Liturgical Memory and Liquid Modernity

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ABSTRACT: This essay seeks to analyze the condition of postmodernity through the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. Postmodernity, better characterized as liquid modernity, culminates in a forgetfulness related to both narrative and meaning. Joseph Ratzinger’s liturgical and sacramental theology serves as a medicine for this forgetfulness, grounding the act of worship in a liturgical metaphysics of tradition, citizenship, and culture. The enactment of Ratzinger’s liturgical metaphysics is carried out through a more inclusive ressourcement, an appreciation of liturgical stability, attention to the evangelizing quality of liturgy as an act of remembering, and the promotion of a liturgical metaphysics grounded in the gift.

KEY WORDS: Zygmunt Bauman, Joseph Ratzinger, liquid modernity, metaphysics, liturgy

Literary theory and philosophy alike tend to characterize postmodern discourse as eschewing metanarratives. In his classic account of postmodernity, Jean-François Lyotard defines the postmodern as “incredulity toward metanarratives,” the epistemic dislocation of knowledge from the surety of metaphysics and science to the play of various language games.¹ In this context, there is a return to enchantment, to the possibility of “religious” narratives that lack metaphysical authority but nonetheless may

participate as one discourse in a broader language game. Whether one accepts the existence of the postmodern as a period distinct from modernity or as the logical consequence of modernity itself (late modernity), the story is told of the early twenty-first century as consisting of a variety of non-hegemonic narratives in which the human self curates one’s identity through the art of bricolage.

Yet, an alternative account of the postmodern exists in the Polish sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman. Rather than treat postmodernity as an epistemic phenomenon related to metanarrative, he interprets it as a sociological and cultural liquefaction where “it is now the facility with which things can be turned upside down, disposed of and abandoned that is valued most . . . we are all thrown into an unstoppable hunt for novelty.” Liquid modernity does not eschew every metanarrative but instead transmits to both the social and individual body the hyper-metanarrative of novelty. The causalities of this liquid modernity are discernable in the loss of national identity, the increasing prevalence of unwanted migrants, an incapacity for human commitment in matters related to love, cultural amnesia, and the existential dread of a self incapable of any degree of completeness. Liquid modernity is not so much the end of metanarratives but a cultivated, programmed amnesia about the ultimate value of any narrative at all.

In this essay, I explore the liturgical consequences of a liquid modernity. First, I examine the amnestic features of liquid modernity in Bauman, drawing primarily from his work Liquid Modernity. In labor, capital, individual identity, space and time, one encounters individual and social unrest caused by the loss of a firm narrative. Second, I argue that Joseph Ratzinger’s liturgical theology offers a piece de resistance to this liquid modernity by presenting a liturgical metaphysics grounded in liturgical tradition, liturgical citizenship, and liturgical culture. I conclude with three


consequences of this liturgical metaphysics for the present state of liturgical reform and formation alike.

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN AND LIQUID MODERNITY

Bauman commences his account of liquid modernity by responding to a common intellectual trope. Namely, the post-Enlightenment period sought to dispense with tradition, erasing authority and thus leaving the naked individual to discern his or her own path alone. Bauman, although aware that the end result of modernity is this dreadful lack of narrative, discerns in the birth of the modern period optimism relative to the possibility of both narrative and authority. The fathers of the Enlightenment may have dethroned the past, but “all this was to be done not in order to do away with the solids once and for all and make the brave new world free for ever, but to clear the site for new and improved solids; to replace the inherited set of deficient and defective solids with another set. . . .”\(^4\) The past must be forgotten for the sake of progress, to cultivate new possibilities in the human condition related to knowledge and capital alike. Modernity’s optimism is that a new human condition can be cultivated through a form of social engineering.

The icon of this “solid” modernity for Bauman is the Fordist factory. He writes:

The Fordist factory—with its meticulous separation between design and execution, initiative and command-following, freedom and obedience, invention and determination, with its tight interlocking of the opposites within each of such binary oppositions and the smooth transmission of command from the first element of each pair to the second—was without doubt the highest achievement to date of order-aimed social engineering.\(^5\)

It is this “solid” modernity, discernable in the factory that functioned as a source of remembering in the modern age. The factory

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\(^4\) Ibid., 3.
\(^5\) Ibid., 57.
was immovable, linking together both capital and labor in a specific place across time. When one began to work for Ford, one expected to work for Ford for the rest of one’s professional life. The act of production also provided meaning for the laborers, who did not create their work or purpose ex nihilo. As Bauman points out, even when strikes occurred, these strikes were not intended to overturn the entire structure. They were intended to “right the ship,” so that the factory’s purpose might be carried out. Such work in modernity was purposeful, participating in project that went beyond the present: “... underlying every merit assigned [to work] was its assumed contribution to that order-making, to the historic act of putting the human species in charge of its own destiny.”

Bauman contrasts this Fordist capitalism with the lighter type of capitalism operative in the present era. In the software era, capital is no longer tied to a specific place: “Capital travels hopefully, counting no shortage of [adventures] or of partners to share them with. Capital can travel fast and travel light and its lightness and its mobility have turned into the paramount source of uncertainty for all the rest.” Whereas the Ford factory worker could plan on spending his life working within that structure, the Microsoft software engineer will inevitably move from company to company. Microsoft can set up its office wherever it desires, and it will change its products whenever the market demands it. Describing the state of the worker in this era,

“Flexibility” is the slogan of the day, and when applied to the labor market it augurs an end to the “job as we know it,” announcing instead the advent of work on short-term contracts, rolling contracts, or no contracts, positions with no in-built security but with the “until further notice” clause. Working life is saturated with uncertainty.

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6 Ibid., 137.
7 Ibid., 121.
8 Ibid., 147.
This uncertainty, discernable in labor and capital, is present throughout liquid modernity. Bauman describes how critical theory, in particular, reshaped the memory of what constitutes the body politic. As critical theory sought to emancipate the person from society’s constraints, the individual no longer had a narrative by which to make sense of one’s identity in the public sphere. Politics become simply about the individual, what Bauman calls “life-politics.” He writes:

When public politics sheds its functions and life-politics takes over, problems encountered by individuals de jure in their efforts to become individuals de facto turn out to be notoriously non-additive and non-cumulative, thereby denuding the public sphere of all substance except of the site where private worries are confessed and put on public display.9

One forgets what it means to be a citizen in liquid modernity because politics has been reduced entirely to the personal. What was supposed to enable human freedom has led the individual into a constant project of self-determination apart from the social body. This process of self-determination is terrifying for the person in liquid modernity. No longer given a narrative early in life, “the odds are that most of human life and most of human lives will be spent agonizing about the choice of goals, rather than finding the means to the ends which do not call for reflection.”10 Shopping becomes the icon for the formation of identity.11 Bauman writes:

Shopping is not just about food, shoes, cars or furniture items. The avid, never-ending search for new and improved examples and recipes for life is also a variety of shopping, and a most important variety, to be sure, in the light of the twin lessons that our happiness depends on personal competence but that we are

9 Ibid., 126.
10 Ibid., 61.
11 Bauman’s description of shopping resonates with James K. A. Smith’s account of the cultural liturgy of the mall. See Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).
. . . personally incompetent, or not as competent as we should and could be if only we tried harder. . . . We “shop” for the skills needed to earn our living . . . for ways of making new friends we want . . . for the means to squeeze most satisfaction out of love and the means to avoid becoming “dependent” on the loved or loving partner. . . . There is no end to the shopping list . . . the competence most needed in our world of ostensibly infinite ends is that of skillful and indefatigable shopper. 12

Identity formation as shopping becomes perilous to the person. For the measure of competency, whether in fitness or love, continues to change as additional narratives are told through mass media. New skills need to be constantly developed such that there is no stasis, no ground, for a person to rest upon. The constant changing of trends in fashion is a sign of an identity that can never cohere because there are always new styles to try on. Functionally, consumer desire, a kind of fantastic virus of authentic Christian desire, becomes its own metaphysics: “the activity of choosing matters more than what is being chosen, and the situations are praised or censured, enjoyed or resented depending on the range of choices on display.” 13 And since every shopper exists on his or her own, human life in liquid modernity becomes violent as each person attempts to cultivate the self in competition with everyone else.

This violence has political consequences for Bauman. Individuals with ennui grow tired of the constant search for meaning and eventually do seek out a community. But, they seek out a community defined by boundaries, limiting participation to those who are “pure” members of the community. A Girardian violence results, one based in mimetic desire. Bauman writes:

The body’s new primacy is reflected in the tendency to shape the image of community . . . after the pattern of the ideally protected body: to visualize it as an entity homogenous and harmonious on the inside, thoroughly cleansed of all foreign, ingestion-resistant substances, all points of entry closely watched,

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12 Bauman, Liquid Modernity, 74.
13 Ibid., 87.
controlled and guarded, but heavily armed on the outside and encased in impenetrable armour. The boundaries of the postulated community, like the outer limits of the body, are to divide the realm of trust and loving care from the wilderness of risk, suspicion and perpetual vigilance.\textsuperscript{14}

In liquid modernity, religious sacrifice does not disappear but is transmigrated to the treatment of the political enemy, the immigrant, the “other.” The icon of this affective political community, one that demands authenticity, is the gated community that cannot deal with the interruption of the stranger.

Bauman’s analysis reframes the prevalent account of postmodernity. Liquid modernity reveals not a multiplicity of meta-narratives, opening up a space for religiosity. Instead, liquid modernity is the collapse of all narrative except for the angst-ridden individual, constructing the broken pieces of an identity from a series of fragmented memories. The result is broken marriages, broken politics, broken cities, a broken culture, and broken human beings. Forgetting, as it turns out, hurts.

RATZINGER’S LITURGICAL THEOLOGY AS RESPONSE TO LIQUID MODERNITY

Joseph Ratzinger’s liturgical theology, like his theological project as a whole, consists of a restoration of a salutary pattern of remembering in a post-Christian era.\textsuperscript{15} In his account of the sacra-

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 184.

ments Ratzinger lays out a liturgical-sacramental metaphysics that allows for the renewal of Christian memory—one that can heal the liquid modernity of our own age.

In his “The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence,” Ratzinger considers the modern crisis of the sacramental. He notes:

In a time when we have grown accustomed to seeing in the substance of things nothing but the material for human labor—when, in short, the world is regarded as matter and matter as material—initially there is no room left for that symbolic transparency of reality toward the eternal on which the sacramental principle is based.¹⁶

Ratzinger’s account of the crisis relates to a way of remembering the origins of the cosmos. The world is not merely raw material for human technology but has a meaning that precedes human action. Existence is first defined by the gift of meaning rather than techne.¹⁷

Ratzinger proposes a liturgical metaphysics of creation as a way of healing this obsession with technical innovation. Beginning with human religiosity, Ratzinger analyzes the function of the meal in community:

Having a meal . . . means experiencing the delightfulfulness of those things whereby men are supplied with the gift of the earth’s fertility, and having a meal means to experience also, in such a reception of the choice things of the earth, the company of other men: a meal creates community, eating is complete only when it happens in company, and human coexistence achieves its fullness in the community of nourishment that unites everyone in the common interest of receiving the gifts of the earth.¹⁸

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This metaphysics of meaning, the *logos* of the created order, is not as Lieven Boeve charges evidence of a Platonic, pre-modernism to Ratzinger’s thought. It is instead awareness that existence is not reducible to the visible or the tangible alone. There is a meaning that comes to us as gift, a receiving that precedes the making.

In some sense, Ratzinger is merely articulating a theology of creation, whereby the divine *Logos* has inscribed in human history a sense of meaning, reason, an ordering principle. But, at the same time, Ratzinger is telling a particular narrative about creation itself. He is reclaiming a forgotten story. The human desire for meal, for solidarity in the act of eating reveals a narrative that is not only one option among many. It pertains to the truth of the human condition that manifests itself across cultural difference. Eating, in its most meaningful form, is never chowing down alone. It is instead a return to gratitude, an expression of solidarity with men and women. As Ratzinger himself later points out, these creation sacraments are “intensifications of the biological dimension of the human person.” There is a primordial sacramentality to human existence itself, a reservoir of meaning, a narrative of gift.

But this narrative for Ratzinger is not adequate unto itself. For the Christian liturgy does not depend upon a general account of sacramentality related to creation but the account of redemption made manifest in Christ: “In a word: he appears as the personal God who is knowledge and love and who therefore is word and love with respect to us. Word that calls us, and the love that unites us.” Human beings are not merely left to construct their own meaning in the face of birth and death. Instead, humanity has been bestowed with the living memory of a person, who offers this meaning—Jesus Christ. Ratzinger writes:

> For the Christian sacraments meant not only insertion into the God-permeated cosmos . . . they mean at the same time insertion into the history that originates in Christ. Indeed, this addi-

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19 Ibid., 158.
20 Ibid., 161.
The modern problem with the sacraments is not confusion around the possibility of mediation. The sacramentality of existence is evident to even the late modern person. Rather, the problematic claim for the sacraments in liquid modernity is their grounding in history, “the history proceeding from Christ with the belief that this is the saving history that opens up to man the historical context that truly allows him to live and leads him into his true uniqueness—into the unity with God that is his eternal future.” Only in the sacraments of the Church does one encounter a narrative, a form of remembering, that makes possible true liberation. It is a narrative that makes sense of the past, opens up into the present, and stretches toward the future. The sacraments are ritual forms of remembering, enabling the human person “to take my place in God’s history with men—the only setting in which I as a man have my true human existence and which alone therefore also opens up for me the true space of my encounter with God’s eternal love.”

In the midst of a multiplicity of angst-ridden, half-formed memories about the nature of human existence, Ratzinger proposes a liturgical mode of remembering grounded in the self-giving love of the triune God. The liturgy is not constructed by human beings, as their form of remembering, but instead comes as a gift to the person: “Liturgy implies a real relationship with Another, who reveals himself to us and gives our existence a new direction.” The “realness” of the relationship depends upon an encounter with a form of remembering that is not constructed by human beings. The covenant of divine love, remembered in the liturgy, completes the created order bringing all of reality into the praise of God.
Here, one comes to the heart of Ratzinger’s account of liturgical *traditio*: the liturgy is a memory that brings humanity into relationship with the triune God, a memory that is not constructed by human beings but is the result of God’s persistent involvement in history. This relationship is mediated through liturgical rites that “logify” human existence, transforming the *bios* of the creation sacrament into the space where the narrative of divine love enfleshes itself anew:

The whole event of the Incarnation, Cross, Resurrection, and Second Coming is present as the way by which God draws man into cooperation with himself . . . this is expressed in the liturgy in the fact that the petition for acceptance is part of the *oratio*. True, the Sacrifice of the Logos is accepted already and forever. But we must still pray for it to become our sacrifice, that we ourselves . . . may be transformed into the Logos, conformed to the Logos, and so be made the true Body of Christ.26

For Ratzinger, this logification of *bios* through divine love is necessarily embodied, a form of active or actual participation that takes up every dimension of human existence, writing upon it a narrative of divine love. Liturgical rites are not the celebration of a community’s identity but the work of divine revelation as it unfolds here and now, and therefore, the rite itself must be celebrated and received as gift. As Ratzinger writes in a discussion on his *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, “The liturgy derives its greatness from what it is, not from what we do with it . . . Liturgy is not an expression of the community’s consciousness, which in any case is diffuse and changing. It is revelation received in faith and prayer. . . .”27 It is that ritual practice, nurtured by the Church’s maternal care, whereby humanity comes to recognize the single narrative that matters: the Pasch of Christ that has led to the wedding feast of the Lamb. *Summorum Pontificum* is itself reflective of this emphasis

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26  Ibid., 107.

upon narrative and liturgical remembering insofar as it recognizes that the ancient form contains within it the richness of this ecclesial remembering, which cannot simply be abrogated: “What earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too, and it cannot be all of a sudden entirely forbidden or even considered harmful.”

Therefore, liturgical tradition for Ratzinger, the rites of the Church handed on (both the Extraordinary Form and the Novus Ordo), is that which allows us to participate in the liturgical metaphysics of creation. The Church is handed something that she did not make, texts and ritual gestures that are not constructed by her but function as a living cultural memory. And the heart of this cultural remembering, whether one is speaking about the Eucharist or the canonical hours, is the sacrificial love of God transforming human existence itself into a sacrifice of love. The regular rhythm of liturgical practice resituates the person in divine love again and again, writing upon their body a new identity—partakers in divine life. The human being is healed through this returning of identity toward love, a “healing of wounded freedom, atonement, purification, deliverance from estrangement.” This healing takes place insofar as human identity, linked to the cosmos, is reconstructed according to the historical Pasch of Christ.

Of course, for Ratzinger, this sacrificial transformation of the human person takes place through the ecclesia, a community not assembled through self-constructed ideals but through the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Word made flesh. As Ratzinger writes:

Christian liturgy is never just an event organized by a particular group or set of people or even by a particular local Church. Mankind’s movement toward Christ meets Christ’s movement toward one divine assembly, of all men. Everything . . . comes together: the horizontal and the vertical, the uniqueness of God

and the unity of mankind, the communion of all who worship in spirit and in truth.  

It is only in the liturgical rite not as constructed but given that a true human community can be formed that is universal in scope. As Ratzinger writes relative to Eucharistic communio:

> We all “eat” the same man, not only the same thing: in this way we all are wrested from our self-enclosed individuality and drawn into a greater one. We are all assimilated into Christ, and so through communion with Christ we are also identified with one another, identical and one in him, members of one another. To be in communion with Christ is by its nature to be in communion with one another as well. No more are we alongside one another, each for himself; rather, everyone else who goes to communion is for me, so to speak, “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” (cf. Gen. 2:23).  

Attuning ourselves to the sacrificial member of the Lord means, in the end, giving up on the project of violent sacrifice altogether. The desire to form a pure community, one that holds a series of self-constructed ideals, is deconstructed through Eucharistic sacrifice. There is a liturgical form of citizenship whereby the memory of divine love forms each and every member of the Church in the art of self-giving love toward the neighbor, who becomes through the Church each and every person: “And so the goal is unity, that we, instead of being separate individuals who live alongside or in conflict with one another, might become, with Christ and in him, one organism of self-giving and might live unto the resurrection of the new world.”

Politics in the Church has a narrative, a meaning that emerges outside the Church herself: longing for the sacrificial love of the Word made flesh to transform existence, to write this narrative upon the social body. For

30 Ibid., 30.
32 Ibid., 370.
Ratzinger, ad orientem worship is not a form of escapism from the world but is instead a communal posture of eschatological expectation, that the source of all love will come *hic et nunc, in saeculo saeculorum*.33

This liturgical citizenship is closely linked to the creation of a liturgical culture. Liturgical culture is not a matter of a self-constructed creativity, attending to the fashion of the day, becoming the consumer shoppers that Bauman eschews. As Ratzinger writes in his theology of church music:

. . . creativity, which would like to function as autonomy and emancipation, is for this very reason in strict opposition to all participation. Its characteristics are: arbitrariness as the necessary form of the rejection of each previously given form or norm; unrepeatability because in repetition there would already be dependence; and artificiality, since the result must be a pure creation of men. In this way, however, it becomes apparent that human creativity that does not want to be receptivity and participation is by its very nature absurd and untrue since men can only be themselves through receptivity and participation. Such creativity is a flight from the *conditio humana* and therefore untruth. This is the reason why cultural disintegration begins wherever faith in God disappears and a professed ratio of being is automatically called into question.34

Ratzinger’s critique of a culture of creativity is not a matter of being artistically conservative. It is instead linked to the “creation” of a liturgical culture that participates first and foremost in the history of salvation. Liturgical culture draws the human person into divine life not through self-transcendence, the individual escaping from reality through art, but a deeper entrance into freedom, and thus into reality itself. The biblical and liturgical texts are normative for


Ratzinger because it is through these sources that the artist first learns to receive the salutary memory of love that makes possible the creation of new art. Liturgical culture renews culture as a whole insofar as it bestows to artists narratives of salvation worth telling.

CONCLUSION

Ratzinger’s account of a liturgical metaphysics that restores to humanity a memory of the logos, a sense of sacrifice as love, an understanding of the liturgical tradition as “given” rather than “created,” is a response to problems raised by Bauman. The aporia of the present age is not a postmodernism of polyphonic narratives. Rather, it is the loss of narrative as a whole, the individual self left seeking to piece together the fragmented dimensions of an identity through a metaphysics of shopping. Ratzinger’s liturgical metaphysics emphasizes the nature of existence not as that which is purchased through an economy of exchange but fundamentally received, entering the Christian into an economy of gift. There are four consequences for Ratzinger’s account, when understood as a response to Bauman:

1. A richer ressourcement: A more comprehensive ressourcement necessitates closer attention to every dimension of liturgical and sacramental history, to every aspect of liturgical-material culture that has taken place. Such a ressourcement is especially needed in medieval Catholicism where too often historical scholars let their prejudices cancel out their capacity to read the Tradition. The goal of this ressourcement should not be simply for the reform of the liturgy. Rather, the goal should be to discern material culture that can function as ways of manifesting a narrative of divine love here and now. It is the creation of a culture that makes possible a rich liturgical life. For example, the York Mystery Plays may be restored as a way of enshrining anew the memory of Christ in the world. These plays should and ought to be performed in public, connected to Eucharistic processions, and other liturgical rites.

2. Liturgical stability versus liturgical change: In the present era, liturgical change is a symptom of the liquid modern age, the desire to shape and re-shape the liturgy again and again. Even
among those who would like to see a reform of the reform, there
must be care about the nature of liturgical change. In the present
environment, those who seek to engage in a fuller retrieval of
liturgical tradition may likewise suffer from the addiction to nov-
elty that Bauman diagnoses as essential to ecclesial life. Some litur-
gical stability is necessary in the present moment, where the goal
should be an encounter with the living memory of Christ rather
than a continued reform of the rites. Of course, liturgical change
may be required. But, such liturgical change cannot feel like a rup-
ture to the liquid modern person, who lives off the constant “kick”
of ruptures. It has to be connected to a fundamental stability linked
to the narrative of salvation proclaimed in Christ.

3. The bracketing of liturgical evangelization: In the present
environment, offices of evangelization have begun to de-empha-
size the liturgical nature of evangelization as a whole, focusing
instead on a “personal” (read individual) encounter with Jesus
Christ. Such an approach to evangelization caters to the liquid
modern condition of our age: one in which the individual seeks
out an identity through personal experience, one-on-one witness-
ing, and through the cultivation of an identity apart from the com-
munity. While having a “personal” encounter with Christ is good
insofar as it involves every dimension of a person’s life, the risk to
such an approach to evangelization is that one forgets that evan-
gelization is necessarily cultural, social—that is, ecclesial.35 Litur-
gical celebration and formation, in the West, is not ancillary to
this work. Instead, it trains the body for a form of remembering
the Eucharistic love of Christ.

4. A liturgical metaphysics: Postmodern liturgical experience
is fundamentally understood as “non-metaphysical.” This dismissal
of metaphysics is not only naïve (with every dismissal of meta-
physics, a new metaphysics is affirmed) but feeds into the liquidity
of our own age. If there is no underlying narrative, no sense of
reality outside of the raw naked sign, then the human person is

35 See, Timothy P. O’Malley, Liturgy and the New Evangelization: Practicing
left to construct their own reality by means of power alone. This construction, as Bauman shows, is not the inevitable process of secularization. Instead, it was the result of certain cultural and social factors that can be responded to.\textsuperscript{36} A liturgical metaphysics: one that sees creation as gift; that understands human existence as a response to this gift may serve as a salutary medicine for a liquid modernity that is uncomfortable with permanent narratives.

Thus, the next era of the liturgical movement will avoid the liquidity that often accompanies liturgical reform in late modern life. Instead, liturgical prayer in the liquid era will ground the human person in solid narratives that enable the construction of an identity as a response to the gift of love anamnetically made present through the Church’s rites.

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\textsuperscript{36} Here, it is important to read Hans Joas’ account of secularization as “waves” brought about by a variety of social and cultural phenomena. See \textit{Faith as an Option: Possible Futures for Christianity}, trans. Alex Skinner (Stanford, CA: University of Stanford Press, 2014) 37–49.