that is largely taken to be synonymous with secularism, *laïcité* nominates the strict separation of religious symbols and the public sphere. Famously, this has extended to a ban on head coverings worn by Muslim women. But it has also included a prohibition on wearing crosses while working at a government or state-owned business. How can a country that so bravely pronounces *liberté* for all curtail the personal expression of the devout? This seems like an outrageous contradiction even for the French. But *laïcité* is not simply a policy to keep religious violence at bay; it is also an essential part of French identity meant to replace its traditional Catholic identity. In other words, French *secularism* is itself a kind of religious identity, though one shorn of devotion to anything beyond the state.

Similar to narratives of the *longue durée* of modernity, accounts of secularism in the nineteenth century are largely explications of the philosophical writings. The writings of Kant, Hegel, and Marx indeed had a tremendous impact. These accounts overlook a critical fact of their relevance: for these philosophical writings to be significant some institution or organized group of people had to, at some point, have taken them up, modified them, and passed them onto others. As Weir shows us, the story of secular worldviews can never be less than a story of how secularists organized themselves, the model for which came from religion itself.

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Secularism is, for Weir's nineteenth century, a movement of free thinkers and atheists who organized themselves into societies, clubs, and church-like communities. While secularists were no doubt well informed of their early modern antecedents and in many cases sought to emphasize their continuity with such 'heretical' philosophers as Giordano Bruno and Baruch Spinoza, the *organization* of secularism undoubtedly occurred in the nineteenth century. Emboldened by the Revolution of 1948 and by later attempts by the dominant Protestant church to purify themselves, German secularists began to craft their beliefs, behavior and sense of belonging along the lines of a *Konfession*.

In the nineteenth century, *Konfession* was a category through which social institutions negotiated religious identities, rights and conflicts. But, as a politically and socially significant category, it has a complicated history within Germany. Initially it was an ecclesiastical term for Lutheran adherents to the *confessio augustana* or the Augsburg Confession of 1530. Not until after 1800 did *Konfession* become an abstract signifier of Germany's three privileged religious societies – Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic. In 1821, when the Prussian state unified the Lutheran and Reformed churches in its territories, the term began to be used to pick out the more abstract categories of 'Protestantism' and 'Catholicism'.

There is, however, another sense of confession that adds to its complexity in nineteenth-century Germany. In addition to the sense of confession as a socio-political body that has specific legal, social and economic privileges was paired, there is the sense of confession as the ability of the free individual conscience to confess (*sich bekennen*). This second sense of confession was championed, in particular, by liberals who saw in *Konfession* narrow-minded dogmatism of

Protestant orthodoxy and Catholicism. These synonyms – *Konfession* and *Bekennntnis* – became, especially for German liberals, antonyms that ‘defined the principles for which two opposing armies entered the spiritual battle of modernity’. The early Christian rationalists, often referred to as the *Leuchtfreunde*, squared off against the conservative Lutherans over the legacy of Luther’s conception of conscience. Unsurprisingly, liberals emphasized the right of each believer to the freedom of teaching and learning rooted in the inviolable individual conscience, effectively raising the toleration of heterodoxy to the status of a Prussian Protestant virtue. Conservatives, however, insisted that such ‘Protestant freedom’ be constrained by a correct understanding of the gospel and submission to authority. Confession, in a sense, was a contronym: it meant both ideological conformity and its opposite, the individual free conscience. So long as the rationalists remained in the church, *Konfession* and *Bekennntnis* held its retained their mutual bond.



In the winter of 1845, a petition was sent to the neo-Pietist King Friedrich Wilhelm IV by 100 prominent citizens of Magdeburg requesting the right to a ‘purely scientific exegesis of the Holy Scripture’, the omission of the Apostolic Creed from baptism and confirmation, and the introduction of a presbyterial constitution that devolved powers from the royal consistory to the local congregations. The King had no interest in reforming his Protestant church according to such rationalist and democratic principles. Instead, he ordered his ministers to draft legislation that would allow individuals to leave a church without having to join another. Until this point, a citizen had to be a member of some confession, whether that is Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish. But German citizens would be forced into a religious confession no longer. It appeared to be springtime for liberalism and Lutheran Prussia, too.

Decreed two years later in 1847, the so-called ‘Tolerance Edict’ was, however, anything but that. While it initially seemed to create a mechanism for dissidents to form new religious associations, the true aim of the Tolerance Edict was the re-entrenchment of the Prussian confessional order. The individual dissident’s right to belief or disbelief was legally subordinated to the corporate rights of the state churches and, ultimately, the interests of the ‘Christian State’. By effectively giving dissenters the status given to Jews as members of a quasi-third confession, the Tolerance Edict allowed the churches to banish their radical elements. This development set

the stage not only for the secularists' attack on confessionalism, but also, in an ironic twist, for their adoption of its legal, social and political forms.

While the *Leuchtfreunde*'s rationalist course was colliding with Friedrich Wilhelm IV's neo-Pietist course, Catholic rationalists were meeting opposition from the ultramontane policies of the Vatican. The actual effect of this pincer movement from Protestant and Catholic traditionalists would eventually be to push liberals toward secularism. But this was after the *Leuchtfreunde* and company had left behind a legacy of religious skepticism within the Christian communities of Germany. In the 1870s the term 'dissident' came to imply in Germany adherence to an immanent conception of God or even atheism. Weir documents that during this period dissident priests were using Darwin to argue that God doesn't exist. One could argue that the first thirty-five years of organized atheism took place in the churches of established Lutheranism.

In hindsight, it was only a matter of time before these dissidents began to create their own *Weltanschauung* or 'worldview', a term and concept that came into vogue in philosophical circles in the second half of the nineteenth century. Those who were eager to split with Christian rationalism latched onto monism, a set of philosophical commitments that has many varieties, not all of which are directly relevant to Weir's nineteenth-century secularists. The variety that best suits his cases seems to be *substance monism*, the view that all existing things can be explained in terms of a single reality or substance. This is to be distinguished from *priority monism*, which stipulates that all things go back to a source distinct from them (à la Neoplatonic procession from the One), and *existence monism*, which specifies that there exists only one concrete object which can be artificially and arbitrarily divided into many things. For Weir's nineteenth-century secularists, monism came to constitute a worldview that was produced by three inter-related philosophical transformations: first, by a shift from monist systems that privileges spirit to ones that privilege matter; second, by a disciplinary shift from philosophy to natural science; and third, by a translation of natural scientific claims back into a philosophy or *Weltanschauung*. The substance monism advocated by mid-century secularists was then a version of materialism not unlike the kind in use by today's 'New Atheists'.

This monistic worldview did not come fully assembled from any one philosopher. It was rather constructed out of eclectic readings of various texts in philosophy, science and religion, which were guided by the *ad hoc* needs of dissidents. Drawing on the legitimacy offered by Spinoza, Schelling and Hegel, this worldview eventuated in materialist commitments: the material world is the sole object of scientific knowledge, and empiricism is the sole method of knowledge production. The theological effect of this can be seen in the rise of eschatological immanentism. In German, this is traced through the changing meanings of *Jenseits* or 'beyond', a noun that was coined in the 1830s to signify that which is 'beyond the grave'. Drawing on their materialist commitments, secularists shifted the burden of their ethics and sociality to a decidedly this worldly – *diesseitig* – stance. What mattered was not so much any cosmic view of justice, which would ultimately be put aright in the hereafter, but rather fair and equal treatment in the here and now.

The transformation of these monistic commitments into a sociality that might garner the same rights and privileges of the confessions brought secularists headlong into a central tension of their movement: how could they strictly oppose any sort of religious dogma yet repeatedly call for a new creed (albeit one consonant with contemporary science and philosophy)? Throughout the middle decades of the nineteenth century secularists would debate this very issue, boxed into it by the confessional field itself, which was becoming more strictly defined along the lines of the two major confessions. But secularists' success only intensified their inner contradictions. By the late nineteenth century, the Free Religious Congregation was Berlin's largest sect, competing with Lutheran, Apostolic, Anglo-American sects, as well as Baptists, Methodists and Mennonites. In other words, it would be hard to deny that they were, at the very least, functioning as a body with rites and symbols around which they might collect their communal identity. If still without a creed, secularism had a devout following and a communal identity within the city of Berlin, and attracted many of the rationalists who in previous decades would have found themselves in the Protestant churches of the city. The bond then between rationalists and the church was at the breaking point.

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The climax of Weir's account comes in his reframing of a series of crises in Bismarckian and Wilhelmian Germany. Germany's nascent political unity was born of competing senses of belonging. The contestation between confessions came to a head in the national consolidation of 1870-1871. At that point, the German Empire was comprised of four kingdoms, six grand duchies, five duchies, seven principalities, three free cities, and the 'imperial territory' of Alsace-Lorraine. Needless to say, a bureaucratic act of national consolidation was unable to bring about national *unity*. How Germany's national unity did emerge is a contested issue, but most scholars acknowledge that Otto von Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* or 'culture struggle' contributed substantially to shoring up a German national identity that was able to transcend regional and ethnic differences. However, the battle lines in Germany's culture war were neither fixed nor clearly identifiable, a dynamic Weir's framework effectively dramatizes.

The *Kulturkampf* refers to a set of policies implemented by Bismarck between 1871 and 1876. Often thought of as a war on Catholicism, Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* is a much broader and more diffuse set of events and policies that ultimately ripped open many of the latent tensions and fissures of German society. The single event that is often the focal point of historiographical contestation is the Moabite *Klostersturm* of 1869. Widely considered to be part of a wave of anti-catholic violence that was sweeping Europe in the late 1860s, the storming of the monastery at Moabite is taken to be the tipping point of Protestant-Catholic violence in the *Kulturkampf*. Indeed, the broader European context would suggest these battle lines. In 1867 Louis Bonaparte withdrew his support of the Papal States and opened the way for the fall of Rome and the completion of Italian unity. Pope Pius IX, thought to be responding to such setbacks, convened the first Vatican Council in 300 years that would, among other things, reassert papal control over lay and clerical affairs of European Catholics.

While this Catholic-versus-Protestant rendition of events is satisfying for its narrative simplicity, Weir shows that it fails to account for how the first-shot of the *Kulturkampf* was fired. The first act of anti-clerical violence was not against the monks of Moabite, but in Berlin city center at the Protestant Cathedral. While the minister was speaking the words of the creed, 'I believe in God, the Father', a young man rushed the alter, shouted 'You're lying', and fired a bullet (the shot missed the priest). Weir brings this event to our attention precisely because it exposes the comfortable but ultimately distorting framework of bi-confessional conflict. The *Kulturkampf* is,

for Weir, better understood as a catalytic event that re-draws and re-identifies cross-confessional loyalties in late nineteenth-century Germany. Secularism emerges on the other side as the common enemy between Catholics and Protestants, but it was the fate of the Jews that was most under threat after the *Kulturkampf*.

It is not merely coincidental that the particular kind of German antisemitism – a blend of ethnic, religious and national bigotry – would surface in the wake of the *Kulturkampf*. Questions over a unified German identity were left unsettled as Bismarck departed from the political scene. A far more dangerous Kaiser Wilhelm II would take hold of the reins of state in 1888 as no German monarch had for several decades. Like some populist politicians today, Wilhelm II had an instinct for where the fissures of society lay. Aided and abetted by his political advisors, Wilhelm II engaged Germany's antisemitism to construct a unified Christian identity, not unlike that which Hitler would try to consolidate nearly fifty years later. One famous antisemite, the publicist Otto Glagau, called on 'Catholics and Protestants to fight like brothers shoulder to shoulder against the common enemy'. This was not just a conservative project, nor did it ignore the challenge of secularism. The liberal antisemite Heinrich von Treitschke sought to define Germany as a Christian nation against *both Jews and* secularists. With its uneasy and contested lumping of Protestants and Catholics together, Germany's modern Christian identity thus began to emerge from a *quadri*confessional field.

Despite having given birth to modern 'secular' philosophy – or maybe because it did – Germany redefined itself as militantly Christian at the end of the nineteenth century. As Weir's account suggests, the fall of a hegemonic power often includes sudden upsurges and reawakenings. Weir's quadriconfessional field illuminates much in the broader picture, but it stops short of addressing the sub-confessional contestations that begin to take place as a result of the rise of secularism as a confession. Hitler's National Socialists were able to recruit Protestants on their promise to root out and destroy secularism. But this fear of secularism was not felt by all Protestants, and the divergent effects the rise of Nazism had on theology is a telling example of how confessions reconstellate themselves in times of war. This omission perhaps results from a necessary limitation of scope in Weir's book, which deserves to be widely read by anyone interested in the fate of German Christianity – both Catholic and Protestant – in the run-up to the two World Wars. Any history of theology of this period would greatly profit from Weir's

attention to the social formations occurring within the lives of Berliners at the turn of the twentieth century. By investigating actual secularists and their efforts to organize into confession-like communities, Weir returns secularism to the rough ground of religious history.

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But where does this leave *liberal* Protestantism? Weir's introduction of organized secular elements in the *Kulturkampf* provides a corrective to recent theses that argue on both the discursive and political levels that the late nineteenth-century conflict was driven by liberal Protestants striving for 'cultural hegemony'. This approach describes how Catholicism (and later Judaism) served as an 'other', against which *Kulturprotestanten* could define themselves. Like racism or sexism, anticatholicism is thus thought to have grounded the identity of liberal European males and to have justified their domination. There were indeed many ways in which liberal Protestants were exerting their cultural hegemony. But this subtly ignores the fact that secularists were agents in the conflict in their own right and were pushing both an anti-Protestant, anti-Catholic and, to some extent, anti-Jewish agenda. Moreover, in the later stages of the *Kulturkampf*, socialism overshadowed Catholicism as the chief threat to Protestantism. And it is no secret that Judaism was similarly experienced as threatening. In one sense, then, liberal Protestantism did not enter the new century with the vigor and vim commonly ascribed to it by historical theologians, but rather with deep anxieties about its dwindling importance in German culture and society.

But there is nothing more dangerous than a hegemonic power in decline. Liberal Protestantism achieved its cultural, social and intellectual pinnacle in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. No theologian did more to help Liberal Protestantism accomplish this than the early nineteenth-century German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). By bridging Pietist spirituality and Enlightenment thought, Lutheran confession and Reformed theology, Church and University, Schleiermacher provided German Protestantism with a synthesis only he could maintain. His *Speeches on Religion* was widely appreciated as a blueprint for navigating such dichotomies. As Mark Chapman explicates in his recently published Hensley Henson Lectures, *Theology and Society in Three Cities: Berlin, Oxford and Chicago, 1800-1914*, theology can never be separated from the world in which it is practiced, taught and preached. As a result, neither can it be separated from the actual individuals who found a way to communicate their

theology in the world. Schleiermacher's recasting of theology's focus on the experience of religion (rather than God) was, for the moment, a workable way to maintain a robustly theological curriculum at a secularizing university. But this focus could remain theological only so long as the experience of Christianity was not only normative but widespread. The popular hegemony of Protestantism did not last. Its conflation of religious and national belonging would not hold.

Liberal Protestantism entered the new century weakened. This is represented by the lack of intellectual leadership on par with what Schleiermacher represented in the early nineteenth century. For all his erudition, Harnack's popular lectures *What is Christianity?* did not inspire multiple generations of university theologians as Schleiermacher's *Speeches on Religion* did. Moreover, Harnack's major intellectual contributions to the German academy – history of Christianity and ancient philology – could be easily reassigned to history and classics without much damage to their methodological integrity. Similarly, Harnack's 'moral case' for the war was not strictly theological. Concerned more about the fate of Germany's *Bildungskultur* than the preservation of *Kulturprotestantismus*, Harnack's defense strongly connected the fate of theology with the cultural institutions that emerged in a post-Napoleonic Germany. To belong to the discipline of theology in Germany was, for Harnack, to belong to the project of enlightened state-building, with its universities, libraries, intellectual societies and cultural associations. For all its verve, the terms of Liberal Protestantism in the new century were by and large being dictated by its secular counterparts in the university.

Harnack's liberalism was not truly secular. And this is the key to Barth's insight on the weakness of liberal Protestantism: it could neither assure a younger generation of theologians that it was sufficiently Christian, nor could it convince its secular counterparts in the university that it was acceptably academic. When dissenters left the church for secular organizations, liberal Protestantism's big tent began to collapse. It was at this point that the German conflation of religious and national belonging was exposed as defrauding both Christianity and Germany of their integrity. Liberal Protestantism's real error might not have been simply that it supported the war; at a deeper level, it forgot that religious and national belonging are only contingently related. The challenge it left to the twentieth century was how to imagine multiple senses of belonging, a struggle that continues into the twenty first century.

