

The III Legitimacies of the Modern Age

Carl Schmitt and Hans Blumenberg in Correspondence

ULRIKE KISTNER

University of Pretoria

Abstract

In making the case for the public role of religion in post-modernity, post-secularism posits the translatability of the claims of religion into claims on the grounds of morality and rationality. While much scope is given to this interrelation, the problem of legitimacy/legitimation, if not conjured away altogether, has received rather less attention. Placing it centre-stage, this article proposes to investigate it within the framework of political theology. To the re-statement of the problematic of 'secular modernity', the debates between Carl Schmitt and Hans Blumenberg make a definitive contribution, which I would like to consider in this article. In the eyes of some commentators, Schmitt and Blumenberg hold opposed positions on modernity – Schmitt asserting the persistence of political theology in the political forms of modern societies, and Blumenberg tracing the recession of the theological, making way for reflexive modernity. However, far from a simple opposition, we can observe a complex intertwinement of their respective positions. With the shifting sand between them, the common ground of their opposition disintegrates, opening paths for investigating an interarticulation of their claims, now no longer mutually exclusive or contradictory, with possibilities for an account of the role of the theologico-political distinct from, and beyond (post-) secularism debates.

Keywords: Post-secularism – political theology – secularisation – legitimacy – modernity

Die Kontinuität der Geschichte über die Epochenschwelle hinweg liegt nicht im Fortbestand ideeller Substanzen, sondern in der Hypothek der Probleme, die auch und wieder zu wissen auferlegt, was schon einmal gewusst worden war. (Blumenberg 1996 [1966]:59)

The invocation of a 'post-secular world' in the first decade of the twenty-first century recognises, in the broadest sense, the renewed traction of religious belief (in the form of "*das Glauben*" – see Nancy 2002:76) in modern societies, posing the task of re-assessing the role of religion in public life. Implied in the notion of a 'return of religion' is a notion of secularisation, attributed to the European Enlightenment, as involving the withdrawal and separation of religion from the public sphere. Post-secularism, in its broadest sense, assumes and advocates the possibility of integrating tenets derived from religious faith (in the form of "*der Glaube*" – see *ibid.*) with public interest to the extent that they are compatible, i.e. to the extent of what is agreeable to all members of society deliberating and acting in public – as suggested in the title of Kant's 1793 essay, 'Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone'.

A rejoinder with Kant's argument for a delimited role for religion in public reason reveals that post-secularism does not in fact pose a challenge to the Enlightenment as putative harbinger of secularisation. A broadly post-secular argument would precisely NOT be at odds with Kant's contention that although morality does not practically need

any ulterior ends, morality extends itself through religion (Kant 1996 [1793] – Preface to the First Edition).

In the counterfactual thought experiment that Kant sets up in this essay, starting from revelation, he aims “to examine in a fragmentary manner this revelation, as [a] historical system, in the light of moral concepts; and then to see whether it does not lead back to the very same pure rational system of religion” (ibid. – Preface to the Second Edition). In the idea of a juridical-ethical Commonwealth, Kant finds a first common denominator of the tenets of religion and public reasoning. A second common denominator lies in what he calls ‘historical faith’ – faith subject to freedom of thought in the public sphere, on par with scholars’ interpretations submitted to the public for examination (ibid. – Preface to the First Edition). Historicising faith means rendering religion subject to the limits of reason in such a way that religion, morality, and reason could conceivably produce combined effects in the public sphere (ibid.).

Closely implicated in this convergence is a series of mediations, transpositions and translations. While Kant still sees historical scholars of religion, in their roles of readers, interpreters, translators, and critics,¹ as usherers of a (re)public of reason, his successors, in theoretically carving out the public sphere, envisage a more direct, less mediated translatability, in the form of ‘communicative action’ and ‘(public) discourse ethics’ through which they embark on a rational reconstruction of moral insight (see Habermas 1987 [1981]:92). The transmission belt for the translation facilitating the ‘reconstruction’, is sought in “the linguistification of the sacred”. Habermas spells out his hypothesis of the secularising conversion that gives rise to a “communication community of citizens” (ibid.:82) as follows:

[...] I shall be guided by the hypothesis that the socially integrative and expressive functions that were at first fulfilled by ritual practice pass over to communicative action; the authority of the holy is gradually replaced by the authority of an achieved consensus. This means a freeing of communicative action from sacrally protected normative contests. The disenchantment and disempowering of the domain of the sacred takes place by way of a linguistification of the ritually secured, basic normative agreement; going along with this is a release of the rationality potential in communicative action. (ibid.:77)

However, the attempt to facilitate a smooth transmission-translation between religion-morality-rationality bumps up against the problem of legitimacy/legitimation from the start. It turns out that the only way in which Habermas can think of the “gradual replacement of the holy by the authority of an achieved consensus”, is by assimilating the holy with its power of sanction supported by law to, and conflating it with, the sacred with its practical, concrete action-orientations in the world – thereby conjuring the problem away.² The transformation-translation envisaged here is pivoted on the putative pair of antonyms, first diachronically separated, and then synchronically conjugated, of ‘sacred-secular’. In terms of an anthropology of religion pioneered by Durkheim (1965 [1912]) and Weber (1967 [1915]:267-301), and of historical-comparative linguistics traced by Benveniste (1973 [1969]), in contrast, the antonym of ‘the sacred’ is ‘the profane’; and the antonym of ‘the holy’ is ‘the secular’ (ibid.:452, 454, 456). Contrasting ‘the sacred’ with ‘the secular’, and drawing them together as a pair, would constitute a conflation amounting to a category mistake, if it were not for the historical fact that magic has been

drawn into and under religion.³ But their theoretical assimilation (if not conflation) cannot cover up the fact that the sacred and the holy cannot translate their effects into each other.

Thus, the problem of legitimacy/legitimation remains – at the very crux of accounts of (post-) secularisation. In order to consider the term that has gone missing from the secularisation debates – namely that of ‘the holy’, as a declared state following legal codification, or an injunction supported by law (see Benveniste 1973 [1969]:456), which forms the counterpart of ‘the secular’ –, we would have to consider its role not simply and generically within the framework of religion, but within the framework of (political) theology. The motivation for looking at secularisation from the perspective of political theology here is neither primarily religious nor moral, but arises “from within modern political and legal thought itself, as it endeavour[s] to answer the following question: to what extent is modern political theory based on or independent of the theological realm?” (Iférgan 2010:149).

This is the broadly formulated subject of a debate between Carl Schmitt and Hans Blumenberg on political theology and secularisation, respectively. However, as I have formulated it here, and will show in my elaborations that are to follow, the suggested opposition between the two philosophers and between the terms with which I have labelled it, cannot be upheld either by themselves or their readers, or in the terms in which I have presented it, in any theoretically considered way. Nor can the debate be considered concluded.

The debate between Schmitt and Blumenberg has become known mainly through the exchanges featuring in Blumenberg’s magisterial treatise, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (1966; revised 1974, and reprinted in 1996), and subsequently in Carl Schmitt’s *Politische Theologie II*, subtitled *Die Legende von der Erledigung jeder Politischen Theologie*, first published in 1970, soliciting a counter from Blumenberg in the revised second edition of his treatise of 1974, and subsequently in their posthumously discovered correspondence, notes, and comments on each other’s work between 1971 and 1978, accessible since 1993 and published since 2006 (Blumenberg / Schmitt 2007 [1971-1978]). More recently published contributions take in the wider context of their exchanges, unearthing their historical, textual, and bibliographical references. Thus, the *Theologische Traktate* (1951) of Erik Peterson, friend and foe of Schmitt’s and legendary antagonist of *Politische Theologie II*,⁴ appeared in the 2011 English translation of Michael Hollerich, also the author of a book on Eusebius of Caesarea (*Eusebius of Caesarea’s Commentary on Isaiah* (1999)), the historically more distant antagonist of Schmitt’s sequel to *Politische Theologie*. As if to displace the contestation between himself and Carl Schmitt to a secondary site, Giorgio Agamben more recently weighed in with his *Homo Sacer II, 2: The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011 [2007]), implicitly bolstering the monarchically grounded Trinitarian cause⁵ of ‘heretic’ Eusebius and Erik Peterson against Schmitt’s monotheistic political theology.⁶

In the eyes of some commentators, Schmitt and Blumenberg hold opposed positions on modernity – Schmitt asserting the persistence of political theology in the political forms of modern societies, and Blumenberg tracing the recession of the theological, making way for reflexive modernity (see e.g. Bragagnolo 2011:86-89; also Nancy 2002:79). The corresponding verdict is that

[...] their debate never shifted ground; Blumenberg holding fast onto a conception of historical consciousness that in its attempt to break away from absolutism makes use of non-totalizing and non-essentialist discursive practices and Schmitt who, working from the opposite tendency never let go of the 'exigency' of absolutism whether it be in immanent or transcendent form. (Bragagnolo 2011:89)

However, far from a simple opposition, we can observe a complex intertwining of their respective positions. Moreover, the view held by some commentators, of Schmitt's and Blumenberg's opposed positions on political modernity, obscures the fact that the debate between them does not take place on the same ground; that they do not respond to each other on the same terms and issues. In fact, the ground keeps shifting, leaving some doubt about the claims to the unchanged validity of political theology on behalf of Schmitt's first volume on the one hand, and the 'legitimacy of the modern age' of Blumenberg's treatise, on the other. With the shifting sand between them, the common ground of their opposition disintegrates, opening paths for investigating an interarticulation of their claims, now no longer mutually exclusive or contradictory, with possibilities for an account of the role of the theologico-political distinct from, or beyond (post-)secularism debates.

It is this latter line of investigation, opened by the expanded field of the Schmitt-Blumenberg exchanges, which I would like to pursue here. To be able to embark on this, I would need to backtrack to the motivation for Blumenberg's inquiry into the Promethean gestures by which the modern age announces its claim to legitimacy.

Epistemically, secularisation is commonly understood as the detachment of knowledge and ideas from their originary faith-based source, from revelation, and their referral to the self-generated human capacity of reasoning (Blumenberg 1996 [1966]:32). Politically, secularisation is commonly understood as the transferral of religious power and property to worldly power (*ibid.*).

However, and this is where Blumenberg's critique sets in, this commonplace understanding of 'secularisation' is not theoretically tenable, on account of its missing premises. The derivation of ideas and conduct from a generalised capacity of human reason is placed on par with its derivation from religious sources, without the specification of the nexus between 'dissolution', 'transformation', and new formation that would facilitate the 'transition' from one to the other (*ibid.*:24, 33). It is not the case that modernity has swapped an other-worldly world for a this-worldly world (*ibid.*:17). The supposed 'transformation' from the one into the other is neither a historical development culminating in this particular result, nor a clarification, but a displaced and displacing discontinuity in relation to an erstwhile operative system of functions (*ibid.*:18). For Blumenberg, the order of knowledge of modernity is full of gaps that cannot be plugged.

Far from any putative consistency and continuity of a 'transition', the (non-normative) 'legitimacy' of the modern age for Blumenberg lies in the historical questioning of its self-understanding and self-affirmation (Blumenberg / Schmitt 2007 [1971-1978]:58), arising from the self-understanding of reason on the basis of its capacity to generate and assert, in and of itself, 'its' truth (Blumenberg 1996 [1966]:84, 107), which it finds primarily in the idea of progress.⁷

Schmitt exposes this ‘self-creation’ of ‘worldliness’ as a “theology turned inwards” (Bragagnolo 2011:98): “Knowledge does not need any justification, it justifies itself. [...] Its immanence, directed polemically against a theological transcendence, is nothing but self-empowerment” (Schmitt 1985 [1922]:120). However, Blumenberg is far from presenting a view of an entirely self-generating, self-enclosed, self-asserting modern episteme; on the contrary, he admits that it generates innumerable vacancies. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* concedes to the modern age this self-affirmation, while not surrendering to it. For the treatise itself is haunted by the ill legitimacy of the modern age at every turn. Secular reason cannot secularise the process from which it emerged (Blumenberg 1996 [1966]:25).⁸ It owes an unrepayable cultural debt⁹ to theology which it excoriates, the departure from which leaves gaping epistemological deficits. ‘Illegitimacy’ is a constitutive feature of ‘secularisation’ (and not only on account of its illegitimate expropriation of property and goods from the care, supervision, authority and jurisdiction of the Church – see *ibid.*:27).

However, rather than holding it to its theological bedrock (as he claims Schmitt does), Blumenberg insists, from the perspective of the new (rather than from the perspective of duration, age, descent, continuity, and tradition, which he imputes to Schmitt – see Blumenberg / Schmitt 2007 [1971-1978]:64), that the modern age explodes the connection between religious and worldly spheres (see Schmitz / Lepper 2007:269), and therefore makes non-sense of its characterisation as ‘secular’. The only way in which it would make sense to talk of ‘transformation’, would be on the basis of an idea of a constant and continuous underlying substance. But there is no such underlying (theological) substance, and hence no ‘transubstantiation’ from the religious to the secular (Blumenberg 1996 [1966]:60).¹⁰ In fact, the theological bedrock of secularisation is not available to our historical understanding. Instead, the referral of the idea of the totality of history from theology to the philosophy of history involves a process of ‘*Umbesetzung*’ (translated as ‘reoccupation of the position’ – see Ifergan 2010:154) – the re-interpretation and investment with new significance of elements within a previous order of knowledge – in this case, through the independently generated idea of progress whose rationality and explanatory purchase has been overestimated and overextended (Blumenberg 1996 [1966]:60). Thus, for Blumenberg, even the idea of ‘*Umbesetzung*’ cannot explain where the newly instituted element comes from, only how it is initiated and instantiated (*ibid.*) – and this is where its explanatory deficit lies, which deficit is one more reason for the ill legitimacy of the modern age.

From considerations adduced so far, the critical encounter between Blumenberg and Schmitt seems quite clear: Schmitt is holding onto the metaphysical schema, with a Gnostic interpretation of the Trinity and a political theology supported by analogies from a theistic theology,¹¹ whereas Blumenberg sees the metaphysical schema exploded in the processes of secularisation (however problematic its definition may be). This is certainly the way in which Blumenberg casts their controversy. In his chapter 8 on ‘Political Theology I and II’ (of his treatise), Blumenberg justifies his ‘legitimacy’ argument on the basis of the ‘newness’ of the modern age, “instead of a justification based on duration, antiquity, historical extraction, and tradition” (Blumenberg 1985 [1966]:99), which he sees Schmitt advocating in his “metaphorical” political theology (*ibid.*:101),¹² and by

which he sees Schmitt submitting his diagnosis of modernity to a notion of secularisation (Schmitz / Lepper 2007:269).

In casting Schmitt's 'Political Theology' thus, Blumenberg refers primarily to Schmitt's famous claim, in *Political Theology I* (1922), that "all significant concepts of the modern doctrine of the state are secularized theological concepts" (qtd. in Blumenberg 1985 [1966]:92).¹³ In this statement, Blumenberg sees "the strongest version of the secularization theorem" (ibid.), which he takes to entail (via the Enlightenment's repudiation of the state of exception), "go[ing] back to the species of concepts that preceded the Enlightenment and repeat[ing] that species in its 'secularized' form" (ibid.). Conversely, Schmitt wants to expose Blumenberg's 'legitimacy' (of the modern age) as being derived from historically self-contained positive law, thus reducing 'legitimacy' to 'legality' – which, Blumenberg acknowledges, is a "strong criticism" (Blumenberg 1985 [1966]:96f.).

To Schmitt's famous statement of 'political theology' in *Political Theology I*, Blumenberg applies his definition of 'metaphorology': "'Political theology' is a metaphorical theology: the quasi-divine person of the sovereign possesses legitimacy, and has to possess it, because for him there is no longer legality, or not yet, since he has first to constitute or to reconstitute it" (ibid.:101). Blumenberg's verdict on Schmitt's *Political Theology I*, formulated as critique, is not inaccurate, by Schmitt's own conceptualisations of dictatorship published a year earlier (1921). Schmitt invokes a sovereign dictatorship for cases in which the entire constitutional order is in question. Upon the suspension of the entire existing constitutional order, a constitutive body has to be convened by sovereign decision, in order to found a new system of law that cannot be derived from, or be authorised or legitimated by the previous one in any way.¹⁴ The definition of a sovereign dictatorship advanced by Schmitt in *Die Diktatur* (1921) would thus meet Blumenberg's characterisation of "political theology" as "metaphorical theology".

There is another point of Blumenberg's critique that is not misplaced, but that neutralises his critique of Schmitt: Blumenberg points to the limitations of analogies following from the fundamental structural analogy here posited by Schmitt: "analogies, after all, are precisely not transformations" (Blumenberg 1985 [1966]:93), says Blumenberg; he is prepared to grant them heuristic value at best (ibid.:94) – that of "mak[ing] something visible" (ibid.).

There are some grounds on which we could turn Blumenberg's critique back on himself. If Schmitt is said to espouse his secularisation theorem at its strongest in the structural analogy that he posits between the theological concepts and the modern doctrine of the state, there is precisely, *qua* analogy, no simple notion of 'transformation' or 'transubstantiation' at work here. On that score, Blumenberg's critique to the effect that "analogies, after all, are precisely not transformations" (ibid.:93) is an entirely accurate statement. An analogy involves a relation between relations highlighting systematic structures – not a transfer of substance, nor a parallelism of religious, eschatological and political notions, nor a simple passage from concepts of theology to public law; it involves a transfer (*Umbesetzung*) of specific concepts within and between thought systems, namely that of the Catholic Church with its juridical rationality in relation to the system of Thomas Hobbes with its redefinition of the friend-foe schema

constituting a decisive foundation for the *Jus publicum Europaeum* (Schmitt 1996 [1970]:86) – that of a non-discriminatory concept of the enemy regulating inter-state conflict –, as Schmitt claims in his ‘*Nachwort*’ of *Political Theology II* directed at Blumenberg’s treatise. Schmitt wants to hold onto this juridical definition of the political, recognisable even under conditions of de-theologisation,¹⁵ as opposed to its sociological or legalistic castings as ‘state’, ‘power’, ‘leadership’, or ‘monopoly over the legitimate use of violence’ (as Weber would have it – see 1967 [1919]:77f.).

Thus, not only does Blumenberg not take cognisance of the nature and function of analogy in his critical response to Schmitt’s ‘Political Theology’; he also does not take cognisance of the shifting definitive criterion of the political between *Political Theology I* (“sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception” – Schmitt 1996 [1922]:13) and *Political Theology II* (the theologically grounded distinction between friend and foe and the ‘*Umsetzung*’ of the rules of war). This is not simply a matter of Schmitt changing his mind on the definition of the political. It is in this epochal shift that Schmitt sees the ‘*Umsetzung*’, which does not coincide, historically, sociologically, or typologically, with the ‘*Umsetzung*’¹⁶ – the practice of “copying extant religious-theological notions into a new format that preserves the original content” (Ifergan 2010:154) – that forms the subject of secularisation in Blumenberg’s account of it. For Schmitt, Blumenberg’s heralding of the ‘legitimacy of the modern age’, does not designate a *creatio ex nihilo* whereby a society constitutes itself on a new and different basis, but a creation of Nothing (see Blumenberg 1974, qtd. in Blumenberg / Schmitt 2007 [1971-1978]:64). For Schmitt, the kind of transformation that Blumenberg has in mind for the ‘legitimacy of the modern age’ is thus simply an ‘*Umsetzung*’, a concretisation in the process of secularisation moving from transcendence to immanence, which Schmitt associates with depoliticisation, neutralisation, and the rise of the masses (see Blumenberg / Schmitt 2007 [1971-1978]:54).¹⁷ Schmitt motivates his own version of the ‘*Umsetzung*’ by reference to Thomas Hobbes’ departure from the monopoly of the decision residing in the Roman Church,¹⁸ to positing, on the basis of juridical elaboration, an alternative in the form of the law of the sovereign state (Schmitt 1996 [1970]:94) institutionalising the conflict between antagonists who are laying claim to the exercise of public authority (see Lefort 1988:226f.). Thus, for Schmitt, political theology marks a shift that inaugurates the political as link between the legitimacy of power and the legitimacy of conflict (see *ibid.*:227), whereas for Blumenberg, it is the ‘legitimacy of the modern age’ that marks an epistemic shift inaugurating the immanence and presence of society to itself.

But what is more, the ‘*Umsetzung*’ underlying the shifting criterion of the political implies a move from a metaphorological statement performing an unmediated deduction of political form from theological form in *Political Theology I*, to a mediated analogical relation in *Political Theology II*.¹⁹

Neither case – neither a metaphorological statement on the sovereign decision over the state of exception, nor a structural analogy – would preclude an explanation of how newness enters the world. Contrary to an attempt at legitimating the modern age through a view towards the past that Blumenberg imputes to him, Schmitt (in his post-Weimar writings) does not believe it possible to newly re-constitute Political Theology through empirically re-animating past theological positions (qtd. in Schmitz / Lepper 2007:48), nor

even to define the political by reference to the state (Schmitt 1996 [1970]:21). In fact, it is precisely in the metaphorological terms of sovereignty, and in the structural analogies between the decision vested in the Church and the law of the sovereign state, that the new can feature in its own light.

Blumenberg hesitatingly concedes this point, without demolishing the grounds of Schmitt's metaphorology.²⁰ A metaphorological casting of sovereignty (as in *Political Theology I*) is invoked where the entire constitutional order is being suspended, as a new political constitution cannot rely on any precedents or continuities with the previous legal system. A structural analogy (as in *Political Theology II*) is invoked where the terms of the analogy are not equivalent and substitutable for each other (which would be the case for 'dead' metaphors, with vastly reduced explanatory capacity – see Ricoeur 1986), but become subject to an '*Umbesetzung*' allowing for extended predications and higher levels of conceptualisation.

Underlying the structural analogy (not equivalence) invoked in *Political Theology II* is the theological demise of political theology, which proceeds upon the separation of the *civitas dei* from the *civitas terrena*. Blumenberg, in contrast, considers the theological demise of political theology a theoretical demise that abolishes the significance of the theological for the political, and abolishes the very distinction itself in favour of the self-immanence, self-affirmation, and self-empowerment of the political (Schmitt / Lepper 2007:264). Stated thus, their positions could not be more irreconcilable.

Yet the two kinds of demise forming their respective premises, indicated for Schmitt with the '*Umbesetzung*' of the theologico-political through the move of specific concepts across a structural analogy, and for Blumenberg with the irrelevance of the theological for the political, are correlative (ibid.:265). Such, at least, is the bold claim of the editors of the Schmitt-Blumenberg correspondence, giving a deeper meaning to the very notion of 'correspondence', and the editors' motivation to publish it.

Bold as this statement is, it remains understated by the editors. Concluding the discussion of this debate, I would like to explore further grounds on we could posit the respective positions as correlative. Such grounds could be sought, firstly, in their respective dis-contents – i.e. in that which escapes the immanence of the self-constituting modern age in Blumenberg's terms, and its depoliticisations in Schmitt's terms.

On Blumenberg's side, the possibility that the historically declining significance of the theological for the political does not exhaust the theoretical significance of political theology, is opened with the precarious status of 'the legitimacy' of the modern age, which is revealed as ill legitimacy. There tends to be, by Blumenberg's account, an excess of questions over explanations, especially at epochal thresholds. This is not so much a matter of the supersession of an order of knowledge that is inadequate to the emergence of new problems and objects of knowledge calling for explanation, as it is a matter of the expectation and obligation of a totality to which a secular order is being held (Blumenberg 1996 [1966]:76), producing an impossibility within the terms of that secular order.

On Schmitt's side, there is an excess of the political as principle of constitution,²¹ over 'politics' of social power complexes. This distinction accords critical possibilities to the

political over and above, yet also potentially irrupting in, the immanence of politics (see Schmitz / Lepper 2007:291).

However, there are, beyond this dis-contents of the (inappropriately) so-called secular transformation that constitutes shared ground between the contestants, good reasons for suggesting a second kind of correlativity – reasons that are stronger in the sense of being more theoretically demanding in reaching across their opposition.

If, for a moment, we grant to Schmitt the point about an epistemic rupture that relates the theological to the political as a matter of political constitution and political unity in symbolic form,²² and to Blumenberg the point about an epistemic shift amounting to an ‘*Umsetzung*’ facilitating a self-understanding of reason and initiating possibilities of human self-empowerment in history, it seems, we have to rely on an understanding of the first rupture in order to understand the second shift. For, as I had stated with Blumenberg earlier, secular reason cannot secularise the conditions and the process from which it emerged (Blumenberg 1996 [1966]:25).²³ Transforming eschatology into a philosophy of history in the course of this ‘*Umsetzung*’ fails to enthrone human reason *in* history and *within* the field of political, social or economic institutions. The break, it seems, did not occur *within* time, not *within* society, but between human beings and time itself, between human beings and society itself, recalling to history and society its foundations (see Lefort 1988:213). This is what Blumenberg’s ‘*Umsetzung*’ cannot come to terms with.

At this stage, I cannot resist soliciting the service of an arbiter to establish their correlativity – an arbiter who is equally boldly prepared to raise the issue of the ‘permanence of the theologico-political’, while simultaneously putting it into question. We may want to say, in the words of Claude Lefort, to Carl Schmitt: “The illusion that the political can be localized within society is [...] not without a certain consistency, and to dismiss it as a mistaken opinion would mean surrendering to one more illusion” (ibid.:228). And we may want to say, again in the words of Claude Lefort, to Hans Blumenberg: “[...] whilst modern democracy does foster [the illusion to be able to confine the principle of its institution within its own limits], it does so by breaking down old certainties, by inaugurating an experience in which society is constantly in search of its own foundations” (ibid.:229).

Does the post-secular constitute a new mode of transposition (*Umbesetzung*), maybe in this case from the secular to the religious, capable of reviving the theologico-political (see ibid.:249) that had been relegated to a phantom²⁴ by the legitimacy of the modern age? Rather than charting transpositions (*Umbesetzungen*) from one register to the other and back again, I would like to address this question with a bigger, and to my mind more challenging question taking in both Schmitt’s and Blumenberg’s positions, by quoting, with slight adaptations, the conclusion on the question of ‘The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?’ by Claude Lefort:

[...] should we not conclude that the old transfers from one register to the other were intended to ensure the preservation of a *form* which has since been abolished, that the theological and the political became divorced, that a new experience of the institution of the social began to take shape, that the religious is reactivated at the weak points of the social, that its efficacy is no longer symbolic but imaginary and that, ultimately, it is an expression of the unavoidable – and no doubt ontological – difficulty [that the modern age] has in reading its own story – and of the difficulty political or

philosophical thought has in assuming, without making it a travesty, the tragedy of the modern condition? (Lefort 1988:255)

Taking on the tragic debt, under “tireless efforts to cancel that same ‘debt’” (Ifergan 2010:156), self-generating, self-enclosed, self-asserting modern reason becomes self-sacrificing, highlighting, despite itself, a relation to the political persisting in the withdrawal of the singular God.

Notes

- 1 Kant explains: “Hence the expositor, in addition to being familiar with the original tongue, must also be a master of extended historical knowledge and criticism, in order that from the conditions, customs, and opinions (the popular faith) of the times in question he may be able to derive the means wherewith to enlighten the understanding of the ecclesiastical commonwealth” (Kant 1996 [1793] – Book III, Section VI). And further: “[...] its exposition concerns [...] teachers in their relation to one another (as philosophical and scholarly expositors of a Holy Book), that they may agree as to its interpretation, since not everything in it is suited to the common capacity of comprehension, nor to the needs of the present, and since a bare literal faith in it hurts rather than improves the truly religious disposition” (Kant 1996 [1793] – Conclusion to Book III).
- 2 This conjuring trick becomes particularly clear in Habermas’ excursion into “the primitive institutions of criminal law”, which is adduced to explain “how the moral authority of the sacred is converted into the validity of institutions”: in the “primitive institutions of criminal law”, the question simply does not arise, says Habermas, for they are “only the symbolic expression of a reaction to the violation of taboos”, and punishment in this context is understood as expiation (ibid.:81). Similarly, the “conversion of the state over to a secular basis of legitimation” – namely the legitimation through “consensus arrived at communicatively in the public sphere” – is exemplified by the “development of the contract from a ritual formalism into the most important instrument of bourgeois public law”, which is envisaged as a transposition of the sacred to the secular, bypassing the ‘holy’ (ibid., 82).
- 3 This process is registered by Max Weber as a first step of rationalisation, whereby religion supersedes magic – albeit in such a way as to presuppose magic: the holy presupposes the sacred (1978 [1956]:418ff, 424; see also Kistner 2002:144ff.).
- 4 Schmitt inveighs against Peterson’s pronouncement of the end of political theology, exposing it as a political claim: “The theologian can reasonably declare the closure of issues of political significance only by establishing himself as a political voice which makes political claims. ... The statement ‘political monotheism is theologically brought to an end’ implies the theologian’s claim to the right of making decisions in the political sphere too, and his demand for authority over the political power. This claim becomes politically more intense along with the degree to which theological authority claims to supersede political power.” (Schmitt 2008 [1970]:66)
- 5 According to Peterson, the Trinitarian doctrine uprooted the doctrine of divine monarchy, rendering the latter theologically irrelevant, freeing the Christian faith from its link with the Roman Empire, theologically ending monotheism as a political problem, and with it, the role and significance of ‘political theology’ (Peterson 2011 [1951, 1994]:102ff.; see also Schmitt’s summary of the concluding statement of Peterson’s ‘Monotheism’ essay – Schmitt 1996 [1970]:74). Augustine’s teaching of the two kingdoms provides a further step in de-linking the church from the Roman Empire in Peterson’s account (see Bragagnolo 2011:90), whence Christianity becomes a spiritual rather than a political force (ibid.:91).
- 6 Schmitt’s monotheistic monarchical basis for political theology is evinced, for instance, in the opening of his book *Donoso Cortès in gesamteuropäischer Interpretation* (1950:10) – which, however, sets the transposition (*Übertragung*) of theological concepts into worldly-political thought at a much earlier stage than Blumenberg would have it.
- 7 The first edition of *Legitimität der Neuzeit* cited in the Schmitt-Blumenberg *Briefwechsel*, expounds ‘progress’ as an independently generated idea in modernity taking, in displaced and displacing fashion,

the role of theological eschatology: “As an assertion about the totality of history, including the future, the idea of progress is removed from its empirical foundation in the extension of the reality accessible to and manageable by theory and in the efficiency of the theoretical methodology employed for that purpose, and it is forced to perform a function that was originally defined by a system that is alien to it” (Blumenberg / Schmitt 1966 [1971-1978]:34; trans. UK).

- 8 Schmitt emphasises the presuppositions that, resisting transposition into secular terms, still form the bedrock of the modern secular state. For modern society does found itself through the excoriation of the theological, through an emptying of its content, rather than establishing for itself a new basis (see Schmitz / Lepper 2007:268).
- 9 Schmitt calls Blumenberg’s notion of a ‘cultural debt’ a ‘tragic debt’, owed by the “worldliness of the new age”, with human reason its sole source of justification, to theological forms of justifications of the past (see Schmitt 1996 [1970]:85; trans. UK).
- 10 Schmitt likewise insists that “the criterion of the political today cannot be a new substance, new ‘matter’” (Schmitt 1996 [1970]:21; trans. UK).
- 11 In *Political Theology I* (1922), Schmitt refers to analogies derived from theistic theology to elucidate juristic concepts, as opposed to deism, which could not sustain such analogies, as it rejects the sovereign’s intervention in the legal order. Schmitt highlights the contrast in the following terms:

“The idea of the modern constitutional state triumphed together with deism, a theology and metaphysics that banished the miracle from the world. This theology and metaphysics rejected not only the transgression of the laws of nature through an exception brought about by direct intervention, as is found in the idea of the miracle, but also the sovereign’s direct intervention in a valid legal order. The rationalism of the Enlightenment rejected the exception in every form” (Schmitt 1985 [1922]:36-37).

“[T]he development of the nineteenth-century theory of the state displays two characteristic moments: the elimination of all theistic and transcendental conceptions and the formation of a new concept of legitimacy” (ibid.:51).
- 12 Blumenberg elaborates on a metaphorological political theology: “‘Political theology’ is a metaphorical theology: the quasi-divine person of the sovereign possesses legitimacy, and has to possess it, because for him there is no longer legality, or not yet, since he has first to constitute or to reconstitute it. The enviable position in which the ‘political theologian’ places himself by means of his assertion of secularization consists in the fact that he finds his stock of images ready to hand [...]” (ibid.).
- 13 In *Political Theology II*, Schmitt rewrites the metaphorological terms of *Political Theology I* in terms of a structural analogy: „Alles, was ich zum Thema Politische Theologie geäußert habe, sind Aussagen eines Juristen über eine rechtstheoretisch und rechtspraktisch sich aufrärende, systematische Struktur-Verwandtschaft von theologischen und juristischen Begriffen“ (qtd. in Schmitz / Lepper 2007:58).
- 14 Schmitt explains: „Von dem Inhalt der zugrundeliegenden Norm aus betrachtet ist jenes konstitutive, spezifische Entscheidungsmoment etwas Neues und Fremdes. Die Entscheidung ist, normativ betrachtet, aus einem Nichts geboren. Die rechtliche Kraft der Deziision ist etwas anderes als das Resultat ihrer Begründung“ (Schmitt 1996 [1922]:37-38). See also Schmitt 2006 [1921]:134; also Schmitt 2003 [1928]:84.
- 15 Schmitt, “Nachwort” in *Politische Theologie II*, qtd. in Schmitz / Lepper 2007:48.
- 16 Commentators on the Schmitt-Blumenberg correspondence translate ‘*Umsetzung*’ and ‘*Umbesetzung*’, without distinction, as ‘re-occupation’ (see Bragagnolo 2011; also Ifergan 2010).
- 17 Schmitt elaborates on the transfer of theological ideas into secular political thought in two stages: „Im ersten Stadium arbeitete diese Mythisierung [der Antriebe und Wunschbilder großer Massen] noch mit den Resten einer säkularisierten Theologie. [...] Das folgende Stadium ist längst darüber hinaus und braucht keine theologischen Begriffe mehr. Den Massen ist in weitem Maße eine reine Diesseitigkeit völlig selbstverständlich geworden. Sie sind [...] gottunfähig geworden” (Schmitt 1950:10).

- 18 There are indications in Schmitt's conceptualisation in *Political Theology II*, that this specific 'Umbe-
setzung' in the making of a secular science, to which he points by reference to Max Weber's *Economy
and Society*, was pre-formed by the fact that the Roman Church had already created a rational law out
of the confluence of sacred and profane law in canonical law which turned out to be a guide on the road
to rationalisation for profane law (Schmitt 1996 [1970]:78).
- 19 See the distinction made by Peter Koslowski between three forms of the relations of deducibility and
legitimation within a Christian understanding of political theology. The first form is that of an unmedi-
ated deduction of political form from theological form – which could be said to be instantiated as meta-
phorology in Schmitt's *Political Theology I*; and the third form is that of a mediated analogical relation,
based on a correspondence rather than determination, correlating political theology and political theo-
ry/jurisprudence (Koslowski 1983:32).
- 20 In this respect, I disagree with Bragagnolo's conclusion stating that "Blumenberg's critique of Schmitt
reveals how Schmitt confused the metaphorical or symbolic meaning of certain ideas with their specific
rational potential" (Bragagnolo 2011:104).
- 21 Closely aligned with Schmitt on this point, Lefort takes 'the political' "to refer to the principles that
generate society or, more accurately, different forms of society" (Lefort 1988:217) by which one can
identify the specificity of politics, but which cannot be localised *within* society.
- 22 The symbolic dimension of the political, which it shares with the religious, crucially marks its excess
over politics, in the sense that it designates the relations that human beings establish with the world (see
Lefort 1988:222).
- 23 Lefort posits the unrepayable debt owed by secular reason to religion in similar terms: "Every religion
states in its own way that human society can only open on to itself by being held in an opening it did
not create. Philosophy says the same thing, but religion said it first, albeit in terms which philosophy
cannot accept" (Lefort 1988:222f.).
- 24 As such it is critiqued by Schmitt in his Introduction to *Politische Theologie II*. 1996 [1970]:12.

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