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FORUM: HISTORY'S RELIGION

Beyond Secularized Eschatology Introductory Remarks

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I

History as a body of knowledge, a loose bundle of working routines and writing practices, of genres, memories, imaginaries, and institutions, has struggled with its relationship to "religion" for a long time. In the European tradition, but also elsewhere, historical writing often served to fill the gaps in the knowledge about the past that had been, in the main, supplied by scriptural tradition. At the same time, historical writing also became a competitor with this tradition. The resulting relationship was, and continues to be, uneasy.[1] In its familiar present-day form, for example, the quality of being "historical," i.e. "historicity," requires the exclusion of divine agency as a permissible explanation of events in the course of worldly affairs. In what François Hartog calls the modern "regime of historicity,"[2] the culture of historical writing after 1750 became dominated by scholarship and aligned with mechanist understandings of the philosophy of nature. Enlightenment-era historical writing increasingly conceived of the world as a nexus of cause–effect relations that afforded space to the divine agency only in the function of "prime mover."[3] History then appeared to fall in line with the other forces of reason-driven "secularization" that stripped religious knowledge of the privilege of explaining things in the world, ultimately transforming it into "dogma" and "belief," both only tenuously connected to reality. Knowledge based on the divinely "revealed" texts and the divinely "inspired" thought of traditionally recognized religious authorities lost its previous epistemic standing.[4] Yet this loss occurred, to the extent that it

[1]See, for a model account of this situation, Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, 1982), Ch. 4.

[2]François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saska Brown (New York, 2015; first published 2003).

[3]On this see still Peter Hanns Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley, 1975); and Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, 2005); see further Jonathan Sheehan and Dror Wahrman, *Invisible Hands: Self-Organization in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 2015).

[4]Thus destroying the cultural "embedding" of reason that Charles Taylor highlighted in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, 2007). For a critique of secularism from a more directly political point of view see, moreover, Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton, 2017).

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did, in the form of a highly complicated negotiation, with compromises stacked on top of other compromises, generating a continuously confusing and mobile state of affairs.

For decades, scholars have criticized, for a great variety of reasons, this notion of the secularity of history. It has been pointed out that secularization has functioned as a norm that acted as an agent of domination and, simultaneously, as a facade behind which the older structure of religious bodies of knowledge about the past mostly remained in place. A further line of critique has targeted the inherent Eurocentrism of the concept of "religion," which privileges the textual practices and doctrinaire character of European monotheism. Christian theologies, especially the Protestant ones—but Catholic efforts at "confessionalization" hardly lagged far behind—have long placed the elusive category of "faith" above ritual practice, mind above body, dogma above convenience, and so on. In an odd loop structure, historical scholarship, simultaneously transforming and abandoning the matrix of religion understood primarily as faith, reinforced the hierarchies and domination inscribed in the modern European concept of "religion."[5] For it elevated religion qua faith to the position of worthiest opponent, most competent negotiating partner, and favorite sibling to reason. That which did not have "faith," the more pragmatic, ritual-bound, flexible, accommodating, non-doctrinaire bodies of practice that existed elsewhere and at other times, was worthy neither of an effort at appropriation nor of serious antagonism.

The critical project has had problems of its own, however. It has explored in a sophisticated fashion the bad faith of modern secularity, the sense in which what looks to be value-free is in fact an extension of a particular (Protestant) understanding of religion as faith. But in doing so, it has oddly accepted the story of reason and faith that secularity supposedly tells about itself, reproducing that odd loop structure that it wants to unravel. Theology, for example, as a systematized and institutionalized body of knowledge about religious matters, remains of marginal interest in these critical projects. Whatever the reason for this, the result is a quiet refusal to symmetrically correlate two distinct bodies of knowledge (history, theology), which would have threatened the well-established asymmetric correlation of faith and knowledge. This asymmetry had its uses. History could pose as a "scientific" endeavor debunking the "myths" of religion, while faith could figure as a domain in its own right, reigning supreme over the aporias and limitations of knowledge. Since the relation between theology and faith is equally asymmetric, not much is gained when one merely shifts the debate to "theology of history" without providing for a broader displacement of the conceptual elements in question. By contrast, if one rescinds the privileges that the concept of "faith" previously enjoyed in the definition of "religion," one simultaneously opens up novel possibilities for reinterpreting the meaning of "theology" in its relations with history.[6]

[5]See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993), esp. Ch. 1; Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago, 1998); Hent de Vries, *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York, 2008); Brent Nongrbi, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, 2013); Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York, 2016).

[6]For the most sophisticated and sustained effort to explore some of these issues see Nancy Levene, *Powers of Distinction: On Religion and Modernity* (Chicago, 2017).

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In the present forum, we propose to revisit and revise basic features of this conceptual arrangement. For this purpose, as a starting point, we suggest unearthing an older phrase, coined by the German historian Wolfgang Hardtwig, that of *Geschichtsreligion*.[7] This phrase, we submit, may be translated as "history's religion"—in full awareness of the equivocality and semantic flexibility of the genitive in the compound, and of the semantic wealth of the component concepts. Hardtwig offers two perspectives on the relation between religion and the discipline of history worth further consideration: first, he understands the religious beliefs of nineteenth-century historians as a supplement for a spontaneous philosophy of history, tacit means for resolving metaphysical problems in the philosophy of history such as theodicy, contingency, or teleology. Second, he suggests paying attention to the practice of historians and the ways in which they experienced their everyday lives of scholarship. What he calls "historical work" reveals particular forms of religiously informed subject formation: the "discipline" of research with its abstention from partisan passion (*sine ira et studio*) linked, for example, to a Protestant ethic, understood in a Weberian fashion as the secularized form of pastoral guidance of everyday conduct. The individual historian submitted to a disciplinary regime of historical work trusted that performing good practice not only yielded scientific output but also resulted in realizing the potential of becoming an upright human being. Although, from today's perspective, Hardtwig's article hews much too closely to Weber, still his argument succeeds in broadening and pluralizing the notion of what "history's religion" might mean. Rereading this work some thirty years later, it appeared to us that it opened up some productive pathways for rethinking the relationship between religion and historical writing.

We initially set ourselves the task of taking a closer look at a number of particular concepts, institutions, and practices, while keeping an open mind about relations between history and religion. Perhaps predictably, we ended up identifying alternatives to the strong emphasis on secularity that shapes much of the contemporary debate. These alternatives do not, and are not meant to, add up to a coherent picture. Rather, they form a long-standing marketplace of multifarious exchanges between history and religion. In order to underscore this point, we opted to revisit some of the best-trodden ground of this debate, precisely the intellectual history of historical thought in its relations with religion in, mostly, German-speaking early modernity and modernity, and some of the main representatives of this tradition, namely Leopold von Ranke, Julius Wellhausen, Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, Rudolf Bultmann, and Gershom Scholem, who all feature in contributions to the forum.

II

The decision to revisit this seemingly old and tired German scene has to do with more than just background, preference, or even precedent.[8] Already a glance on

[7]Wolfgang Hardtwig, "Geschichtsreligion—Wissenschaft als Arbeit—Objektivität: Der Historismus in Neuer Sicht," *Historische Zeitschrift* 252/1 (1991), 1–32.

[8]For a similar approach see e.g. Ian Hunter's contribution on "Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* and Secularization in Early Modern Germany," *Modern Intellectual History* 8/3 (2011), 621–46.

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the secularity argument reveals a dense web of connections between present debate and the library of modern German-language thought. One of the main critical charges against the *topos* of "secular historicity," for instance, remains its mobilization as an insurmountable indicator of "modernization," especially in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth. Conversely, the tenacity of religious practices increasingly appeared as a marker of "backwardness" and lagging development. In Dipesh Chakrabarty's critique of the complicity of European historical discourse with the imperialist idiom of the purported developmental deficiencies of the colonial world, the formula of "homogenized empty secular time" played a crucial role, in order to indicate the reach into basic metaphysical categories of temporality associated with secularity.[9] One of the prime originators of this formula—explicitly credited by Chakrabarty—was Walter Benjamin, in his unfinished manuscript that was posthumously titled *On the Concept of History*, one of the last texts he was working on before his fateful flight from unoccupied France and suicide at the Spanish border. It was in particular the charges of emptiness and undifferentiated homogenization of historical time that tied this formula to Benjamin's peculiar way of integrating the analysis of history with the language of Newtonian, and subsequently also Kantian, conceptualizations of time precisely as "empty" and "homogeneous."[10]

Benjamin's *On the Concept of History* assailed a regime of historicity characterized by nineteenth-century "historicism," a compound of various features of nineteenth-century notions of history, in which Benjamin welded together the premises of singularity, individuality, and organic development, on one hand, and progressivism, on the other. Benjamin then drafted the contours of what one might label a revolutionary Messianism, as antagonist of the compound of historicism. From his point of view, then, the relations between history and "religion" were crucial for understanding both the malaise of the 1930s present and the available remedies. The monstrous deviation of historicist historicity required a different, resistant, and adversarial type of historicity to undo it.

The idea of an antagonism of historicities was hardly Benjamin's alone, but belonged very much to the field of philosophical discussions of history in interwar Germany. It is certainly possible, for example, to read Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), as Chakrabarty does, as proposing a theory of historicity for which such an antagonism is constitutive. Chakrabarty uses these abstract, German resources to outline ways of identifying such conflicts over historicity in actual, concrete, located histories of the world of colonial India. Interestingly, here, too, conflict is vested in confrontations over "religious" practices that inseparably interweave with the emergence of particular social communities. His account is far more pluralist and concretized than its interwar European interlocutors, although one must add that the effort to ground abstract confrontations over historicities in social–cultural reality also informed a significant body of interwar Jewish German thought: Benjamin's ideas about Messianism drew heavily on his friend Gershom Scholem's historical-philosophical recuperations of Jewish religious

[9]Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, 2000).

[10]Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephrott et al., vol. 4 (Cambridge, 2003), 389–400.

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culture, including its heterodoxies, and both also indirectly responded to the ways Franz Rosenzweig had shifted messianic Judaism out of the shared historical consciousness of Christian Europe.[11]

The postcolonial debate is foundational for understanding how global inequality is vested in hegemonic modes of thought, among which include basic, difficult-to-shed convictions about history. It also gives new meaning to the earlier theoretical sources on which it has drawn and continues to draw. The German-language intellectual tradition has had considerable trouble, in the past, to recognize its own specificity. Recent scholarship has pointed out some of the ways in which the older German debate also has to be read as inhabiting, and contributing to, the imperial and colonial worlds of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[12] Its potential for subsequent critical thought may have to do with its own, often surprisingly uneasy and restive, imperial mind-set. Then again, it may also be the notion, prominent throughout many European and North American traditions of learning, that modern science and scholarship are based on German models, which continues to project those old German debates into the present. This notion presumably has to be recognized as at least half-mythical.[13] Here, as elsewhere, reception processes break to pieces what they appropriate, and then they fail to "put Humpty together again," so to speak. As historians, it seemed that we still grapple with Humpty's initial form and composition, so it seemed more attractive to return to that and, predictably, break it into pieces all over again.

III

What about the other side of the secularity diagnosis, however, the one that does not accept the claim that history's separation from religion ever succeeded at all? This is the argument that the philosopher Karl Löwith developed shortly after World War II, according to which historical thought has to be understood as "secularized eschatology."[14] This formula captured the profound delusion of modern understandings of historicity, which in his view never managed to escape the promises of salvation and fears of damnation vested in the apocalyptic prophetism of scriptural monotheism. The only thing modernity has added is forgetting, further removing the potential for criticism and abandoning historicity to its own faulty devices. The comparison of ancient Greek and biblical thought provided what Löwith considers the crucial divergence. For Löwith's Greeks, history was ultimately repetitive and embedded in an eternal cosmos by the laws by which it was bound. There existed a practice of divination, of predicting future events, in the

[11]Stéphane Mosès, *The Angel of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Stanford, 2008); Peter E. Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley, 2003).

[12]See Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton, 2010).

[13]Joseph Mali, *Mythistory: The Making of a Modern Historiography* (Chicago, 2003).

[14]Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago, 1949). For a comprehensive analysis of the interlinkages of secularization arguments and philosophies of history in the German tradition see Jean-Claude Monod, *La querelle de la sécularisation: Théologie politique et philosophies de l'histoire de Hegel à Blumenberg* (Paris, 2002).

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form of oracles that emitted hard-to-decipher assertions that, with hindsight, always confirmed the repetitive nature of the eternal, bounded, and ordered cosmos. The immortal gods overpowered human beings easily, but were not all-powerful. The Hebrew Bible, by contrast, instated an omnipotent and solitary deity, the creator of the world, whose power was such that nothing in the world was exempt from divine unmaking. The future was thus entirely unknowable, unless the deity decided to make it known, by revelation to prophets, in the form of self-binding promises. Historical accounts stressed the presence of miracles and the general singularity and unprecedentedness of past events, which provided evidence for the unpredictable and entirely open nature of mundane time as such. History became—and remained—a future-oriented genre in the sense that it served to continuously confirm the openness of the future. When, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, revelations about the end of world time lost their credit with many of the Christian, and subsequently the Jewish, faithful, the hope for salvation retreated into assumptions according to which history was a progressive process. This process, since the idea of an unmaking of the world had become elusive, was meant to be open-ended. In this way, historicity became the backbone of ideological utopias of all stripes, and an essential element, Löwith believed, of the political cataclysms of the twentieth century.

This line of argument had one of its most important points of origin in Nietzsche's critique of the eschatological obliviousness of nineteenth-century historical consciousness.[15] This idea already enjoyed widespread if polemical reception in the interwar period, and only kept growing after 1945. And it found its way to the forefront of what is currently the theoretical self-understanding of the increasingly differentiated discipline of history. To break the problematic pattern of all-encompassing "historicism" and its pseudo-theological, politically toxic underpinnings (nationalism, imperialism, etc.), we need a pluralism of historical times, of "historicities," it is often said. The underlying gesture remains familiar: that of finally realizing an undeluded secularization of historical thought. The "religion" of faith and revelation will then be overcome. Even those who insist on keeping religion in the picture, then, seem to agree that "faith" has to go, a gesture of overcoming that reproduces the emancipatory and progressive dynamic, albeit one reduced in scope and confidence. Historicism keeps returning, on condition that it ever left, and that it ever existed.

That said, the durability of the apocalyptic imagination remains startling, long after World War II. The way historical thought continues to shape the European and Western present to this day is mapped out by patterns of apocalyptic violence and its obverse, progressive optimism, be it in the debates around the Anthropocene or the ideologies of a globalized financial market. That these patterns are, either way, also tools of dominance is an observation that perhaps only the perspective from the previously colonized spaces of the world has fully revealed. The universalization of Western conceptions of the historical process means that any "apocalypse" of Western political-economic and ecological reality is to pertain to the world as a whole, just as used to be the case with historical "progress." It is hard to deny, then, that there are powerful reasons that have prompted the debate about "history's religion" to emphasize the eschatological underpinnings of historical

[15]Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, 1997), 57–123.

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thought in a one-sided manner. Yet the result has been an impasse. The narrowing of the understanding of "religion" to "eschatology," including "apocalypticism," means that the contradictions of secularized eschatology have spread. The origins of this narrowing thus strike us as being of increasing interest in the present situation.

IV

Löwith, for example, was particularly indebted to Weber, if not the inventor, then the main proponent, of a specific type of historical secularization argument. In his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5) he explained the profit motive in capitalism as a product of the secularization of radical Protestant ideas about "inner-worldly asceticism" and prosperity as an indicator of divine grace. The resulting habitus produced a potent "work ethic," from which God eventually disappeared entirely.[16] Carl Schmitt's work on *Political Theology* (1922) in turn adapted Weber's argument by shifting it from everyday practices to legal concepts. His claim that the key concepts of modern statehood were "secularized theological concepts" primarily focused on "sovereignty" and the "state of exception," which he explained as de-theologized versions of the function of the deity as lawgiver, on one hand, and as worker of miracles not bound by these laws, on the other.[17] Walter Benjamin's unfinished theory of Messianism arguably would have emulated this pattern in a Jewish context, by taking messianic expectation as its starting point for a novel theory of communist revolution. When Löwith finalized his argument about history as secularized eschatology in 1948–9, he was aware of Weber's and Schmitt's secularization arguments, possibly also of Benjamin's more oblique contribution. Incidentally, we do not pretend that this list is complete. Presumably one would find further versions of this type of argument if one went to look for them.

What these arguments have in common is their striking reliance on just one or two areas of theological thought—apocalypticism, messianism, providence, and so forth—as the privileged sites of a secularization process. This process is then deemed crucial for precisely one sector of the late modern order of scholarly and scientific knowledge. Subliminally, all of these arguments also assume that there is a systematic whole, theology, whose "secularization" is only possible by way of its fragmentation. Moreover, they all do their best to ignore their interdependency, although they are clearly tied to one another through lines of reception and mutual observation. It may be worthwhile keeping in mind that the metaphor of "secularization" is based on a legal concept that means the turning over of clerical properties (mostly land) to new, mundane owners. Secularization arguments follow this pattern in that they assume that only a portion of the former totality passes into new ownership, or rather that there are many new owners to be accommodated.

Secularization means forming multiple smaller units out of a previously larger whole. Yet, in the merely symbolic realm of knowledge, it turns out that the preceding totality is imaginary. This is the role that the idea of theology as the scholarly version of the purportedly unified "Christian worldview" of the premodern era

[16]Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York, 1950).
[17]Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, 1985).

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played in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: that of a myth that made possible a self-understanding of the formation of scholarly disciplines as a collective of heirs and successors to the deceased parent. Modern theology, too, in its transformation into one scholarly discipline among others, gave up many areas of pertinence it had previously claimed—for instance, accounting for natural history, or the history of worldly human affairs. Already Nietzsche's friend, the theologian Franz Overbeck, noted the losses incurred by this process when he argued that modern scholarly theology was not "Christian" any more.[18] For Kant, the "contest of the faculties" had consisted in philosophy wresting its territory and rank from the usurpations of theology, law, and medicine. A century later, the other "faculties" had also been transformed into "disciplines." This is to say, they had been redefined as primarily determined by the purportedly natural and universal order of knowledge that belonged in the purview of "philosophy" in the Kantian sense. The victory of the faculty of philosophy thus seemed complete. But it turned out that the imaginary quarrel did not and could not end, because disciplines emerged and sustained themselves by dint of their continuous participation in the conflict. They understood themselves, if only implicitly, as the new owners of a property wrested from the erstwhile whole of theology.

So it might be productive to regard the history of the modern humanities as founded on the myth of the distribution of the former estate of theology among a family of quarreling heirs. This perspective might have some explanatory force. The orientation of historical writing toward eschatological futures, for instance, went along with a neglect of origins. The oldest history of humankind fell out of the scope of history when the latter began to limit itself to written sources. Archaeology and anthropology took up some of this abandoned property; but philology, forever obsessed with the origin of language, the "language of Paradise," was the true inheritor of the ground covered in the Book of Genesis.[19] One could multiply the examples, and the forum proposes a few further ones, such as those which connect to ritual sacrifice or the act of baptism. If we revisit the history of modern humanities as a continuing quarrel of inheritor disciplines, it would also become clear that the inheritance was never fully settled and that conflicts over bits of property unfold to this day. In both institutional and intellectual terms, these conflicts may be viewed as the common core that holds together the vast family of academic disciplines: the myth of disciplines as secular expropriators of theology within the Western university—as if this vast family of institutions truly had a unifying principle—continues to function as a framework of humanities thought. The university itself might then turn out to be a hybrid between institutional structures and this imaginary content.

If we were to offer some prescriptions for thinking "history's religion" beyond the framework of secularity and secularization, then, we might suggest the following: be alert to the spontaneous philosophy and religious notions that underwrite concrete practices of historical research and writing; be sensitive to different theological archives, their formation, their structure, and the ways they can be refigured,

[18]Franz Overbeck, *How Christian Is Our Present-Day Theology?*, trans. Martin Henry, foreword by David Tracy (London and New York, 2005).

[19]Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, 2009).

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translated, and transformed by the historical imagination; refuse to take for granted either the mythical "before" or the disenchanted "after" in narratives of secularization; pay attention to the ways that institutional frameworks (universities, disciplines, genres of writing) encode particular stories about religion and theology. The articles in the forum seek to take these prescriptions to heart. Tomoko Masuzawa explores how the mythology of theology as the "queen of the sciences" obscures the far more contingent history of the university and its faculties, and creates in its wake the "problem" of theology—as both dethroned and powerful hegemon—that secular knowledge apparently has the responsibility of overcoming. If the before-story in our histories of secular emancipation is a myth, in other words, then we need new histories of how modern knowledge forms reinhabit, reorient, and re-create the actual inheritance they received. Jonathan Sheehan takes up this challenge with specific reference to *sacrifice*, a practice, concept, and problem with deep roots in the Christian archive. Tracing its emergence as an issue of central concern to the "history of religion" and the "higher criticism," proto-disciplines that emerged in the German university in the years after 1800, we discover how sacrifice does unexpected forms of intellectual labor in the new sciences of the nineteenth century. Mario Wimmer goes to the mythic heart of the historical discipline, the German historian Leopold von Ranke, to explore the unexpected ways in which he redeployed a certain theology of transcendence to define the historian's relation to the mundane world. This "spontaneous philosophy of history" was less about the transference of religious commitments to a secular register, than about their creative reuse in a new intellectual setting. Daniel Weidner returns us to Karl Löwith and his eschatological origins of the historical discipline. Discussing the work of the theologians Ernst Troeltsch and Rudolf Bultmann, he shows that that theology was less the fixed background out of which historicity developed, than a dynamic partner in rethinking time and temporality in the first half of the twentieth century. Within their exchanges, there emerged a peculiar rhetorical custom of staging grand, empirically often quite unsupported, conceptual claims that became formative for multiple fields. Yael Almog's essay explores, meanwhile, how a *different* theological archive produces a different kind of historical imagination. If the fact/value distinction was essential to the Weberian ideal of modern scholarship, Gershom Scholem explored the resources of Jewish messianism for the new Hebrew University in Jerusalem. History need not be a kind of repressed eschatology, but rather, as practice, it could become the very means of establishing a "utopian return to Zion." Finally, Henning Trüper moves us beyond the horizon of eschatology altogether, when, as in the shadow of late twentieth-century ecological disasters, the "progress as improvement" model became thoroughly unbelievable. History might have abandoned eschatology now, but there are other resources in the theological archive, which Trüper locates in the Catholic philosopher Karl Rahner, that can and do offer a template for thinking human beings both as natural beings and as makers of a new, often terrifying, age of the Anthropocene.

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