

Hannah Arendt on the Secular

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Despite the current debate about the concept of secularization and the politics of secularism around the world, Hannah Arendt has not generally been understood as a proponent of either. But her most prominent study of the liberatory possibilities that modern politics might allow, *On Revolution*, is also an account of the struggle against a civilization grounded on religious premises in favor of one beyond their claims. It would not be too much to say that Arendt placed secularization at the very center of her analysis of the revolutionary phenomenon and secularism at the core of her political hopes. Put simply, Arendt thought that what was at stake in modernity was leaving religion behind, at least as the foundation of public coexistence. Conversely, modernity took its most politically defective forms when (among other things) it had failed to make its necessary break with the religious civilization that preceded it.¹

In what follows, besides reconstructing the fundamentals of Arendt's case, I try to show that it is usefully interpreted as a kind of response to and critique of Carl Schmitt's doctrine of "political theology" as outlined in a famous 1922 book of that name. Both Arendt and Schmitt were central to the revival of interest in the political as such in recent decades, both insisted on

1. For Arendt's youthful flirtation with theology and later turn to the secular in moral philosophy (as opposed to political theory, the subject of this essay) see my *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), esp. chap. 2.

its autonomy from and irreducibility to other domains of existence, and both were deeply concerned with the founding of polities and constitutional ordering.² But their common interest in modernization as some sort of secularization (legitimate or not) deserves to be stressed, too. Now it is true that, despite overwhelming circumstantial evidence, there is no direct proof that Arendt herself saw *On Revolution* as a response to Schmitt's thesis about the continuation of religion in political guise. (There is direct evidence that Arendt saw it as an intervention in a twentieth-century debate, largely Germanic, that Schmitt sparked.) But even if the case for "hidden dialogue" is rejected, there is still the heuristic use of comparing the views of these two major figures.

Arendt willingly assented to the descriptive claim, most familiar from Schmitt's brief but powerful presentation, that modern politics have often covertly depended on the continuation of religious premises or a religious foundation. If *On Revolution* was a response to Schmitt, it incorporated the position she wanted it to overcome. Alongside the familiar Grecophile and modernist Arendts, there is also a "medievalist" Arendt who attributed political or quasi-political functions to the Christian church, ones that alone explain the persistence of some of the very religious figures of thought in the modern political imaginary that Schmitt had stressed in his time. This persistence could occur, the medievalist Arendt argued, because it was both difficult and dangerous for revolutionary modernists to substitute for those political functions that the medieval church had executed so well. The essentially *substitutional* quandary of revolution is one that, Arendt thought, could make progress and regress interpenetrate, as old religious figures of thought were not simply held over inadvertently but actively called back into service in the moment of revolutionary advance.

The comparison with Schmitt also throws into relief how far Arendt hoped to break with any normative conclusion that a full secularization of political life is an impossible goal. She could do so because of a shift in the model of secularization: if she thought she needed to account for what Schmitt implied only the hypothesis of the persistence of religion could explain, she conceded only that the very difficulty of transcending religion made its

2. For prior attempts to relate the two see Martin Jay, "The Political Existentialism of Hannah Arendt," in *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Europe to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 237–56; William Scheuerman, "Revolutions and Constitutions: Hannah Arendt's Challenge to Carl Schmitt," in *Law as Politics: Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism*, ed. David Dyzenhaus (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 252–80; and Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

appeal nearly irresistible precisely at the moment of possible farewell. Willing even to grant that modernity's religious background persists in its absence, Arendt clearly thought that the novel difficulty of substituting for the prior religious basis of political authority makes the modern situation fundamentally different from the classical past she so admired—and makes the latter's exact resumption impossible. Even so, not only are modern secular politics possible for Arendt, but the revolutionary Americans—whom Schmitt had praised in *Political Theology* for recognizing the template in God's sovereignty for their own popular rule—demonstrate how to achieve it. Nevertheless, there is respect for Schmitt even at the heart of Arendt's normative divergence from him. The crux of her study of political revolution is that, even if it is not a requirement, political theology is a risk. Revolution in Arendt's account is often a struggle against religion in which the latter wins. Yet she did not think it always had to do so.

Recovering Arendt's secularization thesis and secularist politics is valuable not simply because they are bound up with an at least relatively systematic philosophy of history—one that helps motivate some of her more famous theoretical commitments (especially her antipathy to rights and her opposition to sovereignty). It is also valuable because of the withering contemporary skepticism about a commitment to “the secular” either as a historical category or as a political cause.³ Traditionally the rallying cry of the reactionary canon in political theory (its source for Schmitt, this canon's most distinguished twentieth-century representative), the critique of secularization and secularism has migrated to the left in the contemporary world. Alas, Arendt's old and so far unrecognized partisanship for commitments once so common as to be unnecessary to defend against their marginal critics does not dispose of the prominent new opposition. If anything, a recovery of her claims in a changed theoretical context suggests their glaring faults. The emphasis in what follows is primarily on reconstructing Arendt's case in the state—often unsatisfactory—in which she left it. But to do so without considering how she might respond to the forceful opposition to secularization and secularism today would miss the connection on which Arendt always insisted between historical study and present commitment.

3. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Gil Anidjar, “Secularism,” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2006): 52–77. It is notorious how far once-secularist theorists have gone in finding a place for the alternative truth claims of religion in modern democracy. See, alongside the “turn to religion” in recent and contemporary Continental philosophy, Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 14 (2006): 1–25.

The Problem of an Absolute

The baseline for appreciating the challenge of finding a secular basis for modern politics, as Arendt sees it, is a sense of the political or quasi-political functions that Christianity has played in European civilization. Arendt is renowned for arguing in *The Human Condition* that “the victory of the Christian faith in the ancient world . . . could not but be disastrous for the esteem and the dignity of politics.”⁴ But she qualifies or upends this thesis in *On Revolution* with a depiction of religion as playing a collective function that modern politics will have to inherit. Her treatment of the history of Christianity in the book, as well as in her related essay on authority, is frustratingly sketchy. But several dimensions of it are clear.

Arendt gives religion (at least Catholic Christianity of the medieval period) an *institutional* and *functional* interpretation. Far from simply extinguishing Roman politics, she argues, “Rome’s political and spiritual heritage passed to the Christian Church.”⁵ As she states elsewhere, the church was a “body politic,” indeed an “authentically authoritarian institution,” to be typologically distinguished from both tyranny and totalitarianism.⁶ Of course, Christianity is based on otherworldly claims, but *as a church* its decisive effect is to establish the authoritative ordering at the heart of Arendt’s vision of politics, discharging burdens that modern and revolutionary politics will have to assume in their time. There is identifiable intellectual content to such otherworldly claims—Arendt insists surprisingly often on the threat of eternal damnation as Christianity’s chief political doctrine—but their function is to provide an institutionally grounded warrant for political coexistence.⁷ So the key

4. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 314; cf. Arendt, *On Revolution* (hereafter cited as *OR*), rev. ed. (New York: Viking, 1965), 284.

5. Hannah Arendt, “What Is Authority?” in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking, 1961), 125. This could happen, she states, because Roman politics (from which the concept of authority derived) were based throughout their history on “the sacredness of foundation,” which made the transition to Christian politics possible (“What Is Authority?” 104).

6. Hannah Arendt, “Authority in the Twentieth Century,” *Review of Politics* 18 (1956): 405.

7. She constantly attaches specific importance to hell and eternal damnation as “the only political element in traditional religion” (Arendt, “What Is Authority?” 132). See also Hannah Arendt, “Religion and Politics” (hereafter cited as *RP*), in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1994), 380–84; and *OR*, 191, where Arendt emphasizes that even American state constitutions all include promises of future punishments. Similarly, late in life at a conference on her work, Arendt responded to remarks by Hans Jonas by saying, “I am perfectly sure that the whole totalitarian catastrophe would not have happened if people had still believed in God—or hell rather—that is, if there were still any ultimates” (colloquy in Melvyn A. Hill, ed., *Hannah Arendt, the Recovery of the Public World* [New York: St. Martin’s, 1978], 313–14).

to interpreting this dimension of Arendt's thought is balancing her critique of Christian antipolitics with her core view that such antipolitics could and did have political or quasi-political *effects*.

Arendt's doctrine of "authority" in *On Revolution* is essentially a statement of an enduring requirement for political ordering, identifying the ultimate basis of collective cohesion (at least after the Greeks, who avoided its claims). But she uses other terms, too. Her description of religion's function is that it provides a "sanction" for human coexistence that modernity will not be able to do without. Like *authority*, the term *sanction* is repeatedly used by Arendt in this connection, probably in both its positive sense of providing a warrant for community and its negative sense of a threat of adverse consequences for members who might stray. But the most unusual phrase Arendt uses in *On Revolution* to describe this core doctrine of the book is the resonant but somewhat enigmatic "absolute." Secularization is precisely the attempt not to escape from the authority and the sanction with which the absolute provides politics but to find nonreligious versions of them.⁸ And this attempt comes to a head in revolution and in fact may define that phenomenon's deepest agenda as a search not just for liberty but also for secularity.

For a thinker usually thought uninterested in or opposed to religion in general and Christianity in particular, Arendt thus attributes an extraordinary efficacy to them in providing an absolute in a way that irreligious politics cannot easily rival. "The enormous significance for the political realm of the lost sanction of religion," Arendt writes,

is commonly neglected in the discussion of modern secularization, because the rise of the secular realm . . . seems so obviously to have taken place at the expense of religion. . . . Yet, as a matter of fact, this separation cut both ways, and just as one speaks of an emancipation of the secular from the religious, one may, and perhaps with even more right, speak of an emancipation of religion from the demands and burdens of the secular. . . . Politics

8. These commitments are marginal in most commentary on Arendt, probably because theorists who place weight on authority as a necessary feature of social coherence have typically argued from a conservative (frequently Catholic) or reactionary position. See, e.g., Yves R. Simon, *Nature and Functions of Authority* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1940); and Jesús Fueyo, "Die Idee der 'Auctoritas': Genesis und Entwicklung," in *Epirrhosis: Festgabe für Carl Schmitt*, ed. Hans Barion et al., 2 vols. (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1968), 1:213–26. Arendt's main essay on authority first appeared in Carl J. Friedrich, ed., *Authority (Nomos I)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), in which the editor notes that the concept remains interesting despite its typical associations.

and the state needed the sanction of religion even more urgently than religion and the churches had ever needed the support of the princes. (*OR*, 159–60)⁹

With even more right and even more urgently: one may want to interpret Arendt as a follower of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger in her demand for a self-contained and postmetaphysical politics that finally and truly deserves the name, but one cannot fail to register her insistence that even such politics must have continuing recourse to an absolute of the kind that metaphysics in the form of religion provided far more plausibly and efficaciously than revolution could easily succeed in doing.¹⁰ According to Arendt, moderns tried to break with the religion of the past, but they could not leave behind the hardship of the demands and burdens it had so long borne. Of course, as the passage implies, those demands and burdens were always “secular” inasmuch as their effects were in this world—but medieval civilization with its otherworldly notions and devices discharged them with no trouble. It is as if Arendt thought that it was easier for religion to fulfill its necessary secular functions than a fully secularist regime could by itself.

Bound to Appear in Revolution

This approach places Arendt in (and may have originated as) a conversation with Schmitt, who following the reactionary tradition insisted on a necessarily religious grounding to society. Arendt’s “response” to Schmitt would then take the form of a critique of the premises that allows concession on the details. For Arendt, it is not religion but the more basic requirement that religion meets that necessarily will continue into modernity. The question is whether the persistence of this requirement (which she concedes at the outset) must also entail the persistence of religion. “The long alliance between religion and authority,” she puts it at her clearest, “does not necessarily prove that the concept of authority is itself of a religious nature” (*RP*, 372). If the similarity in models allows her to concede Schmitt’s findings of continuity,

9. Cf. Arendt, “What Is Authority?” 135: “Under these circumstances [of secularity—her word], religion was bound to lose its political element, just as public life was bound to lose the religious sanction of transcendent authority.”

10. The important postmodernist interpretations of Arendt omit or are uneasy with Arendt’s insistence that, for all the waning of old forms of authority, the American Revolution illustrated the persisting need of absolutes. See esp. Bonnie Honig, “Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on Founding a Republic,” *American Political Science Review* 85 (1991): 97–113; and Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), esp. 157–65.

the difference between them also exposes the hypothetical possibility of a secular politics. And if Arendt is in dialogue and contest with Schmitt, it is no surprise that the clash between their positions will have to emerge on the ground where the latter finds the religious template for modern politics still visible—political revolution, especially the American one.

Revolution is interesting to Arendt largely because the substitutional dilemma comes to a head in it. Where Schmitt alluded to revolution as the founding by a sovereign people on the model of God's miraculous intervention in history, for Arendt it is the moment when secularization is at stake. She begins with a treatment of European revolutions as successors of absolutism. (Surprisingly and disappointingly, the Protestant Reformation is simply absent from her secularization theory.) Absolutism, Arendt says, might seem like "the first and most conspicuous consequence of what we call secularization," playing an essential task in freeing politics from religion. Instead of presenting absolutism as depending on a political theology of divine right, Arendt thinks that absolutism represented a historical attempt to wrest authority from the church in the service of secular politics. "Absolute monarchy," she writes, "has been responsible . . . for the rise of the secular realm with a dignity and a splendor of its own" (*OR*, 156).

Yet on closer inspection, Arendt continues, absolutism accomplished nothing of the sort. Its work, prior to revolution, is in retrospect simply dilatory and wholly negative, illustrating theoretically that some substitution for religion was necessary and postponing for revolutions the exclusive role of finding one. "Secularization, the emancipation of the secular realm from the tutelage of the Church, inevitably posed the problem of how to found and constitute a new authority," she writes. "Theoretically speaking, it is as though absolutism were attempting to solve this problem of authority without having recourse to the revolutionary means." In *On Revolution* Arendt probably uses the concept of the absolute as shorthand for a difficulty that all modern polities face because for her it is absolutism that pioneered the experiment of discovering a secular proxy for religion (*OR*, 157–58).¹¹

But it failed, and its failure haunts all revolutions. One might have guessed otherwise, Arendt acknowledges. After all, the European revolutions characteristically took over after absolutist rule and might have led one to

11. There is a second association in an early lecture on the subject, in which Arendt suggests that Plato and monotheism shared the attempt to establish a "transcendent source of authority" that "tried to impose something absolute on a realm where everything is relative" ("Breakdown of Authority," New York University, November 1953, Hannah Arendt Collection, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Essays and Lectures).

think that it is *only* revolutions following upon such regimes (rather than all revolutions by definition) that might need and therefore seek some authoritative grounding. One might argue that revolution need not have involved the simple replacement of one secular authority (king) with another (people) but done away with the need for authority altogether. But Arendt insists that the American Revolution, though it occurred in the isolated Eden of a new continent, showed that all revolutions are forced to search for some authoritative ground, of the kind that absolutism tried and failed to provide. The Americans, in Arendt's words, were for all their other exceptionalisms "not spared the most troublesome of all problems in revolutionary government, the problem of an absolute." Indeed, "that the problem of an absolute is bound to appear in a revolution, that it is inherent in the revolutionary event itself, we might never have known without the American Revolution" (*OR*, 156). This is because absolutism itself was simply a first, specific attempt to solve a general problem of displacing religion.

It is an interesting implication of Arendt's secularization theory that not only do revolutions of necessity face the problem of the absolute, but only revolutions truly face it. Not simply absolutism but other possible solutions (she mentions the romance of the common law in ancient constitutionalist ideology) must also fail, and for the same reasons (*OR*, 161). "If it is true that the revolutions did not 'invent' the perplexities of a secular political realm," she concludes summarily, "it is a fact that with their arrival, . . . former 'solutions' . . . stood now revealed as facile expedients and subterfuges." The implication is that *revolutions are the only possible successors of religion*. Absolutism emerges as an unstable and unworkable halfway house between religion and modernity, an attempt (failed but spectacular) to accomplish what revolution will try to accomplish without the trouble of revolution itself. Of course, Arendt sometimes uses the word *secularization* to refer to a lengthy historical process that might involve a multitude of events and factors. But other times she recognizes that the terms of her account mean that secularization and revolution are not separate (let alone sequential) processes. Rather, they fully coincide and completely define one another. Put differently, Arendt does not think that secularization simply prepares for revolution or that revolution outlives the era of secularization as a permanent postreligious political possibility. Instead, secularization is possible only *as* revolution; conversely, the signature modern event of politics is available only insofar as it substitutes for religion. This surprising implication of Arendt's conceptualization of the secularizing move is explicitly drawn early in the work: "What we call revo-

lution is *precisely that transitory phase* which brings about the birth of a new, secular realm” (*OR*, 18–19; emphasis added). Revolution equals secularization, and vice versa.

The Paradoxical Fact

Since religion disposed of a quandary with no immediately obvious solution *except* religion, then the problem of the absolute constantly made what Schmitt called political theology a temptation. This was the reason, Arendt notes in drawing the essential inference, that revolutionaries aiming at a secular politics so often turned back to the past in their very advance—why, in Schmitt’s terms, they crafted political theologies pervaded by naked or ersatz religion. Arendt’s work in identifying a revolutionary dynamic of religious entanglement is, in other words, the heart of her putative response to Schmitt’s theory.

Put differently, the hardship of substitution led revolutionaries, at the last minute, to forswear the secularity they sought. It was, Arendt insists, “the enormous difficulties which especially the loss of religious sanction held in store for the establishment of a new authority [and] the perplexities which caused so many of the men of the revolutions to fall back upon or at least to invoke beliefs which they had discarded prior to the revolutions” (*OR*, 114). Similarly, in perhaps the crucial passage, she argues that

in theory and in practice, we can hardly avoid the paradoxical fact that it was precisely the revolutions, their crisis and their emergency, which drove the very “enlightened” men of the eighteenth century to plead for some religious sanction at the very moment when they were about to emancipate the secular realm fully from the influence of the churches and to separate politics and religion once and for all. (*OR*, 186)

In Arendt’s thought, therefore, revolutions may be synonymous with secularization, but they also are the moments when it is likeliest to be derailed.

This revolutionary dynamic powerfully affected both the American and the French Revolutions at the heart of Arendt’s comparative study, albeit in starkly different ways. But it is worth noting, before turning to that comparison, that Arendt’s emphasis on the profound challenge that displacing religion threw up for moderns can lead even her, beyond her emphasis on revolutionary difficulties, to sympathize with doubts that modern secularization was worth trying. In this regard, Arendt, whose actual references to Schmitt nearly always single out his Nazi politics for discussion, may have had her own additional

reason to follow him in seeing the persistence of religion as a live option precisely at the moment of apparent modernization.¹²

In a dramatic passage Arendt reports that “enormous risks inherent in the secular realm of human affairs” made recourse to religion not simply tempting at a moment of difficulty but also morally intelligible in view of what could well follow (*OR*, 192). It is as if, in Arendt’s rendition, the American founders were only partly driven by the sheer hardship of their tasks to revive religion, because they also intelligently chose it to stave off the worst potential consequences of their enterprise. “We, who had ample opportunity to watch political crime on an unprecedented scale, committed by people who had liberated themselves from all beliefs in ‘future states’ and had lost the age-old fear of an ‘avenging God,’ are in no position, it seems, to quarrel with the political wisdom of the founders,” Arendt comments (*OR*, 192).

It was political wisdom and not religious conviction that made John Adams write the following strangely prophetic words: Is there a possibility that the government of nations will fall into the hands of men who teach the most disconsolate of all creeds, that men are but fire flies, and this *all* is without a father? Is this the way to make man as man an object of respect? Or is it to make murder itself as indifferent as shooting plover, and the extermination of the Rohilla nation as innocent as the swallowing of mites on a morsel of cheese? (*OR*, 192)¹³

12. She mentions him first in a review of Max Weinreich’s indictment of “Hitler’s professors” and returns to him in a footnote of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in a similar context. In the first she counts Schmitt among those “outstanding scholars” who volunteered to serve the regime, and in the second she credits him with “very ingenious theories about the end of democracy and legal government [that] still make arresting reading” (even as Arendt emphasizes that though he volunteered to serve the Nazis, their interest in him proved short-lived). Max Weinreich, *Hitler’s Professors: The Part of Scholarship in Germany’s Crimes against the Jewish People* (New York: YIVO Institute, 1946); Hannah Arendt, review in *Commentary* 2 (1946), rpt. as “The Image of Hell,” in *Essays in Understanding*, 201; Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new ed. (New York: Meridian, 1958), 339n65. See also Arendt, “Waldemar Gurian,” in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1968), 252.

13. Arendt is citing John Adams, *Works*, 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1850–56), 6:281. But Arendt makes clear, in an exchange with Eric Voegelin about *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, that while “it is true that a Christian cannot become a follower of either Hitler or Stalin [and] morality as such is in jeopardy whenever the faith in God who gave the Ten Commandments is no longer secure,” it is mistaken to “conclude from the frightening events of our times that we have got to go back to religion and faith for political reasons” (“A Reply,” *Review of Politics* 15 [1953]: 82). The Rohilla were a South Asian people at first targeted by the rival Marathas and then by their British allies—in what became one of the imperial scandals of Warren Hastings et al.—who hunted them down and decimated them as insurgents.

The destruction of the Jews by the Nazi regime (with which Schmitt collaborated) could make the persistence of the religious into the secular not so much a matter of necessary continuity or craven obfuscation as it was one of wise foresight before the threat of secular catastrophe. The reasons for the complex interrelation of progressive secularization and regressive theology in the revolutionary crucible were not just “metaphysical.” They were moral, too.

To Fall Back Upon or at Least to Invoke

Like Schmitt, Arendt is tempted to see more naked political theologies in America where Europe chose more covert versions. The most obvious hold-over for Americans is divinely inspired natural law and, as a corollary, rights talk. One might say that where the European revolutions were secular on their face but religious at their core, for Arendt the American Revolution was religious on its face even if secular at its core. Despite this difference, it is easy to read her depiction of American rights talk as an exemplification of Schmitt’s thesis even in the new world that (on Arendt’s ultimate account) came close to a true secular founding.

In the earlier *Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt shows that she thinks about rights precisely in the context of a secularizing transition. Her account in *On Revolution* candidly acknowledges the role that religious appeals played in the discourse of the American founding, as if she were willing to concede Schmitt’s presentation of America as honestly advertising its politics as divine in origin. In the earlier book Arendt suggests that the modern attempt to state moral norms independent of religious metaphysics raised an implication of which partisans of rights were “only half aware.” “The proclamation of [such] rights,” Arendt observes,

was also meant to be a much-needed protection in the new era where individuals were no longer secure in the estates to which they were born or sure of their equality before God as Christians. In other words, in the new secularized and emancipated society, men were no longer sure of these social and human rights which until then had been outside the political order and guaranteed not by government and constitution, but by social, spiritual, and religious forces.¹⁴

Already, then, Arendt is thinking about rights as a secularizing attempt to make up for a function previously fulfilled by religious civilization. By *On*

14. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 291.

Revolution Arendt sees rights talk as the major means by which Americans, having inherited the problem of the absolute from religion, more or less admitted that only some concession to religion can solve it. But here she offers a further argument about why such persistence was necessary and how it showed up in events.

Maximilien Robespierre's cult of the supreme being seems much less comical, she writes, when one bears in mind that the Americans were just as open about "the need for a divine principle, for some transcendent sanction in the political realm." The reason for this need, Arendt contends, is that America, like Europe, inherited from Christianity not just a general religious background but also a transformation in the concept of lawfulness that made law's authority dependent on its source: monotheism utterly transformed the notion of lawfulness in between classical and modern times and made a command model inescapable. Positivistic theories of law—which Arendt says actually cover natural law theories that are unfailingly rooted in some divine source even in the most deistic articulations—are open or covertly religious to the core. The impossibility of thinking of law except by positing some supra-human source, however antediluvian or covert, made it almost inescapable that religion persist. This mutation provided another reason for interpreting America, too, in the backwash of the "long centuries when no secular realm existed in the Occident that was not ultimately rooted in the sanction given to it by the Church, and when therefore secular laws were understood as the mundane expression of a divinely ordained law." The genealogical entanglement of lawfulness itself in religion meant that even the American attempt to found a new order had "to put the law above man" (in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's words) for its derivative laws to be authoritative; Rousseau's conclusion that *il faudrait des dieux*—one would seem to need gods—for law to be legitimate applied with full force to the American scene (*OR*, 186, 189, 184).

Arendt is therefore not surprised to find that, even when they did not explicitly refer to the divine origin of their proclaimed absolutes, American appeals to inalienable rights as a constraining higher law remained theological or cryptotheological.

There was no avoiding the problem of the absolute—even though none of the country's institutions and constituted bodies could be traced back to the factual development of absolutism—because it proved to be inherent in the traditional concept of law. . . . If the essence of secular law was a command, then a divinity, not nature but nature's God, not reason but divinely informed reason, was needed to bestow validity on it.

It is true that in Arendt's final view rights were merely a necessary rhetoric masking what was truly novel about the American founding. After all, Arendt also clearly thinks that their nakedly or covertly religious origin made "the proclamation of human rights or the guarantee of civil rights" simply unviable as "the aim or content of revolution." Yet they surely persisted as rhetorical necessity—what the founders needed to "plead" at the very acme of their secular ambitions (*OR*, 196, 148; cf. 207).¹⁵ Rights talk is the specifically American form of political theology.

Pleading for Some Religious Sanction

Alas, European revolutions involved far more profound and dangerous political theology than the supposedly merely "invoked" rights of the American scene. In fact, Arendt's depiction of European political theologies is much less original, and may simply be borrowed from Schmitt's earlier account, insofar as she sees European revolutions as reassigning God's sovereign will to the people after the stopgap intermediation of absolutism. If her account of American political theology of rights is more original, and if she wants to exempt America from Schmitt's exemplification of political theology in the shift from *vox dei* to *vox populi*, it is only to assign that very exemplification to European revolutions. Of course, Arendt's dissatisfaction with the concept of sovereignty is well established and usefully studied in different sectors of the literature. Yet it bears insisting that the concept's religious origins, and not just its normative confusions or practical effects, are what trouble her.

In *On Revolution* Arendt's genealogical suggestions of this sort are simply pervasive, from her tracing of the word *sovereignty* back through Jean Bodin to the notion of divine majesty, through her analysis of absolutist experiment as one that made the Word flesh, to her depiction of a French Revolution in which God's will is merely transformed into that of people and nation. And she happily uses Schmitt's rhetoric of obfuscation or disguise to explain the putatively new forms that the absolute took while remaining derivative of its original theological model, with simple "deification of the people" the sad result. In particular, her focus on sovereign *will* as the key site of continuity between Christianity and modernity is an exact replica of Schmitt's earlier claims. Not surprisingly, this material provides the firmest textual or historical link between Arendt and Schmitt on these matters, since

15. Arendt seems most influenced to emphasize the natural law dimension of the American founding by Edward S. Corwin's well-known works.

in a note to one of her essays she explicitly praises Schmitt as “the most able defender of the notion of sovereignty” who “recognizes clearly that the root of sovereignty is the will.”¹⁶ In *On Revolution* she engages the Schmitt-inflected thesis of Ernst Kantorowicz that “when finally the Nation stepped into the pontifical shoes of the Prince, the modern ABSOLUTE STATE, even without a Prince, was enabled to make claims like a Church.” Given what Arendt takes to be the singular isolation of the American version of political theology compared with the triumphant and eventually globalized rival pattern of European sovereignty, one might go so far as to say that Arendt implicitly gives Schmitt credit for discerning a connection that established the model for modern history. “Today it is no longer of great relevance,” she writes, “whether the new absolute to be put into the place of the absolute sovereign was Sieyès’s nation from the beginnings of the French Revolution or whether it became with Robespierre, after four years of revolutionary history, the revolution itself. For what eventually set the world on fire was precisely a combination of these two.”¹⁷

Arguably, therefore, *On Revolution* is, among other things, a distinctive if neglected alternative account of what Raymond Aron and Eric Voegelin variously called “secular religion” or “political religion”—terms they introduced in the late 1930s to characterize and to explain totalitarianism and which in the last decade or so have made impressive inroads in the attempt to understand various historical regimes of the twentieth century.¹⁸ If Arendt rejected and avoided these terms when she encountered them in Cold War

16. Hannah Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future*, 240n21.

17. Arendt, *OR*, 16 (Bodin), 154–55, 158–59 (Bodin to the French Revolution), 159, 195 (“Word became flesh”), 160 (“different disguises”), 195–96 (the nation as “the cheapest and most dangerous disguise the absolute ever took”), 183 (“deification”), 154 (Kantorowicz), 157 (“world on fire”). The Kantorowicz quotation is from Ernst Kantorowicz, “Mysteries of State: An Absolutist Concept and Its Late Mediaeval Origins,” *Harvard Theological Review* 48 (1955): 91. This is a precursor essay for Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), in which Schmitt’s notion figures in the subtitle and which Arendt also cites in her *On Revolution* endnotes (306). (It is probably insignificant that when she does, she mistakenly omits the word *political* from his subtitle.) In her essay on authority Arendt mentions the premier Weimar-era critic of Schmitt’s pamphlet, Erik Peterson. Combined, these two pieces of evidence make certain Arendt’s awareness of Schmitt’s original theses.

18. See Eric Voegelin, *Political Religions*, trans. T. J. DiNapoli and E. S. Easterly III (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1986); and Raymond Aron, “The Future of the Secular Religions,” in *The Dawn of Universal History: Selected Essays from a Witness to the Twentieth Century*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 177–202. The journal *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* and the historical works of its former editor Michael Burleigh have been the main recent sites in English for this discussion; see also Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, trans. George Staunton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

debates, it is because she insists—unlike the original advocates of the label and their contemporary descendants—that such secular commitments as atheism and secular movements as communism are not simply religions that dare not speak their names (in Voegelin’s view, for instance, they are previously suppressed heresies). For Arendt, the current theories of “political religion,” ranging their objects among historical faiths as if they were simple additions, have failed to develop a theory of their significance as *the outcome of a dynamic* she identifies. Their secularism may seem like simple camouflage, but only the modern agenda of substituting for religion can make sense of whatever theistic character there may be to totalitarian ideologies and regimes.¹⁹

In Principle Independent of Religious Sanction

Yet if Arendt goes so far with Schmitt to document the political theologies of the moderns, she seems to do so with the ultimate intent of denying the necessity and thus the outcome of his nostalgic analysis. Despite her view of rights, it is of the essence, in reviewing her unorthodox reinterpretation of the American colonies and the revolution they spawned, to emphasize the absolute priority she gives to vindicating its achievement as transcending theological or cryptotheological continuity. Conceptually, she can do so because of her claim that the absolute came before religion and could explain both its force in its time and its supersession in the end: “The long alliance between religion and authority,” to repeat the clearest formulation, “does not necessarily prove that the concept of authority is itself of a religious nature” (RP, 372). Nevertheless, even here, Arendt wants to take Schmitt’s allegation seriously. Perhaps she felt that she was herself coming close enough to articulating a political theology that she wanted to defend in advance against the charge that she has failed to see it.

It is well known that Arendt locates the essence of the American achievement in settler covenants and “mutual promises.” From the shipboard compact of the *Mayflower* colonists to the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut to the Declaration of Independence, Americans created a political realm of nonsovereign freedom and mutual equality. In this way the earliest Americans stumbled into a practice (never theorized) of action in concert, bringing them out of solitude into common worldliness, that no other modern polity discovered. When the American Revolution came, it simply continued this inchoate tradition, the conflict with the mother country leading to explicit clarification

19. See esp. Arendt, “A Reply,” 81–82; Arendt, RP; and Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, ed. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann, 2 vols. (Munich: Piper, 2002), 1:363–64.

of the prior basis of politics on new shores. “It was as though the Revolution liberated the power of covenant and constitution-making as it had shown itself in the earliest days of colonization,” Arendt proposes. In saying so, she is undoubtedly inspired by Perry Miller’s major investigations of New England covenants, but she leans most heavily on a Merrill Jensen article suggesting that these covenants informed the American belief that simple agreement to join together for common ends created valid government, a belief rooted in practice that underwrote the Declaration of Independence—if not its peripheral and dispensable natural rights language, then its mutual pledge of Americans to one another in a common cause.²⁰

Yet—one might immediately think—the notion of the covenant is one of the hoariest theological concepts there is. Originally introduced to describe God’s compact (*b’rit*) with Noah after the flood, the heart of his relationship with Israel from Abraham through Moses, and renewed by Jesus (on Paul’s interpretation at any rate), the covenant in biblical literature is divine in initiative, derivation, membership, and terms.²¹ It is rather shocking that *the very concept* by which Arendt hopes to see Americans transcending political theology is one fully religious in its lineage. Almost unbelievably, of course, Arendt reads the activity of covenants (most often in her sources explicitly framed in God’s company) as independent not simply of overseas monarchs but also of divine superintendence of any sort. Occasional remarks in her corpus suggest that she thinks this way about Jesus himself—as a worldly actor whose basic contribution swung free of his happenstance divinity—but *On Revolution* rests its case on his American colonial followers pursuing their errand in the wilderness.²² “The colonial compacts had been made without any reference to king or prince,” Arendt writes, stressing their preparation of the later claim of colonial autonomy from the monarchy. It is as if the page before she had not noted that the compacts were made “in the Presence of God,” not just “one another,” or had failed to master the obvious fact that the final paragraph of the Declara-

20. Arendt, *OR*, 165–78, 167 for her words, and 308–9n for her citation of Jensen’s article; Perry Miller, *The New England Mind*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939–54); Merrill Jensen, “Democracy and the American Revolution,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 20 (1956–57): 321–41. Arendt affirms elsewhere in the work that the “greatness” of the Declaration “owes nothing to its natural law philosophy” but flows from the fact that it was “the perfect way for an action to appear in words” (126–27).

21. See, e.g., Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), which studies the idea in the context of ancient Near Eastern legal concepts from which it may have been derived.

22. See esp. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 238–40, 246–47.

tion of Independence, which features the mutual-pledge language, also appeals both to “the Supreme Judge of the world” and to “the protection of divine providence” (*OR*, 166–67). How could covenants be an answer to Schmitt when, as a matter of historical fact, they would seem to perfectly exemplify his claims?

Before reaching any conclusion, it is at least worth seeing that Arendt anticipates the objection that the covenant is continuous with religion, too, ultimately as dependent as natural rights on some theistic lineage. Though she only briefly mentions its distant origins in *On Revolution*, she of course knows what its background was. But what stands out for her is the revolution in meaning by the time of the colonists. “The Biblical covenant . . . was a compact between God and Israel by virtue of which God gave the law and Israel consented to keep it,” Arendt remarks, “while this [i.e., the colonial] covenant implied government by consent, . . . where actually the whole principle of rulership no longer applied.” Or, as she told the American Society for Christian Ethics in 1973, “there is no doubt that the notion of covenant itself somehow is Biblical in origin . . . [but a] covenant of mutuality—this covenant which relies only on *mutuality*—cannot possibly be compared to covenants in which one party is God, to whom we owe existence, creation, and so on, also law and [in which] we only pledge our *obedience*.” This shift in its content, she concludes in *On Revolution*, made “the act of mutual promise . . . *in principle independent of religious sanction*.”²³ Thus she hopes to shield her presentation of colonial secularism, precisely at the moment of its maximum apparent vulnerability, from the force of the thesis of continuity.

How so? Theoretically, she says, it looks as if John Locke—though she could and perhaps should have mentioned earlier figures—cemented the shift of covenant from a divinely initiated contract to a purely human agreement among equals. But on the one hand, Arendt says, Locke may well have drawn on the American experience in imagining a compact of free and equal men as the foundation of government. On the other, he presented a model in which the outcome of the political bargain is consensual hierarchy in a model not of free and equal citizens but a one-to-one relation between private rightholder and public sovereign (the latter, she notes again, liable to be thought about on analogy with divine power—as a mortal god). Thus the common image of

23. Arendt, *OR*, 172, 170; Hannah Arendt, “Remarks at the American Society for Christian Ethics, January 21, 1973,” Hannah Arendt Collection.

Locke as America's philosopher either mistook the source for the recipient or missed the difference between promissory equality and consensual hierarchy. The key for Arendt is that the Americans "had no notion of any theory," for the rise of promissory action is not "a theory or a tradition" but "an event"; "no theory, theological or political or philosophical, but their own decision to leave the Old World behind and to venture forth into an enterprise entirely of their own led into a sequence of acts and occurrences in which they would have perished, had not they turned to the matter long and intensely enough to discover, almost by inadvertence, the elementary grammar of political action" (*OR*, 170–73, 308–9n).²⁴

At the stage of the actual revolutionaries, Arendt continues, the practical inheritance of Puritan covenants may have led to, or blended with, the avowed theoretical recovery of classical politics to lead America to the intentional striving for a secular order. Of course, neither Greek nor Roman law featured the premise of a lawgiver outside the law; those concepts of law mooted any search for an absolute. So no simple return was available, modernity able to retrieve classical wisdom only in the context of its enduring monotheistic legacy—what I called at the outset religion's presence in its absence—of the need for an absolute (*OR*, 186–89).²⁵ Thus, where the ancient world had reconstitutions (with no absolutes), the modern world has revolutions (with absolutes).²⁶ In retrieving Virgil's Fourth Eclogue and updating its key line from *magnus ordo saeculorum* to *novus ordo saeculorum*—the motto of the dollar bill eventually—the Americans at once rehabilitated what classical wisdom they could but also did so in the new and unparalleled circumstance of a postreligious founding. Curiously, the wisdom they saved has been much commented on before—with its analogy between natality and foundation and its emphasis on the double meaning of *arché* as beginning and principle. But the essentially postreligious character of the new context has been neglected (*OR*, 211–15).

24. Of course, it is far from incidental, if Jeremy Waldron is right, that the Americans insisted that promissory equality required God's presence (*God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations of Locke's Political Thought* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002]).

25. Somehow, on Arendt's account, Montesquieu alone among theorists escapes the modern necessity of an absolute, but however he did so does not allow for revolutions to dispense with it. This crucial point is, I believe, missed in the subtle article by Patchen Markell on the themes in this paragraph ("The Rule of the People: Arendt, *Arché*, and Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 100 [2006]: 1–14).

26. Arendt, *OR*, 209 on reconstructions and the "silence" of the "classical archive" for moderns.

A preliminary word on the Fourth Eclogue is needed to put Arendt's discussion in its proper context. The poem's afterlife over the centuries has not been told in any comprehensive history, but its prophecy of a sempiternal regime had major resonance in Germany in the interwar period—an era whose discussions Arendt's own treatment references and with which she engages. As Theodore Ziolkowski explains, there was a “remarkable turn” to the Fourth Eclogue in Weimar Germany, one centered, essentially, on whether to read it in a theological and proto-Christian way or in the secular spirit of classical politics. But Arendt's interpretation, in examining the transformation from the Virgilian poetry to the American slogan, focuses precisely on the shift in meaning of one of the poem's key words: *saeculum* (pl. gen., *saeculorum*, shortened in the poem for metrical reasons). In substituting for Virgil's “great order of the ages (or centuries)” with their own “new order,” Americans signaled that they were forced to begin anew, unlike prior collectives, even if they could find the solution to their new problem of the absolute simply in the mutual project of their founding itself. But, as Arendt insists, this new source of authority is one they implicitly or even accidentally chose *against* any “transcendent, transmundane” alternative, thus playing—and this is the crucial point—on the slow transformation in the notion of *saeculum* since classical times, one that made it more than the strictly temporal concept it was initially.

The American formula transforms classical wisdom, in other words, to stress not just the novelty but also the secularity of the modern enterprise. Coming to denote a domain outside religion (from its medieval legal usage to mean appropriation of church property by irreligious powers), it is no accident that Arendt, under whose pen the word *secular* in its fully contemporary acceptance appears constantly, singles out the American order as a secular one. Arendt uses the expression *transcendent, transmundane* in describing a religious foundation the American founders somehow avoid but also, significantly, in repudiating the standard Christian interpretation of Virgil's poem as a prophecy of Christ's reign. The American founders, it seems, had already shown the limits of the millennial Christian appropriation of the poem—still defended in Weimar Germany, in Eduard Norden's best-selling essay that Arendt singles out for criticism. Her reading of how the Americans updated Virgil (a shift to which she returns in *The Life of the Mind*, in some of the last pages she wrote) thus provides in miniature Arendt's overall interpretation of the place of revolution in modern politics: a classical revival at its best, to be sure, but one in new and changed circumstances that were crucially post- and

anti- or at least nonreligious. So it is that for Arendt the American Revolution (unlike any classical polity and holdover formulas aside) equals secularization, and vice versa.²⁷

Only Immanent Categories

It goes almost without saying that Arendt's depiction of the egalitarian political content and the putative secular basis of covenants—America's incidentally religious colonists and its purely worldly founding—bears little relation to historical fact.²⁸ It is not clear how complete her failure is, however, for two essential reasons. One is that historians might be prepared to reinvent Arendt's argument by rethinking its historical details—indeed, this reinvention has already occurred. When “the republican thesis” cast America's secular achievement as flowing from a different lineage, it no longer relied on (in fact, specifically criticized) the linkage between covenants and democracy, replacing it with a Euro-American neo-Roman tradition with deep roots. Largely unknown to Arendt herself, even if she inspired its discovery, this heritage obviated the need to posit the immaculate conception of secularism on American shores; breaking completely with Arendt's empirical claims to reclaim her normative impulses, however, J. G. A. Pocock's reconstruction of the republican tradition premised the movement precisely on

27. Arendt, *OR*, 196, 200, 205 (internal absolute), 205 (“transcendent, transmundane”), 211 (Eclogue), 317nn (on Norden: “I doubt the religious significance of the poem”); Theodore Ziolkowski, *Virgil and the Moderns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 88, which includes a discussion of Norden, *Die Geburt des Kindes: Geschichte einer religiösen Idee* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1924), in the context of Weimar intellectual history. An important article assembling all of Arendt's appeals to Virgil and stressing her neglected interest in Roman political thought generally nevertheless devotes only the briefest attention to the Fourth Eclogue and misses the issue of the secular at stake in the poem: Dean Hammer, “Hannah Arendt and Roman Political Thought: The Practice of Theory,” *Political Theory* 30 (2002): 124–49. On the semantic drift of *saeculum* see Otto Brunner et al., eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1972–97), s.v. “Säkularisation, Säkularisierung.” For what little is known about the origins of the dollar-bill motto see J. Edwin Hendricks, “Charles Thomson and the Creation of ‘A New Order of the Ages,’” in *America, the Middle Period: Essays in Honor of Bernard Mayo*, ed. John B. Boles (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973), 1–13. See later Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1981), 2:207.

28. The major student of covenants in New England after Perry Miller, though apparently unaware that he is refuting Arendt's argument, concludes that “seventeenth-century New England continued to have a deep sense of hierarchy, and . . . none of the civil or church covenants are cast as contracts. God, Christ, king, the central colonial government, and the local town council were superiors in civil covenants, and God, Christ, clergy, and elders were the superiors in church covenants. . . . The inferiors . . . submitted themselves to their covenantal superiors” (David A. Weir, *Early New England: A Covenanted Society* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005], 227–28).

replacing medieval *homo credens* with modern *homo politicus*, so that the ideology is fundamentally postreligious and secular.²⁹

The more meaningful reason is that the theoretical option Arendt carves out is what matters, not whether any historical case vindicates it (yet). Arendt aims to identify an alternative to political theology and a model of human coexistence genuinely independent of religious premises: what she calls “a purely secular, worldly realm” (*OR*, 226).³⁰ More important, in her discussion of covenants, Arendt designs her argument, whatever its historical validity, with an eye to *warding off* the allegation that all modern politics are in straightforward or encrypted continuity with the religious past. One could then say that Arendt’s crucial theoretical gambit is her alternative model of modernization—one that licenses the hypothetical possibility of secularization—even if her association of it with a particular place and time in history turns out to be specious.

If so, then Schmitt’s presence in Arendt’s mind (or at least over her reader’s shoulder) helps disengage important but generally neglected features of her text. He helps, to sum up, in identifying a fascinating dynamic in her argumentation. By defining religion as a powerful version of authority, but only one of its possible forms, Arendt allows herself to travel a great distance in Schmitt’s company, but to reach an alternative—the alternative—destination. She incorporates a version of his argument into her own, but in the service of escaping it. In short, if it is Schmitt’s firm position that “there are no ‘immanent’ categories to which a political order could appeal for its legitimacy,” then Arendt, without gainsaying the potential appeal of the transcendent, just as firmly wants to take the reverse position.³¹ The religious past affects the revolutionary project and makes an exact return to the classics impossible; the intractable problem of the absolute, she thinks, forbids it. But even so, it does not follow that religion is interminable.

29. J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), pt. 1, passim and 550.

30. The expression is essentially a pleonasm, given the relation in Arendt’s German between *säkular* and *weltlich* and *Säkularisierung* and *Verweltlichung*, unless one interprets the apparent redundancy as only further highlighting the irreligious basis of worldly politics in her thought.

31. This description is from the editorial material in Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 139. Taubes wants to develop, in opposition to Schmitt, a political theology of covenant putatively more faithful to the Jewish tradition that does not insist on political representation of God but still locates him in the background of human community; obviously, Arendt’s attempt to move beyond Schmitt is much more radical, since Taubes still agrees with Schmitt that the autonomy of human politics is impossible and thus that a political theology of some sort is still necessary.

Coda: Separating Politics and Religion Once and for All

So Arendt was a defender—analytically and programmatically—of what is now known as “the secular.” Yet today this commitment is viewed with considerable suspicion, and it seems worth concluding by considering what Arendt might say about this fact. In recent years the most formidable analyst of the category of the secular and the politics of secularism is Talal Asad, whose powerful and multifaceted critique of those categories is not easy to meet.³² For Asad, the secular, which claims merely to privatize religion, actually works on a falsely universalized model of religion (often sidelining its practical and political aspects to reduce it to individual belief and devotion). Indeed, the rise of secularism itself somehow brought religion as a category about and is much better seen as a self-transformation of Christianity than as a potentially generalizable phenomenon. Of course, the outcome of this critique is to trace the not infrequently hierarchical distribution of power and its material and moral incidents between the “secular West” and the religious rest of the world back to the basic categories devised to legitimate that hierarchy.

Asad’s position is not simple, and he is most definitely not arguing Schmitt’s stance that what claims to be secular is “really” just sacred in origin and disguise. He hopes to avoid making secularization an explanatory tool so that it can get attention as an object of reflection; the point is to transcend the entire debate about whether secularization did or did not happen in order to see what commitments that debate might presuppose. The critique intends to identify Christianity as the source that, instead of originally being a religion, created the category of religion in claiming to give rise to a secular politics (one prone to serious exclusions, notably of those unwilling or unable to follow its historical trajectory). “Christianity turned against itself,” Gil Anidjar writes in voicing the critique, “while slowly coming to name that to which it ultimately claimed to oppose itself: religion. . . . Christianity invented the distinction between religious and secular and thus *made* religion. It made religion the problem—rather than itself. . . . secularism is a name Christianity gave itself when it invented religion, when it named its

32. Besides Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, see his prior study, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); and David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006). For a strikingly similar position from a very different quarter, see Leora Batnitzky, “Leo Strauss’s Disenchantment with Secular Society,” *New German Critique*, no. 94 (2005): 106–26. In the historical discipline, see the thoughtful article by Jonathan Sheehan, “Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigmas of Secularization,” *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 1061–80.

other or others as religions.” There is no easy way to dispose with the critique of secularism today. But one might still wonder if it is possible to turn to Arendt for a response and in defense of the secular as a potentially universalizable mood and agenda. “To uphold *secularism* . . . is, I am afraid, not to be all that worldly,” Anidjar says.³³ Was Arendt therefore wrong to care so deeply for their mutual inclusion—to insist on a political realm that would be secular and *therefore* worldly?

It is hard to avoid the impression that Asad has someone like Arendt dead to rights. Since she seems to have (like Schmitt) taken Catholicism as her model, avoiding the Protestant emphasis on “belief” on which the concept of religion came to be based, Arendt does not expunge the practical and even political aspects of the phenomenon. But her Eurocentrism is notable, and her heavy reliance on the dichotomy between religion as a category and secularity as a category ought to be clear by now. Yet a closer look suggests that her position is more complex. In the first place, all of her examples in discussing secularization above assume, albeit most often in silence, that Christianity quite specifically is the antecedent to Western modernity. Though it is not said so directly in *On Revolution*, Arendt states forthrightly elsewhere that “the separation of the public and religious spheres of life which we call secularism did not simply sever politics from religion in general but very specifically from the Christian creed” (RP, 379). Far from seeing identification of this connection in all its specificity as obviating study of the overt and covert persistence of Christianity—for example, in the form of “secular” rights and modern sovereignty—she insists on it. All the same, she does not argue a version of Asad’s position *avant la lettre*; instead of thinking through in some comparative way what may have been distinct about Christianity and its ongoing aftermath, she feels free simply to generalize from its case, as if that could save her the trouble of some larger analysis of religion and modernity.

Still, restricting attention to her limited example, Arendt does strive to find the possibility of transcending Christianity in the name of a truly irreligious order, a possibility that Asad denies. What arguments might she then offer today beset by the specific new form of the critique of secularism? I believe there are two, one critical and one positive. The first involves properly appraising the novelty of secularization as something that *happened* to Christianity rather than as something it did to itself. After all, the critique of secularism, while in content quite different from Schmitt’s allegation of continuity,

33. Anidjar, “Secularism,” 59–60, 62, 65.

has much the same form as the one Schmitt defended. The critique of secularism formally resembles Schmitt's political theology, except it particularizes its object. That is, it radicalizes the claim about political theology by arguing that *secularism itself* is the new form of (a particular) religion. Though she concedes some persistence of Christianity—indeed, she insists on it—Arendt is equally concerned with getting clear about how exactly to explain it. She notes at the start of *On Revolution* the then ubiquitous “claim that all modern revolutions are essentially Christian in origins, and this even when their professed faith is atheism.” (Apparently, the project of unmasking “the secular” is not so new after all.) But given that revolutions are precisely modern rather than Christian, she continues, “the best one can say in favor of this theory” is that

it needed modernity to liberate the revolutionary germs in the Christian faith, which is obviously begging the question. . . . Secularization, the separation of religion from politics and the rise of a secular realm with a dignity of its own, is certainly a crucial factor in the phenomenon of revolution. . . . But if this is true, then it is secularization itself, and not the contents of Christian teachings, which constitutes the origins of revolution. (OR, 18–19; emphasis added)

Even if it were true, in other words, that one found “spilt religion” (T. E. Hulme) in modern politics, it is the “spilling” that has to be explained.

Now, it is ironic that Arendt herself in the same book makes claims about persistence that do not take her own directive to heart. It is true that she tries to unearth the revolutionary dynamic that might explain why, at the moment of secularization, Christianity survived in overt or covert forms. But she does not really consider in the book—or anywhere else, to my knowledge—what sparked secularization (and thus revolution), unless she thinks that it was simply entailed by the failure of stopgap absolutism all by itself. That argument only begs the question. On her own understanding, it would not explain the American case anyway. All the same, her directive stands as a challenge to the claim—Schmittian in form if not in substance—that secularism is Christianity in dissimulated form. That position, she might say, does not explain why the move to the covert transpired and may not acknowledge the major transformations that occurred in that process. Just as a modernization that liberates revolution from Christianity has to be seen as a modernization *against* Christianity, so a transformation that produces secularism from Christianity has to be seen as a transformation *against* Christianity, despite whatever continuities remain.

No doubt, that critical argument does not finally decide the balance between break and persistence in transitions as complex as the rise of “the secular.” Yet there is another, positive argument one might imagine Arendt offering, in the space opened by the critical one. It is also possible to infer it from her existing work because of the Schmittian form of the critique of secularism as Christianity’s self-encryption. Arendt’s best hope would have been not to stake her theory of secularization on particular historical details but to present it as a conceptual scheme that might avoid reducing the category of the secular, the process of secularization, and the politics of secularism to the forms they have so far taken. After all, Arendt’s claim is that secularization is *precisely that process that risks its own subversion* and is likely to lead to its interruption and even its falsification. If so, then the persistence of Christianity in the name of secularism is not a phenomenon she would have been surprised to find, since in some versions she insists on it herself. But, far from spelling the bankruptcy of secularism, Arendt thinks that this result only redoubled the need to advance it. The contemporary critique of secularism confuses history and possibility, allowing the historical investigation of the “masks” (Asad’s term) of secularism to distract from philosophical contention that it can have a true face. Arendt strives mightily—in some ways this is the point of her study of revolutions—to avoid the confusion between these two outcomes. Arendt argues in effect that it is possible to concede the critique’s interpretive claims while disputing its analytic framework and normative consequences. The persistence of religion, when found, does not preclude its obsolescence or a political life beyond its powerful claims.

Still, Arendt’s efforts are at best early struggles to lay out what a secularist perspective might look like. The risk of political theology that she emphasizes—but not enough—in the end still swamped not only the modern project of revolution but also her own project as an author. For even more troubling than the infirm and hypothetical version in which one can salvage any plausible secularist alternative from *On Revolution* is a final harsh reality: Arendt herself occasionally uses theological language to describe precisely the secular politics she advocates. It is legendary that in *The Human Condition* she refers to the possibility of new beginnings involved in political action as miraculous.³⁴ But the religious idea of miracles as a model of political

34. See, e.g., Arendt, *Human Condition*, 247. For a different view than I advance here see James W. Bernauer, ed., *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Boston: Nijhoff, 1987), as well as many recent interpretations placing Arendt in a putative tradition of “German-Jewish messianism.”

revolution is precisely the case that Schmitt himself cited as the best evidence for political theology. And at the very climax of *On Revolution* Arendt's rhetoric lapses, blatantly, into the theological. While repudiating the traditional Christian interpretation of Virgil's Fourth Eclogue as a prediction of Jesus' birth, Arendt, for her part, wants to read the poem as an "affirm[ation of] the divinity of birth as such"—a prophecy of the enigmatic natality that will provide the ground of secular coexistence (*OR*, 212). Arendt finds something religious, one might say, in the very secularity she prizes. Like the language of political miracle that Schmitt targeted, this appeal to the divinity of birth fits ambiguously, and perhaps conflicts flagrantly, with Arendt's more basic attempt to strive for a purely secular politics.

Does this last fact then wreck any attempt to present Arendt as a secularist? Might it even show that whatever her fervent hopes of transcending political theology, the latter must always—as Schmitt originally suggested—have the final word (or last laugh)? There would seem to be only one way to respond to these questions in the negative: to contend that, far from contradicting her argument about the difficulty of overcoming political theology, Arendt *performs* it, unwittingly, no doubt, but perhaps more convincingly, in the very course of framing it most strenuously. If the move to the secular is difficult as a matter of theory, it has to be just as difficult as a matter of the practice of theory. At the very moment of propounding a secular vision of the political realm, Arendt falls back on or at least invokes religion; in her own view of revolutions, however, this troubling dynamic does not foreclose, and at worst conceals or postpones, the secular. The persistence of political theology could be a prelude to its end.