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Blumenberg's Problematic Secularization Thesis: Augustine, *Curiositas* and the Emergence of Late Modernity

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Abstract: Christianity, a spirituality of dwelling critically in the world, is seen by some in late modernity to foster an otherworldly attitude, and thus to cultivate a spirituality at odds with modern identity. Especially in the wake of Nietzsche's condemnation of Christianity on the grounds of its ascetic abandonment of the world, some have contended that Christianity may never have overcome its early conflict with Gnosticism. Hans Blumenberg's *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* continues to be read widely. Critics of modernity often avoid confronting the book's lengthy endorsement of modernity in light of his critique of Augustine's critique of *curiositas*. A central aim of this essay is to complicate Blumenberg's influential thesis about Augustine's supposed repudiation of "theoretical curiosity" that funded early modern science and inaugurated the modern epoch of self-assertion.

Keywords: Blumenberg; modernity; Augustine; secularization



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Nietzsche was reaching for the most incisive formula of usurpation imaginable when he made the "I am that I am" [Exodus 3: 14] into the utterance of an invalid who suffers precisely from being the person that he is. The self-designation of Yahweh is put in the mouth of the diametric opposite of the self-identical pride of life: "I am who I am: how could I ever get free of myself?"

—Hans Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, (Blumenberg 1983, p. 105)

1. Secularization, Christianity and Gnosticism

Secularization theory, developed in the statistical-analytical school of sociology, and associated with names from the 1960s–70s like Peter Berger, David Martin, Bryan Wilson, and Thomas Luckmann, advances the argument that western culture, especially in Europe, witnessed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a decline in religious practice and institutional influence of the Christian church. The pattern of social and cultural differentiation is manifested in the separation or emancipation of "secular" (primarily the state, health and welfare institutions, the economy, etc.) from the "religious" (ecclesiastical institutions and the church). What David Martin names the "standard model" of the secularization thesis focuses on these empirical trends in belief and practice, which of course differ according from one state to another. Some European states reflect a nonlinear secularization model: Ireland, for example, even to this day supports Catholic education as its primary public option (funded by taxpayers) at both the primary and secondary level, even though that is demonstrably and swiftly changing.¹ This model or thesis in general highlights that religion over time becomes increasingly private the more modern and industrialized a society is considered to be.

Steve Bruce formulates the secularization thesis in the language of "loss", in order to explain the cultural trauma induced by modernity. The outcome is the steady forfeiture of power, prestige, and popularity of religion to the domain of the secular not only in Europe but in the land of the so-called great exception to the model as well, namely, America. The loss mapped by statistics opens up the phenomenon of generational drift and thus predicts a steady decline in both near and distant future generations, even in America.² While not irreversible, the trend may give us statistical grounds to yield to the (un)happy reality that

“as religious faith loses social power, it becomes harder for each generation to socialize its children in the faith. It also becomes progressively harder for those who remain religious to preserve the cohesion and integrity of their particular belief system” (Bruce 2011, p. 2).

Social and cultural differentiation (e.g., separation of church and state in education, in healthcare, and so forth), the core of secularization theory, remains for Jose Casanova the relatively uncontested theoretical framework for understanding secularization in the disciplinary world of the social sciences (Casanova 2009, p. 1050). While that model no doubt continues to undergo theoretical fine-tuning (many religions exercise their voice in the public square more than we typically acknowledge³) and statistical refinement, the question for philosophers, theologians, and cultural analysts, is the related, but nonetheless, distinct question concerning intellectual history: From where did the secular and social differentiation, as an idea, originate? From which universe of ideas did the secular emerge? How did the storyline of the “secularization thesis” ever take hold in the first place? Are there medieval ideas and theological debates that are responsible in part for the generation of the secular? The answer, overwhelmingly, is that the discipline of theology must occupy a position front and center in any analysis of secularization. Quite apart from statistical and empirical trends measured by the social sciences, we also attend to the cultural and religious dimensions in which the secular can only make sense as a social phenomenon to be studied and explored by the social scientist.

Charles Taylor, in a philosophical vein, begins to answer this question by examining and scrutinizing how European society began to shift from a Christian civilization in the year 1500 to a secular cosmos in the year 2000. Genealogical in function and scope, his *A Secular Age* proposes the Reformation to have served as an original “engine” of modernization and secularization; hence, in the year 2000, we can conclude that certain theological debates originating with Luther and Calvin have several hundred years later made Christianity and religion reducible to being one option among many worldviews available at the dawn of the twenty-first century (Taylor 2007, p. 90). Others have been more vocal about the upheaval and religious crisis of the Reformation, and therefore, about identifying it as the proximate cause of secularization.⁴

Yet, the question of the *saeculum* lies farther back in the history of ideas. While the biblical idea of an eschatological critique of “this world” (in Johannine literature and Saint Paul especially) certainly frames some of the current debate about the interrelationship of church and world, the chief figure at issue remains Augustine.⁵ Even sociologists observe that secularity’s genealogical story originates in a deep, patristic past, with none other than Augustine himself: Jose Casanova avers that secularization is “basically a debate as to how we got from Saint Augustine to where we are today” (Casanova 2009, p. 1063).

The first sustained history of ideas or “genealogical” approach to the secularization thesis is Karl Löwith’s book *Meaning in History* (1949), and unsurprisingly it includes a watershed analysis of Augustine’s conception of eschatology in the *City of God*. In this book, the very notion that Enlightenment progress and the development of industrialization as a mode of perpetual improvement of society is linked, as a conditional connection, to the teleology of Christian eschatology. Modernity and the secular are delegitimized as genuine intellectual trends in their own right, by Löwith, since they simply secularize and usurp the form of what is an originally Christian doctrine of last things—Christianity attempts to hasten the future kingdom of God in and through prayer, petition, and ritual. Now, in modernity, the economy of work, industry, and technology advance and better society, hastening the prospects that we can transform the world into a better design.⁶ Several other surrogates of this type of secularization of Christian concepts are catalogued in what is another major volume published in the wake of Löwith, that is Hans Blumenberg’s *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966 in German).

Exaggerated for rhetorical effect, Blumenberg’s surrogates are intended to make a parody of Löwith’s thesis. For example, in Blumenberg we may see we are obliged to reinterpret final exams at university as a secularized form of final judgment or Inquisition; modern physics’ concern with the origin of the universe and big bang can only reflect

a variant of the idea of “creation in a secularized form”, or that the modern work ethic arose only because it is a secularization of the ideal of holiness and its method, asceticism, or finally, that the notion of guilt adjudicated in criminal law embodies a secularization of theological guilt and the problem of justification of the sinner before a holy God (Blumenberg 1983, p. 16; 2020a, pp. 55–57).

Blumenberg’s principal thesis in *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* attacks this linear and simplistic historical framework that modernity is a Christian heresy or usurpation of originally Christian formations of history, government, law, anthropology, etc.⁷ Even Nietzsche invokes on occasion this facile style of usurpation or the logic of surrogates in the epigram above (“I am who I am” is the chief ontological name of God rooted in Exodus 3.14). In response, Blumenberg articulates a careful historical analysis of secularization that attempts to prove modernity is more than mere usurpation, more than a loose attempt at the plagiarizing of Christian categories. Modernity, and the process of secularization in which it is embedded, is instead a legitimately independent pathos or worldview or vision of autonomy altogether. It does not represent a transposition [*Umsetzung*], but rather a reoccupation [*Umbesetzung*] of Christian categories and spiritual practice (Blumenberg 2020a, p. 65). What makes modernity “its own” world? In short: it exercises the unique power to defeat Gnosticism, whereas Christianity did not! Blumenberg’s challenge is fundamentally genealogical, not sociological, in intent, and in this sense, reflects a tradition of genealogy studies that go back to Nietzsche and Löwith.

It should be observed, then, that Blumenberg’s secularization thesis operates on basic Nietzschean analytical assumptions, i.e., genealogy. To claim that a Gnostic “syndrome” enfeebled and devitalized Christianity over the long course of the medieval period running from Augustine up to Descartes, and to claim that modernity’s anthropology of self-assertion [Blumenberg calls it *Selbst-behauptung*⁸] overcame this syndrome once and for all, is to reinforce a central opposition between Christian spirituality and modern autonomy that forms a recurrent thesis present in Nietzsche’s sharp denunciations of Christianity: namely, that Christian spirituality concedes to the feeling of *ressentiment*, and therefore, Christianity should be denied carte blanche in favor of an affirmation of this world, this body, and the contingent vocabularies we use to articulate our place in this embodied world. Stemming from the mood *ressentiment* is a particular psychology of values that sets into motion an “ascetic ideal”, (Nietzsche 1967, part III) manifest as an aspiration to “rob reality of its meaning, value, and truthfulness to the extent that you *make up* and ideal world . . . ” (Nietzsche 2005, p. 71). The accompanying existential manifestation evokes hatred of what cannot be secured through violent usurpation, the ownership of the world (Nietzsche 1967, pp. 36, 125, 230–31).

The result is that the Christian (and by implication the European West), beset by this impoverished psychology, often becomes embittered toward, even spiteful of, this contingent world, or so is the familiar refrain emanating out from the many works of Nietzsche. Otherworldliness, then, represents for Nietzsche the religious nomenclature of nihilism since otherworldliness makes the soul “sick” and drains it of “life” (Nietzsche 1967, pp. 123–35). While not using the explicit vocabulary of Gnosticism, one could make the connection between Nietzsche’s interpretation of Christianity’s critical comportment to the world and Gnosticism, a connection made clear in Blumenberg’s *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. In this genealogical volume, he unveils the original syndrome that renders the soul sick and drains it of life—it is in point of fact Gnosticism. The logical end of such condemnations of Christian theology is that the church must be nothing other than a subtle form of institutionalized Gnosticism, because the church is the hospital of culture’s widespread sickness. For Blumenberg, the same is true of Augustine, even if he attempted to condemn and move away from his Manichean-Gnostic past. I wish to challenge this subplot in Blumenberg’s genealogy. I suggest that this more specific, Augustinian connection represents an unfair assimilation of Augustinian theology to Gnostic anthropology; the former is not a species of the latter.

Granting Nietzsche's considerations are not thought up in a vacuum, critics who write in this vein often attend to the conditions of antiquity in which Christianity developed a contentious relationship with Gnosticism and other mystery cults. Blumenberg, the most vocal devotee of Nietzschean genealogy in this respect, sketches a thesis that has hitherto been exempt from sustained critical analysis, at least from the point of view of Augustine's theology. While Blumenberg's work enjoys a wide readership and some of his genealogical claims are generally accepted in the discipline of the history of ideas, his understanding of the identity of specifically Augustinian Christianity and Gnosticism has yet, I believe, to receive adequate theological treatment.⁹

A theological response, then, is not without justification here. As with Blumenberg, others in sociology have taken note of the internal theological debate that frames the discussion of secularization. No doubt Augustine can embody a fundamental cultural symbol that illustrates and signals to the reader the Constantinian integration of church, state, and culture dominant in western culture for so long. Blumenberg the philosopher conversed very little with theology, but he did acknowledge the conceptual and intellectual vision of the world bequeathed to us by Augustine and on occasion subjected his work to critique both in *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* and in an article elsewhere (Blumenberg 1962). It should not surprise readers, therefore, that Carl Schmitt observes that Blumenberg's book reads like a "theological treatise" (Schmitt 2008, p. 121). One commentator, moreover, observes that the purpose of his monumental *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* arguably is to occupy theological terrain in certain regards: that its larger purpose belongs to the domain of polemic carried out specifically with Augustine.¹⁰

To the reconstruction of Blumenberg's argument, I now turn in the next two sections; the subsequent sections after those will test his thesis by mapping out Augustinian conceptions of curiosity and worldhood. The present essay shall open a critical dialogue with Blumenberg, in order to occasion a more detailed conversation, one others may refine about the nature of the dialectic between late modernity and the Christian spirituality of the world.

2. The World Becoming Worldly: *Die Verweltlichung* in Blumenberg

It is not infrequent that Blumenberg invokes the expression "secularization" in German as both *die Säkularisierung* and as *die Verweltlichung*. The latter represents a more cryptic but nonetheless crucially important term. Analysed semantically, *Verweltlichung* signals a broad meaning concerning the secular, the pathos of "becoming worldly" or the modification in perspective in which the world "moves toward itself" by means of itself (Blumenberg 1983, pp. 47, 119). Conceptually, it indicates that modernity coincides with the discovery of the intellectual event about the world as such, namely that the world can "prove itself qua world, as permanent and reliable", and thereby worthy of scientific and philosophical investigation (Blumenberg 2020a, p. 62).

The vocabulary of becoming worldly, I wish to claim, is a fundamental hermeneutical key that governs the whole of *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Secularization, reframed within the remit of the history of ideas (*Geistesgeschichte* in Blumenberg's German), points to a countermovement that protests against what came before it, unworldliness: "There was no 'worldliness' before there was the opposite of 'unworldliness.' It was the world released to itself from the grip of its negation" (Blumenberg 1983, p. 47). The "becoming worldly" of the world or the immanence of modernity "released to itself" suggests that the secular belongs to the movement of human reason operating from within its own resources and in accord with its own finite strength, what Blumenberg names "theoretical curiosity" on display in Bacon, Copernicus, Galileo, etc. The scientific exploration of the world is the modification or reallocation of the world as "worldly". The procedure of disclosing the structure of the world in the vocabulary of exclusive immanence or what Charles Taylor calls self-sufficing, exclusive humanism (with no intervention of transcendence), makes modernity stand in stark contrast with Gnosticism's exclusive otherworldliness (Taylor 2007, p. 19).

Blumenberg's narrative purposely does not devote space to the articulation of a finely grained analysis of Gnosticism. However, it does as a point of emphasis set itself apart from Eric Voegelin's analysis. In a well-known essay entitled "Ersatz Religion", Voegelin offers a portraiture of modernity that functions essentially as the inverse of Blumenberg's. Instead of a spiritual impulse toward escapism, the Gnostic formation of ideas in Voegelin consists of a "movement toward a goal of perfection of this world". Hence, for him, "all gnostic movements are involved in the project of abolishing the constitution of being, with its origin in divine, transcendent being, and replacing it with a world-immanent order of being, the perfection of which lies in the realm of human action" (Voegelin 2000, pp. 299–300). He therefore sees Gnosticism as a practical theology reborn in the political, scientific, and "mass" movements of modernity, expressed cogently and tidily in "isms" such as Marxism, positivism, progressivism, communism, fascism; even psychoanalysis forms one more derivative of the Gnostic attitude (Voegelin 2000, p. 295).

Blumenberg denies that modernity is conceived in relation to political movements that seek to improve or perfect society, corresponds in any fashion to the Gnostic orientation to the world. Indeed, quite opposite necessarily obtains: "The thesis that I intend to argue here begins by agreeing that there is a connection between the modern age and Gnosticism, but interprets it in the reverse sense: The modern age is the second overcoming of Gnosticism."¹¹ His sprawling study "reverses" the alliance between modernity and Gnosticism established by Voegelin. Precisely because there lies an unequivocal antithesis between modernity and Gnostic attitude, Voegelin's thesis cannot be reflective of a Gnostic return. Instead, modernity overcomes Gnosticism once and for all.

The reason for the antithesis, and ultimately the victory achieved by the modern attitude in the war between modernity and Gnosticism, lies in the logic of secularization as *Verwertlichung*. This consists, essentially, of a "humanist" or "immanent" vision of the world set in contradistinction to Gnosticism, an otherworldly comportment. Blumenberg's sketch of the Gnostic metaphysics of renunciation of the world is consistent with many studies on Gnostic spirituality, from the classic work of Hans Jonas's *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* to contemporary studies published by Michael A. Williams, Karen King, and Jad Hatem, among others (Williams 1999; Hatem 2004; King 2005).

For Blumenberg, the Gnostic system represents a stricter dualism than the type offered in the two-world system of Platonism or Neo-Platonism. We may well acknowledge the many variations of Gnosticism, treated in detail by Karen King, and Blumenberg's lack of keen observation on this score constitutes a weakness in his analysis. For example, King makes a compelling case that no one conceptual map can be exploited in service of the task of capturing the diversity of views and themes present in Gnostic literature. The category "Gnostic literature", too, as a matter of principle, must remain a contested category as such. Ranging from conflicting and diverging moral inclinations in Gnostic literature toward institutions like marriage and martyrdom, as well as attitudes concerning female leadership, we can see that "attention to the nuances and diversity of ancient Christian teaching on sexual practice and ethics again does not line up the 'orthodox' lovers of the flesh against the heretical haters of the body" (King 2017, p. 131). Of the many trajectories or subdivisions, the most notable are Marcionism, Valentinianism, Sethianism, and Thomas Christianity, not least various gnostic gospels (King 2017, p. 126).

It merits noting, in response to such diverse Gnosticisms, that it is Marcion and a brief reference to Valentinus that together are emblematic of the most basic Gnostic metaphysical renunciation of the world in the writings of Blumenberg—this is no doubt a clear limit on his work. For Marcion, Gnosticism should appeal to Christian theology's doctrine of sin and fallenness, because the Gnostic framework teaches us about our "fundamental and impenetrable deception by the cosmos. Gnosis must therefore be literally recognition. But the deliverer who brings this recognition from its foreign source in transcendence can no longer be the son of the creator of the world and the ruler of its history" (Blumenberg 1983, p. 130). Further to this, Blumenberg thinks that the Valentinian and Marcion-inspired dualism suffices to serve as workable definition of Gnosticism, at least for the cultural

analysis of the structural change enacted by modernity. Blumenberg determines the structure of Gnosticism in the following paradigmatic statement:

The world is the labyrinth of the *pneuma* [spirit] gone astray; as cosmos, it is the order opposed to salvation, the system of a fall. Gnosticism has no need of theodicy since the good God has never had anything to do with the world. This outline, which I have given here only in order to show what is really “Gnostic”, need not concern itself with the broad range of speculative variants. My interest is in the challenge that this system had to represent for both the ancient tradition and the Christian dogmatics formulated on the basis of that tradition. (Blumenberg 1983, p. 129)

While little engagement with original source material is on display in Blumenberg, we can glean his definition of Gnosticism in the brief fourth-century text, *On the Origin of the World*. This is a Gnostic text whose editors say it reflects not only Sethian theological tendencies, but also Valentinian and Manichean sensibilities, not least Marcionite in tone. I am persuaded a gloss on it simply adds textual support and lends theological merit to Blumenberg’s emphasis on Gnosticism as a theology of tragic decline, of the world as shadow site, as a “labyrinth of the spirit gone astray”. We dwell on this theme in this text to enrich Blumenberg’s use of Gnosticism as an epoch-like category.

The author of the *On the Origin of the World* indicates that, in the eternal realm, where the Pleroma resides, no accommodation of shadow and darkness may obtain. The Pleroma, embraced by itself alone, emits and receives back only light. Outside it, however, “is a shadow, and it was called darkness . . . The shadow perceived that there was one stronger than it. It was jealous, and when it became self-impregnated, it immediately bore envy. Envy was found to be an aborted fetus without any spirit in it. It became like the shadows in a great watery substance” (On the Origin of the World 2009, p. 437). From the abortion is born the material world itself. Its essence is borne of the chaos and anguish that attends any abortion: “Just as all the useless afterbirth of one who bears a little child falls, likewise the matter that came into being from the shadow was cast aside. Matter did not come out of chaos, but it was in chaos, existing in a part of it” (On the Origin of the World 2009, p. 437). An epic of tragedy and decline appears on the first pages of this Gnostic text.

The analogies to the book of Genesis burgeon and become more explicit the further we proceed into the narrative: the creation of paradise with a tree of knowledge, the creation of plants and animals, the creation of man and woman, named Adam and Eve. In this story, Eve grants Adam life, for he had no soul (On the Origin of the World 2009, p. 449). Eve is then unsuccessfully raped by the cosmic rulers themselves, whose intention was to pollute her progeny with their own terrible nature. Adam and Eve, who ate from the tree, were then cursed by the “rulers of darkness”, and this incurred the rage of Sophia Zoe, the good god who chased these rulers out, exacting revenge by casting them into a “sinful world” (On the Origin of the World 2009, p. 451–52). Finally, after much suffering, the world will pass away, into the abyss. The consummation of the age is an apocalypse, here mimicking the book of Revelation. But what happens in the denouement of *On the Origin of the World* is that the chief creator’s “heaven will fall and split in two”. This heaven will fall on the earth itself, and all that is created will perish into the abyss, and the “abyss will be overthrown” (On the Origin of the World 2009, p. 457), as if the world is aborted altogether. Commenting on this important Gnostic origin narrative, Guy Stroumsa observes that the “metaphor of abortion strongly expresses the conviction that the world ‘came about through a mistake’, and that its creator ‘fell short of attaining his desire’”. Gnostic thought, as whole, did not suppress history but sought to mythologize it. This means that history, and ultimately the becoming of the world itself, is viewed as a violent process, one that attests to the tragic in life. Dualism is the only result: When the creator or Sophia gave birth to an abortion, a “lower” Sophia was contrasted with the Pleroma itself. Stroumsa says that this conception of the world, as a tragedy or sin, an abortion, gave rise to a certain consciousness of history, of the world evolution itself: the *Heilsgeschichte* of the Gnostic mythos is that the world is to be denied as an aborted fetus in favor of the purity of the figure of Pleroma, only to be

attained by a “gnosis” or knowledge of the *Endzeit* of the Gnostic apocalypse (Stroumsa 1984, pp. 67–70).

Of special interest here in Blumenberg’s conception of modernity are the theological consequences of his considerations for the disjunction between modernity and Gnosticism, one that can be adduced in texts like *On the Origin of the World*. Thus, a necessary consequence of his genealogy is that Gnosticism’s conception of tragedy (i.e., that the world is a mistake) remains active, if only latently, in Christianity, especially Augustine, and from this founding Father of western theology springs a rivalry between modernity and Christianity. Yet this opposition or dualism between modernity and Christianity need not be fixed as a binary dualism or a strict disjunctive. Blumenberg avoids the facile binary logic here, but not entirely, as I shall show in the subsequent sections.

3. Epochality and Self-Assertion: *Der Neuzeit* in Blumenberg

While not subscribing to the philosophy of history that constructs periods in linear, discrete phases of development, Blumenberg configures history as an entanglement of epochs. This constitutes a genealogical or “epochal” historiography regulated by the quasi-cyclical temporal reality that happily admits that the past influences and insinuates itself within the present. In this model of history, the modern world is a “world” only because it occupies its own sense of “epochality” [Epochalität] at once distinct from and emblematic of past epochs.

With recourse to the decisive vocabulary of “epoch”, Blumenberg manages to expand upon an earlier set of technical vocabularies he employed to great effect, the “world picture” versus “world model”. Blumenberg illuminates the notion of modernity by redescribing it not so much as a mechanistic model of reality rooted in the natural sciences (i.e., world model is merely theoretical) but as a fundamental way of conceiving the world in its existential totality, what he names a world picture. That is, the world picture better communicates the lived sense of world that epochality conveys. To grasp and experience the world as a “world picture” is to undergo it as a field of possibilities (i.e. the practical field); The world picture represents a domain of mood governed by implicit norms, which subsist in the realm of taken-for-granted concrete pragmata, “through which and in which humans recognize themselves, orient their judgments and goals of their actions, measure their possibilities and necessities, and devise their essential needs” (Blumenberg 2020b, pp. 44–45). The movement by which one “world picture” displaces another, say when the early modern period emerges as a new set of practical possibilities in Copernicanism, can be painful for a culture, and the loss of the old world is suffered like an “amputation” (Blumenberg 2020b, p. 53).¹² *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* invokes the vocabulary of “epoch” to reinforce and heighten the scale of the cultural violence of displacement that the idea of the “world picture” only can begin to express.

Thus, the rhetoric of “epoch” employed so artfully by him serves strategically to exaggerate the drama of displacements of world pictures. When one epoch is lost to a new epoch, the Greek meaning of epochè as a “pause” arises. This pause is a suspense of the flow of time, a parenthesis at which point a reversal of direction can and often does take place (Blumenberg 1983, p. 459). Epochal thresholds open up at this disjunctive site, even if the precise point at which the pause occurs eludes us: “There *are* no witnesses to changes of epoch. The epochal turning is an imperceptible frontier, bound to no crucial date or event. But viewed differentially, a threshold marks itself off, which can be ascertained as something either not yet arrived at or already crossed” (Blumenberg 1983, p. 469). The epoch and its threshold therefore signify a great turning point in not only the history of ideas but in the very set of assumptions and moral norms by which a society structures the world it inhabits—and it can be an imperceptible frontier that occupies only a space between vanishing points extending in both directions at once, in a backward fashion to Augustine and his antecedents, in a forward-leaning direction to Descartes up to Nietzsche and beyond.

Modernity, to underline the analysis above, constitutes an epoch because it enacts, in varying degrees depending on the figure and century in question, a dramatic turning point, one contrasted sharply to the antecedent world picture, Christendom's latent Gnosticism crystalized in Augustine. Blumenberg argues persuasively that the modern world owes its secular "shape" to its blunt refusal of Christendom-and-Augustinianism; and yet, such a focused refusal does not eliminate all elements of Christian theology: "For to grant the existence of this cryptic border between the ages would nevertheless mean that the Middle Ages and the modern age existed for a good bit of history intermeshed or side by side, or at any rate without phenotypical distinction" (Blumenberg 1983, p. 470). The content, substance and inner configuration of modernity *reoccupies* Christian theology by affirming the world in its specific way, i.e., under the form of the power of scientific-theoretical curiosity. In other words, modernity is much more than a straightforward secularization of Christian doctrine. Yet, modernity is not hermetically sealed off from the past, as if Christian traces of the goodness of creation cannot make themselves felt within the theoretical curiosity of scientific method.

Nonetheless, modernity's "epochality" originates not from a negation, but a "reoccupation" of what came before it. Modernity prompts a quest toward the world, defined by the unequivocal affirmation of the world that fully affirms the moral and practical ecology of the visible structures of experience, this is modernity's "permanent critical office"—embodied best by someone like Copernicus, Francis Bacon, Descartes, Galileo, Newton, etc. (Blumenberg 1966, p. 61).

The Baconian emphasis on sense impressions in the *New Organon*, for example, is of considerable import for Blumenberg. A forerunner to scientific empiricism, the book declares in the opening pages, in the year 1620, a bold statement in favor of *Verweltlichung*: "Man is Nature's agent and interpreter; he does and understands only as much as he has observed of the order of nature in fact or by inference; he does not know and cannot do more" (Bacon 2000, p. 33). Bacon, a key hinge figure writing at what might be named an epochal threshold, inaugurates a new epoch or world picture that is increasingly gaining (in Bacon's day) its own autonomy in contrast to, and thus in divergence from, the Christian epoch. Yet it is two "epoch-making" figures in Nicolas of Cusa and the Nolan (Giordano Bruno) who truly occupy the threshold and thus show that an epoch can retain elements of its predecessor epoch, reconfiguring them in the new epoch's vision of worldhood.

After passing through the threshold (its boundaries can ever be truly identified), the modern world, according to Blumenberg, formulates a "legitimately" new epoch, one in which "man's essential nature justifies itself simply by being realized and has no need of relation to any other existential purpose". The theological upshot? That humanity's achievement in modernity is to represent nothing less than a "second overcoming of Gnosticism" (Blumenberg 1983, p. 255). The modern celebration of finitude and the affirmation of the "worldliness of the world" subordinates the Gnostic grammar of alienation to the narrative of discovery, science and the Baconian recuperation of the world. The hermeneutical labour to which the modern spirit involves itself turns toward the mediation of genuine knowledge through the senses and rational reflection—a worldly sensibility that serves as a corrective to the Gnostic interpretation of the world as a tragic domain from which we all modern persons are called to escape.

Blumenberg's thesis incorporates moments of historical interrogation, utilizing to great literary effect the terminology of medical pathology: Augustine, and the Middle Ages, thereafter, took ill with the Gnostic disease; the latter became increasingly infected with or defiled by Gnostic asceticism, its impulse to practice the renunciation of the world. It succumbed, in other words, to a "Gnostic syndrome" from which it was never able to recover (Blumenberg 1983, p. 130). Why was the syndrome incurable? Christian theology did not possess the resources to accomplish a complete divorce from the Gnostic contempt of the world. Too often scripture itself spoke of the kingdom "not of this world", and the "mystery" of the economy of redemption, rooted in the suspicion toward theoretical curiosity, what Augustine named not *scientia* but simply *curiositas* in book X of the *Con-*

fessions and book X of *De Trinitate* (see next section below); and Augustine used language of “interiority” that ostensibly cultivated flight from the world toward the transcendent heights of an immovable, “hidden” God.

Augustine was, after all, a “converted Gnostic”, as Blumenberg labels him (Blumenberg 1983, p. 53). So, should a radical break from Gnosticism have occurred, a break from Christendom and its world picture would also have to ensue. Christianity and Gnosticism were too intertwined—the former was unable to undergo a purification of the latter, and this is especially due to Augustine’s towering influence. The consummation of the modern world, for Blumenberg, realizes what the Christian world could never envisage: a world wholly sovereign to itself, without an underlying Gnostic dualism that may induce a retreat from the immanent domain of the world’s relation to itself, the world’s self-reflexivity and self-discovery known simply as the modern epoch, which comes to a philosophical and spiritual head in the famous self-positing ego of the Cartesian *cogito*. The self-asserting *cogito* belongs to itself, grounding itself in itself, and the implications for the modern world picture involved a not-so-subtle critique of Augustinian theocentric anthropology, and so “the paradigmatic significance for the mode of operation of modern rationality was to fall to Descartes’s cosmogony. God must not be needed *in* the history of the world itself” (Blumenberg 1983, p. 210). The world is for the ego and the ego is for the world. Here, no better tautology highlights what is at stake, namely, that a new practical space for human self-realization has emerged, what Blumenberg calls self-assertion—a kind of existential freedom to explore the world rather than a form of naked biological impulse designed to urge us to dominate other species.¹³ Once Augustinianism’s Gnosticism subsides completely, the desire to cultivate the world for its own sake may finally flourish—or so is the story in *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* that Blumenberg proceeds to tell in labyrinthine detail, and with many flashes of brilliance.

However, the Christian world constructed by Augustine, and other fathers, tells another story. We have space here only to discuss Augustine’s contribution to one aspect of the modern constitution of worldhood—*curiositas*. Whereas Blumenberg wants to claim that Gnosticism “haunts” (to use a term coined by Cyril O’Regan 2001) Christianity for nearly fifteen centuries, until the antidote of theoretical curiosity of modernity breaks in upon the European mind and eradicates the Gnostic syndrome for good, I want to claim that the early church, in the grammar of Augustine’s language, sufficiently responded to the “rival” of Gnosticism. I sketch the prospect that Augustine’s anthropology harbors the theological wherewithal to overcome Gnostic *ressentiment* toward curiosity. Ultimately Augustinianism teaches us to cherish the world as a “critical office” worth not only occupying but loving as well. A consequence of this is modernity’s thematic of “self-assertion” and “scientific curiosity” about the nature of the world (Blumenberg’s vocabulary) are not intractable problems for Augustinianism, nor are such vocabularies representative of the only options for overcoming Gnosticism.

4. Augustine on *Curiositas*

Part III of *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* consists of a careful historical analysis of the career of the concept of “theoretical curiosity” [*theoretischen Neugierde*]. Often overlooked in Blumenberg’s tome is the analysis of the bivalent architecture of curiosity, especially as it is conceived in Augustine’s *De trinitate* (book X); here Blumenberg’s discussion of *curiositas* underscores his central disagreement with Augustine, and ultimately, enables him to bring to the surface and clearly register the Gnostic inclinations of Augustinian anthropology. Or so is the chief argument Blumenberg makes in Part III, “Theoretical Curiosity on ‘Trial.’” The title remains for myself telling insofar as the scientific pursuit of knowledge of the surrounding world occurs in the Cartesian and Galilean epoch as a means of not only (i) world-affirmation but also of (ii) self-assertion and the mastery of nature. Augustine surely would agree with the former even while he would firmly reject the latter as a form of idolatry. The trial of curiosity took several centuries, but the verdict was given in advance by Cicero, Plotinus, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and finally and decisively, by Augustine.

In Blumenberg's narrative, the Augustinian *mens* (or *mentem* or *animus*) rejected the Cartesian curious mind because the latter restlessly asserts itself over nature. Augustine would have condemned Descartes' statement that, "I do not accept or desire any other principle in Physics than in Geometry or abstract Mathematics, because all the phenomena of nature may be explained by their means, and sure demonstration can be given of them" (Descartes 1982, p. 76). Hence, curiosity is firmly planted in the "catalogue of vices" by Augustine. Or is it? Is curiosity truly a vice in the moral psychology of the great bishop of Hippo? Not so much a vice as it is a virtue to be harnessed carefully, curiosity's appetite to know and marvel at nature need not be curtailed but redirected over and again toward God. I intend to dwell on this point, in order to challenge Blumenberg's slanted reading of *curiositas*.

Augustine endowed curiosity with an unfocused and unbridled intention to know things, a kind of intentionality without an object, an excess of love without the rightly nurtured telos that forms love's movement. The soul's exercise of love, properly guided by wisdom, enhances curiosity so that it participates in the love of the world in light of the love of God who crafted all things and on which all things rely for their existence.

The enthusiasm of scientific discovery felt by even the most amateur student need not be rejected by Augustine; he is no curmudgeon concerning the wondrous beauty of the universe and the natural world. Rather, he is all too aware that, due to God's beauty made present in the stars and on earth's horizon, we may well be tempted, if unscrupulous, into worship and love of the kind reserved only for the divine craftsman.

Sometimes correlated with the lust or desire of the eyes [*desiderium oculorum*], we can be easily deceived "into thinking nothing but matter exists" and thus this physical realm becomes the only realm deserving of our love. To moderate *curiositas*, we can follow Augustine's logic here, even if it is rehearsed in different language in both the *Confessions* and *De trinitate*: "Concerning mortal and transitory things, then, the temperate man has this rule of life which is confirmed by both Testaments: he must love none of them nor look upon them as desirable for their own sake, but he must utilize them, in the measure that his life and duties require, with the moderation of a user rather than the passion of a lover" (Augustine 1966, pp. 33–34). The desire or lust of the eyes therefore attaches to things as if only matter exists. This is the first stage in the Augustinian critique of *curiositas*.

Curiosity is to be condemned, moreover, if and only if it seeks to master and dominate what it pursues. This represents not the journey of love, but of lust, of the soul's desire for the world for the sake of nothing but the "perceptions it acquires through the flesh" (Augustine 1992, p. 211). For Augustine, the curiosity, as a theoretical enterprise and formal investigation of the universe's physical laws (embodied best in his day in astronomy), is not in itself a vice; it is instead a vice only in the measure to which it shows itself to entertain an uneducated view of love, a hampered (dis)formation of love that loves objects pursued only for the sake of scientific function—which is no love at all, but lust and *superbia*, the assumption that all things are fully knowable if reduced to their empirical datum, their material makeup, and laws. Curiosity is seductive because it cultivates and yields forth precisely a "blind love of the world" as a bare empirical thing (Augustine 1992, p. 209).

Blumenberg connects Augustinian *curiositas*, hastily in my perspective, to a soul's desire to fasten itself to the exterior or outward domain, the world as such. Blumenberg, in turn, argues that the Augustinian soul practices a love of God that can take place *only* within the spiritual domain of memory and the inward journey of cultivating invisible things with what Augustine calls the soul's invisible eyes (Augustine 1992, p. 210). Blumenberg seizes this as an opportunity to highlight Gnostic leanings in the father of western theology, as if Augustine's critique of *curiositas* amounts to a critique of the world and all things physical as such:

That curiosity can, in fact, become one of man's central vices is a characteristic not only and not primarily of man himself but also of the world in which he finds himself—a sphere of obstructed immediacy and only partial anthropocentric teleology bordered by zones of hiddenness and remoteness, of strangeness and

alienating reservation. *Curiositas* is indeed a category applied in turning away from Gnosticism, but the world in which it can become a possible cardinal vice is no longer the cosmos that is open to man and symmetrically intelligible in all directions from the center but rather a sphere filled with Gnostic attributes in which man is [literally] “eccentric”. (Blumenberg 1983, p. 312)

Blumenberg’s bifurcation of the Augustinian soul between inward versus outward does not sufficiently attend to the kind of relationship with the world Augustine proposes the soul actually has and can enjoy, one wholly formed by and in the domain of properly ordered love.¹⁴

The world is so beautiful and lovely, there is so much delight to be had in the soul’s intermingling with the world that in book X, 33 of the *Confessions* (pages before the famed analysis of *curiositas*) Augustine’s principal worry is how to manage and appreciate beautiful singing and melodies used in a worship service. The world evokes in us delight, not self-alienation. So, it remains a site of temptation only because it is so enchanting, beautiful, and moving as a matter of course: even food and drink satisfy deep yearnings of the soul, as he discusses in X, 32 of the *Confessions*. It is not the food and wine that is eccentric or alien, as if it occupied a sphere “filled with Gnostic attributes”. Food literally feeds both body and soul, and it is therefore good. It follows for Augustine it is but the “uncontrolled desire” to consume bread and drink that plunges the soul into a state of disordered love, and it is precisely this same untrained love that funds *curiositas* with regard to theoretical and cognitive matters.

The famous analysis of *curiositas* in X, 35 in the *Confessions* echoes the other well-known analysis of *curiositas* in the more mature and philosophical *De Trinitate*. In both accounts, we see that it is the type and direction of love that fundamentally configures the shape and measure of theoretical curiosity. In both accounts we also see a division between curiosity and studiousness, a crucial distinction Blumenberg invokes only in passing, in a brief footnote (Blumenberg 1983, fn. 15, p. 622). It is a crucial distinction that makes the all the difference between Augustine as Christian *versus* Augustine as (converted) Gnostic.

Key examples abound in book X, 35 in the *Confessions*, in which curiosity is defined as “lust for experimenting and knowing” (Augustine 1992, p. 211). What advantage is there to be had in gawking at a mangled corpse for no other reason other than to know what it looks like (i.e., lust of the eyes), Augustine probes? This kind of curiosity motivates the lust of the eyes to apprehend material around it as nothing but fodder to satisfy the itch for a “thrill” rather than studious and careful study aimed at the advancement of theoretical knowledge of the anatomy of the body. Dissecting a body in a laboratory under controlled circumstances is one thing, staring at a mangled corpse on the road is entirely another. Yet, even if theoretical constraint is observed, Augustine finds theoretical investigations limited and dangerous if they “simply desire knowledge for its own sake” (Augustine 1992, p. 212).

In book X of *De trinitate*, Augustine recalibrates curiosity in the face of the all-important motivation of the soul, that of love. Curiosity does not exercise itself properly as a form of useful or wise knowing if it is detached from the love of what it should like to know about. Sheer knowing for the sake of knowing, and for no other reason, again tempts the soul to perform a heedless reduction of things to their nude material conditions, as if to know the definition of a word or to know the rotation of the planets as pure cognitive information is sufficient. To be wise and studious is to situate curiosity within the context of love and the loving pursuit of what we already know as true and good, which is the world loved by God.

To commence the pursuit of the understanding of a given thing (say a star or a new plant species) “for no known reason” is to indulge in the trivial and uncontrolled state of a ravenous appetite. In contrast, “the love of the studious spirit, that is of one who wishes to know what he does not know, is not love for the thing he does not know but for something he knows, on account of which he wants to know what he does not know” (Augustine 1991, p. 288). For Augustine curiosity appears to lead the mind into an outward course

of the love the world, of external things, and thus consist in the scientific movement of theoretical curiosity, self-assertion, and of the world becoming worldly. Yet, Augustine claims, and I concur here, that curiosity is not innocent. It is rather a disembodied mental state because it appears to want to know a thing only for the sake of knowing it. In this impoverished and unformed state, curiosity does not engage in the love of the unknown, but instead the hatred of the unknown, since the curious soul “would like nothing to be unknown and everything known” (Augustine 1991, p. 289).

The studious, to conclude, are guided by what they love whereas the curious are motivated by what Paul Griffiths call an “anxious hatred” (Griffiths 2009, p. 20) of what they do not yet know—they seek to possess, master, and dominate what they do not know, just like the existential category of Blumenberg’s modern “self-assertion” implies. The modern age is the age of curiosity. With this evaluation I fully agree. But I do not grasp the reason why this must be considered an improvement upon the Augustinian affirmation of the worldliness of the world, an affirmation formed in the hands of studious and intentional love. Augustine supports intellectual appetite, but it must be acknowledged that any appetite, intellectual (or theoretical), seeks ownership of new knowledge only on the basis of well-formed, intentional love, a higher moral logic in which all things are already known by the love of God the creator: a world fundamentally good because it always already participates in a world-involved God. A further note should be highlighted about the metaphysics of the love of the world in Augustine’s work.

5. Augustinian Worldliness

Augustine did not impugn the world but highlighted the manner in which it facilitates participation in God: “Let these transient things be the ground on which my soul praises you (Ps 145.2), ‘God creator of all.’ But let it not become stuck in them and glued to them with love through the physical senses” (Augustine 1992, p. 62). Wisdom is a kind of alertness to God’s presence, located in the department of the mind designed for the higher function of contemplation of the eternal, a style of affective knowledge distinct from lower order appetites of ordinary *scientia* (Augustine 1991, p. 323). There is a genuine distinction between wisdom and curiosity. Wisdom belongs to the process by which the mind opens up the practice of the “cognizance of eternal things”, whereas curiosity is concerned solely with the “rational cognizance of temporal things” to which the mind can be glued, jeopardizing the higher mode of love proper to temporal things (Augustine 1991, p. 336).

But Christian wisdom or studiousness, opposed to *curiositas*, shall not be used to prompt or arouse an inward spiritual flight from the world and into the depths of memory. Even if Augustine shall declare what appears obvious to him, that wisdom/studiousness is the preferred of the two modes of intellectual activity (wisdom versus curiosity), there lies no disjunction between wisdom and the exterior world.¹⁵ To reinforce the intertwining of soul and world, the doctrine of creation is testimony to how God has so established the nature of the world that the performance of wisdom elicits the recognition of the truth of creation, the world here and now, this *saeculum* or age, or dare I say epoch. The world, brought forth from nothing as an expression of God’s love and delight, “bears a likeness to God after its own kind and fashion” (Augustine 1991, p. 310) and the inner constitution of the world cannot help but become an evocation of the “inexpressible reality” (Augustine 1991, p. 66) of God as its supreme good and exemplary cause.

This divine mystery, the economy of creation and redemption, is only properly brought into view by the wisdom of contemplation: “The knowledge which created things have of themselves is, so to speak, shadowy until they see themselves in the light of God’s wisdom, and as it were, in relation to the artist by which they were made” (Augustine 1998, sect. 11, 7). When the human mind appeals to its higher function, that which separates it from the beasts, its gaze climbs upward, in order to “see creation as God’s handiwork, it is like a light breaks over us, like dawn has broken in the minds of those who contemplate them” (Augustine 1998, sect. 11, 29). The natural order of the world harbors transcendence,

in virtue of its being. The world as such lives by the Word of God, which means its contingency must be ever borne in mind as fundamentally good.

Humans are at home in the world, according to the Christian logos outlined in Augustine's work.¹⁶ This perspective discovers its nemesis in Gnosticism, the main rival against which many patristic thinkers constructed their theological discourse of the world. Gerhard May has shown that much theological reflection on the world was established very early on in the second century, and specifically that the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* was formulated as a bulwark or counter-narrative against Gnosticism (Irenaeus 1868, sect. II, 10; May 2004, chp. 2). The Christian conception of the world arguably addressed the problem of otherworldliness raised by the Gnostic conception world, at least at a theological level.

The Christian narrative contrasts, emphatically, with Gnosticism's epic of decline. The crucial interchange between Christianity and Gnosticism was a properly epoch-making event; the Christian stalwart was Irenaeus and, a few centuries later, Augustine. Their work is demonstrative of how radical the affirmation of the world was for the early Christian communities, and just how the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* emerged not in a vacuum, but in direct response to Gnosticism (and middle Platonism) (May 2004, chp. 2).

The Gnostic myth culminates in what Hans Jonas calls the Gnostic "epic of decline", in which the Pleroma or hidden God emanates downward. A disturbance in the heights starts off the downward motion, "which continues as a drama of fall and alienation", and from this drama proceeds a process by which the corporeal world is understood to be a tragic product of decline; often the Pleroma is not aware of this decline (Jonas 1967, p. 93). The Gnostic Pleroma involves itself in no way with the tragic state of the world.

Book V of the *Confessions* formulates an expression of a mournful recollection of his involvement with Manichean cosmology (Augustine 1992, p. 57). The world, reframed by Christian theology, conforms to the economy of the gift, not tragedy. This exchange of call and response, the gift given, and the gift received, grants to the world its liturgical shape. God summons forth, through the world, a response on the part of those who inhabit it. Indeed, the world is a response to God, and in that movement of response, there is no end in view, for no response can exhaust the gift received. Augustine states simply that "in filling all things, [God] you fill them all with the whole of yourself". However, this ontology of participation does not enjoy strict or identical reciprocity: all things cannot contain the whole of God (Augustine 1992, p. 3) For Augustine, God is in all things, for "I would have no being, I would not have any existence, unless you were in me" (Augustine 1992, p. 5). God is infinite, and we are not. This should arouse the spiritual performance of praise for God in the vocabulary and medium of the finite world. Praise is endless, and therefore, infinite, which means the world, formed for praise, is a finite object that can participate in the infinite.

There is a hermeneutic of praise, or a liturgical voice, indigenous to the opening of the world itself: "The hermeneutic of creation consists precisely in *not* defining things as beings but in acknowledging them *as* gifts received in the form of creation and offered in the form of praise."¹⁷ Curiosity about the world, it could be stated at this final juncture, is always already formed and thereby rooted in a hermeneutic of creation and thus properly ordered love. The world is good just as it is, as world (*Verweltlichung*), and it was designed by God who is the origin, instruction and blessedness of its horizontality. In this Augustinian framework, the world evolves toward its *telos* in God so far as God transports it by love.

6. Concluding Remarks

Blumenberg's constructive proposal, that Christianity and Gnosticism share a certain theology of the world, finally does not obtain in the neat and tidy fashion he supposes. But he thinks its legacy, as a dualist framework for reality, was preserved in Augustine's critique of theoretical curiosity. Christianity, therefore, remained haunted by Gnostic metaphysics, especially in its Augustinian idiom.

It should be striking at this juncture how incomplete Blumenberg's interpretation of Augustine is. He says, defying scholarly plausibility, that Christianity reduces to the

proposition: “man is foreign in the world”. More drastic, and exceedingly inaccurate: “Gnosticism is radical anthropocentrism combined with a negative characterization of man’s position in the cosmos. In this regard Christianity, for its pagan opponents, differed little from the Gnostic milieu . . . [it] is the offensiveness to their surrounding world that Christianity and Gnosticism share” (Blumenberg 1987, pp. 25–26). It is true that figures like Tertullian would have held the theatre, poetry, and other mainstays of Roman culture in contempt, as much as Augustine would have condemned sexual promiscuity and unbridled speculative curiosity, but that is at a far remove from saying that Augustinianism *as such* found its ambient world offensive.¹⁸

Is it theologically plausible to claim that modernity constituted a second overcoming of Gnosticism, because Augustinianism never removed from its intellectual tradition the Gnostic impulse to escape the world? The thesis that modernity is the second overcoming of Gnosticism remains, at the level of theological analysis, highly suspect. Blumenberg will argue that modernity consists, at its base, of a radical form anthropocentrism, or self-sufficiency. This is embodied in the Cartesian “ego” or “subject”, but more accurately, it is recast as the “will to power” in Nietzsche. Following this portraiture of modernity, it stands to reason why Blumenberg associates Nietzschean “self-assertion” with modernity more than any other form of anthropology. It is the sovereign will of ego that replaces (or reoccupies) the sovereign will of God. The full spectrum of Blumenberg’s multi-part thesis, how modernity secularized or “reoccupied” several aspects of Christian theology, is a topic for another essay (and probably for a monograph). What concerns us here, and what we have challenged in the foregoing sections, is the thesis that Augustinian Christianity never extricated itself from a Gnostic contempt of theoretical curiosity and of the impulse to explore the world as a “permanent critical office”. If this has been achieved, then it follows that a more critical theological reception of Blumenberg’s vast genealogy may unfold.

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Notes

- ¹ For standard volumes on secularization theory that remain relevant if contestable, see (Luckmann 1967; Berger 1969; Martin 1978; Wilson 1969). For a discussion of the Irish landscape on this score, see (Rivera 2020).
- ² See the Pew Research study on the Religious Landscape in America, which highlights the change in religious belief and self-identification from 2007 to 2014, (<https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>) (accessed on 10 April 2021).
- ³ Jose Casanova’s volume is the point of departure for the analysis of the global context of secularization in light of the publicness of religion; see (Casanova 1994). For more recent analysis, see (Juergensmeyer et al. 2015).
- ⁴ For a more sustained analysis of the Reformation as the proximate cause of European secularization, see the controversial (Gregory 2015).
- ⁵ I cannot adequately account for the sizeable academic output on Augustine’s political thought, even in the English-speaking world alone. Some of the salient works are the following; we do not have space here to parse out the important differences in the application of Augustine and for which political arrangement he is enlisted on behalf of See (Markus 1970; Milbank 1990; Elshtain 1996; Mathewes 2007; Gregory 2008).
- ⁶ Karl Löwith writes: “The ideal of modern science of mastering the forces of nature and the idea of progress emerged neither in the classical world nor in the East, but in the West. But what enabled us to remake the world in the image of man? It is perhaps that the belief in being created in the image of a Creator-God, the hope in a future Kingdom of God, and the Christian command to spread the gospel to all the nations for the sake of salvation have turned into the secular presumption that we have to transform the world into a better world in the image of man and to save unregenerate nations by Westernization and re-education?” (Löwith 1957, p. 203).
- ⁷ He suggests that the modern age could be incorrectly assessed as nothing more than a Christian heresy. See (Blumenberg 2020a, p. 78).
- ⁸ See the title of Part II of *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, “Theological Absolutism and Human Self-Assertion”.
- ⁹ The otherwise excellent critical introduction to Blumenberg’s work by Elizabeth Brient does not even broach the “legitimacy” of Blumenberg’s comparison of Augustinian Christianity and Gnosticism. She focuses rather on his

- misreading of Neoplatonism, as it is inflected by Eckhart and Nicholas Cusa. I hope to supplement that reading with a demonstration of his misreading of patristic Christianity, the “epochal” threshold, a moment marked by Augustine, which transpired against the backdrop of historical Gnosticism. See (Brient 2002). A similar lack of attention paid to Augustine in Blumenberg’s work can be gleaned in Remi Brague’s engagement with Blumenberg in (Brague 2017).
- 10 By no means is this obvious. So understated is the theological undercurrent that only in the second edition of the book can we see Blumenberg’s intention, which can only be described as an “occulted response to the crisis theologians of the 1920s, and to the eschatological crisis thought more generally”. See (Lazier 2003, p. 624).
- 11 The quote in full is worth reproducing here given its programmatic character: “The thesis that I intend to argue here begins by agreeing that there is a connection between the modern age and Gnosticism, but interprets it in the reverse sense: The modern age is the second overcoming of Gnosticism. A presupposition of this thesis is that the first overcoming of Gnosticism, at the beginning of the Middle Ages, was unsuccessful. A further implication is that the medieval period, as a meaningful structure spanning centuries, had its beginning in the conflict with late-antique and early-Christian Gnosticism and that the unity of its systematic intention can be understood as deriving from the task of subduing its Gnostic opponent”. (Blumenberg 1983, p. 126).
- 12 Of Copernicanism, Blumenberg writes: if one interprets Copernicus’ heliocentrism “metaphorically, as it is intended, Copernicus changed our vision of the world so radically that this change confronts us everywhere and in everything. This makes its effect an epoch-making one”. (Blumenberg 1987, p. 126). Copernicus, for the present purposes, symbolizes the beginning of a modernity that is modern precisely to the degree it focuses on the structure of the universe and satisfies the demands of theoretical curiosity about the laws of nature.
- 13 He writes more fully of the new anthropology: “Thus ‘self-assertion’ here does not mean the naked biological and economic preservation of the human organism by the means naturally available to it. It means an existential program, according to which man posits his existence in a historical situation and indicates to himself how he is going to deal with the reality surrounding him and what use he will make of the possibilities that are open to him”. (Blumenberg 1983, p. 138).
- 14 Inward versus outward language is more obvious here in Blumenberg: “The soul is inwardness, as soon as and insofar as it is no longer outwardness; it is *memoria*, insofar as it does not lose itself in *curiositas*. *Memoria*, which as the original ground of the soul corresponds in Augustine’s Trinitarian analogy to God the Father, stands for the fact that all thinking, insofar as it is not occupied and diverted by ‘objects,’ would have to be something that thinks itself: Only then would it represent the likeness of a God Who had been conceived, since Aristotle, as a thought thinking itself”. (Blumenberg 1983, p. 315).
- 15 Indeed, it is clear that Augustine says that even on the way to its ascent to the eternal, the mind may delve inward, but its journey makes its way through, and is mediated by, the world of temporality. He writes, “Before we come to the cognizance of intelligible things that are supreme and everlasting, we meet the rational cognizance of temporal things”. See (Augustine 1991, p. 336).
- 16 My reading of Augustine has been shaped in part by Charles Mathewes’ “worldly” reading of Augustine. See Mathewes (2007) and Mathewes (2010).
- 17 For a generally excellent exegesis of this idea in Augustine, see Marion (2012).
- 18 After Constantine, catholic Christianity allied itself with the state, however, it assured itself that it was in continuity with the church of the martyrs by cultivating ascetic movements and extending the importance of the cult of martyrs. Protest against the “world” never left the early Christian church, even in its post-Constantine era, but this should not be mistaken for contempt of the world. See (Markus 2006, pp. 32–33).

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