Mortal Thoughts

Religion, Secularity & Identity in
Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture

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Contents

Introduction

Secularization & Identity

One of the key principles in the formation of a history of modern identity is that it was the result of an inevitable process of secularization. Such an assumption is so strong as to be unconscious; but it is also part of the formal structure of the concept. From Jakob Burckhardt—who first originated the historical principles of 'The Development of the Individual' and 'The Discovery of the World and of Man'[1] as definitive moments in the emergence of European civilization or modernity—to Charles Taylor—who followed *Sources of the Self* (1989) with the equally monumental *A Secular Age* (2007)—cultural historians and theorists have formulated such ideas as not only related but *necessarily* related:

> The social orders we live in are not grounded cosmically, prior to us, there as it were, waiting for us to take up our allotted place; rather society is made up of individuals, or at least for individuals.[2]

Individualism, in this guise, arises at the same time as—is perhaps a result of—what Max Weber called *Entzauberung* or 'disenchantment'.[3] 'The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the "disenchantment of the world".'[4] Weber borrowed this resonant phrase from Friedrich Schiller and used it repeatedly, almost as a mantra, to cover the character of modernity in all its guises, from

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[1] The phrases 'Entwicklung des Individuums' and 'Die Entdeckung der Welt und des Menschen' are chapter headings in *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860).

[2] *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 540.

[3] The phrase *Entzauberung der Welt* ('disenchantment of the world') originates in Weber's late lecture given in Munich in 1918 and published in 1919, 'Wissenschaft als Beruf': 'Das aber bedeutet: die Entzauberung der Welt. Nicht mehr, wie der Wilde, für den es solche Mächte gab, muss man zu magischen Mitteln greifen, um die Geister zu beherrschen oder zu erbitten', *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1985), 594.

[4] 'Science as a vocation', *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Geerth and C. Wright Mills, new edn. (London: Routledge, 2009), 155.

political economy and the natural sciences to the exigencies of German academic life.[5]

Weber incorporated both liberal political ideals and an Enlightenment view of history to identify a philosophical progression in a linear direction towards technological rationalization.[6] He did not regard this as of universal benefit. Disenchantment involved a retreat from 'sublime values' (*die sublimsten Werte*) in public life towards alternatives Weber clearly viewed with some misgiving: 'the transcendental realm of mystic life' or else 'the brotherliness of…personal human relations' (p. 155). This has transferred itself also into the artistic world:

> It is not accidental that our greatest art is intimate and not monumental, nor is it accidental that today only within the smallest and intimate circles, in personal human situations, in *pianissimo*, that something is pulsating that corresponds to the prophetic *pneuma*, which in former times swept through the great communities like a firebrand, welding them together. (p. 155)

Any renewed attempt at monumentality in art he saw doomed to monstrosity. With something like a prophetic energy of his own, Weber in Munich in 1918 predicted that any attempt 'intellectually to construe new religions without a new and genuine prophecy' (p. 155) would result in something still worse.

Weber's concept of 'disenchantment' has had a very wide and influential currency. This legacy to the interpretation of cultural history could be summarized in the following way. In a modernized, secularized society, such as now dominates in the West, scientific knowledge is valued more highly than religious belief, and rationalism dominates over mysticism in determining social processes and decisions. Weber saw the two as going hand in hand: as the sacred gives way to the secular, so the prophetic cedes to the personal, the intimate. Individualism is seen in this model as a by-product of the disillusioning of man from either subjection to divine agency or incorporation in the world of spirits or demons. Placing man at the centre of the universe, the cliché goes, involved dethroning God. Yet just as powerfully, secularization can be seen as a by-product of this idea of the individual. We are secular to the extent that we live in a society conceived via individualized agency. It is not too much to see in this powerful nexus of ideas the mainstay of the emergence of the social sciences at the beginning of the twentieth century as a new hegemony in political and ethical explanation.

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[5] H. H. Geerth, 'The Man and his Work', in *From Max Weber*, 51.
[6] Geerth, 'A Philosophy of History', *From Max Weber*, 51.

Weber's 'disenchantment' has been joined in this respect to Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss's concept of 'désacralisation'.[7] Here the technical use of this word in Hubert and Mauss has been reapplied later with articulate vigour. Hubert and Mauss were concerned with analysing the ritual processes by which a communication is made between the worlds of the sacred and the profane.[8] A broader historical revaluation of the term has used it to describe how the ritual processes by which ordinary objects were once consecrated with extraordinary powers are subverted by the social rationalization of such actions as mere 'magic' or 'superstition'. This is further related to a third seminal moment in the modern social sciences: Émile Durkheim's concept of *anomie*, in which the individual is unmoored from the ties that bind a society and the moral forces by which our ancestors lived.[9] The decline of religion is once again seen an essential part of this process:

> religion extends over an ever diminishing area of social life. Originally, it extended to everything: everything social was religious—the two words were synonymous. Then gradually political, economic and scientific functions broke free from the religious function.[10]

Thus disenchantment is related structurally to the idea of individualization in societies.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the idea of 'secularization' had gained such a powerful meaning both in cultural history and in sociological terminology that it had acquired its own history. Secularization was an old word—used within Catholic Europe to describe the process by which a priest re-entered secular society, or after the Reformation to mean the appropriation of ecclesiastical lands and property into the control of the state or individuals empowered by the state. The new coinage of the word, however, was ideologically and often emotionally charged. In one direction, especially in 'progressive' contexts, it meant nothing less than the liberation of human ideas as well as institutions from a religious yoke. However, 'secularization' is by no means always a term of praise. In the opposite regard, it could be taken (according to a more conservative philosophical bent) as the process by which society was losing its moral guard. This is its currency among some theologians, such as Josef Ratzinger. Yet among other Christian commentators the term was even welcomed, as allowing a more liberalized or disestablished view of religion itself. What-

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[7] *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice* (1898).
[8] *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, trans. W. D. Halls (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 57.
[9] *De la division du travail social* (1893).
[10] *The Division of Labour in Society*, trans. W. D. Halls (London: Macmillan, 1984), 119.

ever the disagreements about its value, in fact, there was nonetheless a kind of consensus of historical factuality: this was the state of things at the end of the twentieth century. In this context, a value neutral definition could be attempted:

> By secularization we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.[11]

In the modern west, Peter Berger concluded, in a seminal study in 1967 of religion in contemporary social thought, an increasing proportion of people looked on the world (and themselves) as outside of the limits of religious interpretation.[12] Taylor puts it with stark simplicity: 'We live in a secular age'.[13]

   This book both challenges the historical assumptions that lie behind the idea of secularization and questions the boundary between the religious and the secular on which it is based. It is an essay in literary history rather than in contemporary philosophy, but it does share some assumptions with many recent voices which have questioned the idea of secularization. Included among these are Taylor, who believes that the secular idea was transformed after the Second World War, and that in the contemporary world there is 'an unheard of pluralism of outlooks, religious and non- and anti-religious, in which the number of possible positions seems to be increasing without end' (p. 437). Yet in some ways in making this analysis Taylor attributes even more power to the sense that once upon a time things were very different, and that history in relation to religion shows a distinctive regressive pattern which has only recently been disturbed. Central to the pattern of change is the Renaissance and its view of the individual. My argument is that the historical picture of secularization has been determined largely by the ideological investment in the idea of a secular modernity. In place of this I search for an explanation of early modern identity which is not in thrall to modern secularization. This is not to say either that there are no versions of secularity in the early modern period—clearly there are—or that there is not a peculiar attention to concepts of personhood. But a different picture can be drawn of the relation of problems of the self to problems of religion. In the process, we can see how, both in the past and in our own society, the secular and the religious,

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[11] Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin University Books, 1973), 113.

[12] Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*. First published in the USA as *The Sacred Canopy* (1967).

[13] *A Secular Age*, 1.

far from being incommensurate, intersect in creative and profound ways.

Beneath the surface of the grand narrative of secularization there were always obvious tensions. Weber's term *Entzauberung* is only rather dubiously translated as 'disenchantment'. The verb *entzaubern* means to 'break a spell', literally to undo an enchantment, and does not have the connotations of disappointment and cultural disillusion possessed by the English equivalent. In that sense, Weber was appealing to a historical movement within Christianity itself. The Protestant Reformation believed itself to be reinvigorating as much as reinventing religion by doing away with what it saw as 'magic': 'And surely, if a man will but take a view of all poperie, he shall easily see, that the most part is meere Magique', wrote William Perkins in the 1590s.[14] Whereas the stereotyped view of secularization is of a movement decisively *away* from religion, Weber—the most important formative theorist of religion in the early twentieth century—famously considered even the definition of religion to be as yet beyond him.[15] Durkheim recognized that Christianity was itself the origin of the idea of the individual as moral sovereign which gave rise to the possibility of *anomie*; and he studied Calvinism as a case study of the break-up of moral community wholes into individualized fragments.[16] All the more peculiar has been the fate of the word 'désacralisation'. Hubert and Mauss, far from identifying a progression or descent from sacralization to desacralization, considered the two concepts to be in a necessary tension within any act of sacrifice, and perhaps in any human ritual: a two-way interface between the separation and the incorporation of the individual within the group.

Most misunderstood of all in this respect is the phrase that has come to symbolize and summarize the whole concept: Friedrich Nietzsche's 'Gott ist tot'. Routinely extracted from *Also sprach Zarathustra* as a kind of call-to-arms of secular discontent, or radical post-Christian *jouissance*, 'God is dead' is originally found in the voice of the Madman in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882), and is a statement full of philosophical and historical irony, deeply couched in metaphors stolen from Lady Macbeth:

> God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean

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[14] *A golden chaine: or The description of theologie containing the order of the causes of saluation and damnation, according to Gods word* (Cambridge: John Legate, 1600), 51.

[15] *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1922).

[16] *Division of Labour in Society*, 228; on Calvinism, see *Le Suicide* (1897), discussed in Chapter 7.

ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?[17]

Nowhere here is there an idea of religion as casually thrown off or emptied out into a new secular utopia. 'Come you spirits | That tend on mortal thoughts', to quote Lady Macbeth again.[18] The profound angst of getting rid of God is part of the philosophical struggle, not the prelude to its possibility; and Nietzsche's point is more human enfeeblement than empowerment through the dethroning of God.

Indeed, some of the most creative intellectual energy over the idea of 'secularization' can be seen to have come from within theology. The idea of 'demythologization' was developed not as a response outside theology but as a new way of understanding the New Testament, in the work of Rudolf Bultmann. In the 1950s, deliberately paradoxical terms such as 'secular theology' and even 'secular Christianity' were developed to accommodate a response to the anxious demands of the secular within religion in the post-war years. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's phrase, 'religionless Christianity', forged in the war, became the banner for a fractured form of theology which tried to make sense of twentieth-century history.[19] The 'death of God' became itself a form of theological concept in the 1960s.[20]

However, it may be that the idea of secularization has had a power in the twentieth century, and beyond, that transcended its internal logic. Its attraction is precisely its explanatory generalization. It has come to stand for a cultural moment, a cultural philosophy bound up with modern human experience. The idea of a godless world has corresponded to a sense of the forces of a new history of existential alienation but also scarcely imaginable material suffering: the trenches of Flanders, the holocaust, the nuclear bomb.[21] Secularization in this context has become inexorably linked to other trends in contemporary thought, whether in forms of philosophical pessimism or in varieties of existentialism and postmodernism. Here there are strong ironies of transmission, particularly when we consider secularization in relation to ideas of selfhood. For

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[17] *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), § 125.
[18] *Macbeth*, 1.5.40–1. Quotations from Shakespeare (unless otherwise noted) follow the *Arden Shakespeare*, using the online edition (*The Shakespeare Collection*), citing act, scene, and line numbers: <http://shakespeare.galegroup.com>, accessed 6 December 2012.
[19] *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1972).
[20] John Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963) is a popular example, discussed in John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 92.
[21] Jeffrey W. Robbins, 'Introduction' to *After the Death of God*, 2.

the connection between individualism and secularization has been taken for granted even when the autonomy of selfhood has come under philosophical attack. While Nietzsche mythologized the death of God, he ironized the spirit of modernity. In similar vein, Michel Foucault relentlessly satirized the apotheosis of individualism yet saw it as part of the cultural spillage of post-Christianity. It has therefore seemed natural to find allies for secularization in Nietzsche and Foucault even as they are used for consciously avant-garde academic revisionism. A case in point is the turn on the self in Stephen Greenblatt. Greenblatt recognized the 'resolutely dialectical' processes which determined what Burckhardt and Michelet had described as *the* turning point in the history of identities, and embraced the human technologies of the Reformation as part of this complexity; but he still traced within this what he called 'a shift from the Church to the Book to the absolutist state'.[22] Greenblatt, following Nietzsche and Foucault, no longer saw Burckhardt's 'The Development of the Individual' as a liberation, but the new enslavement was still remorselessly disenchanting and desacralized. Even in its obverse and postmodern form, the history of individualization is a secularizing history.

Here the idea of the Renaissance comes peculiarly into focus. The Renaissance was already indentified by Nietzsche as a heroic effort of the human spirit to break free from the suffocating influence of Christianity. In Burckhardt, Nietzsche's older colleague at Basel, the thesis that the Renaissance was intricately connected both with a rejection of religion and a new concept of selfhood found its definitive statement in 1860:

> In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness—that which was turned within as that which was turned without—lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues.[23]

The key word here is 'common': only in the Renaissance, and specifically in Italy, Burckhardt declares, did this 'veil' first 'melt away'. Mankind only then first conceptualized itself in 'an *objective* treatment' derived from a political consideration of the State (p. 81). Of equal force was a move inwards:

> The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such (p. 81)

[22] *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: More to Shakespeare* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 8.

[23] *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1981), Pt. II, p. 81.

Burckhardt's prose at this point now reads a little jejune. In the last three generations, his book has undergone many revisionist attacks. His thesis on the rise of the individual has been rewritten by New Historicism after Greenblatt. But his idea of secularism and the Renaissance is more persistent, not least in Greenblatt's own later work, such as *The Swerve*.[24]

   Within the cultural history of the early modern period, it is not too much to say that Shakespeare has an iconic role in this narrative. That this should be the case in literary study is natural enough, and within English-speaking countries it is explicable in general terms. Yet even Burckhardt, a Swiss writing about Italy, makes Shakespeare's drama one of the seminal episodes in his idea of the emergence of the statehood of the individual. The place of Shakespeare within this historiography is both submerged and structural, however. He is not the originator of any such ideas, but that is almost the point; he is the symptom, the cultural sign of change: 'all Europe produced but one Shakespeare', Burckhardt says; 'such a mind is the rarest of Heaven's gifts'.[25] Shakespeare is both an agent of change—heralded as the first truly modern author, in his charismatic self-presence; and its observer in action—the creator of the symbolic imaginary identities of human character, Hamlet and so on. It does not much matter that nobody particularly believes in the historical veracity of such claims. The claims are too big to want verification. They confirm who we are. And just as implicit as Shakespeare's relationship to individuality is his ownership of a self-determining secularity:

> What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties,
> in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel,
> in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of
> animals—and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?[26]

For Burckhardt, it was Shakespeare's non-religious status which explained the full range of his historic significance in the emancipation of the cultural power of what we call *Personlichkeit*, 'personhood' or 'identity'. Shakespeare could not have existed under a Spanish viceroy, or the Roman Inquisition, or even in England at the time of the religious revolution a generation later (p. 191).

   Secularization and the idea of art have a special relationship. The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s first reference to 'secularization' in its generic sense is from the *Fine Arts Quarterly* for 1863 (only three years after Burckhardt): 'With this secularization of the art, painting rapidly threw off the conventionalism

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[24] *The Swerve: How the World became Modern* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).
[25] *Civilization of the Renaissance*, 191.
[26] *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, 2.2.303–8.

of the cloister.'[27] Art is taken to be religion's antithesis, and also its usurper. Once religion is thrown off, new gods are needed, and art takes on the transcendence that has been left behind. We live in 'The age of the world picture', Heidegger stated in 1938: art comes to be 'an expression of human life [*Lebens*]'.[28] This is the distinctive condition of modernity: an age which represents the world to itself. Again, the connection with an idea of consciousness is not a coincidence. It is derived from Hegel: this is what makes human historical consciousness unique, in that it 'makes the individual comprehend himself as a person, in his uniqueness as a universal in himself'.[29] The nexus of religion and art, modernity and consciousness is very tight here. It does not seem an exaggeration to say that such formulations underlie the formations of the modern historical disciplines of art and literature. In both, the Renaissance had a central role in the early development not only of a suitable syllabus but also a conceptual framework.

Secularity was understood to be the inaugural moment of literature's formation, a defining aspect of its identity. Literature was held to be a fundamentally secular form, and its emergence was explained in terms of the transition from a religious culture. 'Secularism is conceived to be the inaugural moment of literature's formation, a defining aspect of its identity', Gauri Viswanathan has written.[30] In the book that provided the manifesto for the emergence of English Literature as a primary subject in the new humanities at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, this transference of values is taken as axiomatic:

> Religion says: *The kingdom of God is within you*; and culture, in like manner, places human perfection in an *internal* condition, in the growth and predominance of our humanity proper, as distinguished from our animality.[31]

Dover Wilson, who edited Arnold, was also the doyen of English Shakespearians in the mid-century. The historiography of English Renaissance literature naturalized the secularizing narrative of culture as an object of

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[27] *OED*, SECULARIZATION, n. 2. Second edn., 1989; online version December 2011. <http://www.oed.com>, accessed 22 February 2012.

[28] Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

[29] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 'Reason in History', General Introduction to *The Philosophy of History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), III.3.a.

[30] Gauri Viswanathan, 'Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy', *PMLA*, 123.2 (March 2008), 466.

[31] *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 47.

human study. The Elizabethan theatre, projected as a transformation of the drama of the miracle plays of the Middle Ages, and perhaps even (in a more residual sense) the energies of the sacred rituals of the church themselves, was an iconic example of this secularization. Shakespeare again held the key.

While secularization as a concept has preoccupied historians, sociologists, and theologians for decades, it is only in recent years that literary theory has taken notice of one of its own determining tenets. The irony is that this has happened long after the secularization thesis had in other areas come under increasing attack. Not surprisingly, since Weber had such a seminal role in its origination, it was the German-speaking world which first produced a critique. Hans Blumenberg's *Die Legitimät der Neuzeit* (1966), which originated in a lecture to the Seventh German Philosophy Congress of 1962, indeed coincided with the most confident expression of the idea of secularization in English, such as in Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy*. Blumenberg was involved in a complex reappraisal of the concept of modernity in Heidegger or Adorno as a kind of aberration and delusion or (in Adorno's terms) a 'negative dialectic'. He was also taking up a radical stance in relation to Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History* (1949), which deconstructed the modern idea of 'progress' as a fallacy, created by its secularized versions of medieval Christian ideas, and leaving it in a state of philosophical 'illegitimacy'.[32]

The subtlety and intellectual force of Blumenberg's argument is still apparent fifty years later, and has in some ways still not been fully absorbed. It begins with an acknowledgement of the way that secularization is difficult to define objectively because it is something that is never in view from the outside. *Säkularisierung* intrinsically refers to an 'age'—our age, that is—in that it contains within itself the Latin term *saecula*. Its whole purpose is to tell us where we have come from, and yet it already presupposes where we are. Secularization, Blumenberg asserts, contains within itself a complex ideological register of ideas of loss, transformation, and crisis.[33] Yet these are not emotions from which we have escaped and emerged, as in the teleological metaphor of secularization as process. In this sense, Blumenberg rejects the idea of modernity as an overthrowing of theological values: those theological values are still being assimilated. Yet he also rejects the idea, promulgated with vigour by Carl Schmitt in relation to the concept of 'political theology'—of secularization as an

[32] Robert M. Wallace, 'Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Löwith/Blumenberg Debate', *New German Critique*, 22 (1981), 63–79.
[33] *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983), 4–5. Wallace's translation is based on the 2nd edn. of the German original (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973–6).

expropriation of Christian concepts in modern form—such as Schmitt's own example of the modern doctrine of the state as a secularized theological concept.[34]

In a central part of his book, Blumenberg embarks on something of an astonishing satire of what he calls 'the rhetoric of secularizations' (p. 103). He describes a series of 'rhetorical effects and hyperboles', beginning with a savage characterization of Schmitt's concept of public law as a 'stage god'. He shows how secularization as an intentional style simultaneously invokes the sacred as a false idol and then takes on its aura. It creates metaphors of boundary while trying to make a stake on both sides of this boundary. The 'renaissance' he sees as an iconic example of this style, 'which frequently makes literary appearances in vestments of sacral ideas of rebirth and the related cult symbols' (p. 105). One of his funniest examples is Heinrich Heine's description of Shakespeare, whose dramas are 'the worldly gospel', and who was born 'in the northern Bethlehem that was called Stratford-upon-Avon'.[35]

Beyond the literary bravura of Blumenberg's critique is a revaluation both of history and of philosophy. To resist the temptation to see one epoch as a transformed—whether etiolated or revolutionized—pastiche of another is to restore both a sense of the urgency of the present and the investment of the present in history. The last statement of *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* is 'History knows no repetitions of the same; "renaissances" are its contradiction' (p. 596). This question then leaves open what we might do when we have abandoned the framework of secularization. This present study involves an attempt to retrace back through history to see how the period of the Renaissance might look if we take away the secularizing narrative of 'renaissance'. As such, it joins in the increasingly widespread dissent towards the idea of secularization in a number of fields.

Most spectacular of these is in sociology. This is spectacular because, as we have seen, sociology's own foundations are located in a theory of secularization. However, secularism no longer appears as the historically determined fate of modernity. There are modern political states which are conspicuously religious; and there are secular states which are desecularizing as we speak (the United States may be one of them).[36] If secularization is not inevitable, the concomitant anxiety (and evidently it is felt to be an anxiety) is whether it was ever true. If modernity is not a highway

[34] Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 92.
[35] Heine, *Shakespeares Mädchen und Frauen*, in *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. K. Briegleb (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968–), iv. 173.
[36] Peter Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999).

to secularity, what does that make us think of the original location of religion? While this question is being asked urgently in the contemporary world, it also raises difficult questions about history, both the history of religion narrowly conceived, and more widely, in the way that the emerging redundancy of religion has been written into a history of how modernity came about in the first place.

In the field of literature, the turn against secularization has been particularly sharply felt in post-colonial studies. Views have polarized around the supposed incommensurability of religious beliefs and secular values, especially as perceived in relation to Islam. This has resulted in the question being openly asked, 'Is critique secular?' Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood have asked whether the assertion of secularity has not been framed in such a way as to prejudice arguments about law and justice according to westernized tenets.[37] Judith Butler's response in the same volume makes a spirited defence of the post-Enlightenment heritage of the secular in forming what she calls 'the sensibility of critique'.[38] Gauri Viswanathan has suggested a more wide-ranging challenge to what she sees as a secularized orthodoxy in literary theory and its own historicization. She questions the way that literary history has been constructed to confirm this orthodoxy, and especially a 'periodization inherent in narrativizing the decline of religious culture in these terms, with the Enlightenment as a pivotal transition point'.[39] In such a history, religious literature is turned into evidence of the same phenomenon, since 'religious traces are no more than a historical reminder of a displaced worldview' (p. 467).

This places once again a peculiar burden on those periods associated with pivotal transition. The Renaissance once more comes into view, especially because of the way that in literary history the Renaissance formerly eclipsed the Reformation as an engine of historical explanation. During most of the twentieth century, the Reformation was a mere footnote in literary history, part of the narrative which saw the Renaissance as the literary inheritor of the waning of a medieval religious world view. There was considerable irony in this. Ever since Weber, the Reformation had played a key role in the idea of secularization. The idea of 'disenchantment', as we have seen, was a part of the Protestant polemic of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, and enthusiastically pursued by English puritans. Magic has played a complex role in ideas of secularization from the beginning.

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[37] *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, Townsend Papers in the Humanities (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009).

[38] 'The Sensibility of Critique: Response to Asad and Mahmood', in *Is Critique Secular?*, 101.

[39] 'Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy', 467.

On the one hand, historians of medieval popular culture such as Anton Gurevich have used popular religious magic as a way of suggesting that medieval Christianity was less orthodox and homogeneous than in the secularizing thesis which saw it as awaiting a revolution. On the other hand, Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), for long a dominant book in the field, used the disenchantment thesis to suggest an inevitable historical process of change.

Historians have reacted in complex ways to this inheritance. Eamon Duffy's *Stripping of the Altars* (1992) turned upside down the suggestion in Gurevich and elsewhere that popular religion could be distinguished so easily from orthodox religion. In the opposite direction, it also fought vociferously against Thomas's idea of decline. Yet Duffy himself, in a strange dynamic, upholds some of the secularizing thesis in his view of the Protestant Reformation. For he sees the Reformation as an attack both on ritual and on community, and in the process confirms the view in Weber of an opposition between religion as magic and religion in its rationalized, intellectualized form. The Reformation in Duffy is constantly characterized as doctrinal and discursive, a religion of the head at odds with a religion of the body. In the process, he also resurrects the old ghost of the religion of individualism rejecting and replacing communal belief and tradition.

Everywhere, and not least in literary history, there is renewed interest in the history of early modern religion.[40] Yet we could ask if the model of religion that has been used in various forms of revisionism and 'the religious turn' is quite the right one. The task that is often set out for us is how to reframe an existing argument once religion is put back into the equation. In doing this, we are in danger of repeating the old secularizing paradigm even as we claim to shift it. In an odd way, religion in modern meaning has come to be constructed in terms of its opposite. If the secular is a concept that came into being in opposition to religion, the paradoxical result is that in reimagining the religious in a self-consciously 'secular age', we think of it as whatever is left outside the realm of secularity: religion, if you like, is the 'non-secular'. Yet if religion and secularity turn out instead to have had porous boundaries all along, everything we describe in historical writing via the assumption of a dialectic between the religious and the secular has to be removed and rethought. The realm of the religious includes many things that we think of in secular terms. And yet at the same time we should be wary of re-describing this in terms of

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[40] A survey of these developments, in turn highly influential in its own right, is: Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti, 'The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies', *Criticism*, 46.1 (2004), 167–90.

the modern sense of 'religious', for then we re-infect the argument with a concept of the radically non-secular. 'To rethink the religious is also to rethink the secular and its truth claims', suggests Mahmood; but we could also reverse this to say that to rethink the secular means to rethink the religious.[41] The religious, perhaps, is not quite as 'religious' as we thought, and intersects with the world in its totality, not in some hermetically sealed sphere all of its own.

One aspect of this is that religion since the nineteenth century has been thought of in 'private' terms. Religion is conceived as a set of personal beliefs. For a person to be religious, we assume that that person sees the world from the point of view of believing such beliefs. This itself can be seen as a fall-out of the secularization thesis. Berger has written that 'privatized religion' is one of the features of the secularized world view.[42] Viswanathan notes how this relegation of religion to private belief has also narrowed the view of religious ideas, producing a particularly vexed relationship with ideas of gender and sexuality.[43] The modern world is determined by individual consciousness and intentions, we say; so religion is one subset of such intentions, privately adhered to. It is then given special privileges, in a strained and often volatile fashion, in relation to private and especially sexual ethics. This is the way in which religion, in the West, has been re-accommodated within a political theory of society. Freedom of religious belief is just one in a set of vital personal freedoms; and society functions only to the extent that it can tolerate these freedoms in another person. In this way, a liberal non-religious system both allows for the religion of others, yet also defines the practice of religion on its own terms.

Shakespeare, again, is exemplary of the difficulties here. While for almost all of the twentieth century he was idolized as a secular author, so that attempts to place him within a religious framework were marginalized and often regarded as maverick or bizarre, in the last ten years there has been a volte-face. Yet it could be said that this has still been conducted according to a modern and yet outdated conception of religion as a practice. Shakespeare's religion has been recovered along the lines of a personal belief system. The overwhelming motivation has been biographical—and the always murky and fragile documents of Shakespeare's biography have been pored over to prove his affiliation, mainly to Catholic doctrine and belief. Yet before we can assess religion in Shakespeare, still less Shakespeare's

[41] Mahmood, 'Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?', in *Is Critique Secular?*, 65.

[42] Berger, *Social Reality of Religion*, 137.

[43] 'Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy', 475.

own religion, we need to reassess how religious and other impulses relate in pre-modern conditions.

This brings us once again to the complex that joins secularization with personal identity. For if we do not believe in secularization, what happens to the history of individualism? It is the contention of this book that the history of the self in the early modern period has been falsely constructed on an assumption of emerging secularism. We write as if an idea of the self could only come into being as a result of an emptying out of a religious framework. Instead, I look to see what happens if we do not make this assumption. I am not arguing that thereby everything changes; still less that we find the religious framework restored. On the contrary, in the life-stories and ideas I describe, religion is in flux, within the broad set of influences that go by the name of the European Catholic and Protestant Reformations: but these fluxes are fundamental to concepts of the self, not a passing irrelevance. The reconstruction of self after the sixteenth century happens as much through the reinterpretation of religious ideas as by an overturning of them.

The method of the book is to engage with a series of key concepts in the formation of identity, all of which are understood to have undergone fundamental change in the Renaissance, and in the past have been subject to a secularizing analysis, but which are here revealed as part of a more complex cultural history. These concepts, which each occupy a chapter are, in turn: the 'self-portrait' in art and literature; the formation of political 'conscience'; martyrdom and political execution; public identity and space and the invention of the 'private'; self-address and the dramatic soliloquy; chance and contingency in the formation of identity; suicide and ideas of personal and political freedom; selfhood and embodiment. These chapters engage with a series of authors ranging from More to Foxe, from Shakespeare to Milton, from Montaigne to Donne. The construction and performance of identity is analysed through its language, rhetorical figuration, and conceptual space, involving newly ambiguous forms of literary subjectivity. As in Burckhardt onwards, in this book the visual arts form a continuous focus of interest as well as literary genres; just as the book alternates freely between questions of representation in culture and questions of philosophy.

In some cases, as with the discussion of the 'self-portrait' in Albrecht Dürer and Michel de Montaigne, interpretation centres on the extravagantly improvisatory representation of the self in artistic and literary form. The concept of subjectivity is fictive here, yet it also relates to the embodiment of the artist in direct and physical ways: Dürer and Montaigne intercalate their representational selves with their own autographs, archives, and artefacts in ways that complicate the idea of identity as self-sufficient. In

other chapters, as with the narrative of the last years of Thomas More in Chapters 2 and 4, the materials considered include letters and personal remains, and the articulation of selfhood is made lifelike and realistic. Here, and in the records of other political prisoners in Chapter 3, taken from the work of John Foxe, we seem to be looking less at autobiographical self-portraits as at unmediated self-representations. Yet the boundaries turn out to be permeable, just as they are between the archival records Foxe uses and the techniques of dramatic monologue and visual iconology he (and his printer John Day) employ to render the personhood of the martyr. These chapters reveal a radically modern ambiguity about personal autonomy and political ideology, in which the idea of the 'internalization' of religion and of political identity is exposed in a peculiarly externalized fashion. This is a key to ways in which religious subjectivity enmesh with ideas that we associate in modernity with the writer or reader as prisoner of conscience.

In the central chapters of the book (4 to 6), it is a natural step to move from self-presentation and the narrative of selfhood to fictional drama. Here we are dealing with aesthetic readings of the record of human inwardness, as traced especially by Shakespeare. Yet the distinction is also not absolute, since Shakespeare draws on materials from life, from the articulation of selfhood in public and private rituals, and since these rituals are also acts of rhetorical self-presentation and literary formation. These chapters focus on particular speech acts (oaths in Chapter 4, soliloquies in Chapter 5) or else on particular conceptual formations (privacy in Chapter 4, chance and luck in Chapter 6) to reconfigure the relationship between religion, secularity, and identity. Shakespeare's iconic status as a figure on the cusp of modernity through secularization is invoked in order to question it, but the issues of personal truth and inward self-reflection are recognizably still with us. *Mortal Thoughts* attempts to put this history within a new shape.

The final chapters (7 and 8) both return to Montaigne and Shakespeare and move onwards chronologically into the mid-seventeenth century. The book here takes a more openly metaphysical and philosophical direction, concentrating directly on the human body, its experience, and interpretation, in chapters on suicide (7), and birth, embodiment, and materialism (8). These chapters consider new developments in philosophy from late humanism towards the Enlightenment, but once again rewrite the psychological and sociological turn implied by secularization.

The chapters do not form a continuous narrative either chronologically or conceptually. They form instead stand-alone essays which nonetheless share a perspective and an argument. At the heart of the book is the idea of mortality. Each of the chapters is based around the moment of facing

death and the afterlife. This is not surprising. In one direction, the key change of emphasis implied in the idea of radical secularity is the absence of a concept of the afterlife. In another, the trials of religious faith embodied in the Reformation brought with them renewed anxiety and uncertainty over identity as the individual faced the threat of death. Both kinds of existential crisis examine the fate of the individual in an imagined eternity. Mortality is the place where arguments about identity and arguments about religion and secularity come together.

The changing culture of early modern death has been the subject of much new writing in the last twenty years, whether in terms of the controversy over the medieval cult of the saints; or changing practices in Christian ritual and burial; or doctrines of salvation in terms of either sanctification or predestination; or the imagination or treatment of the physical remains at death; or the revival of Lucretius and the theory of mortalism (the death of the individual incorporated in the death of the body). This book builds on such studies while also suggesting a different frame of reference. The focus is not on death and its anthropology as such, so much as on the philosophical consequences of the realization of mortality itself as a boundary for the self. This context for the book crosses over the confessional divides between Catholic and Protestant, as it does between Christian and pagan.

This concern is philosophical, but the method employed here is as much aesthetic as doctrinal. The locus of attention is subjective experience. It raises attention to the language in which subjectivity is understood. This is partly because of its focus on literary and other artistic productions. But the method of the book might be likened to what in the work of Reinhard Koselleck has been called *Begriffsgeschichte* or 'conceptual history'.[44] However, unlike Koselleck, while it deals with the complex history of words such as 'conscience', 'sincere', 'private', 'solitude', 'luck', 'suicide', or 'passion', it does not frame this as an independent scholarly discipline. The words are a way into mental self-presentation. Perhaps in this sense, what is offered is what Blumenberg called a 'metaphorology' of history.[45] Can the images used by minds in the past tell us more about the hopes and cares, passions and anxieties that regulate an era, than their

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[44] Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten: Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006); Koselleck's work has been translated in a number of forms, e.g. *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002) and *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[45] *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, trans. Robert Savage (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

carefully elaborated systems of thought? *Mortal Thoughts* opens out new approaches to authorship; the narrative first person; dramatic dialogue; the invention of the soliloquy; and the subjective space of the interpreting spectator or reader, by investigating a series of personal narratives: of conscience and of martyrdom; of good and bad faith; of oaths made at the moment of execution; of chance and providence; of suicide and freedom; and of material being and nothingness. Its philosophical centre is an idea of the self less as a fixed place ready for Renaissance 'discovery', so much as of a fragile space which both invokes, and threatens, the very possibility of imaginative autonomy or what it is to be human. It therefore transcends the narrow division of religious and secular to suggest a more open-ended approach to the history of identity.