

TIME AND TRANSCENDENCE

Philosophical Studies in Contemporary Culture

VOLUME 1

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Time and Transcendence

*Secular History, the Catholic Reaction,
and the Rediscovery of the Future*

by

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Springer Science+Business Media, B.V.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Motzkin, Gabriel Gideon.

Time and transcendence : secular history, the Catholic reaction, and the rediscovery of the future / by Gabriel Motzkin.

p. cm. -- (Philosophical studies in contemporary culture ; v.

1)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-94-010-5106-4 ISBN 978-94-011-2508-6 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-94-011-2508-6

1. History (Theology) 2. Time. 3. Transcendence (Philosophy)
4. History--Philosophy. 5. Secularism. 6. Tradition (Theology)
7. Sociology, Christian (Catholic) 8. Heidegger, Martin, 1889-1976--
Contributions in philosophy of history. I. Title. II. Series.
BR115.H5M65 1992
261.5--dc20

92-10249

ISBN 978-94-010-5106-4

Printed on acid-free paper

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Originally published by Kluwer Academic Publishers in 1992

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*To my wife
Emily*

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Acknowledgements

Any book is a collective product, reflecting the complexity of a life lived for many years before the actual project was undertaken. The intuitions that are articulated and reshaped in it echo ideas and persons that will not be mentioned here. Gratitude is expressed to those who have made this book possible in many senses, and is also extended to all those who have accompanied its author.

I am indebted to the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, and its very helpful staff, for a fellowship for the year 1988–1989, during which the project was completely redefined; the Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte in Göttingen, for a grant for Summer, 1989, during which most of the first draft was written; and the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation of New York, for a grant for Summer, 1990, during which the final draft was completed.

I should like to thank Natan Rotenstreich, of the Israel Academy of Sciences and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, for his unstinting encouragement; Michael Heyd and Amnon Linder, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who insisted that this book be written; Rivka Feldhay, of the University of Tel Aviv, and Jürgen Renn, of Boston University, for many illuminating discussions; Tristram Engelhardt, of the Baylor University School of Medicine, who supported this project at every juncture, and was instrumental in its realization; and Jeffrey Barash, of the University of Amiens, for his suggestions for improvement of the manuscript.

I should like to express a special word of gratitude to someone who will not be able to receive my thanks, the late Klaus Hartmann of the University of Tübingen. His work was an inspiration for all who had the opportunity of engaging with this remarkable scholar. His review of this book provided its author with the best sense of his own enterprise.

Preface

This book investigates one aspect of the story of how our religiously-oriented culture became a secular one. It concentrates on the conflicts enveloping the attitude to the past from the late seventeenth to the early twentieth century. The background argument is that the way the process of secularization occurred in one particular religious context, the Roman Catholic one, was determinative for the possibility of something such as secular culture, and hence for both the modern secular attitude to the past and the modern religious one.

In recent years a spate of scholarship has suggested that the expanded version of Weber's theory, according to which modernity is a consequence of Protestantism, is not quite accurate. Robert Merton modified this theory to argue that modern natural science originated in the context of seventeenth-century Protestant England.¹ Against this position, many scholars have investigated origins for the development of science in Catholic countries.²

The development of natural science, however, is not the whole story of the development of modern secular culture, even if the story of that development is restricted to the development of knowledge. Our modern universities are organized around the division between humanities and natural sciences, and it can be thought that this process of modernization or secularization affected the humanities no less than the sciences.

In the conception of human society, the parallel development to that of science was the development of the historical attitude to the past. Perhaps the two developments were related. Certainly it is not a coincidence that one significant origin of the new historical attitude to the past can be found in France at the end of the seventeenth century. However, the remarkable point about the historical attitude to the past is that its basic point of view - its conception of the subject, its theory of knowledge and its intuition of time - *contradicts* that of natural science. Strange that two such contradictory "secularizations" as history and natural science occurred at roughly the same time.

If the distinction between the secularization of science and the secularization of history is accurate, then it should also be possible to distinguish between the religious reaction to the challenge of natural science and the religious reaction to the challenge of history. In the second part of this book, I shall try to describe

one particular religious reaction to the challenge of history, that of nineteenth-century French Traditionalism, and to explain why it failed. In a word, it failed because the Catholic church found a better strategy for fighting the challenge of secular culture: the Church took advantage of the distinction between science and history to reject secular history while accepting secular science. In turn, this religious bifurcation of secular culture was consequential for the secular attitude to secular history, and especially for secular philosophy's understanding of the secular philosophical past.

One cardinal assumption made here is that the history of secularization in Catholic countries is incomprehensible if one uses Weberian sociology as a framework for analysis, not only because the origin of many modern attitudes cannot be found exclusively in Protestant societies, but also because Weber's categories are constructed in such a way that we overlook the analogous processes in other societies. Because the history of secularization was different in Catholic and in Protestant countries, the word secular does not connote the same range of meanings in a Catholic context as it does in a Protestant context. This difference between the meaning of the secular in a Protestant religious context and in a Catholic religious context is decisive for the development of modern secular culture. Perhaps we have to refine what we mean by secularization.

Such historical interpretations as this one can be seductive and nonetheless false. How can they be evaluated? Evidence alone can only provide partial support, because the issue is one of interpretation. Their test must be in the coherence of the picture they proffer of the whole, a picture which cannot provide the whole if that whole is understood as being everything that happened. The ideal of completeness applicable to global interpretations must be one through which the major positions have been spelled out and shown in their interrelation. The mutual reading of texts must use earlier texts to clarify the positions of later ones, and later ones to elicit the implications of earlier ones.

One can also question whether the topic addressed in this book is intrinsically important. If attitudes are unimportant in deciding the content of history, then the relation between secularization and the attitude to the past is an interesting literary question, but it is not an historical problem. One aim will be to show how and why such attitudes are important because they also affect the sense we impart to our historical actions, and not only provide a matrix for our historical memory. The image we have of the past is a focus for all our deep beliefs about ourselves, even the unadmitted and embarrassing ones. One of our key ambivalences goes to the idea that a culture can transform itself from within, that all its norms are temporary positions in time. For this reason, we are obsessed with the transition between a pre-modern and a modern culture in our own culture. The sense we impart to this transition affects our capacity for interpreting our own possibilities of cultural shift and cultural perseverance.

NOTES

1. Robert Merton, *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth-Century England* (Osiris, Bruges: 1938, v. 4).
2. *Science in Context*, v. 3, n. 1, Spring 1989. ed. Rivka Feldhay.