Reason, Faith, and Secularization:
Jürgen Habermas Meets Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

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Abstract

The debate between the two leading representatives of critical theory and Catholic theology on the moral and (presumably) religious foundations of the secular state that can neither be vindicated nor ignored by secular reason has drawn great attention far across the borders that tend to separate theologians from liberal philosophers. The paper seeks to explore the historical context of the debate and to identify major areas of agreement between the two discussants before it examines some of the more important remaining differences. With the subsequent election of Cardinal Ratzinger as Pope and the programmatic implications of his Papal name the debate has taken on a new significance by highlighting the continuous need for dialogue and deeper understanding between the Church and all people of good will regardless of intellectual background or ideological affiliations.

I. Cross-Border Explorations

On Monday, 19 January 2004, the Catholic Academy in Munich hosted a debate between two of the most distinguished German intellectuals with international acclaim far beyond their respective disciplines. The debate took place between Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Professor Emeritus Jürgen Habermas.

In many quarters the encounter at first stirred up disbelief and utter surprise. It was thought nearly impossible that two personalities representing positions diametrically opposed to each other would engage in an open-ended debate and could even find a common language for it. For many in Germany, Ratzinger as one of the most powerful prelates of the Roman Church and for over two decades the prefect of the Congregation of Faith, was above all a conservative theologian whose doctrinal views would jeopardize any meaningful dialogue and at best present another dogmatic statement of the Roman point of view. Habermas' left-wing friends and followers were taken aback by his willingness to engage in a dialogue with the head of the congregation that directly succeeded the infamous Sacred Congregation of the Universal Inquisition established in 1542 by Pope Paul III. to fight heretics and to suppress free thought.

It is therefore one of the great surprises of this in many ways remarkable encounter that it not only took place at all, but also that friend and foe acknowledged the great sincerity and respect with which the two antagonists debated their issue at the highest intellectual level. And even more significant was that they succeeded in bringing religion and its contribution to modernity again into focus of a debate whose tremendous implications far exceed Catholicism and Christianity and extend to non-believers and unbelievers alike. Both discussants, albeit from different angles, found commonalities in their claim of a role for religion within modern society that let forget, at least for a moment, the remaining differences between them.

Apparently, the initiative for the debate came from Cardinal Ratzinger. As a well-informed observer not only of developments in contemporary theology but also in the whole range of the humanities, he seemed to have followed with great interest what in the meantime has been called Habermas' approximation to religion. In particular, Habermas' surprising intervention in the debate about the implications of biotechnology, particularly in the context of human cloning and wasteful embryo research, had caught the cardinal's interest. Habermas' small but influential book on the challenge of biological engineering and human cloning was published in 2001 entitled *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur*; the title of the English translation (2002) aptly indicates its major concern: *The Future of Human Nature*. The book offers an eloquent defense of the right to a unique human identity and explores the limits of human interference with nature. While Habermas examines the issue from his own philosophical perspective, in various points his results show a remarkable affinity to the Catholic position.

Beyond its immediate point of departure, the Munich debate gains its full significance only if it is placed within the broader context of a renewed interest among European intellectuals in religion and of their search for partners in a dialogue that meets at the high level of intellectual integrity and sincerity the topic deserves. Three specific contexts are worth mentioning.

1. The Martini-Eco Debate

The opening issue of the Italian journal *Liberal* published on 22 March 1995 included the first of a series of letters between the archbishop of Milan, Carlo Maria Cardinal Martini, and the world-famous linguist and novelist Umberto Eco (*The Name of the Rose, Foucault's Pendulum*). Altogether eight public letters were exchanged and published in quarterly intervals that ended in March 1996. The letters met with unusual interest among Italian intellectuals, which prompted the editors to invite others to participate and to contribute views from their respective professional backgrounds, i. e. from philosophy, journalism, and politics. The title under which the letters were collected and published in 1996 once again indicates the overall topic of the debate: *In cosa crede chi non crede?* Which could be literally translated as: *In what does he/she believe who does not believe?*[1] A German issue appeared in 1999 and was most appropriately prefaced by the former archbishop of Vienna, Franz Cardinal König, who from 1965 to 1980 headed the Vatican Secretariat for the Non-Believers. The title of his preface succinctly illustrates the significance he attached to this exchange and to the renewed interest in religion: *The question of God knocks again at our doors.*

Although it is here not possible to provide an adequate overview of the various issues the two partners in the dialogue discussed, the last two letters touch on an issue that is directly relevant to the Ratzinger-Habermas debate as well; it is certainly of fundamental importance to believers and non-believers. While in the first three letters Umberto Eco takes the initiative and raises issues that range from the meaning and purpose of history, the beginning of human life and its protection, all the way to the role of women in the Church, in the last exchange it is the Cardinal who puts the question to Eco. This question relates to the foundation and authority of ethics in the age of post-modern secularization and is put as follows: "What is the basis of the certainty and necessity for moral action of those who, in order to establish the absolute nature of an ethic, do not intend to appeal to metaphysical principles or transcendental values, or even to universally valid categorical imperatives?" He

reformulates it again and asks more specifically: "Which reasons can someone adduce for his actions whose moral principles entail the possible sacrifice of his own life but who does not believe in a personal God?"[2] Martini emphasizes that his goal is not to "upset anyone's conscience," but to bring believers and nonbelievers closer in their cooperation towards a more humane world. As one critic remarked, Martini frames his words without any sense of judgment or superiority, and it is very obvious that he has a genuine desire to understand secular humanism at its root level. He also expresses his hope that a common ground can be found on which the principle of human dignity could be based that would inspire, motivate, and morally guide the actions of people that may otherwise be separated by secular and religious divisions.[3]

Eco's response consists partly in exploring what he calls "semantic universals" or "elementary notions that are common to the entire human species and can be expressed in all languages." From there he develops some kind of evolutionary ethics that has its foundational experience in the encounter with "the other." He maintains that "the ethical dimension begins when the other appears on the scene" and when it dawns on the individual that nobody "should do to others what he does not wish to be done to him."

In our present context even more significant is Eco's description of what he calls his "lay religiosity," as this offers a pre-religious yet foundational perspective on life that could be shared by secular and religious communities: "I firmly hold that there are forms of religiosity, and therefore a sense of the Holy, of the Limit, of questioning and of awaiting, of communion with something that transcends us, even in the absence of faith in a personal and provident divinity."
Such a position is not that of an atheist, which - for Eco - is simply the exchange of one form a belief with another (cf. the book's Italian title). Or as he puts it: "I do not see how one can not believe in God, and hold that His existence cannot be proved, and then firmly believe in the nonexistence of God, holding that it can be proved."

Instead, he regards himself more as an agnostic - and this is another parallel to Habermas. In allusion to Max Weber's famous self-characterization, Habermas too has called himself "religiously tone-deaf." There is even a further similarity that is worth mentioning. The Martini-Eco exchange is not only respectful and filled with curiosity and even warmth, both authors are also "perfectly matched thinkers, gentlemen scholars with a genuine interest in what the other has to say" (Allan B. Ruch). I think the same can be said about the exchange between Habermas and Ratzinger. And a final observation applies to the Habermas-Ratzinger debate: As Harvey Cox in his introduction to the English translation of the letters between Eco and Martini remarked, "reading this book left me wanting more."

2. More Lines of Communication

And more was forthcoming when in 2002 the well-known Italian journal of the leftist political spectrum *MicroMega* dedicated a whole issue to the thesis that contemporary philosophy is above all else interested in religion and seeks to engage itself in a dialogue with it. This thesis is then tackled by philosophers of various camps, but also by three theologians. One of them is the archbishop of Chieti-Vasti, Bruno Forte, the second the founder of a new monastery (Bose, Italy) Enzo Bianchi, and the third is no other than Cardinal Ratzinger. In the preface, he is introduced by the journal's editor as the quintessential representative of Catholic orthodoxy. Ratzinger was apparently amused by the fact that his text would be included in a journal that usually accepts only articles by non-believers and that not long ago had published a harsh critique of the Papal Encyclical on the relationship between reason and

faith, *Ratio et Fides,* which is thought to be directly influenced by the Cardinal's views. Ratzinger's own interest in participating in the debate, however, is the prospect that religion can be brought back to the focus of intellectual discussion and that a broad-based discourse could be stimulated on the truth of the Christian religion (per stimolare il dibattito sulla veritate della religione cristiana).

It is no coincidence then that ever since Ratzinger moved to Rome as head of the Congregation of Faith he actively sought to open new avenues of communication with intellectuals inside and outside the Church. His other important positions in the Vatican, as long-time president of the International Theological Commission and as head of the Papal Committee entrusted with the new edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1986-1992), provided additional incentives for taking up the challenge of modernity and for expounding the Christian message in a new language to the Catholic faithful, critical theologians, and skeptical intellectuals. In an interview with a German journalist he revealed that he had made it some kind of condition of accepting his appointment as prefect of the Congregation of Faith and of giving up his beloved Munich archdiocese that the Pope would allow him to continue his scholarly work even in his new position and to publish as an ordinary theologian. As he confessed, he had secretly hoped that the Pope could not consent to this condition. But to his surprise John Paul II. replied that although this request was rather unusual there were precedents and he would have to consult his advisers. When the Pope's response came and was positive, Ratzinger had no longer an excuse to decline the Pope's request as he had done already once before when the Pope had asked him to come to Rome not longer after he had been installed as archbishop of Munich.

It is a sign of Ratzinger's international acclaim as theologian that in 1992 the *Academie des Sciences Morales et Politiques* at the Institut de France, the highest academic institution in secular France besides the *Académie Française*, elected him as membre associé étranger. The title of his acceptance speech is highly programmatic as it indicates Ratzinger's desire for dialogue that bridges the fortified borders between the religious and the secular worlds: "The significance of religious and moral values in the pluralist society."[4] The list of books and papers taking up similar issues and reaching far beyond the confines of Catholic theology is long and includes at least the following: "Liberty, Right, and the Good: Moral principles in democratic societies", "Political visions and praxis of politics" (2002), *Truth, Values, Power* (1993). *Faith, Truth, Tolerance: Christianity and World Religions* (2004). The small volume entitled: *Values in Times of Change* became an instant bestseller in Germany.[5]

3. The Lambertini-Voltaire Debate: A Remarkable Historic Precedent

Lastly, when Ratzinger was elected Pope and took the name Benedict XVI. an even more significant historic parallel became available that can shed new light on the Habermas-Ratzinger debate. In choosing his papal name, Ratzinger wanted his pontificate to be seen in line with his immediate predecessors of the same name and to carry their respective missions forward. Benedict XV. (1854-1922) was the Pope during World War I who condemned the use of poison gas as inhumane weapon and tried hard to mediate peace between the warring parties. Although he failed, he steadfastly continued in his pacifist policy and soon after the war had ended, which he had already at its beginning called "the suicide of Europe," he wrote an encyclical (*Pacem, Dei Munus Pulcherrimum*) pleading for international reconciliation. His moral standing is reflected in the inscription to a monument in his honor that was in 1920 erected in a church courtyard in the Turkish city of Istanbul. It reads: "The great Pope of world tragedy... the benefactor of all people, irrespective of nationality or religion."

The intellectual similarity with Benedict XIV (1675-1758), the former Cardinal Lambertini, is even more striking. Prior to his elevation to Pope he too was head of the Congregation of Faith, then still called the Inquisition and had actively sought to establish a dialogue with the intellectual representatives of the 18th century, the self-conscious age of reason and enlightenment. As scholar, he was regarded as one of the most erudite men of his time. His excellent knowledge of literature and all sciences brought him into close and friendly contact with many famous authors, and in spite of some criticism he stated that his familiarity with the likes of Tasso, Dante and Ariosto were a necessity for him as they gave energy to his thought and life to his style.

In the Enlightenment, belief was in rapid retreat and Cardinal Lambertini thought it was not enough for the church to be merely defensive. As an observer summed up his motives for dialogue, "if the church was to deal with a world in which active Christians were in a minority, it needed to convince others of the importance of what it was saying. It could no longer do this by force, but needed to use argument and rationality."[6] So Lambertini corresponded with Voltaire, the greatest philosopher of the French Enlightenment, and maintained this dialogue when he became Pope. As Voltaire was not only the greatest philosopher of the French Enlightenment but also the feared critic of absolutism and advocate of freedom of thought, particularly in matters of religion, Lambertini's intellectual exchange with him both as head of the Inquisition and later as Pope is all the more remarkable. Against this historical backdrop, Ratzinger's choice of the papal name takes on a new and programmatic significance.

II. The Context: Religion and Modernity

In preparation of their Munich debate, it had been agreed beforehand that Habermas and Ratzinger would reflect on the "pre-political moral foundations of the liberal state."[7] At issue was the authority, scope, and possible limit of secular reason as it originated in ancient Greek philosophy and established itself as the dominant force of modernity in the West during the Enlightenment period. Its particular form of rationality, which found its most important expression in modern science and technology as well as in the liberal, democratic, and constitutional state, was not only credited with the mind's liberation from self-wrought bondage and Church tutelage, but was also thought to have no rival and thus to naturally extend its reign to non-Western cultures and, finally, throughout the world. Thus the triumph of science and technology was the triumph of secular reason.

Due to the specific interests of the two discussants, this very large issue was narrowed down to the question about the relationship between faith and reason in modern society and the role of religion in the secular state. In its more specific form, the question had first been raised in the late 1960's at the peak of the neo-Marxist excitement in Germany by a conservative legal philosopher, Ernst Wilhelm Böckenförde, who later became an influential judge on Germany's highest constitutional court. For a moment it had looked as if the Marxist utopian vision of a free and equal society exclusively based on rational and "scientific" foundations had come a decisive step closer to realization. And in such a society there would certainly be neither a need nor a place for religion, which would quickly disappear from the secular scene and fade into oblivion. The opponents to views of such heroic simplicity fell on hard times as their voices were drowned in the upheaval of streets protests, "sit-ins," and "teach-ins" that greatly disrupted university life. While Habermas' neo-Marxist leanings could easily be appropriated for the revolutionary cause, Ratzinger always steered clear of the

theological sympathizers within the Church and in his own faculty at Tübingen. He became, however, completely disillusioned when he saw himself as a target of anti-religious slogans. He soon gave up his chair of dogmatics and went into some sort of internal emigration at the largely undisturbed and more quiet university in the city of Regensburg.

Böckenförde, however, didn't mind a fight and caused a huge outcry with his claim that in spite of appearances and neo-Marxist wishful thinking the roots of the modern, secular state reached well below its supposed rational foundations. Instead it depended on spiritual and moral resources it was unable to justify by its own means and within the perimeter of its own rationality. One of those taking up this challenge was Jürgen Habermas. It is therefore not without irony that after almost forty years he should again be confronted with the same question but now find himself in some sort of agreement not only with conservative philosophers but even with the most prominent representative of Catholicism.

1. The Tale of Reason

The Munich debate took place within the larger historical context of the process of secularization that has defined the state-Church relationship of modern European society. Although this is mainly a socio-cultural but also a political phenomenon of European history, it generated a new, "liberated" form of rationality that found its clearest expression in modern technology and instrumental reason and as such has long extended its overwhelming influence around the globe. Some of the cultural tensions the world is facing at present seem to have one of their causes in the conflicting responses to the implications of secularization. While no country rejects completely modern technology, religious (and sometimes also cultural) resistance against the dominating power of secular rationality is on the rise. A brief outline of the process of secularization that is the point of departure for the intellectual exchange between Ratzinger and Habermas may therefore be necessary so as to bring their debate into sharper profile.

The story goes somewhat like this:

At the beginning of modernity, the grand medieval synthesis of faith and reason, Church and state, collapsed under its own ideological weight and left in the ruins not only three separate Christian churches fighting for the superiority of their respective truth-claims but also invigorated reason that would soon leave churches and religion by the wayside. Kant has famously illustrated this process in the image of the maid-servant and her mistress. In the past, reason as maid-servant to faith had walked behind her mistress humbly carrying her bridal gown. With the advent of modernity, however, she walked in front of her bearing the torch by whose light alone faith (religion) could set her foot forward without stumbling. Yet the story quickly took a new turn even Kant had not anticipated - or if he did, he kept quiet about it. Before long the maid would run off altogether leaving her former mistress in pitch darkness behind. After holding a grudge against her for a while and even turning hostile, finally, reason would forget about her as if she had never existed. Then reason would bask in her own light on the assumption that it would shine ever brighter and gradually enlighten the whole world from West to East.

In his best-selling book *The Secular City* (1965), Harvey Cox defined secularization less dramatically as "the liberation of man from religious and metaphysical tutelage, the turning of his attention away from other worlds and toward this one." Secularization then is the process of socio-cultural change in which religion loses cognitive and social significance. In its extreme form of secularism the complete abolition of religion is advocated and the

transfer of its functions to secular agencies.[8]

Typical of such functionalist theories of religion originating from the philosophies of Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche is their attempt to reduce the basic religious experience to something other than what religious people say it is referring to. Thus religion is no longer supposed to relate man to God as in fact there are no such "things" as transcendence, the absolute, or God. Consequently, reference to anything that cannot be translated into the language of secular rationality is illusory and the likely product of some complex mechanism of otherwise "natural" forces that sooner or later will find their rational explanation. Depending on the theoretical approach, these forces have variously been identified as economic, psychological, social, or cultural. They were thought to have disguised themselves so cleverly that the naive mind could be misled to take them for something real beyond this world, something that was religious in the full sense of the word.

2. Religion Within the Bounds of Reason

In Habermas' analysis, the greatest achievement of modernity is the liberal state of equal citizens enjoying the same freedoms, in principle, under the constitutional protection of secular law. This state is the historic result of the religious wars at the dawn of modernity and of the collapse of the authority of comprehensive doctrines of religious or metaphysical provenance. In the functional analysis of religion in his *Theory of Communicative Action*,[9] Habermas had argued that whereas in the past religion had provided legitimacy to state authority both in legal and moral terms, in modernity this function has been absorbed into secular reason. Thus invalidated religious world views first gave way to metaphysical world views which then evolved into rational discourses at various levels, above all scientific, legal, and moral. The liberal state of equal citizens is based on religiously neutral ground and is required to hold equal distance to churches and religious communities. The conduct of and the participation in its affairs requires a commitment to exclusively public reasons open to all. Secular morality is therefore expected to result from the rational consensus about principles of universalistic ethics on the sole basis of the stronger arguments. It is the characteristic of post-metaphysical thought that it has neither the authority of absolute truth previous religious and metaphysical world-views had claimed nor the means to achieving it. Instead it proceeds on the premise of "methodological atheism," which for the secular state translates into religious neutrality. By and large, Habermas continues to hold on to this narrative. Yet with the ever-accelerating progression of modernity, he seems ready to admit that the story of modernity has been written in too broad strokes and that the time has come for a more detailed inspection and re-examination.

With this assessment, Ratzinger can concur, albeit for rather different reasons. While he would not accept the role religion has been assigned in the process of modernity, he agrees with Habermas' assessment that "the derailment of modernity" has become a real possibility with frightening implications. If I am not mistaken he then goes even further by claiming that it is not only a real possibility but has already become manifest reality. On this reading, modernity is not simply in crisis, but has veered off its original track and begun to run wild. Habermas, however, has taken refuge in the belief that at least some of the problems modernity has presented us with are merely indications of the fact that it has not fully completed its task yet but remains an "unfinished project." While the project of modernity certainly requires re-examination and adjustment, it has no viable alternative and still holds the promise of being able to cope by secular means with the dark forces of its own making. Though Habermas, on his premise of methodological atheism, cannot enlist religion in the

service of reason, the re-assessment of the historical genealogy of modernity as well as the recognition of the factual re-emergence of religion within the secularized world have sharpened his intellectual sensitivity for religion and prompted him to redefine its role in the liberal state as well as the state's responsibility towards religion.

III. Shared Perspectives

For any discourse to be meaningful there needs to be some kind of common ground and a minimum of shared convictions. In spite of all their differences, I see three major areas where Habermas and Ratzinger found some kind of "overlapping consensus" in their debate about the relationship between faith and reason.

1. The Challenge of Re-Emerging Religion

The first area of agreement relates to the fact that religion is still alive and well even in the secular West. Not only does it pose a new challenge to the liberal state, it offers also valuable resources society can hardly ignore. The recognition of the factual survival and even re-emergence of religion within secular modernity is taken at the theoretical level as a strong argument for its right of existence. Ratzinger's critical question whether the previously advocated gradual abolition of religion was indeed a necessary condition of humankind's progress[10] has found its answer. Not only has religion a right to exist in modernity but it even has a positive role to play in it.

Habermas concurs and notes that it was the assumption of a common human reason that provides the epistemic base for the justification of a secular state, which no longer depends on religion. The surprising "political revitalization of religion at the heart of Western society" requires a review of the epistemic relationship between secular reason and religion. While statistical evidence suggests that the wave of secularization affected all European countries since the end of World War II and brought forth social modernization, in the United States the comparatively large proportion of devout and politically active Christians has remained the same over the last sixty years.[11]

The re-emergence of religion in a supposedly secular world is a challenge to Habermas' conception of modernity. It prompted him to reconsider modernity's, which he, following Hegel, had seen culminating in self-consciousness, self-determination, and self-realization. Now, Habermas pays greater attention to the implications of the Judaeo-Christian origin of those fundamental ideas for modernity. On Habermas' interpretation, modernity is the result of a process of secularization that liberated the cognitive core of those ideas from Church domination and the political powers of religion.[12] Self-consciousness is founded on the increasing reflexivity that absorbed the substance of rigid cultural traditions into the domain of reason. Self-determination is the result of egalitarian and individualist universalism and its vindication in law and morality. Self-realization evolves through the internal pressures arising from the demands on the individual to take charge of one's own fate.

In a recent interview Habermas summarized his re-interpretation of the driving forces in modernity: "For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or a catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love."

In other words, both "Athens" and "Jerusalem" have played important roles in Western thought and both have contributed to the modern emphasis on individualism, freedom, autonomy, and justice. It is above all the Christian legacy that provided the ideological foundations for the human rights discourse. Yet, Christianity owes it to modernity to take cultural diversity into serious account, and to apply these formal ideals worldwide without coercion.

Ratzinger, by contrast, can take a more relaxed attitude towards the genealogical aspect of modernity as it seems to confirm New Testament theology comparing Christian ideas with the yeast that is gradually permeating and transforming the dough into nourishing bread. On this reading, the effects of the Christian message are not restricted to the Church but extend into secular society, which in turn cannot be fully understood without taking into account its Christian heritage. However, the effects of Christianity, above all on morality and the human rights discourse, remain necessarily "anonymous" and therefore cannot be a substitute for explicit faith within the ecclesial community of believers.

The necessity of explicit faith and, by implication, of continuous evangelization marked the line that already in the 1960s divided Ratzinger's theology of salvation from Karl Rahner's theological doctrine of the anonymous Christian. While Rahner thought a more constructive relationship not only between Christianity and modernity but also between Christianity and the other religions was possible and could be developed from the theology of creation, Ratzinger, together with his theological friend (and later cardinal), Hans Urs von Balthasar, insisted on a clear separation between the Christian and all non-Christian (religious and secular) realms.

It is, however, remarkable that Ratzinger and Habermas concur in their views of the potential for danger inherent in religion. The fact of the survival of religion and its invigoration in modernity is ambivalent as it may unleash highly destructive forces that threaten civilized society and endanger humanity. Both link contemporary examples of the destructive potential of religion to fundamentalist movements and their disregard of reason that leads to an uncompromising rejection of the liberal pluralist state in favor of some form of theocracy. These fundamentalist and reactionary movements threaten to replace the secular world with a counter-modernity of their own making.

2. The Challenge of Instrumental Reason

A second area of consensus between Habermas and Ratzinger can be found in their acknowledgment of the tremendous risks mankind is facing at this historical juncture. Both discussants see morally unrestricted "instrumental reason" as one of root-causes of the grave uncertainties that cast long shadows on the achievements of modern science and technology. While for Ratzinger those problems are symbolized in the destructive potential of nuclear weapons, Habermas, on various occasions, has expressed his concern with regard to social and moral challenges arising from tensions between the progressive forces of modernity and traditional values. One area where this tension is particularly evident is biotechnology. It apparently were - as we may recall - his recent publications on this subject that caught Ratzinger's attention. The new technologies in the life-sciences and their penetration into all areas of human life have begun to change the parameters that previously defined the realm of nature. They even extend their naturalistic and scientistic interpretations to the human person and to human self-understanding. In particular, genetic intervention at the genomic level raises the fear that the resulting human product would have lost the fundamental freedoms constituent of human personhood.[13] Similarly, Ratzinger fears that the human being is in

danger of being turned into a commodity, which would have lost any sense of mystery associated with creation. The temptation will arise to see in such product no more than raw material for social construction that can be discarded if it loses its functional value.[14]

Doubts about the unchecked progress of modernity arise further from the scope and pace of economic globalization and unfettered capitalism. In his acceptance of the prestigious peace-prize of the German publishers association, Habermas observed that "the economic language pervades everything and forces all interpersonal relationships into a pattern that orientates everything exclusively on individual preferences. The social bond, however, consisting in reciprocal recognition of free individuals transcends the concepts of contract, rational choice, and the maximization of usefulness."[15] In another context he notes that the previous balance in the division of labor between the integrative mechanism of the marketplace, bureaucracy, and societal solidarity no longer exists and that it has been replaced by an economic imperative that is exclusively focused on economic success of disenfranchised, competing individuals.[16]

Lastly, the far-reaching changes in society's value structure and ethical outlook pose the risk of the total collapse of moral norms and an increasing erosion of moral consciousness. Indications are the gradual disappearance of "sensitivities to social pathologies" and the growing inability to see any meaning in the question about the "good life", or its opposite: whether life can be wrong and meaningless (verfehltes Leben). It is remarkable that Habermas should now pay specific attention to the substantive question of a good life as his own ethical theory had avoided it and instead focused on procedural mechanisms for the consensual recognition of formal moral principles.

As the changes evolved from within the parameters of secular reason, modernity is not only under threat from outside, i.e. pre-modern religion, but also from inside. And it looks as if it could soon be "derailed" by its own ever accelerating forces of progress and advancement for the sake of advancement. Habermas is fully aware that no post-metaphysical philosophy can adequately address these fundamental concerns and provide the answers. Philosophy within the confines of modernity has lost the ground upon which authoritative answers were once constructed that were both authentic and consoling. In other words, philosophy is no longer in command of reasons that once distinguished a holistic world-view that at the same time could motivate right actions and meet the existential expectations of individuals for a meaningful life within a meaningful universe. The Church-dominated world of faith, which provided normative guidance in all contexts of life has not been able to withstand the challenge of enlightened and critical reason and has collapsed into a plurality of competing "comprehensive doctrines" and moralities. Yet secular reason emerging victoriously from the ruins may now have arrived at its own limits or even at a dead end.

3. The Challenge of the Two Cultures

Habermas and Ratzinger agree, thirdly, in their evaluation that contemporary society holds the chance of a new openness on both sides of the divide, secular and religious, for a re-assessment of the cognitive roles of the fundamental religious conceptions in secular discourse. Habermas's re-examination of the genealogy of modernity has set a precedent for the positive recognition of non-secular moral and intellectual resources and of their re-integration into modern society. And Ratzinger too acknowledges interculturality as an indispensable dimension in any debate on the foundations of humanity.[17]

The Cardinal concedes that the search for true humanity cannot be undertaken exclusively on the premises of Christianity, and this is a remarkable statement by the Roman

official at the helm of Congregation of Faith. Yet he subsequently adds that they cannot be undertaken exclusively on the premises of secular reason either. Christianity and the tradition of secular reason represent two distinct cultures both of which have defined the Western world - but mainly the Western world. In spite of their theoretical claim for universality, both traditions have to recognize that other cultures outside their perimeters have factually remained as yet unmoved by their advances. Ratzinger refers to the cultures of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism as well as tribal cultures of Africa, which challenge not only the revelatory claims of Christianity but also secular rationality in spite of experiencing within their own respective societies similar tensions as the culture of secular reason. With this interpretation of the tradition of secular reason in terms of culture, the Cardinal undercuts Habermas's universality claim for a common secular reason and reduces it to the claim of one particular culture among others. Christianity's new openness for secular reason is therefore defined by a position of strength, not weakness.

When both discussants advocate a new readiness to listen to each other in good faith and to learn from each other's thoughts and intuitions, they in fact advocate different things. For Habermas it means that secular reason has to attempt to appropriate pre-conditional constituents of sound rationality that lie outside its purview. The universality claim of secular reason is upheld as it recognizes no rival to its authority. Strictly speaking, the tradition of secular reason is not simply one culture among others but rather provides all cultures their rational foundation. Habermas therefore had to reject the idea raised by a colleague at a meeting with philosophers in Teheran that secular rationality may represent nothing more than one particular system or culture (*Sonderweg*) among other cultures or systems of truth. While Habermas thus has to clearly separate the realms of faith and of reason, he accepts that in today's secular world of cultural pluralism there is a greater need than in the past for reflection on the conditions of peaceful cooperation between citizens of a liberal constitutional state.

Ratzinger, on the other hand, seems comfortable with the idea of comprehensive pluralism as for him the controversy among the various cultures, including the culture of secular rationality, about the respective claims for universality and truth has not yet been settled. In his perspective of multi-culturalism, the tradition of secular reason represents only one possible approach to truth within human history and this tradition is in need of correction through religion.

Ratzinger's more relaxed attitude towards the divide between reason and faith is, of course, grounded in a theology of Creation, which derives all good from God, and reason is neither an exception nor a natural opponent to faith. From such perspective, the liberal, democratic state is not the antagonist to the Church earlier theology had suggested. Instead it is rather the neutral framework within which various "comprehensive doctrines" can find their places. Ratzinger therefore argues for a "necessary correlationality of reason and faith, reason and religion so that they both are called to mutual purification and therapy." Both are in demand of each other and must recognize each other in their respective roles. This is particularly necessary as *both*, religion and reason, can become distorted and defective. Ratzinger recognizes the possibility of highly dangerous pathologies of religion, which currently unleash their disastrous potential in religiously inspired terrorism or more exactly in terrorism that claims for itself religious roots and motivations that resonate within the fundamentalist religious spectrum.

The Catholic doctrine of reason as *lumen naturale* provides powerful conceptual means for ideological purification and therapy. For Ratzinger and in accordance with a long tradition, reason serves in a dual-function as critical assessment of and as constructive advisor

to religion, and both functions are grounded in the theology of Creation. Reason therefore is not only the *natural* light that shines into human darkness so that even outside the realm of revelation truth can be found. As Ratzinger points out, reason is above all "the *divine* light," which illuminates religion and which can and must be utilized within religion and for its own purification. In as far as the natural light of reason is at the same time the divine light this presupposes a conception that correlates reason and nature in and through their common origin in God's Creation. This gives Ratzinger ground for his claim that in as far as faith and reason are correlative and to the extent that reason itself can go astray it needs faith as its limiting and corrective force.

While this position far exceeds what Habermas can grant from his own agnostic perspective and on the basis of secular modernity, he not only sees a positive role for religion within modernity but also holds that the secular state needs religion. And that is something really remarkable and merits further exploration.

4. Peaceful Cooperation

Both discussants concur that any conflict between cultures must be resolved by means of the better arguments and with respect for other conscientious convictions. On this latter point, Habermas has more to say than the Cardinal. Although in the present context it is not possible to provide his full and detailed argument, a few remarks may at least indicate the direction in which his thought on this subject recently has evolved.

Firstly, Habermas assumes that philosophical reason can play a maieutic role in mediating in the dispute between the conflicting comprehensive doctrines and holistic world-views. He assigns to philosophy the role of interpreter of the substantive life-plans that unite and separate the Christian faithful, the believers in other religions, and the non-believers. Philosophy is thought to be able to assist in a discourse whose aim it is to find sufficient commonalities for the establishment of a peaceful society on shared moral ground. While philosophy may draw on its analytical abilities in the service of enlightened reason, it must avoid any attitude of superiority and supposedly greater insight.

Secondly, taking his point of departure in a critical review of Rawls' concept of "the duty of civility," Habermas holds that it would be neither fair nor necessary to demand of politically engaged religious citizens to suppress their personal religious convictions in favor of exclusively "secular reasons." Such demand would ignore the integral role religion plays in the life of persons of faith. It is therefore a matter of fairness that the liberal, democratic state should not place a greater burden on the shoulders of religious citizens by demanding of them to ignore their religious world views. It is therefore a matter of fairness that both sides ought to be open-minded and sensitive to other people's world-views. Whereas religious citizens may make public contributions in their own religious language provided that they are presented so that secular citizens can grasp their meaning, secular citizens must not close their minds to the possible truth content of such presentations and even enter into dialogues from which religious reasons then might well emerge in the transformed guise of generally accessible arguments.[18]

I note in passing that this issue presents another context from which the question of the specific status of secular reason could arise and demand further scrutiny. From Ratzinger's perspective one could argue that it was an illusion to simply regard secularization as formal and procedural and in tune with culture-independent reason. If, however, secular rationality too would have to be understood in cultural terms, the principle of procedural neutrality would conflict with the de-facto privilege the secular position holds in the West. In

other words, the question of the epistemic status of faith and reason remains unsettled.

IV. Concordant Discord

In spite of fundamental differences, it is encouraging to see the two discussants engaged in the honest search for common ground from which resources can be drawn in defense of a shared conception of humanity and human dignity. While Habermas continues to hold on to an agnostic position that respects the dividing line between faith and reason and steers clear of any cognitive assessment of religious, or Christian truth-claims, he acknowledges that the religious and in particular the Christian tradition offers highly important resources for secular citizens and the modern world in general. He displays great sensitivity for fundamental concepts in the Christian spiritual tradition whose recovery for secular modernity has become a matter of urgency in the face of the continued erosion of its own moral resources.

Habermas regards it as one of the major roles of philosophy in modernity to translate religious statements into non-religious propositions, i.e. public reasons that carry relevant validity claims without requiring a metaphysical foundation. While he has long committed himself to this sort of translation, he has now become more sensitive to the question of whether such translation is indeed possible without remainder. Put positively, the question is whether religion may have something substantial to say that must remain elusive for secular modernity.

Although Habermas resists post-modern temptations and does not waver in his belief that modernity is the process of liberation from self-wrought immaturity and bondage and not a disastrous development that should be undone, he recognizes that in this process something important was lost and that it is one of the roles of philosophy to seek to salvage as much as possible from the wreckage. The way to do this is to translate substantive religious concepts into the parlance of secular reason. Habermas holds out the hope that in this way philosophy can contribute to the re-integration of at least some of the religious resources into modern consciousness, albeit in the form of sensibilities, motives, and ideas that are accessible to public reason.

In this task he locates himself in the tradition of Hegel whose genealogical approach sought to decode the highly suggestive narratives and enigmatic messages of the great world-religions so that they could be integrated into the universal history of the mind and the phenomenology of the spirit. Habermas not only believes that such an approach is still possible today but also that it is highly necessary. He is convinced that the religious heritage contains insights, intuitions, expressive possibilities, and forms of interpersonal behavior that modernity could neglect only to its own disadvantage and which deserve to be reintroduced into the communicative system of contemporary society. What is required is not so much the whole-sale readmission of those religious insights into the system of communicative reason but their transformation into publicly accessible concepts and motivations. Examples of a successful transformation Habermas finds in secular concepts such as "positivity," "alienation," and "reification" whose religious origins are associated with the narratives about sin, the fall of humankind, and the loss of paradise as well as with the prohibition to form an image of God (*Bilderverbot*).

In the light of these secularized religious ideas the triumph of modernity under the sign of capitalism takes on a new look as it is illuminated from the perspective of a religiously motivated longing for meaning that transcends the economic sphere. The critical application of such ideas has removed the veil of normality that had long covered the social conditions of modern life: "Kant, Hegel, and Marx made secular consciousness feel the sting

of the religious heritage."[19] While they appropriated religious concepts and ideas for philosophy and utilized them for the progress and liberation of humankind, Kierkegaard took the opposite position by criticizing secular reason from the perspective of faith and religious reason. He confronted post-metaphysical thought with the unbridgeable heterogeneity of a faith that rigorously denies the birthright of anthropocentric modernity. Thus he pointed to something that from the perspective of secular reason must remain hidden and inaccessible. Yet it preserves something that is of the highest importance to secular philosophy: the insight in its own limitations.

Habermas compares the encounter between philosophy and religion, between knowledge and faith, to the aesthetic experience, which is similarly part of human life, although it is inaccessible to any rationalistic interpretation. Philosophy can only circle around (*umkreisen*) the concept of the transcendent and point to the abyss out of which those utopian energies emerge that motivate our longing for the realization of the "highest good" or the "kingdom of God." Philosophy, however, can successfully translate religious content into its own language only as long as it is conscious of what it is doing: that it is and remains in the service of reason and knowledge and is aware of the unbridgeable gulf that separates it from revelation and faith. Habermas is convinced that any attempt to reduce the one to the other or to blur the dividing line will inevitably lead to the collapse of both.

But philosophy has a further and perhaps even more crucial role to play with regard to religion and faith. Though it would be unreasonable to assume that the cognitive substance and content of religion has been exhausted and did not deserve to be recovered through secular translation, such translation is possible only to a point. Habermas is aware that religious content may resist such translation and that not all of its substance can be recovered in secular language.
Instead of dismissing this remainder as insignificant, as some of his liberal colleagues would advise, Habermas is remarkably sensitive to the semantic connotations of religious concepts and to their significance for secular modernity.

He acknowledges, for example, that when sin was transformed into guilt, something was lost, and this has to do with the longing for forgiveness that is accompanied by the unsentimental wish that suffering caused to others may be made undone. This is different from any form of secular remembrance of the victims and even from Walter Benjamin's belief in its therapeutic power since - in the words of Adorno - the slain are really slain, and nothing can put past injustice right. Only religion holds out the hope that past suffering of the just is not in vain and, as Kant acknowledged, that the worthiness of happiness arising from moral action may be rewarded with true happiness in a life to come. Thus the lost hope in resurrection leaves a tangible emptiness in modern secularization when it is confronted with the irreversibility of past suffering and with the injustice of abusing, denigrating, and murdering the innocent. The magnitude of such suffering exceeds any secular, humanly possible forms of restitution and compensation.

While philosophy thus cannot be a substitute of religion and religious worldviews, it has nevertheless a positive role to play. It needs to keep the empty space once occupied by religion empty as a constant reminder of the loss incurred so that hope may still arise. In this assessment Habermas comes remarkably close to the iconoclastic theology of the Old Testament, which anxiously sought to preserve Yahweh's place in the world by keeping it empty.

With this interpretation of the relationship between reason and faith the Cardinal can fully agree. I conclude with two quotations from an article in which Ratzinger looks back on one of his most important early books, *Introduction to Christianity*, and writes as follows:

"Today, after the horrors of the [twentieth-century] totalitarian regimes, the problem of theodicy urgently and mightily demands the attention of us all; this is just one more indication of how little we are capable of defining God, much less fathoming him. After all, God's answer to Job explains nothing, but rather sets boundaries to our mania for judging everything and being able to say the final word on a subject, and reminds us of our limitations. It admonishes us to trust the mystery of God in its incomprehensibility."

And further: "The mystical dimension of the concept of God, which the Asian religions bring with them as a challenge to us, must clearly be decisive for our thinking, too, and for our

faith. God has become quite concrete in Christ, but in this way his mystery has also become still greater. God is always infinitely greater than all our concepts and all our images and names."[20]

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