

Article

Karl Löwith's Secularization Thesis and the Jewish Reception of Heidegger

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Abstract: This article argues that Karl Löwith's thesis of secularization—in brief, that while modern philosophical notions present themselves as secular, they are in fact secularized, that is, they preserve features of the theological background they repress and remain determined by it—can serve as a productive hermeneutical key for framing and understanding an important strand in the twentieth century Jewish response to Heidegger's philosophy. It takes Ernst Cassirer, Leo Strauss, and Martin Buber as test-cases and demonstrates that these three Jewish thinkers interpreted various categories of Heidegger's *Being and Time* to be not simply secular but secularized Christian categories that continue to bear the mark of their theological origin even in their now-secular application and context. The article concludes with a number of reflections and observations on how Löwith's thesis of secularization can shed light on the polemical and political-theological edge of this strand in Heidegger's Jewish reception.

Keywords: Martin Heidegger; modern jewish thought; Ernst Cassirer; Martin Buber; Leo Strauss; Karl Löwith; secularization; German philosophy



Citation: Herskowitz, Daniel M.. 2021. Karl Löwith's Secularization Thesis and the Jewish Reception of Heidegger. *Religions* 12: 411. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060411>

Academic Editor: Elliot Wolfson

Received: 13 April 2021

Accepted: 25 May 2021

Published: 3 June 2021

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1. Introduction

In his recent masterful scholarly and constructive work, *Heidegger and Kabbalah: Hidden Gnosis and the Path of Posēis*, Elliot R. Wolfson demonstrates the fertility of the distinction, favoured by Heidegger, between the Identical (*das Gleiche*) and the Same (*das Selbe*). In “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics”, among other places, Heidegger writes: “the same is not the merely identical. In the merely identical, the difference disappears. In the same the difference appears, and appears all the more pressingly” (Heidegger 1969, p. 45).¹ Drawing this distinction into the orbit of Jewish thought, Wolfson demonstrates the “disarming correlation” of a constellation of themes and viewpoints that are found in Heidegger and the Kabbalists and provocatively urges us to reflect on “the identity of the nonidentical in the preservation of the nonidentity of the identical” that forcefully emerges by this seemingly unlikely juxtaposition (Wolfson 2019, p. 9). In the present essay I wish to utilize a somewhat different application of the distinction between identity and similarity and likewise draw it into the context of Jewish thought. A conceptualization of sameness through difference can be said to lay at the heart of Karl Löwith's thesis of secularization, one of the influential and contested contributions to twentieth century European intellectual history, and in what follows I suggest that it can serve as a productive hermeneutical key for framing and understanding an important strand in the twentieth century Jewish response to Heidegger's philosophy.²

This study will be divided into four sections. In the first section, I lay out, in brief, Löwith's understanding of the relation between modern secular philosophies of history and their apparent Christian past. In the second section I discuss Heidegger's early philosophy in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 2008) and highlight some of its elements that touch on the issue of secularization. The third section deals with three Jewish thinkers—Ernst Cassirer, Leo Strauss, and Martin Buber—who claimed that Heidegger's philosophy is not simply secular but secularized and developed alternative programs of thought to what they took

to be its philosophical, moral, and political deficiencies.³ Finally, in the fourth section I offer some reflections on how Löwith's thesis of secularization can shed light on this strand of Heidegger's Jewish reception.

2. Löwith's Secularization Thesis

We begin with a brief outline of the core elements of Löwith's understanding of secularization. In his book, *Meaning in History*, first published in English in 1949, Löwith argued that modern philosophies of history perceive themselves to be independent of religion and indeed countering religion's narrative of history, but in fact they are in continuity with the religious past they are rejecting. The main modern understandings of *Weltgeschichte*, he maintained, all draw on the eschatological purposiveness of the Judaeo-Christian biblical messianic vision of history. While negating this *Heilsgeschichte* and recognizing themselves as independent of it, they are still dependent on its animating logic insofar as they hold doctrines of historical progress which are re-articulations of the "theological concept of history as a history of fulfilment and salvation" (Löwith 1947, p. 1). As such, modern philosophies of history are not secular but secularized: they constituted reworkings of originally Christian categories but something of the original theological content remains inscribed in them, even while they sought to operate outside—or against—the orbit of the Christian conceptual legacy. The apparent structural similarities between biblical messianism and modern secular notions of progress are not coincidental, but reflect a hidden and enduring dependence of the latter on the former. Thus, under critical examination, the "modern" and the "secular" in modern secular philosophies of history do not reflect their true nature but rather conceal their constitutive pre-modern and theological roots. The modern historical consciousness is thus a confused hybridity: "The modern mind," Löwith wrote, "has not made up its mind whether it should be Christian or pagan. It sees with one eye of faith and one of reason. Hence its vision is necessarily dim in comparison with either Greek or biblical thinking" (ibid, p. 207). It is "as Christian by derivation as it is non-Christian by consequence" (ibid, p. 197).⁴

Löwith's *Meaning in History* is an original analysis of modern secular doctrines of progress, seeking to uncover their true genealogy and to demonstrate their internal incoherence. Yet the historical context in which it was composed is important. Written during Löwith's prolonged exile in the US (after fleeing Nazi Germany to Italy and then to Japan), the catastrophic political situation in which it was composed is stitched into its thesis (Barash 1998).⁵ For as Löwith himself pointed out, only in the West did the murderous totalitarian regimes, the Holocaust, and the development of the Atom Bomb take place. For him, the ideological underpinning of the aggressive modern secular goal to transform the world into a better place—even at the price of infliction immense pain, "re-education", imperialism, and so forth—is the secular adaptation of biblical eschatology. "Is it perhaps Jewish Messianism and Christian eschatology, though in their secular transformations," he wrote, "that have developed those appalling energies of creative activity which changed the Christian Occidental into a world-civilization?"

Löwith thus highlighted the continuity between the so-called secularity of modernity and its theological past, claiming that modern secularism is secularized, i.e., preserves features of the repressed theological background and remains determined by it. To paraphrase Heidegger's aforementioned distinction, we might say that for Löwith secular modernity is not "identical" with the Christian legacy it seeks to supersede, but they are still fundamentally the "same", as the identical is preserved in their non-identity.

Now, the formal insight about the dynamic of negation with preservation constituting the process of secularization is not exclusive to Löwith, but was taken up and developed in different directions by a host of thinkers during the twentieth century. We focus on Löwith here for two main reasons: firstly, because in *Meaning in History* he offered the canonical account of secularization which exerted great influence on post-war debates over the question of the continuity and break with respect to modern philosophical systems' past and on the question of the enduring religious charge of modernity; and secondly,

because Löwith applied this critical perspective not only to the notion of progress in modern philosophies of history, but to Heidegger's philosophy as well.

Himself a former student of Heidegger, Löwith began developing this reading in his contributions to the very early debates over *Being and Time* and its relation to Christianity that raged in theological circles in Germany during the 1930s, and he continued to develop this hermeneutical approach in a number of later publications.⁶ In his now classical comparative study of Heidegger and Franz Rosenzweig, Löwith claimed that Heidegger's philosophy was secularized, stating it was "though inexplicitly, living on the Christian 'saeculum' and failing to dechristianize it" (Löwith 1942, p. 63). He maintained that in the notion of *a-letheia* Heidegger "empties the concept of revelation of its theological sense," and that the distinction between Dasein's authentic and inauthentic existence reflects Heidegger's inability to entirely abandon "the Christian bifurcation of 'proper' (*eigentlich*) and 'improper' (*uneigentlich*) existence" (ibid, p. 63–64). The same is true, Löwith affirmed, with respect to other formalized ontological categories in *Being and Time*: the "entanglement of death, guilt, and conscience in an existence responsible only to itself means, it is true, an eradication of these concepts from their Christian sphere of origin, but on this very account they are still related to it" (ibid, p. 68). Löwith likewise identified a Christian echo in Heidegger's notion of authentic being-toward-death, where Dasein is to "deliver itself over" to its possibilities, but the possibility of discontinuing the burden of existence through suicide—a legitimate option in ancient philosophy but firmly prohibited by Christian morality—is implicitly rejected. The basic idea, that Heidegger's secularization of Christian categories transformed them into something different while the mark of their origin continues to reverberate, is frequently employed by Löwith.⁷ Heidegger, he declared, was a "godless theologian" (Löwith 1994, p. 47).

Löwith's thesis of secularization remains a landmark achievement in twentieth century intellectual history. Naturally, it was also subjected to critique. Here we shall mention in brief only what is perhaps the most decisive and famous objection. Hans Blumenberg, in his 1966 tome *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Blumenberg [1983] 1966, [English, 1983]), put forth a critical appraisal and response to the secularization theories that depicted the foundational concepts of secular modernity as secretly harbouring the theological charge they professed to overcome. His charge was directed primarily against Löwith's thesis, but similarly targeted Carl Schmitt, who argued that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" (Schmitt 1922, p. 35 [English, 2005, p. 36]).⁸ Against their claims, Blumenberg asserted that the modern ideal of progress is self-standing and legitimate on its own right. The legitimacy of modernity derives from its being *Selbstbehauptung*, self-asserted on the basis of ideals and premises of its own creation. In Blumenberg's view, Löwith's account of secularization was predicated on a metaphysical understanding of ideas as substances and by portraying it as a hybrid and incoherent creature formed by an unacknowledged dependence on the conceptual inheritance it sought to repudiate, it constituted a normative attempt to de-legitimize modernity. For Blumenberg, however, the logic of the modern ideal of progress is only correctly understood if it is divested of premodern assumptions and ideals. Unlike biblical eschatology, which is said to irrupt from beyond and offer closure to history, the modern ideal of history is immanent and strives for infinite progress. The eschatological ideal undergoes a secularization, but the result is a properly secular order, distinct from its theistic past and bereft of its baggage. A decisive discontinuity exists between the premodern and modern epochs, since modernity was established on the basis of the rejection of its theological inheritance. To be sure, Blumenberg recognized that there may be continuities between pre-modernity and modernity in the questions that are asked and addressed, but the answers given to them are importantly dissimilar. "The continuity of history across the epochal threshold lies not in the permanence of ideal substances," he wrote, "but rather in the inheritance of problems" (Blumenberg [1983] 1966, p. 48). As such, any case of employment of pre-modern terminology in a modern register should be understood either metaphorically or as an instance in which specific terms "outlive" their original

meaning or referent. The “sphere of sacral language outlives that of a consecrated objects” and is “conserved and used as a cover of precisely where philosophically, politically, and scientifically new thinking is being done” (ibid, p. 78).

Much more can be said of the seminal debate between Löwith and Blumenberg over the efficacy of the term “secularization” for modern times, but doing so will divert us away from the main concern of our discussion.⁹ We will note a few additional critiques of Löwith’s outlook in the final section of this paper. Blumenberg’s critique does allow us, however, to highlight an important point in Löwith’s position. Over the past few decades an elaborate and sophisticated discourse about “secularism” has developed, and it has been recognized that this term is utilized to denote a host of dissimilar things. The term is often taken to refer to the diminishment in the individual’s commitment to religious beliefs or traditions, or the falling away from a sacred tradition, or the so-called “privatization” of religion, i.e., the lessened legitimacy of appeals to religious terminology, sources, or reason in public discourse, or the transfers of divine authority to human institutions, or the process of some so-called rationalization or intellectualization, to name only a few.¹⁰ Löwith, however, was primarily concerned with secularization as a process of transformation in intellectual traditions and ideas, whereby concepts are transposed from one context, formed by religious assumptions, norms, and ideals, to another, worldly, context which on the face of it denied them.¹¹

In what follows, I wish to argue that something like Karl Löwith’s continuity thesis of secularization is reflected in the approach of a number of Jewish thinkers toward Heidegger’s thought, and that juxtaposing their analysis of Heidegger with Löwith’s can illuminate some of the assumptions, details, and motivations of this important strand in Heidegger’s Jewish reception. To understand how so, we must turn to the philosopher himself.

3. Heidegger and the Question of Secularization

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger centred on the question of the meaning of being, that is, what it means to be or that something *is*. At this stage in his thinking, he did this by investigating human existence, which he termed *Dasein*, since he believed this was the best way to approach the ontological question of the meaning of being. One of his driving motivations was the conviction that traditional philosophy and metaphysics was guided by faulty ontological assumptions due in part to the powerful hold Christianity had on it. This was no less the case of modern philosophy. Heidegger held that central elements in modern philosophy were based on secularized Christian theology. In *Being and Time* he wrote explicitly that “in modern times, the Christian definition [of the human’s being] has been de-theologized [*enttheologisiert*]” (Heidegger 2008, p. 74). In an earlier lecture course, he contended that the origin of Descartes’ account of the modern subject, the inception of modern philosophy, is theological: “What was previously established in believing consciousness’ understanding is here secularized [*säkularisiert*],” he wrote (Heidegger 2005, p. 236). The same was true with respect to Descartes’ account of freedom: “Descartes transposes what is theologically designated as the working of God’s grace to the relation of the intellect working on the will” (ibid, p. 116). Heidegger sought to develop an account of ontology that would not be beholden to the misconceptions of metaphysical and Christian thought and which would set out the preconditions of any thought-structure. In order to do so, his own account was to be a-theistic—meaning here neither confirming nor refuting theology’s specific claims, but instead separating philosophy and theology and bracketing the question of God from the philosophical discourse. It would be “fundamental”, applicable to any program, religious and non-religious alike.

Indeed, *Being and Time* offered a penetrating and original transcendental analysis of *Dasein*’s being and what Heidegger called ‘being in the world’ [*In-der-Welt-Sein*], introducing a myriad of new ontological [*Existential*] preconditions and possibilities of *Dasein*’s ontic [*Existentiell*] existence. However, as indicated already in the discussion of Löwith’s

interpretation of Heidegger in the previous section, one difficulty that arises from Heidegger's analysis of human existence is that a variety of its basic categories seem to bear the stamp of Christianity, either in their designation or content, while operating in the otherwise non-religious register and context of this work.¹² Many can be culled, but here three will be mentioned, as they will serve our discussion below. A feature Heidegger claimed was fundamental to the care structure [*Sorge*] of human existence is "fallenness" [*Gefallenheit*]. By this he meant, in a nutshell, the tendency to disown oneself and be "lost" in the common, homogenizing anonymity of existence that we always find ourselves already absorbed in. This has been read as a secularized version of the Christian view of human fallenness and immersion in sin in light of the Fall. In Heidegger, however, it is detached of any notion of sin or transgression and the "fall" is not from a higher or purer state. Heidegger also spoke of "the call of consciousness" [*Gewissensruf*] to denote the moment that prompts an existential transformation from inauthenticity or being not-one's own to authenticity. Heidegger described this as an internal call, lacking any content but which urges the human to choose to own up to and embrace the particularity and totality of its existence, i.e., to be resolute, authentic. This notion of "the call" has been read as a secularized version of divine revelation, which calls the human being from its lostness and forsakenness to redemption. In Heidegger, however, the "redemption" is not a state of being with God but authentic existence in the world, and the caller is not a transcendent being but Dasein itself. Another example is the notion of being-toward-death. Heidegger claimed that human existence is rightly conceived in light of, and as determined by, its temporality and finitude, and authenticity involves a particular way of reckoning with one's own time and one's own death. Finitude and mortality are not something that come at the end of one's life, Heidegger insisted, but are already present in the present in the sense that "death is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is" (Heidegger 2008, p. 245). Human existence is always "toward death" [*Zum-Tode*] in that we project ourselves into the future and are always ahead of our-selves (*Sich-vorweg-sein*), delimited by the projected future extended forth by and into our finitude. This structure of life as projected forward into a finite future that grants the present its import has been read as a secularized version of the Christian eschatological stance. In Heidegger, however, it is not God, salvation, or the Second Coming toward which life is directed, but death.

On this reading, these ontological features outlined by Heidegger—alongside others—are of Christian origin but have been displaced from their traditional context, stripped of their religious content, formulized, and employed in a philosophical context that is decidedly non-theological. Heidegger, to be sure, completely rejected this interpretation of his thought, but it has been extremely influential throughout the century-long reception of *Being and Time* and has been endorsed by a long line of Heidegger readers.

The question of secularization thus emerges as important in the context of Heidegger's philosophy. Does the fact that Heidegger is said to have drawn on and secularize the conceptual, structural, and terminological reservoirs of a certain confessional tradition challenge his claim for theological neutrality? The answer to this would depend on how one understands the process of secularization. If Heidegger's analysis of human existence is beholden to a specific legacy, specific texts, with specific assumptions about what it means to be human—assumptions that are otherwise contested by other traditions and legacies—and these continue to inform his philosophy, then we might be justified to challenge its claim for universality and neutrality. If, on the other hand, the process of formulization and secularization results in an account that is uncommitted theologically and discontinuous with whatever conceptual framework it drew on, then Heidegger's claim for neutrality and universality can be, at least from this perspective, accepted.

What is suggested here is that the question of the lasting imprint of Christianity on Heidegger's philosophy and the character and efficiency of the process of secularization is not only important for understanding his philosophy, but is of particular relevance for his Jewish reception. If the existential analysis of Dasein involves the secularization of Christian notions, is the result universally valid categories that can shed light on, or be applied in the

context of, Jewish thought and existence? Or is the result an analysis of existence that continues to promote Christian assumptions covertly and unintentionally?¹³ To the extent that Jewish thought seeks to guard itself from Christian influences, any remnants of a Christian legacy in Heidegger's philosophy would be undesirable from a Jewish perspective. Thus, the question of the continuity and discontinuity between secular concepts and their apparently theological past emerges as important for the Jewish reception of Heidegger's philosophy. In short, whether or not one concurs with Löwith that the de-theologization involved in the transition and transformation of concepts from their Christian origin to a secular context does not overcome the conditioning of their religious provenance can affect how one reads Heidegger from a Jewish perspective.

Having outlined the basic conceptual background, we can now turn to the main argument of this essay: that this precise logic animated how a certain strand of Jewish readers approached Heidegger's early thinking. That is, that some of Heidegger's Jewish readers identified various categories in *Being and Time* as secularized incarnations of Christian theological categories, and that their critical assessment of his philosophy is tied, among other things, to their conviction that the process of secularization does not entirely negate the original theological content. As noted, our test-cases will be three prominent twentieth century Jewish thinkers: Ernst Cassirer, Martin Buber, and Leo Strauss.

4. Secularization as a Critical Lens in the Jewish Reception of Heidegger

We begin with the important Jewish neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer. In pieces written shortly before his famous 1929 debate with Heidegger in Davos, a debate that assumed almost mythical symbolic meaning in twentieth century intellectual history imagination, Cassirer called attention to Heidegger's "Christian-religious" image of the individual Dasein, defined by its "world-fallenness" [*Weltverfallenheit*] and confined to its own finitude (Gordon 2010, p. 117).¹⁴ In some post-Davos notes, published only recently, he observed that Heidegger "comes [. . .] from the philosophy of religion," as his entire philosophy emulates religious structures: the modality of inauthenticity is portrayed as "a kind of 'fall from grace,'" and the emphasis on historicity is "always a religious-individualistic comprehension of history" (Cassirer 1994, p. 202). Cassirer also stated that in *Being and Time* "all temporality has its roots in the 'present moment' [*Augenblick*] seen in a religious sense—for it is constituted through 'Sorge' and through the basic religious phenomenon of death—and 'Angst' (cf. Kierkegaard)" (ibid, p. 200–1). Indeed, in Heidegger's analysis of anxiety and finitude "a genuine religious tone becomes audible, as with Kierkegaard," Cassirer observed. Yet unlike Kierkegaard,

with Heidegger, the problem seems to cut more deeply, insofar as his posing of the question was wholly determined by theological considerations [. . .], but the theological solution to the problem is rejected. He does not allow anxiety, as mankind's basic state of mind, to be pacified through either theological metaphysics or a religious Gospel of salvation. (ibid, p. 206)

The issues animating Heidegger's philosophy are rooted in and determined by Christianity's framing of the problem of the existential stance of the believer, Cassirer claimed, but Christianity's solution is rejected by him. Cassirer likewise linked Heidegger's "deeply religious, especially Protestant" flavor to statements by Luther about death, identifying the important role of the Reformer in the "power and depth" and "religious purposes" expressed in *Being and Time*. For Cassirer, Heidegger's philosophy is based on the Christian tradition and its account of human existence, stripped of its overt theological content. While actively distancing itself from this heritage, it still betrayed its traces. The outcome of this undecided hybridity is not only inconsistency, but a rejection of the ideal of eternal truth, resulting in moral and political fatalism. This, at least, is how Cassirer made philosophical sense of Heidegger's Nazism. In his later work, *The Myth of the State* (1946), Cassirer connected Heidegger's notion of "fallenness" [*Geworfenheit*] to his political affiliation to make the following claim: the idea that Dasein is simply thrown into its facticity suggests a

fatalistic outlook according to which one's situation cannot be changed by one's efforts. Such fatalism gives itself to the immorality of fascism and totalitarianism:

A theory that sees in the *Geworfenheit* of man one of his principal characters [has] given up all hopes of an active share in the construction and reconstruction of man's cultural life. Such philosophy renounces its own fundamental theoretical and ethical ideals. It can be used, then, as a pliable instrument in the hands of the political leaders. (Cassirer 1946, p. 293)¹⁵

As an alternative, Cassirer offered in his essay, "Judaism and the Modern Political Myths" (Cassirer 1944), his own account of philosophical idealism and an intertwined depiction of a rational and ethical Jewish monotheism. This religio-philosophical stance, informed by Kantian reason and ethics and by the moral message of the Hebrew prophets, was to be a humanistic counter-force to the mythical, irrational, and secularized political and theoretical frameworks that Heidegger, in his philosophy and politics, represented. This humanistic account of Judaism—anti-mythical, rational, and ethical—was philosophically, morally, and politically superior to the general worldview staked out by Heidegger.¹⁶

We turn now to our second example. Leo Strauss, a former student of Heidegger's and political philosopher on his own right, read Heidegger's philosophy not as secular but as secularized as well. On a number of occasions he claimed that Heidegger's notion of the "call of consciousness" is the secularization of a specific Christian understanding of revelation.¹⁷ In a 1930 letter to his friend Gerhard Krüger, a reader of Heidegger himself, Strauss wrote that modern philosophers have not made a compelling argument against religion but merely expressed a will against it.¹⁸ "I see indications of such a will in Machiavelli, Bruno, and Spinoza," he stated, adding that "its most extreme representation is reached in Nietzsche, and its completion attained in—*Being and Time*" (Shell 2018, pp. 15–18). The example Strauss brought to demonstrate that Heidegger's early masterpiece represented the completion of the modern tradition of anti-religious will is the notion of "the call". "I mean," he continued, "in the interpretation of the *call* of conscience and in the answer given there to the question of *who* is calling. It is only on the basis of Heidegger's *Dasein* interpretation that an adequate *atheistic* interpretation of the Bible should be possible." The reason the Heideggerian "call" is the ultimate fulfilment of the anti-religious modern philosophical attitude is that it replaced God with the human being as the source of a quasi-religious call that prompts an existential transformation. In this secularized version, revelation is deprived of its divine and absolute authority and of its public political function, and what remains is a secularized notion of revelation, that is, an interior, subject-centered, and unverifiable experience of a "call" from *Dasein* to itself. Heidegger was drawing on the structure found in Christian tradition, where a transformative and abrupt "call" pulls the believer out of her foreshadowing and into existential redemption, but applied it in a secular register where God plays no role and instead *Dasein* does the calling.

In another letter from the same year Strauss reflected on the intellectual options that were available to one like himself "who does *not* believe" and who would therefore not be interested in being subjected to the Christian "dominion" which he identified in modern philosophy. In Strauss's understanding, there were two options. He wrote:

The most proximate consequence—Heidegger's, among others—is: Christianity has brought to light facts about human life that were not known or not known sufficiently to classical philosophy; at least it understood these facts more *deeply* than the ancients; therefore the understanding of historicity first made possible by Christianity is a *deeper*, in this sense a *more radical* understanding of human beings [. . .] Fundamentally: the philosophy still possible, and first made possible, after the decay of Christianity preserves the 'truth' of Christianity. [. . .] I stated that the most proximate consequence of modern unbelief is the assumption: post-Christian philosophy represents a *progress* over against classical philosophy even if Christianity is not 'true.'

Heidegger's philosophy epitomized the modern tradition of atheism in that it is predicated on the "facts about human life" introduced by Christianity, namely, the historical conscience and historicity of truth that made nineteenth century "historicism" possible, and that continued to develop on the basis of this Christian foundation even if it no longer took Christianity to be "true". The attempt to break away from Christianity, typical of modern philosophy, was played out in the form of 'secularization,' understood by Strauss here as negation with preservation. Thus, the modern anti-Christian philosophical tradition that found its ultimate articulation in Heidegger's *Being and Time* believed itself to have truly progressed beyond the Christian horizon, but it was still preserving its truth.¹⁹

This point regarding the enduring indebtedness of modern philosophy to the Christian legacy was repeated by Strauss in a number of other occasions over the next few decades, as was Heidegger's pride of place in this secularized tradition. This reading is articulated most straightforwardly in Strauss's famous Preface to the English translation of his book on Spinoza. There he wrote:

Heidegger wishes to expel from philosophy the last relics of Christian theology, like the notions of 'eternal truths' and 'the idealized absolute subject'. But the understanding of man as the rational animal is, as he emphasizes, primarily the Biblical understanding of man as created in the image of God. Accordingly, he interprets human life in light of 'being towards death', 'anguish,' 'conscience', and 'guilt'; in this most important respect he is much more Christian than Nietzsche. (Strauss 1965, pp. 12–13)

In other words, Heidegger's attempt to cleanse his philosophy of Christian elements did not succeed, and the result was an analysis of human existence that was not simply secular but secularized. Indeed, all the examples listed by Strauss are notions that have been frequently claimed to have their roots in Christian concepts. We see that Strauss's approach to Heidegger not as a thinker following the "reduction thesis" of secularity, whereby God is "dead" and religion plays no role in his system. Rather, Strauss accepted that central elements of Heidegger's program were no longer Christian but that they still remained entangled in the Christian conceptual world. It is for this reason that Strauss could claim that Heidegger was "much more Christian than Nietzsche."

This interpretation is part of Strauss's wider agenda of reading Heidegger's philosophy as the culmination of a misguided tradition of thought, rooted in Christianity, that conceived revelation as dogma and knowledge rather than public divine legislation, which Strauss claimed was the case in the competing Jewish and Islamic traditions of thought (Batnitzky 2005, 2006, 2009). The result, he asserted, was a privatized notion of religion and an account of philosophy with anti-rationalist tendencies and closely linked to historicism. Strauss maintained that the modern secularized mind hubristically cultivated a belief that human reason had in its capacity to answer conclusively the fundamental questions of philosophy. This belief in reason's self-sufficiency set an unattainable expectation that led to the eventual erosion in confidence in its abilities. Intimately tied to this development was the rise of historicism, which generated a relativization of truth (Strauss 1953). The result was the modern crises of relativism and nihilism, two destructive features manifested most quintessentially in Heidegger's philosophy and Nazi politics. Strauss had too much respect for Heidegger's philosophical brilliance to reduce his philosophy to his politics and draw a simplistic and direct cause and effect relation between the two. He did not, however, deny their "intimate connection". In his essay "What is Political Philosophy?" Strauss wrote:

It was the contempt for these permanencies which permitted the most radical historicist in 1933 to submit to, or rather to welcome, as a dispensation of fate, the verdict of the least wise and least moderate part of his nation, while it was in its least wise and least moderate mood, and at the same time to speak of wisdom and moderation. (Strauss 1988, pp. 26–27)

The modern religious and philosophical systems built on Christian foundations were deeply flawed, Strauss believed, for what he took to be the question of political philosophy, i.e., the basic question of the life worth living, cannot be properly addressed by them. Strauss likened the philosophical situation governed by the historicist consciousness to a “second cave” below the Platonic cave, representing an additional obstacle facing the already taxing job of the philosopher seeking to exit the “first cave” and move from opinion to knowledge. As an alternative to modern historicism and the enduring sway of the Christian horizon over both modern religion and philosophy, Strauss sought to raise anew the basic question of the knowledge of the Good and the good life and the debate between what he considered the two key approaches toward this question. The first option, natural and unaided human reason and guidance, is captured symbolically by “Athens”. The second option, divine revelation and guidance, is captured symbolically by “Jerusalem”. “No alternative is more fundamental than this,” Strauss declared (Strauss 1953, p. 74). For him, “Athens” is represented best by Plato and Greek philosophy and “Jerusalem” is represented best by biblical monotheism and medieval Jewish philosophy. Only by reviving ancient philosophy and “authentic” premodern Judaism and by reinstating the enduring debate between Athens and Jerusalem, without syntheses, compromises, or reconciliations, can intellectual life return to its proper path. Only in this way, Strauss maintained, can Heidegger’s historicist philosophy and its dangerous political implications be countered.

We turn now to our third and final example. Martin Buber, in his 1938 lecture series, “What is Man?”, dealt at length with Heidegger’s philosophy.²⁰ One point he was particularly concerned with was the fact that the human’s relation to God “is completely lacking in Heidegger” (Buber 1947, p. 178). But Heidegger did not simply delineate a secular or atheistic account of human existence, Buber asserted. Heidegger, rather, secularized the Christian depiction of the individual standing alone in the face of God—a stance articulated most poignantly by Kierkegaard in his portrayal of the single individual believer, which Buber referred to as the “Single One”. The structure of this religious model still stood in Heidegger, but it was employed in a context in which God was absent. Heidegger, Buber asserted, had “taken over Kierkegaard’s mode of thinking” and “secularizes [säkularisiert]” it by “severing the relation to the absolute for which Kierkegaard’s man becomes a Single One” (ibid, p. 174). Heidegger adopted the existential stance of the lone individual facing God, but in his secularized rendition, the individual does not face God but its own temporal selfhood and ultimate finitude. Buber believed that the gnostic elements of Christianity, often concealed and marginalized, emerged forcefully in Kierkegaard, whose individual believer is constituted by its relationality toward God, but this relationality was directed solely toward God and excluded relations with fellow humans and the world. Heidegger’s secularized account retained this exclusion and took it one step further. Having excluded God, too, from the purview of human existence, Buber argued, what Heidegger offered was not a relational if also exclusivist account of human existence like the one found in Kierkegaard, but a “monological” portrayal of a solipsistic human existence, locked up onto itself and unable to truly encounter that which was not itself, God or human. The possible disconnect between the relation with God and the relation with fellow humans, which Buber took as the monological pitfalls implicit to Christianity, are reproduced and radicalized in Heidegger. And note: Buber’s point was not simply that the origin of Heidegger’s notion of being-toward-death was the Christian posture of the believer vis-à-vis God, but that this origin, and some of its flaws, remain reverberating in Heidegger’s thought despite its transposition into a Godless framework. For Buber, Heidegger’s relation-less depiction of human existence excluded what was most essential and precious about human existence.

Interestingly, like Strauss, also Buber identified Heidegger’s “the call of conscience” as a secularized moment in *Being and Time*, and he contrasted this self-relating internal “call” with his own relational rendition of the biblically-resonant external call of “Where art thou?” [*Ayequa*],” to which the reply is “Here am I’ [*Hineni*]” (ibid, p. 166). For Buber, only when the I encounters the presence of someone who was not the I, “only then am I

‘really’ there: I am there [*Ich bin da*] if I am *there* [*da*], and where this ‘there’ is, is always determined less by myself than by the presence of this being which changed its form and its appearance” (ibid, p. 166). It should be noticed that Buber here covertly—though most likely intentionally—appropriated Heidegger’s terminology of *Da-sein* and replaced it, together with Heidegger’s call, with the biblical *Ayequa* and *Hineni*. In so doing, he accentuated that Heidegger had co-opted the religious account of divine revelation in his own philosophy but employed it in a secularized manner in which its core message—that true selfhood emerges as a response to the revealed call—was preserved as well as transformed. Buber underscored that, in contrast to Heidegger, the source of genuine revelation, and hence of genuine authenticity, was transcendent to the Self, coming from without, from the other and from God. By insinuating that only the relational I in its encounter with a Thou should be rightly termed “Dasein”, Buber was in effect positioning his own biblically grounded dialogical framework as an alternative to Heidegger’s secularized philosophy.

Buber continued to polemicize against Heidegger’s philosophy in ensuing writings and he likewise continued to pose his own thinking as its appropriate alternative (cf. Buber 1965, 2003, 1988). He, too, he saw Heidegger’s monological, secularized thought and its lack of ability to transcend the immanence of selfhood as the conceptual foundation for Heidegger’s shameful political involvement. In Buber’s essay from 1952, “Religion and Modern Thinking”, he drew a direct line from Heidegger’s immanentist framework to his Nazi politics. Like his concept of selfhood, Buber charged, Heidegger’s solipsistic and secular understanding of history left no room for God, the “One who does not dwell in time but only appears in it.” The danger of absolutizing historical time rather than seeing it as the dynamic setting in which the drama of human-divine encounter unfolded is that “it can easily occur that in the midst of present historical events the time-bound thinker ascribes to the state’s current drive to power the character of an absolute and in this sense the determination of the future” (Buber 1957, p. 77). This was precisely the case with Heidegger, who identified an absolute historical moment in which “the essence of truth is originally decided” (ibid, p. 77) in Hitler’s ascent to power.

5. Concluding Reflections

Much more can be said of the reception of Heidegger by Cassirer, Buber, and Strauss, and a more elaborate analysis of their reading of his work through the lens of secularization can be offered (Herskowitz 2021). It is important to emphasize that what is argued here is not that Löwith influenced these thinkers on this matter, nor that reading Heidegger through this lens was an exclusively Jewish exercise. In fact, this reading was widespread and shared by many, across confessional, political, geographical, and generational lines. Yet as indicated above, such a reading had particular ramifications when taken from a Jewish perspective. As a conclusion of sorts, I wish to offer some brief reflections on what can be gleaned from approaching Heidegger’s Jewish reception through the lens of Löwith’s understanding of secularization and modern philosophy.

In her article, “A Secular Utopia: Remarks on the Löwith-Blumenberg Debate” (Svenungsson 2014), Jayne Svenungsson observes that notwithstanding Blumenberg’s critique of Löwith, in the final analysis they are in agreement that modernity’s theological past is something that ought to be left behind. Löwith’s theory of secularization is an implicit critique of the biblical narrative of history, for it suggested that the secularized form of the messianic historical structure was the logic behind modern political ideologies and twentieth century totalitarianism and imperialism in particular. Holding that the biblical *Heilsgeschichte* was detrimental to the modern world, Löwith opted for a stoic temperament of *amor fati* and a return to the pre-Christian pagan notion of nature [*physis*] which includes the cosmos and the human being. In Svenungsson’s words, Löwith (and Blumenberg) “remained deeply skeptical about the purportedly constructive impact of the ‘Judeo-Christian’ legacy on modern thought.” Löwith sought a “secular utopia” that transcended beyond the conceptual reach of the “theology of history” of the biblical framework.

Svenungsson makes a few additional points that are pertinent for our discussion. She notes that Löwith presents a singular narrative of the intellectual development of the West that reduces the multiple, conflicting, and ever-developing outlooks expressed in this tradition throughout the long period he had considered. Faultily, Löwith formulated an overly simplified template of the relation between secular modernity and its religious past, one which does not do justice to the dramatically messier picture that emerges from a more careful examination. Moreover, Svenungsson points attention to the fact that Löwith did not really differentiate between Jewish and Christian traditions in his sketch of the theological heritage of the West. He speaks of the “Judaean-Christian tradition” or “Hebrew and Christian thinking”, but he has primarily Christian tradition in mind. Löwith’s backward narrative ran from modern representatives of philosophy of history, such as Marx, Hegel, and Comte, through Enlightenment thinkers such as Condorcet, Turgot, and Vico, to the medieval thinkers Joachim of Fiore and Augustine, and finally to the biblical legacy—as picked up by Christian tradition. The narrative of the West is told by him primarily as the story of developments, transitions, and overhauls within Christian culture.²¹ Judaism plays no significant role in this history. As Svenungsson puts it: “if [Löwith] had devoted more of his attention to this particularity, he would have been compelled to admit that Jewish messianic expectation throughout history have looked quite different from Christian expectations” (ibid, p. 76). Löwith thus recognized only two streams of thought, Christian and pagan, and his position is revealed to be not only that any debt to Christian tradition in contemporary cultural and theoretical frameworks should be rejected, but that Judaism played at best a minimal role in the drama of Western thought.

Svenungsson’s points can illuminate some of the motivations and assumptions underlying the strand in Heidegger’s Jewish reception that has been discussed above. For as we have seen, in contrast to Löwith, the overarching Jewish conviction is that the Jewish heritage—either in distinction to Christianity or with Christianity according to Jewish terms—offers the much-needed corrective to the modern susceptibility to totalitarianism and nihilism. To be sure, each thinker presents a different ideal of the Jewish corrective to the present predicament. Cassirer, following Kant and Herrmann Cohen, proposed a humanistic vision of universalism, liberalism, and reason. Buber projected a dialogical existence in which people are able to encounter fellow humans and the divine with intimacy and immediacy as part of an anarco-theopolitics of God’s direct rule.²² And Strauss, in his attempt to revive a manner of questioning, promoted a non-utopian utopianism of what he took to be a moderate, non-dogmatic rationalism matched by a moderate, non-totalitarian politics. Strauss, in fact, sailed close to Löwith in his desire to return to a pre-Christian, truly secular outlook that he found in the ancient Greek world. But unlike Löwith—with whom he corresponded for decades—his call for a return included a return to a pre-modern, non-Christianized Judaism as well, as he believed that only in this way the question of Athens and Jerusalem can be properly posed. Indeed, in many respects Buber’s and Strauss’s accounts were pitted against the general Enlightenment line of the *Aufklärer* Cassirer. Their divergent visions notwithstanding, all three thinkers shared the assumption that the modern predicament and calamity was an outgrowth of the conceptual world of a version of a specific religious tradition coming out of the Bible, namely, Christianity. Likewise, they insisted that another religious tradition coming out of the Bible, Judaism, would not only have *not* resulted in the perils of modernity, but was a constructive resource for political and philosophical engagements seeking to remedy these perils.

One recurring trope we encountered in Cassirer, Strauss, and Buber was that Heidegger’s secularized philosophy was connected to his attraction to National Socialism. The general idea is that a secular conceptual framework that is confined to the world of immanence, finitude, and history, does not have at its disposal the ability to ground values in an ultimate, non-relative basis, leaving morality on a flimsy and insecure foundation. According to this line of reasoning, Heidegger’s thought was either implicitly nihilistic or unable to guard itself against nihilism—and nowhere was the immorality, barbarity, and nihilism more present than in the Nazi party to which Heidegger pledged alliance. The

critique of secularism in this context had moral and political implications: secularism led to nihilism and totalitarianism. This should be understood as a critique of both secular and secularized programs of thought, but in Cassirer, Buber, and Strauss, this charge is also levelled implicitly against Christianity, which they took to be a tradition that in one way or another was in greater risk of lapsing into secularity. While their arguments to this effect differ, according to these thinkers Christianity was less secure against the pitfall of secularization, and by implication, it was more susceptible to the dangers of nihilism.

What is reflected here is therefore not only a polemic against Heidegger but also a polemic against the religious tradition which is said to be the original source of many of Heidegger's categories. This covert polemic can be seen more clearly when we consider that complementing their critical remarks, Cassirer, Strauss, and Buber also offered a version of Judaism or Jewishness that was to serve as an alternative to Heidegger's thought. This alternative, they believed, was conceptually, politically, and morally superior. It reflected a superior philosophico-ethical perspective (Cassirer), a superior analysis of human existence (Buber), or a superior approach for the possibility of political philosophy (Strauss), and it stayed clear of the moral and political pitfalls of modern secularism—primarily, totalitarianism and nihilism.

Cassirer, Strauss, and Buber thus echoed Löwith's understanding of secularization in viewing the theologically charged modern secular vocabulary of *Being and Time* to be bearing a hidden continuity with its Christian past, that something of the original content is retained and carried forward despite its negation. They likewise concurred with Löwith's logic, that such a Christian inflection gives grounds to reject Heidegger's philosophy, each with his own reasons. Indeed, Blumenberg's insight, that Löwith's thesis of secularization was not simply a descriptive sketch of the genealogy of concepts but an evaluative intervention aiming at delegitimation, is an astute depiction of the stances put forth by Cassirer, Strauss, and Buber vis-à-vis Heidegger. However, these thinkers developed their programs of thought as an alternative to Heidegger's philosophy by drawing on, or with reference to, Jewish tradition, and in so doing they were implicitly suggesting that the happenings of the twentieth century were not the only possible result of the appropriation of the biblical worldview, but merely one, flawed possibility of such an endpoint. Rather than overcoming the biblical tradition and projecting the hope for a "secular utopia", as Löwith recommended, Cassirer, Strauss, and Buber mobilized Judaism or Jewishness as they understood it as a primal spiritual and moral antidote to the dangers of modern secularism and to the comprehensive crisis of modernity that Heidegger's philosophy represented in their eyes. For them, it was the Jewish heritage that offered the much-needed corrective to the modern and Christian susceptibility to the totalitarianism and nihilism reflected in Heidegger's secularized thought.²³

In other words, these three thinkers, each in his own distinct way, believed that modern culture ought not to liberate itself of the biblical legacy, but of a certain strand within it, and embrace as an alternative a different strand of biblical legacy. Instead of striving to overcome the biblical heritage and present a truly secular theoretical scheme, one must uphold the difference between Christianity and Judaism and recognize that the predicament of modern secularity is the outcome of the former, but that the latter may, in fact, hold its remedy. It should be noticed, however, that this implied opposition to Löwith's position set forth by Cassirer, Buber, and Strauss is in line with Löwith's account in similarly presenting a reductionist approach toward the history of ideas, whereby the multiple, conflicting, and ever-developing traditions within Judaism are contracted into a single idealized tradition that is presented as exemplary and salvific.

We see that through their critique of Heidegger, these three thinkers were also articulating an indirect critique of Christianity, or, to be more precise, a critique of a certain kind of Christianity, one that denied its Jewish heritage. Through this they were critiquing a certain modern philosophical stance that they saw as indebted to the conceptual world echoing this Christian denial. Cassirer, Buber, and Strauss (though in a less obvious way than the former two) maintained that the humanistic European (Christian) culture and

thought reached its true heights when it was aligned with the message of the Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition. Thus, the critical engagement of these Jewish thinkers with Heidegger's thought through the lens of secularization encompassed more than just an engagement with a troubling albeit formidable philosopher, but channeled a moment in the Jewish polemic against Christianity as well as an attempt to come to terms with modern secularism. Nevertheless, it must also be noted that in their own debates with Heidegger and in the alternatives they set out to his philosophy, Cassirer, Buber, and Strauss based themselves on traditions of thought that were shared with Heidegger, which are themselves, according to their own admittance, colored by Christian tradition. Their presentation of a clear opposition between Heidegger's secularized philosophy and their own version of Jewish thought is thus not one that should be accepted uncritically. For while certainly not the "same", it is only on the basis of their "identity" that the differences between them appear all the more pressingly.²⁴

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Not Applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- 1 Cf. (Heidegger 1975, pp. 218–19); and the discussion in (Wolfson 2018, pp. 87–108).
- 2 "Jewish" here means in this context responses to Heidegger's philosophy that perceive themselves as reflecting or representing a normative strand within Jewish tradition.
- 3 While Heidegger's ties to the National Socialist party and his antisemitism have been the subject of heated debates since the 1930s, the recent publication of his personal philosophy notebooks from the period of the war, the so-called "Black Notebooks", reignited these debates with force and fervor. See for example, among many others, (Heidegger 2017; Trawny 2015a, 2015b; Nancy 2017; Di Cesare 2015; Farin and Malpas 2016; Heinz and Kellerer 2016; Homolka and Heidegger 2016).
- 4 I analyze Löwith's account of secularization in further depth, specifically vis-à-vis his interpretation of Heidegger, in (Herskowitz 2022).
- 5 Cf. (Löwith 1994). See also (Löwith 1964).
- 6 Cf. (Löwith 1930a, 1930b). It does not seem at all implausible that the roots of the secularization thesis laid out in *Meaning of History* are to be found in Löwith's early engagement with, and interpretation of, *Being and Time*.
- 7 Cf. also (Löwith 1982, 1953, 1995, 1964, p. 210).
- 8 On Blumenberg see (Falsch 2019; Zill 2020; Pippin 1987; Brient 2002; Jay 1985; Lapidot 2020). Blumenberg and Schmitt would continue their ideational clash in their correspondence. See for example (Ifergan 2010; Bragagnolo 2011; Müller 2008).
- 9 On the Löwith–Blumenberg *Säkularisierungsstreit*, see among many (Gordon 2019; Wallace 1981; Monod 2015). Löwith was a key figure in the wider post-War debate over the nature of modern secularism, which included Odo Marquard, Hans Jonas, Gershom Scholem, Hans Blumenberg, Eric Voegelin, Jacob Taubes, and Susan Taubes, among others. See (Styfahls 2019).
- 10 (Taylor 2007; Swatos and Christiano 1999; Casanova 1994). From this more socially focused perspective, it is more accurate to speak in plural of secularizations, not least in terms of their geographical and historical occurrences—it would be mistaken to speak of a uniform notion of "secularism" or "secularity" in, say, France, India, and the US, and nineteenth century secularism differs from twentieth century secularism, and so forth.
- 11 How this phenomenon of secularization in the realm of ideas relates to sociological processes of secularization did not seem to occupy Löwith.
- 12 Much has been written on the general topic of Heidegger and Christianity. See (Wolfe 2013, 2014; Coyne 2015; Wrathall and Morganna 2011; Caputo 1993, 2000; Gadamer 1994; Hemming 2002; McGrath 2006; Baring 2019). Heidegger's thought in *Being and Time* developed out of his earlier work in theology and Christian philosophy of religion. The definitive works on Heidegger's intellectual development building up to *Being and Time* are (Van Buren 1994; Kisiel 1993; Kisiel and Van Buren 1994; Kisiel and Sheehan 2007).
- 13 On Heidegger's Jewish Reception, see (Herskowitz 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Fleischacker 2008; Lapidot and Brumlik 2017; Roubach 2009).
- 14 On the Heidegger–Cassirer encounter in Davos, see (Krois 1983, 2004; Gordon 2010; Friedman 2000; Barash 2008). See also (Cassirer 1931).
- 15 See also (Cassirer 1953, 1955, 1956).
- 16 On Cassirer's interpretation of Judaism, see among others, (Mali 1986; Meyer 2000).
- 17 A more detailed account of Strauss's reading of Heidegger's notion of the "Call" as secularized see (Herskowitz 2021). For alternative discussions of this theme, see (Vega 2018; McIlwain 2018; Meier 2006). On Strauss and Heidegger more generally, see (Velkley 2011; Smith 1997; Chacón 2010).
- 18 This is a central thrust in his early book on Spinoza (Strauss 1930). On Strauss's correspondence with Krüger see (Pangle 2014).
- 19 On Strauss and Christianity, see, among many, (Pelluchon 2006; Merrill 2000).

- 20 On Buber and Heidegger see (Goldstein 1978; Gordon 2001; Hadad 2017; Mendes-Flohr 2014; Herskowitz 2019, 2020b, 2017; Novak 1985; Sigfried 2010; Chighel 2020).
- 21 Löwith singled out Marx's Jewish background but drew on the modern (Protestant) depiction of the biblical prophet serving as the bearer of a social and ethical message. Löwith wrote: "[Marx] was a Jew of Old Testament stature, though an emancipated Jew of the nineteenth century who felt strongly antireligious and even anti-Semitic. It is the old Jewish messianism and prophetism—unaltered by two thousand years of economic history from handicraft to large-scale industry—and Jewish insistence on absolute righteousness which explains the idealistic basis of Marx's materialism" (Löwith 1964, p. 44).
- 22 (Buber 1947, 1958, 1957). See also (Brody 2018).
- 23 This is a mirror image of Heidegger's own politico-theological view vis-à-vis the Judeo-Christian tradition. Cf. (Schmidt 2017).
- 24 Indeed, in contrast to the tendency of the three thinkers discussed in the present study who posit a clear disjoint between Heidegger and Jewish tradition, recent scholarship has explored various areas of commonality and proximity. See for example, (Lapidot 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Dolgopolski 2017; Atkins 2018; Scult 2004, 2007; Wolfson 2005, 2006, 2014, 2018, 2019; Fagenblat 2016, 2017).

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