No Spiritual Investment in the World

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Eschaton

Gnostic Evil in History

From the late 1940s onward, the issue of modern Gnosticism was largely incorporated into the German secularization debates. In contrast to the heterogeneous contexts in which Gnosticism was referred to in the first half of the twentieth century, the reference to Gnosticism increasingly appeared in a well-defined debate about the theological roots of modern, secular thought. Although Gnosticism could be perceived as such a theological precursor of modernity, these debates initially centered on the secularization of eschatology rather than on Gnosticism. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, eschatology is the theological doctrine concerned with the end of history and the salvation of human existence. A number of postwar German philosophers debated the connection between eschatology and secular modernity—Karl Löwith’s definition of modern progress as “secularized eschatology” being the classic example.1 Along these lines, Jacob Taubes developed an eschatological interpretation of Western modernity in his Abendländische Eschatologie (Occidental Eschatology).2 Moreover, the concept of

secularized eschatology was adopted by many of Löwith’s contemporaries, including by Eric Voegelin and Odo Marquard. However, Löwith’s theory of secularization and its favorable reception were heavily criticized by Hans Blumenberg in The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, notably in the book’s first part, “Secularization: Critique of a Category of Historical Wrong.” In view of the pertinence of Blumenberg’s critique, the German secularization debates have often been reduced to a debate between Löwith and Blumenberg, which centered almost exclusively on the issues of progress and secularized eschatology. This overemphasis on the Löwith-Blumenberg debate not only tends to misrepresent the number of people working on the issue of secularization in postwar Germany but also obscures the role of Gnosticism and the structural relation between the topics of Gnosticism and eschatology in the secularization debates.

From the outset, the eschatological interpretations of secular modernity implied the Gnostic readings of modern thought. This chapter therefore shows how Gnosticism’s appeal, in postwar German thought, as an explanatory category for the modern condition cannot be understood independently of the contemporaneous


debates on the secularization of eschatology. It is hardly a coincidence that all the thinkers who wrote on the issue of secularized eschatology, except for Löwith himself, were also involved in the debates on the Gnostic origins of modernity. For Taubes, Voegelin, Blumenberg, and Marquard, the concepts of Gnosticism and eschatology were virtually interchangeable. As Gnosticism made salvation from an evil world the keystone of its doctrine, eschatology is evidently of paramount importance in any Gnostic speculation. In addition, these thinkers also maintained that eschatology in all variants—be it Jewish, Christian, or secular—is itself ultimately Gnostic. In a letter to Carl Schmitt, Blumenberg stated this explicitly: “It is my systematic contention that every eschatology is Gnostic by its very nature.” Blumenberg maintained that the more emphasis is put on the redemptive end of the world, the more this world loses its legitimacy as God’s creation. The more eschatology emphasizes the hope for a utopian future or redemption beyond time, the more depraved the present and history itself appear. The eschatological notion of salvation is only conceivable assuming the existence of some form of worldly evil from which humanity has to be delivered. Thus, eschatology implies deep pessimism about the present state of the world, which, according to these German thinkers, gave rise to Gnosticism’s metaphysical rejection of all immanent reality as godless, fallen, and evil.

Connecting modern thought to eschatology and Gnosticism essentially implied that secular modernity adheres to a deeply pessimistic worldview and to a theological concept of salvation. This role of pessimism and the related problem of evil remained ambiguous in Löwith’s reflections on eschatology in his *Meaning in History*, which will be discussed in the first section of this chapter. To

6. This approach fundamentally contradicts Cyril O’Regan’s Gnostic reading of modernity, as he considered the Gnostic genealogy of modernity to be not only fundamentally different from but also superior to the apocalyptic and eschatological readings of modernity: Cyril O’Regan, *Gnostic Return in Modernity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 65–76.

the extent that he recognized the importance of evil and pessimism at crucial moments, his reflections on secularized eschatology implicitly announced the Gnostic interpretations of modernity of his contemporaries, such as Taubes, Voegelin, and Marquard. Nonetheless, he was ultimately not interested in the possible continuities between eschatological pessimism and modern thought. Löwith simply wanted to point to the surprising parallels between modern philosophy of history and Christian history of salvation. Taubes’s *Occidental Eschatology*, which will be discussed in the following section, is much more explicitly concerned with eschatology’s pessimistic implications. In immediately connecting eschatology to Gnosticism, Taubes accounted for the pessimistic worldview that underlies every eschatological hope for or pursuit of a redemptive change in time, whether it is religious or secular. This pessimism aligns well with the Gnostic crisis-thinking that was discussed in the previous chapter. For pessimism is the prototypical response to crisis. However, pessimism should hardly be as paralyzing as the experience of crisis, Taubes observed, as eschatology implies hope for the future and incentive for change as well as radical critique of the cultural, political, and metaphysical status quo. Gnosticism’s pessimism is eschatological insofar as it always points to something redemptive beyond the current evil, as Michael Pauen also noted in his book on Gnostic return in modern philosophy: “Gnosticism represents a mediated, a secondary pessimism, that has to be understood not simply as a reflection of the existing reality but as a very distinct intentional interpretation of this reality. The representatives of these visions are, as a rule, no passive victims of crises, as they frequently occur, but rather active pioneers of fundamental changes.”  

interpretations of eschatology by Rudolf Bultmann and Hans Urs von Balthasar, Taubes’s work echoes the messianism of interwar Jewish thinkers like Ernst Bloch, Gershom Scholem, and Walter Benjamin.

Without knowing Benjamin’s essay “On the Concept of History,” Taubes and Löwith were actually continuing Benjamin’s project of uncovering the tacit theological and messianic presuppositions of the modern conception of history. Benjamin hinted at this connection between theology and the modern historical consciousness at the beginning of his essay with the famous image of the puppet and the dwarf:

There was once, we know, an automaton constructed in such a way that it could respond to every move by a chess player with a countermove that would ensure the winning of the game. A puppet wearing Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent on all sides. Actually, a hunchbacked dwarf—a master at chess—sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophic counterpart to this apparatus. The puppet, called “historical materialism,” is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight.9

Karl Löwith: The Secularization of Eschatology

Eschatology is generally considered to be the theological discipline that speculates about the end of time, the final judgement, the establishment of the kingdom of God, and the salvation of human-kind. The end of history (eschaton) is not just the annihilation of the present world, but, in the Christian tradition, also the fulfillment of world history by divine providence. In this regard, the

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story of time that commenced with the creation of the world will be completed by the salvation of humanity at the end of history. Both Taubes and Löwith emphasized that the eschatological theology of salvation radically broke with the classical, cyclic interpretation of time. History no longer appeared as an infinite repetition of recurring patterns but rather as a linear and progressive evolution from a beginning toward an end, that is, from creation toward redemption. Both thinkers maintained that this linear structure determines, until today, our modern experience of time. By the same token, they recognized this experience as being fundamental for the modern interpretations of history and progress. In spite of this general agreement about eschatology’s nature and its modern afterlife, Taubes and Löwith emphasized different aspects of eschatology.

Taubes, on the one hand, homed in on the eschatology of Apocalypticism. The apocalyptic speculations of Jewish messianism and early Christianity were probably the first manifestations of eschatological thinking. Paradigmatically, Apocalypticism does not proclaim the end of time as a fulfillment of world history in a distant future, but rather as the imminent destruction of an inferior world. As such, the Apocalypse will either be the catastrophic annihilation of immanence or the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth after the destruction of the present world. In both cases, Apocalypticism has a straightforward political and revolutionary meaning that was expressed in a historical and theological framework. The proclamation of the end of time is almost always an act of political resistance of a violently suppressed minority—the Jews in Babylon, the early Christians in the Roman Empire. In this sense, Apocalypticism typically implies a pessimistic view of the existing world order. While the present is sinful and depraved, the Apocalypticist

believes that a transcendent force will settle a new and better world by destroying the immanent order.

Löwith, on the other hand, was primarily concerned with Christian eschatology. The orthodox Christian eschatology is decidedly less apocalyptic than the early Christian and Jewish eschatologies. The reason why the church rejected Apocalypticism had to do with the ambiguous ontological and eschatological nature of Christ. In Christian orthodoxy, Christ is not just considered to be a prophet proclaiming the end of history and the coming of God; rather, he is the incarnated God himself. Christ cannot just proclaim salvation, as he himself is supposed to be the savior. Paradoxically, Christian orthodoxy has situated the eschatological events in the past, that is, in Christ’s incarnation and resurrection: “What really begins with the appearance of Jesus Christ,” said Löwith, “is the beginning of an end.”

Accordingly, Christian eschatology is directed to the past and present as if they were the future; that is to say, Christianity remains faithful to the temporal and future-oriented structure of eschatological hope by, at least partly, redirecting this spiritual futurity to the past and the present. Through the figure of Christ, eschatological salvation has already taken place and is now a present reality for the Christian. This conception of eschatology that Löwith subscribed to was fundamentally in tune with the leading theological interpretations of eschatology at the time. In his writings on demythologization, Rudolf Bultmann showed how the New Testament overcame the mythical expectation of an imminent cosmic apocalypse by conceiving salvation as taking place in the present: “The eschatology of Jewish apocalyptic and of Gnosticism has been emancipated from its accompanying mythology, insofar as the age of salvation has already dawned for the believer and the life of the future has become a present reality.”

Since God’s incarnation in Christ is considered the most important eschatological event in the Christian history of the world, the

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12. Löwith, Meaning in History, 197.
current state of the immanent world is the last phase of world history for the Christian. After Christ’s resurrection, the world retired and waits patiently for its end. No truly historical change will or can still take place. According to Löwith’s interpretation, Christian eschatology is oscillating between the past and the future. On the one hand, the eschatological expectation of salvation is redirected to the past and present; on the other hand, Christians still hope for salvation, as they do not yet live in the kingdom of God. Referring to Saint Augustine, Löwith showed that the true Christian kingdom of God is not to be realized in a future realm coming after this world. The Augustinian City of God is rather a transcendent reality beyond profane history—beyond the City of Man. Accordingly, the epoch that began with the incarnation of Christ, though the last one in world history, is not the political realization of the kingdom of God. Christian eschatology cannot be conceived apocalyptically, for salvation is here no transcendent intervention in political history that occurs publicly as an immanent end of time. Löwith agreed with Augustine that “the historical destiny of Christian peoples is no possible subject of a specifically Christian interpretation of political history.” Disarming the political and revolutionary dimension of Apocalypticism, Christianity transformed the conception of salvation into a purely transcendent, apolitical, and spiritual fulfillment or forgiveness of the individual believer: “In Christianity the history of salvation is related to the salvation of each single soul.” As such, Christian eschatology can

14. Hans Blumenberg added that if the eschatological events have already taken place and the world persisted nonetheless, history regains legitimacy for the Christian. If salvation has already happened and the world will be abolished only in a distant future, all worldly affairs have at least temporary justification. That is why the church could institutionalize itself within this world, in the first place. Blumenberg termed this return to worldliness “secularization by eschatology.” Refuting Löwith’s main argument, he added that the “secularization of eschatology” in modernity was no longer possible, as eschatology had already secularized itself in the early Middle Ages. See Hans Blumenberg, The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, trans. Robert Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 45.
16. Löwith, 195.
17. Löwith, 195.
have nothing to do with the secular. Again, Löwith subscribed here to Rudolf Bultmann’s interpretation of eschatology. For Bultmann, Christian eschatology had no worldly or historical implications; he claimed that the kerygma “is an event whose eschatological character does not admit of secular proof.”

To the extent that Christian eschatology, in Löwith’s perspective, broke with the apocalyptic interpretation of eschatology, it also discarded its cultural, political, and ontological pessimism. The end of history no longer appears as the destruction of an evil world, but as the providential fulfillment of the transcendent history of salvation. Therefore, the oscillation between past and present in Christian eschatology coincides with an ambiguity in the interpretation of evil. On the one hand, Christians do not believe that this world is intrinsically depraved. In Scholastic theology, evil is not even considered to be a real ontological problem. In a world created by a benevolent God, evil was just the absence of the good, the privatio boni. The problem of evil, on the other hand, is certainly not absent in Christianity and Christian eschatology. Instead of interpreting evil gnostically as an ontological dysfunction of the world, Christianity attributed it to human sin and to God’s just punishment for our evil deeds. As chapter 1 showed, this is also how the crisis theologians and Bultmann interpreted evil. In this perspective, salvation no longer appears as the historical redemption from an intrinsically evil world but as the individual and transcendent forgiveness of human sinfulness.

In the introduction to Meaning in History, Löwith explicitly emphasized that eschatology’s linear interpretation of time assumes the experience of evil. If evil and suffering are experienced as fundamental and insurmountable, the perception of time as it were demands a progressive interpretation of history. Because the present evil seems insuperable, salvation is projected into the future. The course of history obtains meaning and direction to the extent that an evolution from an evil to a better world can take place: “The

outstanding element, however, out of which an interpretation of history could arise at all, is the basic experience of evil and suffering, and of man’s quest for happiness. The interpretation of history is, in the last analysis, an attempt to understand the meaning of history as the meaning of suffering by historical action.”

A radically pessimistic worldview makes it impossible to conceive time as a purposeless course of ever returning and immutable patterns. The hope for a better, and hence significantly different, future has to be imaginable one way or another. Since this projected future presupposes an ontological subversion in the course of time as the linear transition from evil to good, history has to allow for structural change. Meaning in history is thus indissolubly connected to the possibility of historical change proper.

Consequently, the interconnected problems of pessimism, hope, and salvation were, for Löwith, absent in a noneschatological conception of time. He had the Greek-Nietzschean eternal recurrence in mind. Observing that “no similar hope and despair can be found in any classical writer,” Löwith maintained that the classical cosmologies and Greek philosophy combined an ontological optimism with a cyclic conception of time. In his perspective, the optimism of Greek cosmologies guaranteed that the experience of evil could not have had ontological bearing. These cosmological presuppositions were also reflected in the ancient experience of time. Because cosmological evil was absent, the hope for a better and different future did not exist, or was considered to be a form of hubris. Since Löwith, not unlike Nietzsche, characterized the Greek experience of time as a continuous repetition of the same cycle, the past, present, and future were even structurally indistinguishable in Greek thought: “According to the Greek view of life and the world, everything moves in recurrences, like the eternal

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recurrence of sunrise and sunset, of summer and winter, of generation and corruption.”24 As such, significant events in the political or cultural history could never be conceived as real evolutions. For Löwith, structural historical changes, let alone progress, were philosophically inconceivable in ancient thought: “To the Greek thinkers a philosophy of history would have been a contradiction in terms.” Philosophical knowledge could only be about the unchangeable: “The immutable, as visible in the fixed order of the heavenly bodies, had a higher interest and value to [the Greeks] than any progressive and radical change.”25

According to Löwith, the ontological pessimism that gave history its eschatological meaning was absent in antiquity. Apparently, the eschatological search for meaning in history arose only when humanity could no longer conceive the world as a harmonious cosmos. When the experience of evil became so fundamental, historical change first became conceivable, and eventually even necessary. But the relation between linear time and pessimism is also valid in the opposite sense, for Löwith. Endowing history with meaning is not just an answer to pessimism, but pessimism itself is conceivable only within the eschatological perspective of the ultimate meaning of history: “It is only within a pre-established horizon of ultimate meaning, that actual history seems to be meaningless. This horizon has been established by history, for it is Hebrew and Christian thinking that brought this colossal question into existence.”26 Without the touchstone of a future that gives meaning to history as a whole, the present state of affairs cannot be experienced as meaningless. Singular historical events in their own right do not have any meaning at all—as such, they are neither good nor bad.

Löwith’s discovery of the structural connection between eschatology and the pessimistic experience of meaningfulness also shows that the comparison between the modern philosophies of history and Christian eschatology assumed an interpretation of the role of pessimism in modern thought. Because pessimism and the

25. Löwith, 4 (emphasis original).
problem of evil are the driving forces of eschatology, they must have played a crucial role in the genesis of modern progress, in Löwith’s perspective. Without a pessimistic attitude to the present world or to humanity, there would be no need for future salvation and progress: “The starting point of the modern religions of progress is an eschatological anticipation of the future salvation and consequently a vision of the present state of mankind as one of depravity.”

For Löwith, the secularization of eschatology progress is not to be understood as a mere transfer of theological contents from one age to the other. In defining progress as secularized eschatology, he discovered, rather, a substantial continuity of ontological problems between premodernity and modernity. Both the eschatological problem of evil and the possibility of salvation appear fundamental for modern thought.

Nonetheless, Löwith argued that modern thought rejected the Christian interpretation of salvation, and tried to solve the problem of evil by new—now secular—means. The modern overcoming of evil was no spiritual salvation of the individual believer; rather, it became a historical and controllable progress toward an imminently perfect world. Rather than simply adopting Christian eschatology, modernity modified the traditional answer to the problem of eschatology. Interpreted in this way, Löwith’s position seems to dodge Hans Blumenberg’s most fundamental criticism of the theory of secularization. Blumenberg argued, explicitly targeting Löwith, that “the continuity of history across the epochal threshold lies not in the permanence of ideal substances but rather in the inheritance of problems.” As such, Blumenberg’s criticism missed the point. Löwith’s conception of secularization implied not only mere transfer of the “ideal substance” of eschatology but also a continuity of the underlying problems. Nonetheless, the point of Blumenberg’s criticism was more subtle. He argued that progress cannot be understood as a mere immanent answer to the age-old theological question of eschatology. Progress, in Blumenberg’s view, arose quite independently from this question and was rather the product

27. Löwith, 61.
of human self-assertion in history. Progress is an originally modern answer to a legitimately modern question. It did not arise as an answer to the theological question of the meaning of world history or to the question of salvation. Rather, progress had a more narrow scope that concerned the possibility of transgenerational progress in science. But even as a genuinely novel interpretation of historical evolution, Blumenberg maintained, progress had to conform itself to the dominant theological interpretations of history. The modest interpretation of progress was therefore generalized and totalized in order to answer a theological and eschatological question about the meaning of history that could not yet be dismissed. For this reason, Blumenberg rejected Löwith’s category of secularization, as it obscured the real historical dialectic between medieval and modern intellectual history: “What mainly occurred in the process that is interpreted as secularization . . . should be described not as the transposition of authentically theological contents into secularized alienation from their origin but rather as the reoccupation answer positions that had become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated.”

In this quote, Blumenberg not only rejected Löwith’s descriptive account of secularization but also dismissed its normative implications. Secularization not only designated the transfer of contents from one epoch to another, for Löwith, but also implied the alienation of that content from its origin. While Blumenberg sought to defend the “legitimacy of the modern age,” such alienation delegitimized modern thought.

Löwith indeed radically criticized modernity and modern progress. He argued that the modern secularization of Christian eschatology corrupted the transcendent and individual meaning of Christian salvation. The modern notion of progress is therefore an illegitimate heir of Christian theology: progress is eschatology’s bastard. The modern philosophers of history, such as Voltaire, Condorcet, Hegel, and Marx, borrowed the theological framework of the history of salvation but applied it to the immanent course of profane history. These modern thinkers attributed meaning and

29. Blumenberg, 65 (emphasis original).
direction to history by transforming the spiritual faith in the transcendent fulfillment of history into the rational belief in a historical progress toward a perfect world. This immanent, and hence politico-historical eschatology is inconceivable in Christianity, Löwith argued. By definition, Christian eschatology and providence are not concerned with the immanent course of history (Weltgeschichte) but with the structure of the transcendent history of salvation and the possibility of a spiritual redemption (Heilsgeschehen). Therefore, Christianity does not allow for a real philosophy of (world) history. Because Christian eschatology is essentially transcendent, an immanent Christian eschatology is a contradiction in terms. The modern confusion between world history and the history of salvation, however, was not just an innocent category-mistake. For Löwith, it was a potentially dangerous illusion. In illegitimately applying the eschatological structure of Heilsgeschehen to Weltgeschichte, modernity generated the illusion that the meaning of world history and the possibility of salvation are immanent and therefore essentially controllable. Although Löwith was not as explicit on this point as some of his contemporaries, such as Eric Voegelin, he assumed that this modern illusion is actualized most radically in the totalitarian movements—the secular religions—of the twentieth century.

For Löwith, the modern philosophies of history were not so much misguided because of their unconscious continuity with the premodern framework of Christianity, whose influence the moderns categorically tried to renounce. If this were the only problem, modernity would have just misunderstood itself: it emphasized discontinuity between modernity and theology where there was actually continuity. However, Löwith considered this continuity preeminently a corruption, and a dangerous deformation of the

30. See the German translation of Meaning in History: Karl Löwith, Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen: Die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1953).
original Christian message. By secularizing eschatology, modernity negated Christianity’s most essential feature: its transcendent God. For Löwith, modernity’s rejection of transcendence ultimately led to radical nihilism and groundlessness. In Heidegger’s Children, Richard Wolin perfectly summarized Löwith’s criticism of modern nihilism: “For the Greeks, the structure of the world was eternal; for Christianity, it was created by God. Modernity, as an ideology of radical immanence, brusquely dismisses both standpoints and finds itself, unsurprisingly, destitute and disoriented, lacking a permanent ground.” Although Löwith saw his former teacher Martin Heidegger as a prime example of such nihilism, Wolin also emphasized how his critique of the history of Western thought as degeneracy and decline was fundamentally influenced by Heidegger’s history of being. Metaphors of decline are indeed omnipresent in Meaning in History. For Löwith, modernity copied Christian theology, but also distorted its original meaning: “The modern world is as Christian as it is un-Christian. . . . The whole moral and intellectual, social and political, history of the West is to some extent Christian, and yet it dissolves Christianity by the very application of Christian principles to secular matters.”

For Löwith, a secularized eschatology could no longer be a Christian eschatology. However, what he described in Meaning in History as the modern application of Christian eschatology to secular affairs could just as well be considered a return to the early or pre-Christian eschatology of Apocalypticism. Since Apocalypticism conceived redemption not as individual salvation but as the revolutionary break within history that appears publicly, it can perfectly pass for political and even secular eschatology. This, we will see, was Taubes’s position. Unlike the Christian providential interpretation of history, apocalyptic eschatology shares a revolutionary

34. Wolin, Heidegger’s Children, 97.
35. Löwith, Meaning in History, 201–2.
vigor with modern political movements such as Marxism and social utopianism. However, this apocalyptic interpretation of eschatology hardly suited Löwith’s project, as it could not account for modern progress. Although redemption can appear within history according to the apocalyptic speculations, it is never the result of historical evolution, let alone of progress. Salvation rather opposes historical immanence. In this sense, progress could hardly be secularized eschatology, although it could be secularized providence. Löwith indeed often made such claims: “The belief in an immanent and indefinite progress replaces more and more the belief in God’s transcendent providence.”

Blumenberg rightly observed that Löwith remained ambiguous on this point. He failed to opt for either eschatology or providence: “In regard to progress, the advocates of secularization theory should have decided early on whether they were going to make the Last Judgment or Providence the Terminus a quo . . . . The eschatological God of the end of history cannot at the same time be the God who makes himself known and credible in history as its caretaker.” Blumenberg argued that if Löwith wanted to appeal to Christian providence in his analysis of modern historical thought, he could not at the same time have maintained that “the starting point of the modern religions of progress is an eschatological anticipation of a future salvation.” Löwith’s ambiguity also obscured his interpretation of modern pessimism. The eschatological, apocalyptic interpretation of history is pessimistic; redemption implies here a revolutionary break with a depraved history. The providential, progressive interpretation of history is optimistic; progress even implied human self-assertion and the self-justification of the present, for Blumenberg. On this point, Taubes was more coherent. In connecting modern thought to eschatology, he opted more univocally for an apocalyptic and revolutionary

36. Löwith, 60.
37. Blumenberg, Legitimacy, 32. For a similar criticism, see Amos Funkenstein, Heilsplan und natürliche Entwicklung: Formen der Gegenwartsbestimmung im Geschichtsdenken des hohen Mittelalters (Munich: Nymphenburg, 1965).
38. Löwith, Meaning in History, 61.
interpretation of eschatology and hence for a pessimistic understanding of history that ultimately implied the Gnostic rejection of all historical immanence.

Jacob Taubes: Apocalypticism, Gnosis, and Modernity

In 1949, Hans Jonas received an invitation from Jacob Taubes to discuss the latter’s recently published book, *Occidental Eschatology*. In his book, Taubes referred repeatedly to Jonas’s *Gnosticism and the Spirit of Late Antiquity*. Not unlike Jonas, Taubes’s eschatological analysis of the history of Western thought recognized Gnostic features in modern philosophy. Jonas, however, knew neither Taubes nor the book in question, and asked his colleague Karl Löwith whether he was familiar with Taubes’s work:

> Before the meeting I asked Karl Löwith, “Do you happen to know a Jacob Taubes?” “Of course I know him,” he replied. “Well could you tell me something about him? He’s sent me a letter. I’ve never heard of him, but he refers to a book he’s written and asks to meet me. Do you know the book?” “Oh, yes,” he said, “I know the book.” “Well, is it any good?” At that he said, laughing, “Oh, it’s a very good book. And that’s no accident—half of it’s by you and the other half’s by me.”

The thematic scope of Taubes’s *Occidental Eschatology* was strikingly similar to that of Löwith’s *Meaning in History*: both developed a genealogy of the modern historical consciousness by uncovering its eschatological roots, both argued that the secularization of eschatology originated in Joachim of Fiore’s medieval philosophy of history, and both agreed that it culminated in the nineteenth-century philosophies of Hegel and Marx. However, since Löwith’s *Meaning in History* (1949) was published two years later than Taubes’s *Occidental Eschatology* (1947), one would expect that

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Löwith was influenced by Taubes rather than vice versa, as Jonas recounted. As a matter of fact, the influence of Taubes’s conception of eschatology on Löwith’s book was minimal. Löwith referred only twice to *Occidental Eschatology*, as he had already developed his basic thesis on the secularization of eschatology in several texts from the early 1940s, that is, before the publication of *Occidental Eschatology*. In this regard, the line of influence has to be reversed. The numerous references to Löwith’s *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (From Hegel to Nietzsche) in Taubes’s *Occidental Eschatology* clearly prove the former’s profound influence on Taubes’s early thought. In the autobiographical introduction to *Ad Carl Schmitt*, Taubes even explicitly praised this very same book: “It was like the scales falling from my eyes as I grasped the line that Löwith traced from Hegel via Marx and Kierkegaard to Nietzsche.”

Löwith and Jonas suggested that Taubes’s analysis, though interesting, largely plagiarized their own work. Taubes indeed heavily relied on both Jonas’s conception of Gnosticism and Löwith’s interpretation of the secularization of eschatology. Although Taubes had a dubious reputation as an intellectual, has often been accused of plagiarism, and can hardly be called an original thinker, his *Occidental Eschatology* is highly relevant if one wants to gain insight into the German Gnosticism debates. Taubes’s main strength as an intellectual was his ability to recognize the potential for debate and comparison in existing scholarship rather than conceiving of innovative theories himself. Thus, Taubes can be considered the originator and mediator of the postwar debates on modern Gnosticism. The originality of *Occidental Eschatology* precisely consisted in bringing the two perspectives of modern Gnosticism and secularized eschatology together.

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In reading Löwith’s reflections on eschatology in the light of Gnosticism, Taubes emphasized the apocalyptic and pessimistic aspects of eschatology. Unlike Christian eschatology, which was central in Löwith, the ancient heresy of Gnosticism explicitly emphasized the fundamental depravity of the immanent world, and the absolute necessity of eschatological salvation from this evil world.\footnote{For Taubes’s notion of Gnosticism, see Carsten Colpe, “Das eschatologische Wiederlager der Politik: Zu Jacob Taubes’ Gnosisbild,” in Abendländische Eschatologie: Ad Jacob Taubes, ed. Richard Faber, Eveline Goodman-Thau, and Thomas Macho (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2001), 105–29.}

In light of this, Taubes’s conception of eschatology was apocalyptic rather than Christian. He even argued that the orthodox Christianity of the Middle Ages did not have eschatology. Because of its focus on a purely transcendent and individual salvation, traditional Christian eschatology lost its fundamentally historical nature. For Taubes, the imminent and revolutionary threat of the Apocalypse is discarded in the Christian providential interpretation of history. Since the imminence and the historicity of the end of time are essential in Taubes’s concept of eschatology, he primarily referred to Apocalypticism and Gnosticism, which behold “the turning point not in some indeterminate future but entirely proximate.”\footnote{Taubes, Occidental Eschatology, 10.}

This emphasis on Apocalypticism aligned Taubes’s thought with Jewish messianism and with the revival of this tradition in early twentieth-century German-Jewish thought. Thinkers like Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, and Ernst Bloch all found in Jewish messianism a theological tool both to make sense of and to remedy secular modernity.\footnote{See Anson Rabinbach, “Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch, and Modern German Jewish Messianism,” New German Critique 34 (1984): 78–124; Paul Mendes-Flohr, “To Brush History against the Grain: The Eschatology of the Frankfurt School and Ernst Bloch,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 51, no. 4 (1983): 631–50.} Unlike Christian eschatology, messianism is by definition apocalyptic. For Scholem, this meant that in Judaism redemption appears as a public and visible event, taking place in or at the end of history. He opposed this to the Christian concept
of redemption that takes place personally and spiritually. The apocalyptic nature of messianic redemption also shows itself in its radical opposition to historical immanence. Unlike Christian providence and modern progress, messianism never posits redemption as the result of historical evolutions but rather as the repudiation of history itself. Benjamin stated in his “Theological-Political Fragment” that “nothing that is historical can relate itself, from its own ground, to anything messianic. Therefore, the Kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it cannot be established as a goal.”

This messianic-apocalyptic opposition against the world and history culminated in Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia*. “This book,” he said, “will never make peace with the world.” Bloch’s concept of utopia implied an overcoming of history and a radical critique of all exiting reality. Utopianism is premised on a cultural pessimism characteristic of all apocalyptic thinking: “The task and problem here is to make our acknowledged permanence triumph over empirical adversity, over our own insufficiency, that is: to overcome, . . . through the Apocalypse, as the absolute work of the Son of Man, the history that cannot be experienced in its entirety.”

This apocalyptic dynamic that Bloch ascribed to modern revolution and utopia was both secular and theological. Although he emphasized that modern utopia can be man-made, rejecting its theological aspects would inevitably compromise the utopian pursuit of that which is radically other than this world.

This modern Jewish messianism clearly suited Taubes’s conception of eschatology, in particular, and his philosophical thinking, in general. His Gnostic-apocalyptic motto *No spiritual investment in the world as it is* indeed repeated the messianic critique of all

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historical immanence. In spite of being a German-Jewish thinker himself, however, Taubes never mentioned the messianic tradition in *Occidental Eschatology*. Instead, he focused almost exclusively on the apocalyptic heresies in Christianity, thus implicitly challenging the radical distinction that Scholem made between the apocalyptic messianism of Judaism and the nonapocalyptic eschatology of Christianity. Again, the originality of Taubes’s position consisted in bringing together two radically divergent perspectives, applying as it were the insights of the modern Jewish messianists to Christian eschatology. For *Occidental Eschatology* primarily discussed figures like Jesus and Paul, and was interested in the apocalyptic features of the ancient Christian heresy of Gnosticism or of modern revolutionary heretics like Thomas Müntzer or the Anabaptists. On this point, Taubes’s position probably came closest to Bloch’s, which recognized the same revolutionary potential in early Christianity and in the revolutionary Christian heresies as in Jewish messianism. Bloch even wrote an entire book on Thomas Müntzer’s “theology of revolution,” which Taubes frequently referenced. More importantly, Bloch was also fascinated by Jewish messianism’s “latent Gnosticism.” The worldview that underlay Bloch’s apocalyptic concept of utopia had obvious Gnostic overtones. This is especially true of the section in *The Spirit of Utopia* entitled “Forms of Universal Self-Encounter, or, Eschatology.”

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54. For Bloch’s modern Gnosticism, see Pauen, *Dithyrambiker des Untergangs*, 199–254; Richard Faber, *Politische Dämonologie: Über modernen Marcionismus* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2007), 45–92. Not unlike his colleagues from the Frankfurt school Benjamin and Bloch, Theodor W. Adorno also recognized the connection between utopian hope and Gnostic pessimism in his lectures from 1964–65: “Without the hope that things might improve with time, the heinous aspects of the world and its ways really would become immortalized in thought and creation itself would be turned into the work of a gnostic demon.”
Here, he wrote about “the God of this world, ever more clearly becoming Satan,” and associated this notion with “the demiurgic principle,” finally adding, “So maliciously random is the world’s causal nexus.” For Bloch, Apocalypticism, messianism, and modern utopianism all shared this Gnostic pessimism. In its turn, this pessimism and the experience of worldly evil immediately entailed the possibility of radical critique, revolution, and redemption. Bloch concluded his book accordingly: “What was specific to The Spirit of Utopia became especially definite, something entrusted peculiarly to evil, as to its remedy: revolutionary gnosis.”

In Occidental Eschatology, Taubes also used the notions of eschatology, Apocalypticism, and Gnosticism interchangeably, albeit for different reasons than Bloch. These religious movements, he argued, introduced together a new experience of history that radically broke with the classic Greek conceptions of being and time. Despite their widely divergent modes of expression, the Gnostic and the apocalyptic speculations ultimately shared a sense of existential alienation: “In their narration of the history of the world the apocalyptic myths introduce self-estrangement as a dramatic leitmotif, and it is on this very theme that the more theoretical, ontological speculations of gnosis are founded. The boundaries between Apocalypticism and gnosis are, of course, fluid.” Taubes actually repeated Jonas’s interpretation of the existential role of alienation in Gnosticism and applied it to Apocalypticism. In Gnosticism, human beings are estranged from themselves because they are ontologically separated from their divine origins. The Gnostics saw themselves as prisoners in a godless world. This alienation gave rise to a radically dualistic ontology, for Jonas and Taubes. God himself is alienated and estranged from the world to the extent that he is radically separated from it. On this point, Taubes almost literally copied Jonas: “God and the world are not distant.

56. Bloch, 279.
57. Taubes, Occidental Eschatology, 36.
but estranged and divided, and therefore hold each other in mutual
tension. Just as there is nothing of God in the cosmos, so God is
the nothing of the world.”\textsuperscript{58} This radical separation between God
and world entailed, in Gnosticism and Apocalypticism alike, an
extremely pessimistic ontology that simply reversed the optimism
of Greek cosmology and rejected the Christian notion of creation.
“Even if in the earliest statements of Apocalypticism the world is
still within the sphere of God’s omnipotence, then God’s alienation
from the World progresses until the World is identified with the
fullness of evil, which God opposes as the fullness of good. The
equation cosmos=skotos, world=darkness, expresses the concept
of life to be found in Gnosis.”\textsuperscript{59} Emphasizing again the continuity
between Gnosticism and Apocalypticism, Taubes argued how the
problem of evil, which was only implicitly operative in medieval
Christian eschatology, became more explicit in Apocalypticism,
and was the very cornerstone of the Gnostic ontology.

Taubes then showed how Gnosticism cast the historical content
of Apocalypticism in an ontological mold. The historical separa-
tion between the present world and the future kingdom of God
was transformed into an ontological antithesis between transcen-
dence and immanence, between good and evil. The ontological per-
spective of Gnosticism, however, did not abolish the historical and
eschatological features of Apocalypticism. On the contrary, the on-
tological evil of Gnostic cosmology is conceivable only as histori-
cal evil, according to Taubes’s interpretation. Just like Löwith, but
more explicitly so, Taubes argued that the problem of evil is funda-
mentally intertwined with historicity and with the linear direction
of time. In Gnosticism, immanence is depraved insofar as it is finite
and historical. The world is finite because its being is temporary
and because it has a history with a beginning and an end. The
world’s essential temporality is the antithesis of God’s eternity. For
Taubes, history is by definition the absence of the divine, hence sin-
ful and depraved: “History is identical with the aeon of sin, which

\textsuperscript{58} Taubes, 39. See Hans Jonas, \textit{Gnosis und spätantiker Geist} (Göttingen:
Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1934), 1:151: “God—the nothing of the world.”
\textsuperscript{59} Taubes, \textit{Occidental Eschatology}, 28.
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is embedded between creation and redemption.”⁶⁰ Therefore, the end of time is conceivable only as salvation. The end of history is indeed the transition from temporality to eternity, that is, from godlessness to God, and from evil to good.

Taubes’s *Occidental Eschatology* now tried to make the case that these Gnostic and apocalyptic dynamics returned in modern thought: “Apocalypticism and Gnosis inaugurate a new form of thinking which, though submerged by Aristotelian and Scholastic logic, has been preserved into the present and was taken up and further developed by Hegel and Marx.”⁶¹ For Taubes, the early modern age and German idealism were eschatological to the extent that Apocalypticism and Gnosticism resurfaced in modern culture; not because Christian theology was secularized. In this respect, Taubes was less concerned than Löwith with the question of secularization, and with the ways it distorted eschatology. Rather, he wanted to fathom, in a more substantial way, what it means for modernity to be eschatological. For Taubes, the pessimistic cosmology of Gnosticism and Apocalypticism as well as their historical structure returned in what he called the “apocalyptic waves of the modern age.”⁶² The discovery of the genealogical connection between modernity and eschatology is also the discovery of the epocheal role of pessimism in modern thought and German idealism: “It is vitally important for the history of German idealism that the eschatology of early Christianity, even if clandestine and apocryphal, continue . . . alongside the Enlightenment, so that knowledge of the radical nature of evil is preserved.”⁶³

Taubes suggested that the historical and pessimistic dynamics of eschatology were suppressed, marginalized, and hereticized at two different moments in the history of the West—first, in the medieval church and the Scholastic tradition; second, during the Enlightenment. Instead of secularizing medieval Christian eschatology, modernity radically broke with traditional Christianity and revived the

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⁶⁰. Taubes, 28.
⁶¹. Taubes, 35.
⁶². Taubes, 85.
⁶³. Taubes, 130.
revolutionary Gnostic and apocalyptic spirit of early Christianity. This Gnostic and apocalyptic modernity rejected Scholasticism’s static and ahistorical rationality. In the same vein, Taubes’s interpretation of modernity was also highly critical of the rationalism and optimism of the Enlightenment. Referring to the earthquake of Lisbon, he claims that modern human beings are confronted with experiences of evil and irrationality “which the system of reason is unable to fathom.” Thus rejecting the Enlightenment as well as Scholasticism, Taubes maintained that modern thinkers could interpret the world neither as a reflection of a transcendent reality nor as a good and rationally ordered universe. Thus, the modern world is cut off from transcendence, and becomes a de-divinized, meaningless, and possibly evil facticity that is not created for the sake of human beings. In this nihilistic worldview, Taubes recognized, not unlike Jonas, the modern return of Gnosticism.

Because of this disappearance of transcendence, not only did the modern world lose its goodness and rationality, but the traditional Christian hope for a transcendent salvation also became insignificant. For this reason, Taubes argued, modernity reintroduced history: “The Copernican world is an earth deprived of the heaven, which used to be an archetype to the earth. . . . Because the space between heaven and earth has become meaningless, Copernican man seeks to revolutionize the world according to an ideal that can become reality in the course of time.” Instead of seeking personal and spiritual salvation in Christian transcendence, modern humanity redirected its gaze toward fulfillment in the future. To the extent that the future is the touchstone of modern thought, modernity recovered Apocalypticism’s eschatology. Consequently, the meaning of the modern world is no longer determined a priori but depends solely upon its historical development. The historical realization of this meaning is not gradual, but it is a revolutionary, apocalyptic

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64. Taubes, 86.
66. Taubes, Occidental Eschatology, 137.
rupture at the end of history as the eschatological transition from evil to goodness.

In line with Scholem, Benjamin, and Bloch, Taubes evaluated the role of eschatology in modern thought very positively. Unlike these interwar Jewish thinkers, he did not associate eschatology with Jewish messianism but with Christianity. Thus, he zeroed in on an existing debate within Christian theology on the nature of eschatology and secularization rather than on a Jewish debate.67 Taubes obviously relied on Löwith’s theory of the secularization of Christian eschatology, but he also took up Christian theological sources like Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele* (*Apocalypse of the German Soul*).68 These Christian writings on eschatology as well as Löwith’s theory were typically critical of the secularization of eschatology in modernity. Taubes applied the positive evaluation of modern messianism to these more negative Christian interpretations of secularized eschatology. Unlike Löwith and the Christian theologians, he did not criticize modernity on account of its eschatological nature. On the contrary, he recognized in these apocalyptic waves of modernity the fundamental dynamics of Western thought. The modern renaissance of eschatology is not a corruption of theology, as Löwith and many Christian thinkers believed, but merely its legitimate transformation.

In his personal life as well as in his philosophical writings, Taubes was fascinated with the antinomian, revolutionary, and nihilistic nature of Apocalypticism, which he recognized in secular as well as religious phenomena. In an article on Taubes’s early thought, Joshua Robert Gold argued that the scope of Taubes’s account of Apocalypticism went beyond the domain of theology: “Taubes transforms the theological concept of Apocalypse into a critical category, and he does so by thinking through the


political and ethical implications of the claim that there is an end to time.”

69 In this regard, Taubes’s notion of eschatology did not have the function of a general definition of the nature of modernity, which the concepts of secularization and secularized eschatology definitely had. Taubes was interested in the different continuities between the theological concept of theology and secular politics, thus affiliating himself more with Carl Schmitt’s project of political theology than with Löwith’s theory of secularization. From a Schmittian perspective, Taubes could have seen the Apocalypse as the ultimate state of exception that overcomes liberal normativity’s static lawfulness. Taubes was typically sympathetic toward political revolution, whether it was on the Far Left or Right. In addition to this political-theological interest, however, he was just as much concerned with the ways in which the structure of apocalyptic theology returned in modern aesthetics, and in the artistic avant-garde.

Although Taubes was decidedly less critical of modernity than Löwith, he was highly dismissive of any ahistorical or static modes of thinking. The church and the Enlightenment epitomized, for Taubes, these moments where the eschatological and apocalyptic dynamics of Western thought were absent or artificially fixated. Western eschatology can be brought to a halt, argued Taubes, only by the illegitimate historical proclamation of the kingdom of God. The claim that salvation is realized in the present makes a relative and merely historical perspective absolute and inviolable by history: “Medievalism and the Enlightenment are two static spheres of life in Europe. The Medieval Church and the church of the Enlightenment establish themselves as absolute and are based on the equation the church is the Kingdom of God.”

70. See Jacob Taubes, “Notes on Surrealism,” in From Cult to Culture, 98–123.

71. Taubes, Occidental Eschatology, 86 (emphasis original).
annihilated. Thus, Taubes warned, not unlike Löwith, “Beware of the illusion that redemption happens on the stage of history.” 72 In *Occidental Eschatology*, Taubes never mentioned a third moment after the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment when the illusion of a historical salvation was created. Nonetheless, it is not hard to imagine what Taubes might have had in mind when he was writing his dissertation, which would later be published as *Occidental Eschatology*, in Switzerland during the Second World War. Could he not have written just as much that “Nazism established itself as absolute and was based on the equation: the Third Reich is the Kingdom of God”? For this is exactly what some of Taubes’s contemporaries later argued, associating the notion of a Third Reich with Joachim of Fiore’s Trinitarian philosophy of history or showing how fascism presented itself as an “immanent eschaton.” 73

**Criticism versus Apologetics of Political Eschatology**

Given the particular historical context of Löwith’s and Taubes’s discussions of eschatology—two Jewish thinkers, writing only a few years after the end of the Second World War—it is hardly a coincidence that their concern with the problem of evil is so central. Unlike Hannah Arendt’s more conceptual analyses, Taubes’s and Löwith’s historical outlook kept them from confronting the evils of totalitarianism and the Holocaust head-on. 74 Nonetheless, these events must have been in the back of their minds when they tried to make sense of the history of Western thought. Although neither thinker developed an explicit interpretation of totalitarianism, their respective positions can be thought through in such a way that they do allow for an implied evaluation of it. Eric Voegelin did

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exactly that. Heavily relying on Taubes and Löwith, Voegelin used the concepts of secularized eschatology and modern Gnosticism to develop an analysis of totalitarian politics.\footnote{75. Voegelin, New Science of Politics, 110–27.}

Strikingly, neither Taubes’s nor Löwith’s philosophical framework allowed for any real consolation, or even hope to overcome the evils of the Second World War. For Löwith, hope is no longer an option today. On the contrary, it was the modern eschatological structure of hope itself that had made the horrible events of the Second World War possible in the first place. In this regard, totalitarianism appeared as the ultimate human attempt to create a historical eschaton as the immanent overcoming of evil. For Löwith, this was the most explosive and dangerous feature of modern hubris, as it paradoxically generated new and even greater forms of evil: “There are in history not only ‘flowers of evil’ but also evils which are the fruit of too much good will and of a mistaken Christianity that confounds the fundamental distinction between redemptive events and profane happenings, between Heilsgeschehen and Weltgeschichte.”\footnote{76. Löwith, Meaning in History, 203.} Because the fundamentalist faith—“too much good will”—in a final solution for the problem of evil has proven to be fraught with dangers, Löwith proposed to abandon the eschatological principle of hope altogether. In view of its modern and totalitarian excesses, every form of eschatology had become suspect. He thereby rejected any simple return to Christianity or, for that matter, Judaism as a solution to the modern crisis. In contrast to many of his Jewish contemporaries, including Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Taubes himself, Löwith wondered “whether the future is really the proper horizon of a truly human existence.”\footnote{77. Löwith, 204.} The Judeo-Christian perspective of future-oriented hope had been perverted to such an extent that it had become impossible to return to its transcendent origins. In line with another Jewish thinker, Leo Strauss, Löwith rather suggested that human beings had to recover their place within the ahistorical cosmos of Greek philosophy by interpreting existence
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as constituted in relation to an eternal and immutable order. He proposed to abandon the linear conception of time, and revalue pagan, Greek-Nietzschean eternal recurrence.

Taubes, in his turn, rejected such a naïve return to Greek philosophy. In an often-quoted interview he stated: “There is no eternal return, time does not enable nonchalance; rather it is distress.”78 In this respect, he equally dismissed any naïve abstract hope for the future. Quoting the same line in an article on Taubes’s time in Jerusalem, Nitzan Lebovic adds: “Two short years after the end of the most horrible destruction the Jewish people had ever known, Taubes offered no comforting words. Against the passive hope of those confronting the end of the world, Taubes emphasized in 1947 the need for an immediate decision . . . Taubes had in mind a Schmittian operation from within the destructive situation: it involved using and abusing destruction as a tool, acknowledging its inevitability.”79 In this respect, the evil of the Holocaust would be the ultimate confirmation of the Gnostic-apocalyptic worldview for Taubes. Paradigmatically, it is in the most intense moments of violent oppression and radical evil that the end of time is nearest. The Holocaust itself could appear for Taubes as the apocalyptic catastrophe par excellence, as Martin Treml maintained.80 The force of the Apocalypse is always primarily destructive, nihilistic, and negative. Moreover, it is only from within this negation itself that an absent God, who is in every respect opposite to the world, can manifest himself. God’s fundamental absence is the condition of possibility of apocalyptic redemption. Thus, the case of Taubes is an interesting exception to Anson Rabinbach’s observation that “unlike after World War I, neither intellectuals nor politicians were inclined to adopt a redemptive vision, . . . World War II might therefore be called ‘the

78. “Jacob Taubes,” in Denken, das an der Zeit ist, ed. Florian Rötzer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987), 317.
nonredemptive apocalypse’. “Unlike any of his contemporaries, Taubes strangely upheld the notion of a redemptive Apocalypse, which Rabinbach ascribed to interwar thinkers like Benjamin and Bloch, even after the Second World War.

Taubes would have emphasized the fundamental importance of eschatology and Apocalypticism as the only possible response to totalitarian politics. Western modernity could therefore retain its legitimacy, even after the horrors of the Second World War, but only to the extent that it continued the legacy of occidental eschatology. Contrary to Löwith, eschatology did not appear as the cause of the modern crisis, but rather as its solution. By the same token, it was not the presence of (secularized) eschatology, but its absence that made totalitarianism dangerous for Taubes. Totalitarianism entailed a return to paganism, and was therefore a reaction against Apocalypticism and its survival in modern times: “If Fascism is a reaction against the Jewish or Christian apocalyptic, which in many respects attracts something apocalyptic itself, it is still a pagan reactionary form and opposes itself against the philosophy of history.”

In view of these opposed political evaluations of eschatology, the main difference between Löwith and Taubes can be highlighted again. As Peter Gordon sharply put it, “Taubes embraced the eschatological tradition Löwith reviled.” The real problem for Löwith was not so much eschatology’s illegitimate secularization, but eschatology as such, and by extension even history in general. This


82. “Jacob Taubes,” in *Denken, das an der Zeit ist*, 319.

is where Blumenberg’s interpretation of Löwith tends to miss the point. Löwith’s theory of modernity did not just revolve around the concept of secularization, and the way in which it deprived Christianity of its transcendent eschatology. Rather, it revolved around the meaning and illegitimacy of eschatology itself, and the way in which it constituted modernity. As Odo Marquard cryptically summarized in his own writings on eschatology and the philosophy of history, “For Löwith, the philosophy of history is the legitimate continuation of the illegitimacy of biblical salvation, for Taubes it is the legitimate continuation of its legitimacy: for Löwith the theology of history as such was already bad; for Taubes the philosophy of history is still, and even a fortiori, good: for both the category of secularization does not, as it does for Blumenberg, function as category of distinction.” While heavily relying on Löwith’s conceptual framework, Taubes reversed its valuation. Despite the former’s undeniable influence, Taubes’s thought is much closer to the messianic legacy of Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin than to Löwith, as chapters 3 and 4 will show in detail. Taubes’s later Die politische Theologie des Paulus (The Political Theology of Paul) showed more clearly that he continued to be fascinated with those phenomena Löwith radically mistrusted—not only with eschatology and the philosophy of history, but just as much with heresy and nihilism.