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# The Theological Significance of the Secular

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## Abstract

In this article, the notion of the secular is defended as a meaningful and relevant concept in order to determine the role of theological reasoning in the public sphere. For this purpose, in the first section, it is shown that John Duns Scotus already developed a provisional account of the secular and, moreover, provided it with a theological justification. The second section starts off with a brief sketch of the secular's main characteristics as they can be deduced from Scotus's account. Building on Thomas Pröpper, it is demonstrated how a transcendental analysis of freedom as the basic rationale of the secular brings to the fore a fundamental ethical principle as well as an idea of the secular's ultimate destination. Theological reasoning in the public sphere or public theology, so it will be argued, aims primarily at making visible the ethical implications and the ultimate destination of the secular.

## Keywords

The secular, John Duns Scotus, Christology, freedom, Thomas Pröpper, public theology

## Introduction

In certain theological circles, the concept of the secular has a poor reputation. When John Milbank, for instance, opened his book *Theology and Social Theory* with the famous words ‘Once, there was no “secular”’,<sup>1</sup> then this was surely not meant as a simple historical assertion, but rather as a bold theological accusation. For him, as for many like-minded scholars of the radical orthodox movement, the secular emerged from a mistaken theological course-setting in the late Middle Ages and developed into a godless, nihilistic and violent myth which eventually brought about a purely self-sufficient understanding

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1. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd edn (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), p. 9.

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of ourselves as well as of our social and natural environment.<sup>2</sup> According to those theologians, any endorsement of the secular is thus ‘quite literally, a Christian heresy—an ideological distortion of theology’.<sup>3</sup>

Though, as we will shortly see, one must seriously doubt this inexorable condemnation, Milbank and his allies have nonetheless made an important contribution to the theological debate by framing this term. Due to its semantic opposition to terms like ‘religion’, ‘the sacred’ or ‘the eternal’, the notion of the secular does, after all, not only signify a historical epoch as ‘modernity’, ‘the enlightenment’ or ‘our present age’, but at the same time points at the theological challenges that this epoch bears as a whole. In other words, the binary coding of the secular immediately provokes the question of which stance theology should take towards an age whose self-understanding is not primarily religious.<sup>4</sup> By coining the concept of the secular, radical orthodoxy has thus accentuated the theological provocations that modern and enlightened forms of thought have brought about. Such an achievement can hardly be overestimated; theology thus cannot but deal with the secular.

In this article, I will attempt to determine what the theological significance of the secular accounts for. In order to do that, first, some light will be shed on the initial conceptualisation of the secular as it can be found in the theology of John Duns Scotus. Of course, Scotus did neither employ the term nor did he overlook all implications of his ground-breaking thoughts; and yet it was he who already developed the *conceptual nucleus of the secular* and provided it with a *theological justification* that still proves to be valid. In the second section, I will briefly sketch the main characteristics of the secular and carve out *freedom* as its *basic rationale*. An in-depth analysis of this rationale, as will be shown in line with the German theologian Thomas Pröpper, not only lays bare the ethical content of the secular but also puts forth the idea of its ultimate destination. The central task of theological reasoning in the public sphere then is to make visible these largely hidden traits of the epoch we inhabit. Public theology, I will argue, aims at *enlightening the secular*.

## The Conceptual Nucleus of the Secular

There is no doubt that major historical transformations cannot be traced back to the intellectual innovations of a single person, however ingenious she or he may have been. But it is also true that large-scale developments in the history of thought sometimes find a

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2. See John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013).

3. Simon Oliver, ‘Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: From Participation to Late Modernity’, in J. Milbank and S. Oliver (eds), *The Racial Orthodoxy Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 3–27, at p. 6.

4. See Hans Joas, *Faith as an Option: Possible Futures for Christianity* (trans. A. Skinner; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). Besides, in the epilogue, Taylor expresses ‘a great deal of sympathy’ for the account of radical orthodoxy (see Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 773–76).

condensed expression in the work of a great thinker and, at the same time, receive momentous impulses from it. Friends and foes alike agree that John Duns Scotus (1266–1308) was such a figure and that his writings had far-reaching effects. However, whereas historians and philosophers notably differ in their opinion of what Scotus precisely contributed to the advent of modernity,<sup>5</sup> theologians, during the last twenty years or so, have created a widely-accepted master narrative. This so-called ‘Scotus Story’<sup>6</sup> incriminates the subtle doctor of having instigated an ontological revolution which eventually gave rise to the formation of the secular.

According to this story, it was Scotus’s *doctrine of univocity* which allowed for a separation between the creator and his creation in that the notion of *being* now could be predicated to God and his creatures in exactly the same way. This, so the argument continues, obfuscated the fact that each creature *has* its being only by virtue of its participation in God who alone *is* being. Catherine Pickstock, perhaps the most ardent narrator of the Scotus Story, asserts that

while, indeed, univocity is for Scotus a semantic thesis regarding the constancy of meaning through diverse predications, all the same he tends to semanticise the field of ontology itself . . . In effect this implies that being as a semantic or logical unit is also a formal element of the make-up of any existential reality.<sup>7</sup>

Summarising her own account of the relationship between Scotus’s construal of univocity and the genesis of the secular, Pickstock asserts ‘that Duns Scotus and his successors . . . opened a space for univocal treatment of finite being without regard to theology, rational or revealed. Although this space was not immediately exploited in a secularising fashion, in the long run, this came to be the case.’<sup>8</sup> Perhaps there is no better way to tell the Scotus Story in a nutshell.

Yet, on the basis of careful exegesis of the pertinent texts, almost all renowned experts have denied that for Scotus the doctrine of univocity has ontological implications.<sup>9</sup> On

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5. See Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 3rd edn (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997), pp. 205–233; Heinrich Rombach, *Substanz, System, Struktur: Die Ontologie des Funktionalismus und der philosophische Hintergrund der modernen Wissenschaft*, vol. 1, 2nd edn (Freiburg/München: Alber, 1981), pp. 78–82; Ludger Honnefelder, *Woher kommen wir? Ursprünge des modernen Denkens im Mittelalter* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2008); Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2008), pp. 19–30.
  6. It was Daniel P. Horan who thoroughly reconstructed the genesis and the proliferation of the Scotus Story. See his *Postmodernity and Univocity: A Critical Account of Radical Orthodoxy and John Duns Scotus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).
  7. Catherine Pickstock, ‘Duns Scotus: His Historical and Contemporary Significance’, *Modern Theology* 21.4 (2005), pp. 543–74, at p. 547.
  8. Pickstock, ‘Duns Scotus’, p. 570, n. 2.
  9. See Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 34–39; Ludger Honnefelder, *Duns Scotus* (München: C.H. Beck, 2005), pp. 59–63; Thomas Williams, ‘The Doctrine of Univocity is True and Salutary’, *Modern Theology* 21.4 (2005), pp. 575–85; Horan, *Postmodernity and Univocity*, pp. 157–88.

that account, the whole Scotus Story rests on a false premise so that one might feel inclined to completely discard it. But this would be too hasty as Scotus can indeed be seen as a pioneer of the secular. Moreover, he not only paved the way to modernity which then gradually took on a secular imprint, but also he already designed what one could call the *conceptual nucleus of the secular*. And, most importantly, he provided this nucleus with sound theological justification. Contrary to Pickstock's account, however, these innovations did not emanate from the doctrine of univocity but rather from Scotus's *anthropology*. More precisely, it was his account of *Christ's human nature* which eventually gave rise to a novel understanding of what it means to be a human being and how this being is related to God.<sup>10</sup>

In his attempt to do justice to orthodox Christology as it was formulated by the councils of Chalcedon (451), Constantinople II (553) and Constantinople III (680/1), Scotus determined the relationship between the assuming Word and the assumed human nature in accordance with the ontological model of substance and accident. With the exception of Thomas Aquinas, most of his predecessors and contemporaries had employed this model but Scotus, as Richard Cross asserts, 'provides the most detailed and metaphysically sophisticated defence of' it.<sup>11</sup> To get a grip on the particular metaphysical advantages of Scotus's construal, it might be helpful to take a closer look at his view on Christ's *being*, Christ's *will*, and Christ's *personhood*.

(1) With respect to *being*, Scotus's account differs significantly from that of Aquinas. Aquinas, as has been indicated, refused the substance-accident model. One reason for this was his suspicion that applying this model would amount to a revitalisation of a particular Christological doctrine, the so-called *habitus* theory, which Peter Lombard had presented in his *Sententiae* as one of three possible Christological accounts. According to this theory, the Word put on Christ's human soul and human body like clothes;<sup>12</sup> and, of course, this quasi-docetism was unacceptable for Aquinas. Furthermore, he suspected that the substance-accident model would entail that the human nature, taken as an accident, had actualised a passive potency within the Word, but for him, there is no such potency in God. From all this, Aquinas drew the conclusion that the model in question was an instantiation of the *Nestorian* heresy, for 'it would require to set two *esse* in Christ, namely one according to which he is God, and another according to which he is human'.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Aquinas rejected the allegedly Nestorian substance-accident model and emphasised that there is only one divine *esse* in Christ.<sup>14</sup>

10. For Scotus's Christology see Maria Burger, *Personalität im Horizont absoluter Prädestination: Untersuchungen zur Christologie des Johannes Duns Scotus und ihrer Rezeption in modernen theologischen Ansätzen* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1994).

11. Richard Cross, *The Metaphysics of Incarnation: Thomas Aquinas to Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 136.

12. *Sent.* III, d. 6, cap. 4: '*illis duobus [sc. animae et carni] velut indumento Verbum Dei vestiretur*'.

13. *ST* III, q. 17, a. 2: '*oportet ponere in Christo duo esse, unum quidem secundum quod est Deus; aliud autem secundum quod est homo*'. All translations from Aquinas are mine.

14. The alternative model that Aquinas employs is the so-called 'concrete whole-concrete part' model. Due to lack of space, I cannot go into that here. For further details see Cross, *The Metaphysics of Incarnation*, pp. 51–62.

It comes as no surprise that this theory could not remain unchallenged.<sup>15</sup> If Christ's human nature possesses indeed no being on its own, then it is hard to see how true assertions about his humanity can be made. For when there is no ontic reference, truth claims simply miss the mark. Moreover, on the basis of the one-*esse* theory, it is only possible to state that Christ *has* a human nature, but not that he *is* a true human being. And finally, if Christ possesses only a divine *esse* which, of course, is eternal, then it would follow that his human nature is eternal too, which is obviously heretical. In short, all theologians after Aquinas rightly suspected his Christology to exhibit a strong *monophysite* tendency.

For these and other reasons, Scotus prefers the substance-accident model, even though he admits that this 'does not sound good'.<sup>16</sup> Still, he is of the opinion that the human nature of Christ is a kind of accident which belongs to the substance of the divine Word. The most important inference of this is that the human nature now can be conceived as possessing its own *esse* which can clearly be distinguished from the divine *esse*. In contrast to Aquinas's misgiving, however, this does not entail some sort of Nestorian separation of the two natures. For, according to Scotus, God created a particular relation which made Christ's human nature fully dependent on the Word. The unity is thus warranted. Aquinas, as we saw, was afraid that assuming such a relation would involve the actualisation of a passive potency within the Word. But this is not what Scotus has in mind. For him, the human *esse* by no means informs the divine *esse*, since the relation is solely one-sided: the human nature depends on the Word and not vice versa. 'The unity is thus a real relation of inequality in one reference point, to which no relation corresponds in the other, or at least no real one.'<sup>17</sup> In conclusion, it thus can be said that Scotus avoids the pitfalls of the one-*esse* theory by assuming a distinguishable human *esse* in Christ. At the same time, he meets Aquinas's concerns by emphasising a one-sided dependency relation which fully unites the human nature with the Word.

(2) To further unfold Scotus's anthropological account, we now have to consider his understanding of Christ's human *will*. As is well known, the third council of Constantinople had defined *dyotheletism*, that is, the doctrine that there are two wills in Christ. But it remained unclear how the human will was to be understood.<sup>18</sup> The majority of church fathers and medieval theologians defined the will in terms of a natural desire or inclination. Another tradition, however, tracing back to Augustine, saw the will as the faculty to choose or to decide. In the thirteenth century, theologians of the Augustinian-Franciscan heritage thoroughly elaborated the second option and emphasised 'that the self-movement of the will is fundamentally distinct from any natural self-movement. The will is capable of *free self-determination*.'<sup>19</sup> Scotus endorsed this view and explicated its Christological

15. For this see Cross, *The Metaphysics of Incarnation*, pp. 64–74.

16. *Ord.* III, d. 6, q. 1, n. 8 (ed. Viv. XIV, p. 312): '*non bene sonet*'. All translations from Scotus are mine.

17. *Ord.* III, d. 1, q. 1, n. 3 (ed. Viv. XIV, p. 8): '*Est igitur ista unio relatio disquiparantiae [?] realis in uno extremo, cui in altero nulla relatio correspondet, vel saltem nulla realis*'.

18. For the following see Nico den Bok, 'The Will as Key to Christology', *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 70.4 (2016), pp. 292–304.

19. Den Bok, 'The Will as Key to Christology', p. 298; my emphasis.

consequences. For him, Christ's human will must not be thought of as a mere instrument of the divine will, as for instance, Aquinas tended to think.<sup>20</sup> Instead, the will forms an autonomous centre of human agency. Scotus holds 'that the Word has no causality over an act of the created will in Christ which the whole Trinity does not have. Therefore, the created will in Christ has not less power over its own acts because of its unification with the Word, as if it was not united with the Word.'<sup>21</sup> Scotus thus not only attributes a distinguishable *esse* to the humanity of Christ but also an *effective will* which is able to *freely determine itself*.

(3) The last point to consider is the concept of the *person*. Most of Scotus's predecessors and contemporaries built on Boethius's definition according to which 'a person is an individual substance of a rational nature'.<sup>22</sup> Scotus, however, rightly suspects that, on the basis of this understanding, an ontological function would be attributed to the Word which he, in fact, does not have. After all, Constantinople II had defined the doctrine of the *enhyposstasis* by emphasising that the two natures in Christ were united in the second Trinitarian person so that the Word did not assume a human *hypostasis* or person. Yet, if the divine person is taken as an individual substance, then this substance serves as the ontological individuation principle of Christ's human nature. Christ, in other words, cannot be viewed as an individual *human* being, because his ontological individuation is effectuated by the *divine* Word. Aquinas who decidedly endorsed the Boethian definition drew exactly this consequence. For him, the Word assumed a human nature '*in atomo*', that is, an individuated human being, but the principle of the individuation is '*no one else than the uncreated suppositum, who is the person of God's son*'.<sup>23</sup> But if, according to this reading, Christ possessed no human individuality, then this, once again, raises the question of whether Christ was a human being at all.

The full extent of the problem becomes visible in the light of a widely-endorsed statement of John of Damascus according to which 'that which has not been assumed cannot be healed'.<sup>24</sup> If therefore a theological account is not capable of showing that Christ's human nature comprised all dimensions of humanity, this would entail that the human race is, if at all, at most partly redeemed. To resolve this problem, Scotus points out that it is not the person who serves as individuation principle, but something that

20. See *ST* III, q. 18, a. 1, ad 2.

21. *Ord.* III, d. 17, q. un. (ed. Viv. XIV, p. 654): '*Verbum nullam causalitatem habet super actum voluntatis creatae in Christo, quam non habeat tota Trinitas; ideo voluntas creata in Christo non privatur dominio respectu suorum actuum plus propter unionem ad Verbum, quam si non uniretur ei*'.—A few lines later Scotus holds that even the Trinity does not cause the operations of the created will, but only puts it into being and allows it to perform its own acts ('*Trinitatis tantum ponit voluntatem in esse, et sinit ipsam movere in actibus suis*' [ibid., p. 655]).

22. Boethius, *Liber de persona et duabis naturis*, ch. 3: '*persona est rationalis naturae individua substantia*'.

23. *ST* III, q. 4, a. 2, ad 1: '*naturam humanam assumpsit filius Dei in atomo, idest, in individuo quod non est aliud a supposito increato quod est persona filii Dei*'. See *ST* III, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3.

24. John of Damascus, *Expositio Fidei* III/6 (*An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, in *The Writings* [trans. F. Chase; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1958], pp. 165–406, at. p. 280).

belongs to the assumed nature. In the second book of the *Ordinatio*,<sup>25</sup> he had already shown that there must be a final ontological determinant, an ‘ultimate reality of being’<sup>26</sup> which is neither formal nor material but contracts a common nature to singularity; and elsewhere he had called this ultimate reality *haecceitas*.<sup>27</sup> When thus applied to the Christological question, it follows that Christ’s human nature was already endowed with a particular *haecceitas* so that it was not the divine person who made up Christ’s individuality. Since the *haecceitas* is the ultimate ontological determinant, it once again follows that the human nature of Christ had its own ‘actual existence’ and its own ‘essential being’.<sup>28</sup> By introducing the concept of the *haecceitas*, Scotus thus makes sure that Christ can be conceived as possessing an individuated, actually existing and essentially being human nature.

With this account, Scotus provides a highly innovative solution to the individuation problem, but still, the question remains of how the completeness of Christ’s humanity can be thought when it lacks personhood. Scotus responds to this question by introducing a negative understanding of the person. Building on Richard of St. Victor,<sup>29</sup> he defines the person as the absence of both actual and aptitudinal (i.e. dispositional) dependence<sup>30</sup> and moreover emphasises that this concept is univocally applicable within the Trinitarian and in the Christological context,<sup>31</sup> for otherwise it could hardly be made intelligible that it was the second Trinitarian person who accounted for the one person of Christ. It is thus not the absence of a positive ontological feature but just the absence of actual and dispositional independence that distinguishes the human nature of Christ from any other human being. Therefore, Richard Cross rightly states that Christ’s human nature ‘fails to be a person not in virtue of anything it lacks but in virtue of an additional relational property that it uniquely has. Christ is thus, on this account, fully human.’<sup>32</sup>

With regard to the *metaphysical* features of Scotus’s Christology, we can summarise that his view of the substance-accident model is fully *orthodox* in that it clearly distinguishes the human and the divine nature in Christ and so takes them as ‘unconfused’ and ‘unchangeable’ as the council of Chalcedon had defined them. At the same time, the oneness and unity of Christ is warranted because the human nature stands—again

25. See *Ord.* II, d. 3, p. 1, qq. 1–6 (ed. Vat. VII, pp. 391–494).

26. *Ord.* II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 6, n. 188: ‘*ultima realitas entis*’ (ed. Vat. VII, p. 483).

27. See *Rep. Par.* II, d. 12, q. 5 (ed. Viv., XXII, pp. 25, 29, 31, 32); *In Met.* 7, q. 19, nn. 9, 26 (ed. Viv. VII, pp. 410, 426).

28. *Ord.* III, d. 6, q. 1, n. 5: ‘*natura ista . . . habet suam propriam existentiam actualem, sicut suum proprium esse quidditativum*’ (ed. Viv. XIV, p. 310).

29. See Burger, *Personalität im Horizont absoluter Prädestination*, pp. 36–44.

30. *Ord.* III, d. 1, q. 1, n. 9 (ed. Viv. XIV, p. 26): ‘*et ita negatio, scilicet non dependentia, non quidem actualis tantum, sed etiam actualis est aptitudinalis, talis complet rationem personae in intellectuali*’.

31. *Ord.* III, d. 1, q. 1, n. 10 (ed. Viv. XIV, p. 27): ‘*iste conceptus incommunicabilis, qui negat communicationem actualem et aptitudinalem, univocus est Deo et creaturae, personae divinae et creatae*’.

32. Cross, *Duns Scotus*, p. 121.

in line with Chalcedon—in an ‘indivisible’ and ‘inseparable’ dependency relation with the Word.<sup>33</sup>

At this point, however, we have to remember that the central question of this section is not whether Scotus delivered a *metaphysically convincing* and at the same time *orthodox* account of the incarnation, but in which way he developed the *conceptual nucleus of the secular* and provided it with a *theological justification*. Yet, for this purpose, it was necessary first to recognise that even when being united with the divine, the human nature is in no way annihilated but retains its *own being, self-determining freedom* and *genuine individuality*. As Christ’s human nature, moreover, differs in no respect from the nature of every other human being, we may cautiously draw the conclusion that, according to Scotus, the human nature exhibits some kind of *alterity* over against the divine. Since it is this alterity that will shortly be identified as the nucleus of secular, we now have to briefly investigate what this alterity consists of and why it is so important to Scotus.

In his treatise on the predestination of Christ, Scotus defines predestination as the ‘preordination of someone glorifiable to glory as well as of the ordered things that relate to glory’.<sup>34</sup> This pertains primarily to Christ’s human nature but likewise to every other created being which can be glorified. The only difference is that in Christ the terminus of the glorification is the nature, whereas in all other cases it is the person.<sup>35</sup> Irrespective of this difference, however, there can be no doubt that for Scotus every glorifiable being is destined to be glorified like Christ. The ultimate fulfilment of humanity, in other words, is a Christ-like unification with the divine. At the same time, Scotus holds that no human being is capable of achieving this destination by her own efforts. What humans can only accomplish is glorification proportionate to merits, but a Christ-like glorification does not fall under the logic of merits.<sup>36</sup> Rather, it is an undeserved divine gift.

This gift, however, must not be considered as a kind of ontological alteration of the creature which God alone effectuates and the creature just passively undergoes. The gift, as we have seen, is presented to someone who possesses her own *esse* and individuality. Since the divine moreover has ‘no causality over an act of the created will’,<sup>37</sup> glorification as the unification of God and humanity presupposes the *free consent* of an autonomous human being. Hence, the unity of God and creature cannot be thought of as the intensification of an already existing ontological participatory relation; rather it must be

33. Even a decided critic of Scotus’s Christology, such as Aaron Riches, concedes that ‘we ought to allow that Scotus was motivated by the good Christological intention to avoid Nestorianism’ (Aaron Riches, ‘Christology and the “Scotist Rupture”’, *Theological Research* 1 [2013], pp. 31–63, at p. 62).

34. *Rep. Par.* III, d. 7, q. 4 (ed. Viv. XXIII, p. 301): ‘*praedestinatio est praedeterminatio alicuius glorificabilis ad gloriam, et ad ordinata ad gloriam*’.

35. *Ord.* III, d. 7, q. 3 (ed. Viv. XIV, p. 349): ‘*Verum est tamen, quod in omnibus aliis ab isto [sc. Christo], praedestinatio respicit personam*’.

36. *Rep. Par.* III, d. 7, q. 4 (ed. Viv. XXIII, p. 302): ‘*et talis gloria [sc. gloria absolute] non potest cadere sub merito*’.

37. *Ord.* III, d. 17, q. un. (ed. Viv. XIV, p. 654): ‘*nullam causalitatem habet super actum voluntatis creatae*’.



taken as a relationship which two distinguished others instantiate only by freely willing it. In an often-cited passage from the *Reportata Parisiensia*, Scotus makes clear what this means. In this passage, he holds that God wants his self-love to be mediated by an ‘extrinsic other’, otherwise he would not regard it as ‘pure love’.<sup>38</sup> God thus wants to be loved by a non-divine other because only such love would complete the love he has for himself. Against this background, it comes as no surprise that the notion of *love* forms the very centre of Scotus’s Christological and anthropological account. The unity of the Word and Christ’s human nature in particular, as well as the unity of God and the human being in general, is nothing but a *unity of love*. Moreover, Scotus rightly assumes that the concept of love would remain unintelligible if it was not perceived as a relationship between two partners who exhibit a kind of *mutual alterity* which alone enables them to freely execute their unifying relationship.

If the concept of love is indeed the key to Scotus’s Christology and its implicit anthropology,<sup>39</sup> then this paves the way to a novel understanding of the relationship between God and humans. The alterity that distinguishes both can no longer be explained in terms of an *analogical* relation which takes any similarity between the creator and his creation as being surmounted by an always greater dissimilarity and at the same time keeps the creatures in an absolute ontological dependency from this incomprehensible divine.<sup>40</sup> Instead, alterity now has to be conceived of as a *difference of freedom*, that is, the difference between God’s and human freedom, because only such difference allows for a proper understanding of love. Of course, this is not to say that the creator and the creature are now on par. On the contrary. Solely God brought the creation into being and keeps it in being; solely God sets the freedom of the humans free so that they are capable to love God; and solely God predestined human freedom to find its ultimate glorification in the loving unification with himself. Accordingly, any exercise of human freedom is just a reaction to God’s antecedent initiative.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, it is also true that the Scotian model brings God and human beings—despite their mutual alterity—closer to each

38. *Rep. Par.* III, d. 7, q. 4 (ed. Viv. XXIII, p. 303). The full passage reads: ‘*Primo Deus diligit se; secundo diligit se in aliis, et iste est amor castus; tertio vult se diligi ab alio; qui potest eum summe diligere, loquendo de amore alicuius extrinseci; et quarto praevidit unionem illius naturae, quae debet eum summe diligere, etsi nullus caedisset*’.—‘First, God loves himself; second, he loves himself in others, and this is pure love; third, he wants to be loved by another who is able to love in the highest possible way, and this is speaking of the love of someone extrinsic; and fourth, he foresaw the union with the nature of him who ought to love him in the highest possible way, as if nobody was fallen.’

39. See Olivier Boulnois, *Duns Scotus: Logik der Liebe* (trans. B. Goebel et al.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2014).

40. The most sophisticated elaboration of the analogical model can perhaps be found in Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm* (trans. J. Betz and D. Bentley; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).

41. The one-sided dependency relation which, according to Scotus, unites Christ’s human nature with the Word might therefore not be understood in terms of ontological dependency, but rather as God’s irresistible invitation to the human nature to freely enter into a loving unification with the Word.

other. After all, it was God who freely decided not to be content with the inner-Trinitarian self-love but to let it be mediated by a non-divine other. In doing so, he made himself dependent on the loving response of the creature and even ran the risk of the creature's refusal of his antecedent love. However, to think of God in this way by no means entails the diminishment of his abundance, for all the classical attributes such as transcendence, omnipotence or impassibility are still applicable to him. The only difference is that God now is considered as someone who willingly can abstain from exercising these prerogatives and, in fact, he does so for the sake of pure love for a non-divine other.

The Scotian model thus allows us to think more highly of God and the human beings: of God, because he can take a free stance towards his absolute attributes;<sup>42</sup> and of the human beings, because they can take a free stance towards the divine. Likewise, it now becomes evident why this model provides us with a conceptual nucleus of the secular as well as with a theological justification of it. The secular is, provisionally speaking, the alterity which God voluntarily sets free in order to create space for human freedom. And this alterity is theologically justified because God wills it in order to make pure love possible.

## Enlightening the Secular

As Scotus never intended to amplify the notion of the secular, let alone to provide a full-fledged theory of it, it was only possible for us to discover the *secular's conceptual nucleus* in his work. Nonetheless, at least the following characteristics came to the fore: First, the secular is a human sphere *detached from the divine*. In contrast to analogical thinking which determines the relationship between the creator and his creation in terms of an indissoluble creational dependency, the concept of the secular insists on creational alterity. Second, the *basic rationale* of the secular is *human freedom* because, as we have seen, the difference between divine and human freedom accounts for the secular's alterity and is, moreover, the decisive prerequisite for 'pure love' between God and the humans. What the analogical model thus unites by presupposing an ontological dependency relation can now be considered as the existence of two distinguishable partners who are able to freely enter into a relational unity. Detecting freedom as a basic rationale involves, moreover, that the secular is primarily shaped by human freedom and not by divine intervention. Third, the secular is *willed by the divine*, for God's antecedent love brought it into being and also determined its ultimate destination to consist in the unification with himself. It is this third feature which, as we have seen, serves as the secular's *theological justification*.

At this point, it must be stressed, however, that the theological justification of the secular by no means entails a total endorsement of its *real-historical developments* or its *current manifestations*, for this would come down to a general exculpation of the

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42. There is only one divine attribute which God cannot suspend, namely his goodness. Therefore 'it follows that God has no [duty of] justice except to give to his own goodness or will that which is suitable'. *Ord.* IV, d. 46, q. 1 (ed. Viv. XX, p. 425): '*sequitur quod [Deus] nullam iustitiam habet, nisi ad reddendum suae bonitati vel voluntati, quod eam concedet*'.

manifold distortions, mutilations and perversions of secular thinking and acting. For that reason, the secular's theological opponents have a strong point when they criticise the abundant excesses of a 'derailing secularisation'.<sup>43</sup> Milbank's fierce disapproval of a self-stabilising complex of reductionist science, privatised religion and exploitative economy<sup>44</sup> or Cavanaugh's denunciation of an idolatrous adoration of the nation-state<sup>45</sup> are surely in the right, even though one might wonder whether philosophers have not long since contemplated these matters much more thoroughly.<sup>46</sup> Be that as it may, challenging the manifold theoretical and practical oddities of the secular is undoubtedly an indispensable assignment of contemporary theology. Yet this does not justify even the most sophisticated plea for a return to analogical thinking.<sup>47</sup> Instead, such criticism should—next to denouncing all kinds of tangible distortions—primarily attempt to break open the perilous secular immanentism from within itself. For if the theological significance of the secular can no longer be demonstrated, as Scotus did, on the basis of commonly shared doctrinal premises, then the secular's own logic has to be employed in order to show that its ultimate destination consists in a Christ-like unification with the divine. Hence, an *inversion* of Scotus's thoughts needs to be invoked; and performing this inversion is the task of a public theology which operates within the context and on the basis of secular thought.

To my knowledge, it was the German theologian Thomas Pröpper (1940–2014) who made the most decisive attempt to explore such an inversion.<sup>48</sup> In fact, however, he provided both a kind of Scotian account and its inversion. On the one hand, he developed a *theological hermeneutic* which, comparable to Scotus, sought to reveal the secular implications of faith. On the other hand, he built on a *reflection on the basic principle of the secular*, attempting to show in which way a concept of ultimate destination can be developed from it.<sup>49</sup> Though strictly distinguishing between the two modes, Pröpper is of the opinion that both are indispensable for a comprehensive theology. Accordingly, he characterises his own account as exhibiting a kind of 'elliptic double-poledness'.<sup>50</sup> Since,

43. Notably, this term originates not from a theological critic but from Jürgen Habermas, *Glaube und Wissen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), p. 12.

44. See Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, p. 115.

45. See William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

46. See the locus classicus, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (trans. E. Jephcott; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

47. See Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

48. Unfortunately, until now, Pröpper's work has not been made accessible for the English-speaking world. His major works are: *Erlösungsglaube und Freiheitsgeschichte: Eine Skizze zur Soteriologie*, 3rd edn (München: Kösel, 1991); *Evangelium und freie Vernunft: Konturen einer theologischen Hermeneutik* (Freiburg: Herder, 2001); *Theologische Anthropologie*, 2 vols (Freiburg: Herder, 2011).

49. To be sure, Pröpper does not employ the term 'basic rationale of the secular'; he just speaks about 'freedom'. In the light of the previous considerations, however, we are justified in using both terms univocally.

50. Pröpper, *Evangelium und freie Vernunft*, p. 6. All translations from Pröpper are mine.

however, only the second pole is of interest for our present purposes, I now will confine myself to Pröpper's reflection on the basic rationale of the secular.

This basic rationale, as we have seen, is *human freedom*. But freedom must neither be taken as the ridiculous caricature that some theologians make of it when they reduce it to mere consumerist freedom,<sup>51</sup> nor must we understand it in the flat liberal sense of the liberty to do whatever you want as long as you harm no others.<sup>52</sup> These and other reductionist forms of freedom can, according to Pröpper, at most serve as the starting point of a *recursive analysis* which seeks to reveal the *transcendental structure of freedom*. Though, as Kant has already shown in his third antinomy,<sup>53</sup> the reality of freedom is theoretically neither demonstrable nor refutable, we cannot meaningfully deny it and even have to necessarily presuppose it in order to lead our individual and communal lives. On that account, the recursive analysis leads from the liberty to act through the liberty to choose to the transcendental insight that in every act of choosing not only a particular object is chosen but also the self that chooses. Referring to Kierkegaard's concept of the 'absolute choice' or 'self-choice', Pröpper stresses that only through 'freedom which as such is seized and chosen, actions become one's own actions, merely performed acting becomes willed, definitively imputable and thus morally qualifiable acting'.<sup>54</sup> Since we cannot conceive of the self-choice as being caused by any conditions, freedom on this transcendental level exhibits a *formal unconditionedness*, whereas on all other levels it is *materially conditioned*.

For Pröpper, freedom, therefore, proves to be the 'capacity of self-determination' which involves that freedom is 'determinable by itself', that it 'determines itself through the affirmation of a content' and that 'it is, in its formal unconditionedness, the measure of true self-determination'.<sup>55</sup> At first glance, this might appear as the culmination point of modern hubris, narcissism and self-centredness, but quite the opposite is the case. In fact, Pröpper highlights that the content or the terminus which has to be affirmed in order to determine oneself must also possess the quality of formal unconditionedness. 'The rank of the freedom's self-being', he asserts, 'depends on the dignity of its terminus'.<sup>56</sup> From this, it can be inferred that *freedom has to unconditionally recognise every possible manifestation of freedom* which includes all human beings who are not yet or no longer free and also those who only display a most minimal capacity of self-determination. Every act of freedom must, therefore, be directed towards an unconditional affirmation of every other freedom.

51. The most telling example here is Stanley Hauerwas. For him, even choosing existentially relevant beliefs and belongings is nothing but the performance of a consumerist arbitrariness; see *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 7. For a much more nuanced view see Walter Kasper, *The Christian Understanding of Freedom and the History of Freedom in the Modern Era* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1988).

52. See Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Sphere* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 24.

53. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A444/B472–A451/479.

54. Pröpper, *Theologische Anthropologie*, vol. 1, p. 503.

55. Pröpper, *Evangelium und freie Vernunft*, p. 60.

56. Pröpper, *Erlösungsglaube und Freiheitsgeschichte*, p. 186.

Needless to say, in doing so, Pröpper introduces a fundamental *ethical principle*. Yet, as we have seen, formal unconditionedness applies to freedom only on the transcendental level, whereas it is constrained by manifold conditions on the empirical level, be they biological, psychological, biographical, physical, cultural or whatever. Consequently, the concrete recognition of other freedom is always mediated by outward actions and institutions and therefore proves to be a mere *symbol*. We are thus obligated to recognise every human being unconditionally, but we can express this recognition only in a conditioned, finite and symbolical way. Notwithstanding this merely symbolic character of all concrete recognition, we are still committed to bringing about a world whose conditions promote every manifestation of freedom and epitomise its recognition in the greatest possible way.<sup>57</sup> By so inferring the ethical implications of the secular's basic rationale, Pröpper makes sufficiently clear that its core essence is the opposite of violence. Rather, the concept of the secular bears an ideal of humanity which can effectively be utilised against its own distortions.<sup>58</sup>

But this, so to speak, 'secular justification of the secular' is not what is at stake here. For we are dealing with the question of the extent to which a reflection on the secular's internal logic allows us to envisage a conception of its ultimate destination which refuses an imminentist interpretation. To this end, Pröpper points to the *aporia* that we already came across when we observed the tension between the obligation to unconditionally recognise every manifestation of freedom and the fact that this can be achieved only in a conditional and symbolic way.<sup>59</sup> The *aporia* thus consists in the inability to follow through that which human freedom intends and already realises in an initial way: a state of affairs in which the unconditional and mutual recognition of all forms of freedom becomes a reality. For Pröpper, however, this *aporia* is not necessarily irresolvable. On the assumption of a *formally and substantively unconditional freedom*—and this is the idea of a *loving and omnipotent God*—the anticipated state of affairs is in fact conceivable. 'With the idea of God', he states, 'we imagine just that reality which humans have to presuppose in order to substantiate and make possible the unconditional obligation which they already anticipate in their decision for themselves and for others.'<sup>60</sup> The existence of an almighty and all-loving God is, therefore, a necessary prerequisite in order to make the secular exercise of human freedom ultimately meaningful. Yet this might still sound as if God were only an instrumental condition for the achievability of human striving, as with Kant's resolution of the 'dialectic of practical reason' in which God serves as a necessary precondition for the possibility of the 'highest good'.<sup>61</sup> But

57. See Pröpper, *Evangelium und freie Vernunft*, p. 63.

58. Of course, this would require the translation of the transcendental concept of freedom into a full-fledged ethical theory. For a humble attempt to do this see my *Grundlegung der christlichen Sozialethik: Versuch eines freiheitstheoretisch-handlungsreflexiven Ansatzes* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2006).

59. The actual scope of this *aporia* becomes visible when we realise that the obligation to unconditionally recognise every manifestation of freedom also pertains to *future generations* and also to *those who are long since dead and forgotten*.

60. Pröpper, *Evangelium und freie Vernunft*, p. 64.

61. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, AA 5:124–32.

this is not what Pröpper has in mind. For if God, as he contends, must indeed be conceived as formally and materially unconditioned freedom, then such freedom necessarily exercises itself as absolute recognition of every manifestation of freedom, including finite human freedom. God, in other words, appears to be the unconditional love for all human beings, so that Pröpper can eventually conclude that the ultimate destination of human freedom consists in nothing but everlasting 'communion with God'.<sup>62</sup>

At this stage, it should be noted that Pröpper by no means seeks to provide proof of God's existence. He only asserts that we have necessarily to develop the idea of God if we believe that our moral striving is meaningful. After all, what human freedom ultimately anticipates in its decision to unconditionally recognise other freedom would, in fact, remain *aporetic* if it were not made possible by the grace of an all-loving and almighty God. Pröpper's sophisticated analysis of the secular's rationale therefore only leads to a *hypothetical statement*: If the authentic self-determination of human freedom is ultimately meaningful, then God exists and offers us everlasting communion. It is this hypothetical statement that forms the endpoint of Pröpper's *reflection on the basic rationale of the secular*. In doing so, he has paved the way for his *theological hermeneutic* which, as we have seen, forms the second pole of his overall approach. This hermeneutic sets in with the belief that 'the essential significance of the story of Jesus accounts for the revelation of God's absolutely decided love for the human being'.<sup>63</sup> So, it is nothing but an *act of faith*, an unforced acknowledgement of God's existence and his revelation in Jesus Christ that turns the hypothetical statement into an assertion which then can serve as the starting point of an all-encompassing theological elucidation of faith's implications. To a secular mindset, of course, the whole line of thought ends up with the aforementioned hypothetical statement. But given that statement, an act of faith becomes at least plausible.

What consequences can eventually be drawn from such a reflection on the secular for theological reasoning in the public sphere? In fact, the answer has already been given. Public theology, I now would argue, has to enlighten the secular about itself. This entails, as we have seen, to boldly challenge the secular's manifold distortions and deformations; to make visible and to enforce its intrinsic ethical normativity wherever possible; and to break open its immanentism by reasonably disclosing its orientation towards an ultimate destination.<sup>64</sup> In contrast to current versions of public theology,<sup>65</sup> however, these tasks should no longer be performed in a Scotus-like manner, that is, by starting from theological premises, because such premises are no longer generally shared by a secular audience. Instead, the basic rationale of the secular itself must serve as a principle when public theology undertakes its critical, ethical and orientating functions. But, of course, the Scotian mode of doing theology must not be neglected, because public theology still

62. See Pröpper, *Theologische Anthropologie*, vol. 1, pp. 123–270.

63. Pröpper, *Theologische Anthropologie*, vol. 2, p. 1298.

64. It should be clear that particularly the latter task needs not necessarily be undertaken on the basis of Pröpper's approach. For a comparable attempt see Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (trans. J. Bowden; London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 80–97.

65. See Ted Peters, 'Public Theology: Its Pastoral, Apologetic, Scientific, Political, and Prophetic Tasks', *International Journal of Public Theology* 12 (2018), pp. 153–77.

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has to build on genuinely Christian beliefs in order to bear witness to the credibility of Christian doctrine and life as well as to the ubiquity of God's loving grace. Such matters, however, will barely unfold their plausibility in a secular context as long as the secular is not enlightened. And so it would seem that *enlightening the secular* is indeed the core business of theological reasoning in the public sphere since its overall aim is to enable people to take a free stance towards the gift of God's loving grace.