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De-Worlding or De-Secularization?

Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger) and Robert Spaemann on *Entweltlichung* in the Tension between Secularization and Universal Mission

During his recent apostolic visit to Hungary in April 28-30 of this year, Pope Francis – while addressing members of the Hungarian clergy in the archdiocesan co-cathedral Saint Stephen's Basilica (erected from civil donations, including pledges from flood survivors) – quoted with apparent approval an address delivered by his predecessor Benedict XVI a decade earlier and thousand kilometers to the West. The ostensible “spread of secularism” and the seemingly inexorable retreat of religion in Western societies, Pope Francis said, would prove “helpful to the [Catholic] Church,” because, he claimed quoting his predecessor ([official translation](#)), “secularizing trends ... have always meant a profound liberation of the Church from forms of worldliness.”

This appraisal might come from an unusual angle, but it adds to the growing list of ecclesiastical, scholarly, and public interlocutors who deem Benedict XVI's proposal of the Catholic Church's becoming “unworldly” or “detached from worldliness” (in Ratzinger's native German: *Entweltlichung*) – propounded in 2011 on a distinctively secular stage, namely the 1990s modernist building of the municipal Concert Hall in Freiburg (erected by the city council against the will of the citizens as expressed in a referendum that missed the validity mark) – worthy of further discussion; or rather: of acute critique. Even though the immediate echo of Benedict's speech – cf., e.g., J. Erbacher (Ed.): *Entweltlichung der Kircher? Die Freiburger Rede des Papstes* (Theologie Kontrovers; Freiburg: Herder, 2012) – became gradually drown out by the long-lasting exegetical controversy between the German pope and his compatriot theology professors; the idea of *Entweltlichung* still preoccupies the contemporary discussion about religion, as manifested not least by Magnus Striet, the *spiritus rector* of the German Synodal Way, who criticized Ratzinger's notion for anti-dialectical static Platonism and, in more practical terms, for being against ecclesiastical parliamentarism (cf. *Für eine Kirche der Freiheit. Den Synodalen Weg konsequent weitergehen*. Freiburg: Herder, 2022, p. 101).

In my presentation I first analyze Ratzinger's idea of *Entweltlichung* against the backdrop of his early writings from the 1950-1960s, with a special attention to the somewhat unique notion of secularization it implies.

In the hindsight, in an interview given during the COVID period, Benedict XVI (then already Pope Emeritus) doubted whether the term *Entweltlichung*, “which comes from the vocabulary coined by Heidegger, was wisely chosen

by me as a concluding keyword in Freiburg.” Indeed, Heidegger was probably the most prominent philosophical user of the term – in the *History of the Concept of Time* and the subsequent *Being and Time* –, understood as a dislocating modification involved at present-at-hand objects or the (spatiotemporal) world in its entirety (cf., e.g., GA 20, p. 66). However, the usage of this notion within the dense philosophical constellation that is gradually discovered by historians of philosophy – which included not only Heidegger but both his Freiburg teacher Edmund Husserl and other lesser-known phenomenologists or phenomenologically-inclined contemporaneous philosophers and organically reached to Rudolf Bultmann (Heidegger’s colleague in Marburg) – was considerably more intricate (in a certain way, this semantic complexity is already indicated by the various sporadic English translations of term *Entweltlichung*: *de-worldling*, *de-mundanisation*, not to mention *de-secularisation*). For both Husserl, who was demonstrably aware of Heidegger’s use of the term, as well as minor figures, e.g., Georg Misch (not to mention cases of ambiguous authorship like the 1933 *Kant-Studien* essay) the term *Entweltlichung* and its derivatives, in contrast with Heidegger, actually signified the phenomenological reduction itself. As if that were not enough, it is precisely the English equivalent *de-secularization* that was preferred by the translator of Bultmann’s *Theology of the New Testament* (not without due reasons, as it is well aligned with Bultmann’s related notion of *Entgeschichtlichung*, which both imply a different conception of secularization).

Robert Spaemann, who has recently been eulogized as the leading contemporary German philosopher of religion, belonged to the few scholars who positively embraced Ratzinger’s notion of *Entweltlichung* when, in his last years, he increasingly grew concerned over recent developments in Germany and abroad (cf. *Die Konzil hat die Kirche lasch gemacht*; Oct 2012). However, I think it is worth digging deeper, as it is precisely Spaemann’s earlier philosophical essays on the tension between secularization and universal mission that are relevant in this regard, especially since the signature theory of secularization by the School of Joachim Ritter, to which Spaemann belonged on its fringes, seems to have proved attractive to Ratzinger himself as manifested by Ratzinger’s (in)famous debate with Jürgen Habermas in 2004.

The second part of my presentation is therefore dedicated to unraveling these conceptual connections hand-in-hand with the metamorphosing phenomenological usage of the term *Entweltlichung*.