



The European Legacy

Toward New Paradigms

ISSN: 1084-8770 (Print) 1470-1316 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cele20>

Habermas on Religion and Democracy: Critical Perspectives

Camil Ungureanu & Paolo Monti

To cite this article: Camil Ungureanu & Paolo Monti (2017) Habermas on Religion and Democracy: Critical Perspectives, *The European Legacy*, 22:5, 521-527, DOI: [10.1080/10848770.2017.1317160](https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2017.1317160)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2017.1317160>



Published online: 16 May 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 705



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

INTRODUCTION



Habermas on Religion and Democracy: Critical Perspectives

Camil Ungureanu^a and Paolo Monti^b

^aDepartment of Political and Social Sciences, University Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain; ^bUniversità Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano, Italy

The recent rise of populism and nationalist majoritarianism in various countries from the United States and India to Turkey, Hungary, and Israel poses a challenge to constitutional democracy and human rights around the globe. Events such as Brexit and Donald Trump's electoral success are a reminder of the fragility of democracy in "times out of joint." The full significance of these changes is difficult to fathom, and will become clearer only in the years or decades to come. It seems safe to argue, nonetheless, that we are moving into a more polarized and unstable world.¹ These changes have not come out of the blue: for decades political theorists, sociologists, and historians have been identifying and analyzing the signs of a malaise and growing disaffection in Western and non-Western democracies, the increased tensions between corporate capitalism and democracy, and the divisions between North and South.² Jürgen Habermas, for long at the forefront of these debates, has repeatedly addressed the tectonic shifts and tensions in modern capitalist democracies and has passionately advocated the democratic re-engagement of citizenry. Over the past two decades, Habermas has focused on two specific sociopolitical phenomena: the crisis of the European Union and the renewed influence of religion in the public sphere. To address this dual challenge, he introduced two new concepts: first, the notion of a *European postnational constellation* to counter the technocratic rule of bureaucratic experts and financial markets as well as the exclusive focus on the nation-state;³ and, second, the notion of the *postsecular society* where the discourse of religious communities is reflexively integrated into public discourse and democratic practice. Habermas thus proposes an intermediate stance between two opposed and extreme views of the place of religion in contemporary democracies: the "revenge of God," on the one hand, and the inevitable divorce of democracy from religion, on the other.⁴ His vision of a postsecular society attempts instead to reconcile the tradition of the Enlightenment and modern religion, democracy and reflexive faith.⁵

In recent debates on postsecularism, critics of different ideological outlooks from various disciplines have often turned Habermas's vision into a punching bag. While it has become fashionable to debunk Habermas by reducing his view to a caricature or a series of clichés, his view has also been carefully scrutinized.⁶ His left-wing critics see his growing interest in postsecularism as a retreat into conservatism, thus abandoning his earlier post-Marxist critique of religion as articulated in his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981). Some see

his defense of “secular reason,” which appears to universalize a particular Western tradition, as a symptom of Orientalism and Postcolonialism. His right-wing critics contend that Habermas’s over-rationalistic conception of politics fails to take the political-theological heritage into account. Sociologists see his vision of a postsecular society with its rigid distinction between the religious and the secular as empirically naïve, while legal scholars see it as too vague when it comes to constitutional-legal conflicts involving religion.⁷

Beyond the merits and demerits of these critiques, Habermas’s practical struggle and the richness of his theoretical synthesis that questions the dichotomy of modernity vs religion or rationality vs religious imagination cannot be complacently brushed aside as the “provincial” fixation of an old-fashioned “old European.” In light of the fragility if not collapse of constitutional parliamentarism, Habermas’s project acquires, in the current circumstances, a new relevance. His work and activism represent a point of reference and anchor for a reflective politics of resistance in the troubled seas of global politics. We can thus move beyond his Critical Theory not by abandoning it, but by working closely with its tools and following the paths it has opened up, as suggested by the title of this Special Issue, “Habermas on Religion and Democracy: Critical Perspectives.” Arguably, the use of “postsecularism” in academic debates may decline or be abandoned altogether in the coming years, as happened with “postmodernism,” “postnationalism,” “postfeminism,” and “posthistory.” Academic terms are sometimes no more than tools that serve a limited purpose for a period of time. If “postsecularism” is taken to refer to the passage to a new “postsecular society” that has moved beyond secularization, it is unsustainable because empirical research rejects this kind of maximalistic interpretation of the term. As various sociologists from Pippa Norris and Steve Bruce to Olivier Roy and Detlef Pollack have emphasized,⁸ the theory of secularization has not lost its empirical relevance, though its more radical versions that posit the imminent end of religion or see modernity vs religion as a zero-sum game—now appear implausible. Significant macro-trends of secularization are detectable not only in Western Europe but also in the United States and in some Muslim countries.⁹ However, the concept of secularization need not turn into a grand narrative, ideology, or myth of the fatal decline of religion in modernity; nor, conversely, should it be replaced by counter-myths devoid of empirical support, as, for example, “the postsecular age,” ongoing “desecularization,” or “the clash of civilizations.”¹⁰

The merit of Habermas’s reflections on religion and democracy is not to advance a grand narrative proclaiming the replacement of an old secular society with a new one.¹¹ His goal is to challenge the empirical and normative assumptions of secularization as the grand narrative of the decay of religion,¹² and of depicting it as a relic of a past that is at loggerheads with rationality, freedom, and emancipation (i.e., the view the early Habermas shared with Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud).¹³ We suggest that, in his recent work, Habermas presents three challenges and insights that are especially pertinent to the current philosophical, sociological, theological, and political agenda: (1) the need to overcome the rigid opposition between secular liberalism and political theology; (2) the transformative understanding of the communicative engagement of believers and unbelievers; and (3) the need for a cross-disciplinary approach to the interpretation and normative assessment of changing sociocultural contexts.

First, Habermas has the merit of moving beyond the dichotomy between the secularization paradigm and the revival of interest in political theology without rejecting the relevance of either. From his perspective, the tale of the decline of religion has allowed secularists to

turn a blind eye to the transformations religion has undergone in modernity, the resurgence of (non)religious spirituality, and the interaction between democratic and religious practice, public discourse, and the moral-religious imagination. Sociological research shows, indeed, that the relation between religion and modernity is not a zero-sum game. Even in Western Europe where church attendance and belief in God are at their lowest point, a significant number of young people express an increased interest in alternative and modernized forms of religiosity and spirituality. Moreover, the modernization of the major religions is, differences notwithstanding, a global phenomenon. This is what Habermas has in mind when he speaks of the socio-historical processes of learning various religions are engaged in, which, he argues, enable them to support practices of democratic participation and solidarity. As he stated, when a demoralized public discourse “no longer has sufficient strength to awaken... an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world,” believers and unbelievers can both take inspiration from religion to cultivate an “awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven.”¹⁴

Habermas thus questions certain aspects of the secularization paradigm but is also critical of the current revival of political theology. When it does not refer to Carl Schmitt’s exaltation of decisionism, political theology manifests itself as a conservative nostalgia that is at odds with modern pluralist social life; it may, alternatively, manifest itself as neo-communist nihilism, which longs for a miracle-like event that would violently destroy capitalism (Alain Badiou; Slavoj Žižek).¹⁵ In contrast to these opposing manifestations, Habermas analyzes the role of religious heritages and theologies in shaping democratic public discourse and defends the necessary separation between the democratic state and religion in pluralistic societies.

Second, Habermas’s focus on learning, deliberation, and translation offers a convincing alternative to the one-dimensional concepts of the “culture wars” or the “clash of civilizations.” The desideratum of a deliberative democracy made up of citizens-translators has been rightly criticized for being overambitious and overtaxing people’s rational capacities.¹⁶ His endeavor to develop an interactive religious and democratic practice and at the same time to maintain a “wall of separation” between the two under the aegis of public reason also runs into intractable difficulties. Nonetheless, severing “translation” and “deliberation” from Habermas’s still-rigid rationalism, and envisaging a plurality of communicative interactions (acculturation, mutual influence and contamination, argumentative and rhetorical exchanges, inspiration and insight, etc.) is a promising path for furthering the dialogue among the faithful, and between believers and unbelievers. The urgency of developing such communicative exchanges today is primarily motivated by the role religious traditions can play in response to the global challenges posed by refugees, poverty, climate change, and the defense of human rights. Habermas convincingly argues that neither believers nor unbelievers can claim exclusive ownership over the prepolitical foundations of democracy and the moral imagination, from the standards of practical reasoning to the repertoires of public justification and the symbolic resources of civic motivation.

Third, Habermas’s position offers an approach to religion and democracy that is sensitive to contexts and the transformations driven by globalization. It provides both an interpretive and a normative framework that questions the rigid barriers between normative political-legal theory, comparative history, and positivist sociology. A positivist sociology alone is unable to acknowledge the role that the critical re-appropriation of meaning has in the genesis and evolution of social practices. In turn, the study of the principles of justice cannot be exclusively based on counterfactual reasoning and ideal theorizing

while neglecting sociohistorical conditionings or by falling into the trap of methodological nationalism and ignoring global interdependencies. While it is true that Habermas mainly focuses on the political woes of European societies and the Judeo-Christian world, his cosmopolitan philosophical perspective and his sensitivity to historical contexts clears the path for a non-reductionist comparative analysis of multiple democratic models, and of the ways they have been influenced by different spiritual-religious heritages.¹⁷ A renewed Critical Theory with a focus on the plurality of (non)religious traditions rather than on Kantian idealizations could, moreover, benefit from an increased sensitivity to the power imbalances within religious practices (e.g., gender inequality and relations of domination) and among majorities and minorities.

The four articles included in this Special Issue deal with different aspects of the current debate on Habermas's work by criticizing and expanding on the relevance of his concepts of democracy and religion. In "Habermas's Theological Turn and European Integration," Peter J. Verovšek places Habermas's concept of religion in modern society within the European context, tracing its genealogy and discussing its relevance in light of the rise of populist movements in the continent. By focusing on two of the most important actors involved in the creation of the first European Community, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman and German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, Verovšek shows how explicitly religious reasons can broaden political perspectives, resulting in the creation of new, inclusive, post-national forms of communal life. In his account, the importance of political Catholicism in the early history of European integration offers an interesting model of how pluralistic, nondogmatic and nonauthoritarian religious claims can enrich the discursive process in the formal public sphere.

This is followed by "Habermas and Taylor on Religious Reasoning in a Liberal Democracy," in which Andrew Tsz Wan Hung focuses on the use of religious language in the public sphere. By reconstructing their debate, he shows that Taylor's hermeneutics of modernity provides a useful counterweight to Habermas's teleological rationalism. He argues that the difference in their perspectives springs from their different normative theories: Habermas's universal discourse ethics vs Taylor's communitarian substantive ethics. While finding both Habermas's and Taylor's translation proviso problematic, Hung suggests that Taylor's historical hermeneutics should be extended to include the narrative approach to ethical deliberation as conducive to mutual experiential understanding, and hence to achieving a fusion of horizons of the diverse worlds of citizens in a liberal democracy.

A different perspective on the same issue is offered by Adil Usturali in "Religion in Habermas's Two-Track Political Theory," which investigates the porous formal and informal boundaries of the public sphere. Usturali reads Habermas's work as an attempt to accommodate both the liberal conception of the secular state and the republican quest for a robust ethics of citizenship. By critically examining the notion of translation, Usturali concludes that, despite its merits, the Habermasian postsecular project runs into deep interpretive and normative difficulties.

Finally, in "Found in Translation: Habermas and Anthropotechnics," Matteo Bortolini brings the discussion back to Habermas's concept of religion, which, he argues, overlooks the integrative role of ritual. By drawing on Michel Foucault and Peter Sloterdijk, Bortolini extends Habermas's view of religion to encompass doctrines, myths and symbols in order to show the importance of religious practices as sources of social integration. His alternative to Habermas's problematic translation proviso consists of religious symbolic content that can

be translated into behavior-regulating technologies that foster the dispositional resources needed for developing and maintaining the postsecular dialogue between religious and nonreligious citizens.

In sum, the prospects of a fully-fledged postsecular society appear to be utopian in view of the current rise of populism and religious majoritarianism: social conflicts, stark inequalities, fundamentalist estrangement and resentment—all these endanger and marginalize the potentially fruitful communication between believers and non-believers. We argue, however, that precisely because of these trends, Habermas's cosmopolitan vision of democracy and religion, notwithstanding its philosophical and sociological difficulties, stands out as an exemplary lifelong defense of inclusive communicative interactions and forms of resistance. The inner tensions of Habermas's theoretical outlook—rationalism vs historicity, universalism vs particular world-views, state neutrality vs religion's indirect impact, and sociological vs normative analysis—are inherent to democratic theory and practice and thus remain instructive for understanding the multilayered interrelationships of religion and democracy from comparative and global perspectives.¹⁸

Notes

1. See Habermas's reflections on populism in "For A Democratic Polarisation."
2. See Crouch, *Post-Democracy*; Laclau, *On Populist Reason*; De Benoist, "The Current Crisis of Democracy"; and Zakaria, "Can America Be Fixed?"
3. Habermas moves from a reconstructive science to a reconstructive approach. See Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*.
4. Kepel, *The Revenge of God*.
5. Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation*.
6. For a good bibliography of Habermas's work, see <http://www.habermasforum.dk/>.
7. Some academics even suggest that Habermas's postsecularism is a passing academic fad, useful merely for getting research grants. See Bader "Post-Secularism or Liberal-Democratic Constitutionalism?"
8. Pollack and Olson, eds., *Religion in Modern Societies*; Roy, *Holy Ignorance*; Norris and Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*; and Bruce, *Secularization*.
9. Western Europe remains an exception on a global level in terms of the decreasing number of believers. We should be wary however of "essentializing" its exceptionality. For a sociological analysis of Europe's position, see Berger, Davie, and Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?*; Pollack, Müller, and Pickel, eds., *Social Significance of Religion*.
10. For an analysis, see Bottici and Challand, "Rethinking Political Myth."
11. We do not deny that Habermas's vision has elements of a "grand narrative," even if, from the 1980s onwards, he has admitted the growing relevance of historicity and hermeneutics. See Ungureanu and Monti, *Contemporary Political Theory and Religion*.
12. The term has sometimes been objected to for carrying different meanings (empirical phenomenon, normative ideal, etc.). Like any "post-" term, "postsecularism" may generate more confusion than clarity. But the objection of polysemy does not obtain. First, most concepts in philosophy and the social sciences are polysemic and are used in various and at times confusing ways. Second, polysemy can be an advantage: that for Habermas "postsecularism" carries both an interpretive and a normative meaning is part of its defining features. See *infra*.
13. Requejo and Ungureanu, eds., *Democracy, Law and Religious Pluralism*.
14. Habermas, *Awareness of What Is Missing*, 19.
15. See, for instance, Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*. Žižek and Badiou rightly emphasize the historical "discontinuity" in criticizing Habermas's teleology. But from their valid concern to the exaltation of the Event there is a chilling leap of faith.

16. It should be noted that Habermas has gradually abandoned some of the rigidity of Kantian rationalism.
17. For a similar approach, see Sen, *The Idea of Justice*; for a typology of comparative approaches, see Ungureanu and Monti, *Contemporary Political Theory and Religion*.
18. For an excellent recent collection on Habermas's work, see Calhoun, Mendieta, and VanAntwerpen, eds. *Habermas and Religion*.

Notes on contributors

Camil Ungureanu is Associate Professor at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, in Barcelona, Spain. His research focuses on religion and democracy, art and politics. His work has been published in various journals including *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, *Human Studies*, and *The European Journal of Political Theory*. He is currently writing a book on Michel Houellebecq and religion.

Paolo Monti is Lecturer at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, in Milan, Italy. His research focuses on the ethics of democratic citizenship and the role of religion in the public sphere. In 2004 and 2006 he was visiting researcher at Notre Dame University, Indiana, USA, and in 2009 at the Department of Bioethics at the NIH, Maryland, USA. He is co-author with Camil Ungureanu of *Contemporary Political Theory and Religion* (Routledge, forthcoming in 2017).

References

- Bader, Veit. "Post-Secularism or Liberal-Democratic Constitutionalism?" *Erasmus Law Review* 5 (2012): 5–26.
- Berger, Peter L., Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas. *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2008.
- Bhargava, Rajeev. *Secularism and Its Critics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Bottici, Chiara, and Benoît Challand. "Rethinking Political Myth: The Clash of Civilizations as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy." *European Journal of Social Theory* 9 (2006): 315–36.
- Bruce, Steve. *Secularization: In Defense of an Unfashionable Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Calhoun, Craig, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds. *Habermas and Religion*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015.
- Crouch, Colin. *Post-Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.
- De Benoist, Alain. "The Current Crisis of Democracy." *Telos* 156 (2011): 7–23.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-secular Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Facts and Norms*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008.
- Habermas, Jürgen. "For a Democratic Polarisation: How to Pull the Ground from under Right-wing Populism." *Social Europe*, November 17, 2016. Available online at: <https://www.socialeurope.eu/2016/11/democratic-polarisation-pull-ground-right-wing-populism/#>; last accessed on March 30, 2017.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Between Metaphysics and the Critique of Reason*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Postnational Constellation*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.
- Kepel, Gilles. *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.
- Laclau, Ernesto. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso, 2005.
- Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

- Pollack, Detlef, and Daniel V. A. Olson, eds. *The Role of Religion in Modern Societies*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Pollack, Detlef, Olaf Müller, and Gert Pickel, eds. *The Social Significance of Religion in the Enlarged Europe: Secularization, Individualization and Pluralization*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Requejo, Ferran, and Camil Ungureanu, eds. *Democracy, Law and Religious Pluralism in Europe: Secularism and Post-Secularism*. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Roy, Olivier. *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Sen, Amartya. *The Idea of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Ungureanu, Camil, and Paolo Monti. *Contemporary Political Theory and Religion*. New York: Routledge (forthcoming 2017).
- Zakaria, Fareed. "Can America Be Fixed? The New Crisis of Democracy." *Foreign Affairs* 92 (2013): 22–33.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998.