

Afterword: Apologetics as a Seismograph of Social Change and an Arena of Secular-Religious Conflicts

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History and Sociology

THIS IS A book of comparative history. Its chapters approach a variety of apologetics across the ‘short 20th century’ through case studies taken from different world areas, under different conditions, and giving expression to various forms of pressure and tension. It captures religious–secular contestations involving different religious denominations and their internal divisions, often differing in their stance towards politics and the changing role of religion in society.

The book is not only relevant for historians, but also speaks to a sociology of religion that is interested in social conflicts and social change. It is especially appealing to sociologists of religion, like myself, who focus on the relations between the religious and the secular, including the boundary demarcations between the two. Over the past several years, I have co-led a research group at the University of Leipzig that deals with these issues under the heading ‘Multiple Secularities: Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities’.¹ While discussing some systematic perspectives of the present volume, I will relate the findings on apologetics to some of the basic assumptions of the Multiple Secularities approach and explore the common ground between the two.

¹ The Centre of Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences ‘Multiple Secularities: Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities’ (funded by the German Research Foundation) at the University of Leipzig: <http://www.multiple-secularities.de>. Christoph Kleine and myself are the directors of this Centre. The Centre builds upon the findings of a previous project (2010–12), in which I worked with Marian Burchardt, and in which we came up with the title ‘Multiple Secularities’. For both research projects see: M. Wohlrab-Sahr and M. Burchardt ‘Multiple Secularities: Towards a Cultural Sociology of Secular Modernities’, *Comparative Sociology*, 11 (2012), 875–909, and C. Kleine and M. Wohlrab-Sahr, ‘Research Programme of the HCAS “Multiple Secularities—Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities”’ (Leipzig, 2016), <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsz:15-qucosa2-167272>.

Elements of a Historical Sociology of Apologetics

The exploration of apologetics as undertaken in this book brings to light a number of characteristics of the phenomenon that I would like to systematise in this afterword, and based on which I would like to draw some conclusions for future research.

First, it seems that apologetics is a *seismograph of social change*. Most often, this refers to the social changes related to religion. However, as is suggested in this volume, the concept can also be applied to other changes and to the types of defence that they provoke.

As far as religion is concerned, apologetics alerts us to tendencies related to secularisation, whether as liberalisation within and outside the churches, or as rigid secularism, atheism, or other strong ideologies, like Nazism, that are experienced as a threat to one's own faith or to the foundations of faith itself. In this sense, apologetics is a response to change, and at the same time a formulation of this change, expressed from a partisan perspective. Apologetics gives change a specific face, and it reflects the meaning that this change has for the world of the apologist. This makes it a lens through which the experience of social change can be observed.

It is an open question as to how sensitively and how early the seismograph of apologetics is able to capture social change. The developments in the short 20th century that the contributions of this volume deal with are not by coincidence situated within the time span from the Bolshevik Revolution to the collapse of the Soviet Union. During this time, as Hugh McLeod and Todd Weir argue (in the introduction to this volume, pp. 1–16), secularism and atheism became state ideologies for the first time, but it was also a time in which liberal, secular worldviews challenged the religious underpinning of traditional politics. The Cold War eventually contributed to the reification of communism as the greatest opponent of religion. Later, old enemies appeared in new forms: liberalism, consumerism, hedonism, and others.

However, the contributions to this volume also show other constellations in which apologetics emerge: the rule of the Nazis in Germany, which also had a massive impact on the churches, the post-colonial situation in India after the traumatic experience of the partition between India and Pakistan, just to mention two. These are examples in which social changes had already reached a climax and where the seismograph of apologetics measures the highest disruptions. Can one also use it to register the beginnings of epochal changes?

One might find such an apologetics in the ground of modern culture wars, which, as the editors argue, was being prepared from about 1800. One might think, for example, of the Romantic lament of the loss of the 'wonderful fusion of spiritual and mundane matters', as expressed in the writings of Joseph von Eichendorff in 1818, after the secularisation of church property, which he considered 'a misfortune for Germany'. This process destroyed 'the legal influence of the clergy ... on war and peace, jurisdiction and administration, in general on the Christian

institution of public and private life in Germany.² This indicates that in the early 19th century, an apologetic, anti-secularisation ‘narrative’ already existed which interpreted the expropriation of church property and the diminishing power of the Church in political and legal matters as the dissolution of a previous unity. This unity, symbolised by the medieval Catholic Church, was perceived as the reflection of a superior, transcendent order in the world. To put it sociologically: the secularisation (*Säkularisation*) of the Napoleonic era was a process not merely of expropriation, but also of *differentiation* between the Church and the state, the dissolution of something retrospectively perceived as a unity, the loss of which was interpreted as a misfortune.³ Secularisation and functional differentiation were commented upon with a grand narrative of decline: ‘The abolition of the sovereignty of bishops and abbots is a cultural-historical document of the decline of an epoch in the history of the occident.’⁴ In a certain way, some of the apologetics of the ‘short 20th century’ appear to be a working out of variations on this Romantic theme.

Yet, the examples that the contributors of this volume offer go beyond mere lament: they treat apologists who took an offensive stance, bringing them in proximity to phenomena of culture wars, of missionary activities, and of political propaganda of various kinds. In this expression, actions and not only words became an element of apologetics.

The contributions of this volume indicate two different aspects of secularisation to which apologists reacted: On the one side, they responded to societal *differentiation*, i.e. the diminishing power of the churches to define the rules of the societal game, indicated, for example, by changes in the divorce law or by the institutionalisation of secular education. On the other side, they responded to strong *ideologies*, like secularism or atheism and related politics that claim dominance and thereby threaten the influence of religious groups.

Second, apologetics is *relational*. It is the *expression* of a relationship and it simultaneously *constitutes* a relationship. It includes a speaker/actor who defends, an external and/or internal opponent who is perceived as a threat, and an audience that is addressed. In addition, it includes the definition of a situation in which these actors have to play a specific role, as well as the definition of the common good perceived to be under threat and in need of defence.

With regard to religion, apologetics typically defines secularism or liberalism as its enemy, which it locates both externally and internally. Generally, the outward confrontation is duplicated in the inner group, for whom the apologist speaks. If

² J. von Eichendorff, ‘Über die Folgen von der Aufhebung der Landeshoheit der Bischöfe und der Klöster in Deutschland’ (1818), in J. von Eichendorff, *Historische und politische Schriften*, Historisch-kritische Ausgabe, 10, 1, ed. Antonie Magen (Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2007), 5, 35, 28–9 (my translation, MWS).

³ M. Wohlrab-Sahr, ‘Counter-Narratives to Secularization. Merits and Limits of Genealogical Critique’, in Robert Yelle and Lorenz Trein (eds), *Narratives of Disenchantment and Secularization: Critiquing Max Weber’s Idea of Modernity*, (London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 149–71

⁴ W. Conze, H.-W. Strätz and H. Zabel. ‘Säkularisation, Säkularisierung’, in O. Brüner, W. Conze and R. Koselleck (eds), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 5 (Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1984), pp. 792–829, at 812 (my translation, MWS).

there is an external enemy, there is always an internal opponent as well—the foe in one’s own camp—who supports the machinations of the external enemy. Liberalism in society and liberal tendencies in the churches are then two sides of the same coin.

As Todd Weir argues in his contribution (chapter 1, pp. 19–37), ‘apologetics help us to demarcate a zone of contention, a theatre in which religious and secularist actors shared the stage and exchanged ideas and strategies in the course of their conflict’. It is not least this interactionist dimension⁵ that makes the analysis of apologetics a worthwhile undertaking, taking into account that social processes, like secularisation, are the outcome of struggles. Struggles that have actors, audiences, stages, repertoires, and scripts. When the editors speak of apologetics as an ideal type (in the Weberian sense), they address such basic elements. Without neglecting the bitter seriousness of certain situations in which apologetic expressions are formulated, to reflect upon such interactionist ingredients nevertheless leads us away from the actors’ intentions, their personal experiences and expressions, to the more general aspects of apologetics as a *genre of communication*, and to the *type of experience* it refers to.⁶ The contributions of this volume have begun to explore the field of apologetics, which seems a fruitful arena for more extended historical, sociological, as well as theological research.

Third, it is relevant to keep in mind that apologetics connects the meso- and micro-levels of societies with perceived fundamental threats on the macro-level. On the meso-level, apologetics refers to the strategies, influence, and actions of religious, political, and educational institutions, organisations, and groups. On the micro-level, it refers to charismatic personalities, converts, martyrs, and renegades. However, these individuals become important in the apologetic struggle not as such, but as iconic figures, as personalities who—with their individual struggle—represent the fight over the place of religion, the theme of secular–religious contestations.⁷ They represent the possibilities and necessities of change, the need of suffering and the chance of success, and they indicate that the apologetic enterprise implies the *need to legitimise* change. As Victoria Smolkin reveals in her study of the apostates recruited into the atheistic campaigns in the Soviet Union (chapter 9, pp. 182–207), the conversion narrative of ‘how I became a different person’ becomes the legitimacy blueprint of a change of the entire society or the world as a whole. Even if apologetics may deal with small entities, it has always the ‘whole story’ in mind. In this sense, apologetics is a totalising endeavour: hyperbolic, exaggerating, polemical, and with strong interests. It cannot be taken at face value. However, precisely the emotion expressed in the polemic and hyperbole of

⁵ See E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, Doubleday & Company, 1959).

⁶ See T. Luckmann, ‘Grundformen der gesellschaftlichen Vermittlung des Wissens: Kommunikative Gattungen’, in Fritz Neidhardt *et al.* (eds), *Kultur und Gesellschaft: Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*. Sonderheft 27 (Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1986), pp. 191–211.

⁷ See M. Wohlrab-Sahr, ‘Disembedded Religion and the Infinity of References: Violated Feelings and Threatened Identities’, in C. Scheve *et al.* (eds), *Affect and Emotion in Multi-Religious Secular Societies* (London, Routledge, 2019), pp. 175–93.

an individual apologist can serve as a seismographic needle that registers substantial shifts that are going on at the aggregate level of institutions or society.

Apologetics and Multiple Secularities

In order to discuss the common ground between the approach to apologetics chosen in this book and the Multiple Secularities approach, I have to give some information on the latter. In 2016, a Humanities Centre for Advanced Study under the title ‘Multiple Secularities: Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities’ started its work at the University of Leipzig in Germany. The core of the research of this centre is the interest in *secularity in a comparative perspective*, in present societies as well as throughout their historical development. In this context, *secularity* is understood differently than in the common perception of *secularism*. The term addresses various forms of *conceptual distinction and institutional differentiation* between religion and other social spheres and practice. The Humanities Centre extends this perspective to non-Western societies as well as to pre-modern contexts. It is guided by the assumption that secularity is not an asset of Western societies alone, and that we find forms of distinction and differentiation related to religion in pre-modern contexts as well, which might have influenced the path for the development of modern forms of secularity in state and society. We use secularity as a *heuristic concept*, and thereby try to avoid—as far as possible—the normative connotations of the term ‘secularism’.

This perspective is, of course, indebted to the ‘multiple modernities’ approach as it was developed by Shmuel Eisenstadt (2000). This approach insists on the indispensability of the concept of modernity, without persisting in its one-sided orientation to a seemingly universalistic Western model. Against this backdrop, we have suggested taking into account the ‘*cultural pathways*’, maybe even path dependencies of secularity and their conditions as well as the *history of interaction* between different models of secularity.⁸

With ‘multiple secularities’ we therefore address the various forms of distinction and differentiation between the religious and other social domains, discourses, or practices on the societal level, on the organisational level, and on the level of social interaction. Persons, of course, are included on all three levels, and may create their own way of relating the religious and the secular in different ways.

Our assumption was that these secularities exhibit different cultural logics that document a specific social history of conflict no less than the competing influence of religious expressions on the one side, and of other forms of secularity on the other side. The Indian type of secularity, for example, gets its specific feature by being distanced from the French or the American type of secularity. It is *not* the wall of separation that is the main issue in India, but rather the attempt to balance

⁸ Cf. Wohlrab-Sahr, Burchardt, ‘Multiple Secularities’.

the relation between different religious and ethnic communities. But, as such, it provokes specific criticisms which—as Clemens Six shows in his chapter on the apologetics of decolonisation (chapter 8, pp. 160–181)—build on the notion of the besieged majority.

Another relevant issue for the Multiple Secularities project was the assumption that secularities can be identified through *guiding ideas*, which accompany and foster the institutionalisation of differentiations, which are used to legitimise them, but which also point to their specific features. Guiding ideas are linked to collective actors and to social movements. They may be propagated by public intellectuals, but also by guiding figures within social movements. Ideas, as Margaret Archer⁹ has put it, must have holders to have an effect on sociocultural interaction. Therefore, it remains an important area of research to look at the emergence of guiding ideas and the groups or agents that promote them. It is still an open question, if the existence of guiding ideas de facto already indicates the emergence of *secularism* in a narrower political sense.

Another assumption was that the ‘multiple secularities’ that are taking shape in different countries and regions ‘respond’ to specific societal problems (as their *reference problems*), or the other way round: they articulate societal problems and present solutions to them. This means, they are not only constructions based on ideology, but they have a nexus with the societal reality and their interpretation.

With regard to both assumptions, apologetics enters the picture. One may say that apologetics emerged in historical situations where distinctions and differentiations between religion and non-religion (in our understanding: secularity) turn into secularism, i.e. into ideologies of separation and policies related to them. This means that apologists make the shifting of boundaries and boundary demarcations explicit by addressing the underlying ideologies and guiding ideas, whether their own or those of their opponents. Apologists defending their religious faith against secularists refer to what they perceive as the guiding idea of the other side; apologists defending their irreligious conviction or ‘faith’ explicitly formulate a secularist guiding idea.

Therefore, the study of apologetics is of utmost importance if one is interested in situations in which secular–religious distinctions and differentiations adopt a conflictive mode, in which they are especially contested, and in which they produce groupings and taking sides pro and contra.

The figure of the individual apologist is thereby of importance as well, inasmuch as he functions as the voice to articulate a guiding idea in contradiction to dominant voices in the state and in one’s religious group. Benjamin Ziemann’s case study on Martin Niemöller (chapter 4, pp. 74–94) gives an interesting example in this regard.

⁹ M. Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory*, Revised edn (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996).

A final issue in the study of apologetics that I want to discuss also relates to the research interests of the Leipzig group. It is the question to what degree the features of apologetics as they are presented in the case studies in this volume, simply depend on specific historical situations, and to what degree they go beyond that. May it be that apologetics reveals certain path dependencies, in the sense that it reproduces certain patterns that can be traced back to earlier historical phases? Or, to bring in a third option: Does the ideal type of apologetics as such or one of the real-types that can be reconstructed through comparison, as Clemens Six shows (chapter 8, pp. 160–181), produce certain features that are then available in the global and trans-historical stock of knowledge? If the latter should be the case, the question arises of how certain features became elements of such a stock of knowledge, and how the transmission has worked from one place to the other. One might ask, for example, how the critique of liberalism that can be found in a variety of apologetic postures throughout the world until today received this global importance. Was it simply a by-product of colonial power and the battle against it? Or is there a tendency in apologetic worldviews to produce holistic, anti-liberal images of a world dominated by only one principle that is supposed to secure one's own group and the world as a whole against threats from outside and from within?