Between Christian Democracy and Critical Theory: Habermas, Böckenförde, and the Dialectics of Secularization in Postwar Germany

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> Nothing of theological content will persist without being
> transformed; every content will have to put itself to the
> test of migrating into the realm of the secular, the profane.
> —Theodor W. Adorno, "Reason and Revelation"

OVER THE LAST TWENTY YEARS, THE CLASSICAL THEORY OF
secularization has suffered a series of near fatal humiliations. It was Max
Weber who deserves greatest credit for the orthodox thesis, according
to which modernization brought an inevitable differentiation of value
spheres, a thoroughgoing rationalization of procedure, and the conse-
quent disenchantment of the world. The classical theory presupposed
that the comprehensive metaphysical and normative authority of reli-
gion could not long survive once it stood exposed to the disarticulat-
ing processes of rationalization: charisma would yield to bureaucratic
routine and, without the requisite authorization for normative consen-

sus, the social whole would shatter into a mosaic of incommensurable parts. With evidentiary support from sociologists such as David Martin and theoretical refinements from master-scholars such as Peter Berger, the classical theory survived well into the 1960s, its endurance assured thanks to a marriage of convenience with the dominant social science paradigm of modernization theory. Even patterns of immigration from more observant parts of the globe did not trouble the confident view that acculturation would rob the newcomer's of their traditionalist faith (Martin 1978; Berger 1967).

The classical thesis has died a hard death among sociologists, although some have resisted (Bruce 2002). But today it seems abundantly clear that secularization theory in the orthodox mode is ready for its last rites (Warner 2010). The empirical counterevidence appears overwhelming, from the terrorists inspired by a militant Islam to the settlers of Jewish ultra-orthodoxy, and from the ideologues of Hindu nationalism to the astonishing vigor of evangelical Christians not only in sub-Saharan Africa but in megachurches across the United States. In theoretical literature as well, the plausibility of the secularization narrative has recently encountered resistance, from sociologists such as Grace Davies and José Casanova, anthropologists such as Talal Asad, and philosophers such as Charles Taylor (Davies 1994; Casanova 1994; Asad 2003; Taylor 2007). Rodney Stark has gone so far as to author an essay with the provocative title "Secularization R.I.P" (Stark 1999, 2000). Whatever their differences, all of these scholars contest the inevitabilism of the classical thesis, and some of them even advance into prescriptive terrain, suggesting that modern societies carve out a space for a persistent and public mode of religion that, in their view, may offer an alternative to the normatively impoverished discourse of secular modernity.

A similar challenge to the secularist premise is evident when we consider current steps toward the transformation of critical theory undertaken by its foremost representative, Jürgen Habermas. Over the past decade the philosopher and social theorist has more or less abandoned the assumption of thoroughgoing rationalization that he had

inherited from the canons of post-Weberian sociology and has come to embrace a new vision of the modern West as a *post*secular society (Habermas 2009, 59–77). In his most recent work, Habermas has jettisoned his earlier expectation that communicative reason must leave religion behind; he argues instead that religion may very well persist long into the future. With some deference to the secular character of democratic reason, he continues to insist on the Rawlsian proviso that religious citizens must submit their claims to the constraints of fallibilistic argumentation that define the pluralistic public sphere (Rawls 2005; Habermas 2008, 114–147). However, Habermas also takes the further and more surprising step of implying that religion's persistence may prove vital for the survival of democracy itself, since communicative reason alone may suffer from a deficit of normative content. The present essay explores the ideological origins of this idea and poses the question as to whether the idea of such a normative deficit can be reconciled with Habermas's theory of communicative reason.

HABERMAS'S CHANGING PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGION

That Habermas has modified his stand on secularization now appears self-evident. In the fall of 2001, just a month after the terrorist attacks of September 11, Habermas delivered a short address on "Faith and Knowledge" ("*Glauben und Wissen*") as his acceptance speech for the Frankfurt Bookseller's Peace Prize. Although one could glimpse an interest in religion in the 1988 essay collection *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (*Nachmetaphysisches Denken*), it is really only with the 2001 address that Habermas turned decisively to religion as a phenomenon demanding theoretical attention. Since that time he has not ceased to comment on religion and he now appears ready to accept not only its longevity but also its vital benefit to modern democracy. In 2004 he met at the Catholic Academy in Bavaria with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later named Pope Benedict XVI) for a discussion concerning the character and consequences of secularization—a dialogue to which I will return later in this essay. In 2005 Habermas published his newest and most expansive volume of essays under the title *Between Naturalism and*

Religion, and in 2007 he met in Munich with a group of Jesuit scholars for a conversation published as *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Postsecular Age*. More recently he has met in New York with Charles Taylor, Judith Butler, and Cornel West for a public colloquy, the transcript of which was later published as *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (Butler et al. 2011). It is also known that he has been writing a new and major work on religion, portions of which have been presented in various workshops with colleagues in both Europe and North America.

One might have thought Habermas an unlikely candidate for religious awakening. Raised in the stables of the Frankfurt-based and Marxist-oriented Institut für Sozialförschung, Habermas first came to prominence in the 1950s and 1960s as a fierce critic of postwar Germany's conservative ideological consensus. He is an intellectual committed, both in theory and practice, to retrieving the promises of the Enlightenment after its catastrophic implosion during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Despite various modifications in his theoretical system, Habermas has kept faith over the last several decades with the guiding idea that humanity bears within itself a capacity for a certain kind of discursive logic that he calls "communicative rationality." The theory is forbidding in part because it borrows promiscuously from a broad range of sociologists, anthropologists, and philosophers of language. But its basic task is to defend rational modernity by demonstrating that we can find reliable principles for democracy in reason itself. Embedded in all discourse, Habermas argues, is a quasi-transcendental presupposition of unforced understanding: every act of communication aims toward a mutual intelligibility that necessarily exposes all claims to criticism. Discourse thus contains an intersubjective rationality that is oriented pragmatically toward consensus.

Now it is crucial to note that for Habermas the status of such a consensus is merely regulative: it cannot secure the metaphysical guarantee of a final truth. This means Habermas extends the ban on metaphysics to reason itself: the earlier (Kantian-Hegelian) conception of transcendental reason has given way to a post-transcendental and

merely pragmatic conception of reason as a mundane and fallibilistic medium for public debate. The distinction—between idealist transcendentalism and universal pragmatics—was a major theme in the dispute between Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel (Habermas 2000). Although critics commonly fault him for placing unwarranted confidence in reason, Habermas abjures faith in a *Weltgeist* or a truly transcendental model of reason that could serve as the grounding for absolutistic consensus. He insists instead that a universal pragmatics of rational discourse must accept the turn to "postmetaphysical thinking." Reason itself, in other words, has passed through the trial of secularization.

Although this thesis had been gestating for many years, it made its full debut only in 1981 in the two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action* (TCA) at a time when Habermas was not yet fully prepared to surrender the inevitabilist commitments of secularization theory. The basic claim at this point was that religion belongs to that rich stock of cultural norms that have accumulated historically into the taken-for-granted background of any given lifeworld. Although according to Habermas such norms belong to the wellspring of moral insights from which a culture can draw instruction, in the TCA Habermas seemed to imply that human history was on the track toward a full rationalization of the lifeworld, and he did little to ward off the impression that this rationalizing process would ultimately deplete the reservoir of sacred belief and leave nothing behind. The compulsory character of religious norms, which once served to bind society into a whole, would be retained but only as the binding character of the better argument. In the second volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action,* Habermas called this process *die Versprachlichung des Sakralen*, or "the linguistification of the sacred" (1985, 77).

In his most lucid presentation of this idea, Habermas describes the emergence of communicative action not as an accomplished fact but merely as a guiding hypothesis that helps us to conceptualize the path of societal rationalization:

> the socially integrative and expressive functions that were
> at first fulfilled by the ritual practice pass over to commu-

nicative action; the authority of the holy is gradually replaced by the authority of an achieved consensus. This means a freeing of communicative action from sacrally protected normative contexts. The disenchantment and disempowering of the domain of the sacred takes place by way of a linguistification of the ritually secured, basic normative agreement; going along with this is a release of the rationality potential in communicative action. The aura of rapture and terror that emanates from the sacred, the *spellbinding* power of the holy, is sublimated into the *binding/bonding* force of criticizable validity claims and at the same time turned into an everyday occurrence (1985, 77; emphasis in original).

The argument as stated above seems to commit Habermas to an ideal of thoroughgoing secularization. For in the passage quoted above, it would be impossible for society to retain religion as anything more than an historical artifact or the object of emotional or aesthetic cathexis. The genuine "authority of the holy" will find it is "gradually *replaced by* the authority of an achieved consensus" (my emphasis). From the logical point of view this idea of replacement implies supersessionism rather than cooperation: the old cannot persist alongside the new. If this reading is correct we can only conclude that in 1981 Habermas still cleaved to the classical theory of secularization, albeit with certain qualifications. The triumph of proceduralist reason and the consequent disenchantment of the social order had lost the quality of historical inevitability, but they nonetheless survived in Habermas's theory in the form of a pragmatic ideal for societal rationalization (J. Berger 1991).

In his most recent work, however, Habermas (2012) seems to have considerably relaxed the expectation of thoroughgoing secularization. Over the last 10 years he has gradually distanced himself from the logic of supersessionism and he has adopted a far more nuanced and cooperative understanding of the relation between religion and modernity. Ironically, with this transformation he has also effected

a surprising rapprochement with major currents in modern German conservative thought. Specifically, we can discern in his recent arguments a series of presuppositions that suggest certain affinities with the postwar discourse of Christian Democracy.

To those who know Habermas primarily through his interventions in public political debate in Germany, the idea that he has embraced even minimal elements of Christian Democratic discourse may seem implausible. Although he is now well past his eightieth birthday, Habermas remains an unflagging critic of German conservatism in all its forms. A geopolitical positioning system would locate him on a well-traveled *Autobahn of democratic socialism; he has rarely strayed onto more exotic* roads. To be sure, his readiness to condemn peers on the radical left for what he once called "left fascism" long ago brought a permanent rupture with populist left-militancy; indeed, his admiration for American-style liberal theorists such as John Rawls has earned him a reputation as an ideological moderate. But he is, nonetheless and indisputably, a partisan of the social-democratic left whose fidelity to Enlightenment themes of progress and critique had already begun to solidify during the miracle years of Germany's postwar economic recovery. Even today this political orientation remains unchanged. These caveats notwithstanding, we can see in Habermas's recent turn to religion a readiness to entertain certain ideas associated with the conservative and Christian Democratic critique of secular modernity. My task in what follows will be to explore the nature of this rapprochement.

CHRISTIANITY AND DEMOCRACY IN GERMANY

We can begin by considering the definitive role of Christianity in postwar German political life. The importance of Christianity for modern Germany—or, at the very least, Christianity understood as a cultural and ethical formation—is immediately apparent, especially if one compares German constitutional resolutions to those in France, where the *laïcité* of the republic has been an article of faith at least since the 1905 Law of Separation that deprived the Church of its public-political standing.

Scholars have long remarked on the fact that the German *Aufklärung* never turned against religion with the same vigor as did the distinctive variants of Enlightenment in England or France (Sorkin 2008). Already in Kant's *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* there emerged a powerful train of liberal Protestantism, which by the later nineteenth century had congealed into the *Kulturprotestantismus* expounded by theologians such as Adolf von Harnack. The fusion between a presumptively Protestant Christianity and German national identity served as an ideological justification for the militancy of the *Kulturkampf* and in 1914 enflamed political-theological passions for war. It endured into the 1920s and even survived the wave of dialectical theology whose major representative, the Swiss pastor Karl Barth, condemned Harnack's fusion of nationalism and Christianity as state idolatry. A certain fascination with radicals on the Weimar left may have discouraged us from recalling that for most liberals and conservatives in Germany, modern society still bore a strongly Christian imprint. Even Max Weber, that theorist of inevitable disenchantment, saw in capitalism a repertoire of ethical dispositions that had once sprung from a doctrinally modified Calvinism. Meanwhile, the political and legal theorist Carl Schmitt (by origin a Catholic) claimed that all significant political concepts were traceable to Christian theology, and he believed that liberal procedures of parliamentary debate would soon break down into unworkable factionalism were it not for the quasi-theological miracle of a sovereign decision. Without religious tradition or its functional equivalent, the modern political order could not survive (Schmitt 2005).

We should keep this background in mind when we consider that in postwar Germany, conservative and Christian politicians were united in declaring that the evils of the Third Reich had arisen in part because the nation had abandoned its spiritual heritage. The hagiographic remembrance of dissenting Church leaders such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer helped to fortify the widespread conviction among conservative legal and political theorists that in the future Germany could only retain its moral equilibrium if it remained open to the norma-

tive guidance of Christianity. The old Harnackian ideal of a partnership between Christianity and culture remained unshaken, not only in the primarily Protestant *Länder* of northern Germany but also in mainly Catholic Bavaria. Under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's careful leadership and the anti-utopian slogan of "no experiments," West German conservatives after 1945 rallied to the ideology of Christian Democracy as institutionalized in the postwar Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its sister party in Bavaria, the Christian Social Union (CSU).

It is crucial to recall that German Christian Democracy gained institutional and ideological legitimacy in the early years of political trauma when a clean break from the Third Reich seemed a prerequisite for democratic participation. German conservatives who might otherwise have suffered from the stigmas of the past developed a legitimizing political-theological narrative that saw Nazism as the denouement of secularization. As Maria Mitchell has shown, West Germany's Christian Democrats and party apparatchiks in the late 1940s and early '50s characterized Nazism as a pathological symptom of "materialism"— a capacious term that embraced all of the afflictions of modernity: liberalism, rampant capitalism, even Marxism (Mitchell 1995, 2012). The paradoxical consequence of this defensive interpretation was to exculpate German conservatives of any ideological kinship with the Nazi past, heaping the greater share of blame upon the political left for the German catastrophe. Most ironic of all was that the new charge of "materialism" recapitulated a concatenation of anxieties about liberal modernity that the Nazis themselves had once manipulated to their own advantage. Occasionally postwar Christian Democrats reverted to the older language of antimodernist resentment: Adenauer himself described the Jews as an "influential" force in big business. As Norbert Frei has explained, Adenauer's Germany was keen to put the memory of National Socialism aside as quickly as possible even if this meant retaining a great many representatives of the Third Reich in the West German political bureaucracy. The compromise was perhaps necessary—West Germany might not have survived a more zealous purge—

but for many younger Germans on the left it called into question the legitimacy of the fledging democracy (Frei 2002).

At the level of informal discourse and social theory, Christian Democracy drew upon and helped to support an ideological syllogism: Nazism was born from secular materialism, and henceforth West Germany would retain its moral equilibrium only if it cleaved to its Christian heritage. This political logic gained prestige well beyond the ranks of the conservative parties. The 1959 revision of the SPD platform introduced in Bad Godesberg abandoned the militant secularism that had long distinguished European socialism since the nineteenth century and explicitly acknowledged that democratic socialism has its roots "in Christian ethics, humanism and classical philosophy" even while it also abjured any appeal to "ultimate truths." It hastened to explain the platform's resistance to epistemological certitude was not due to "any lack of understanding for or indifference to philosophical or religious truths, but out of respect for the individual's choice in these matters of conscience in which neither the state nor any political party should be allowed to interfere" (Grebing 2005, 406–464).

While the SPD struggled to admit its historical affiliation with Christianity, it was the conservative end of the West German political spectrum that found greater solace in religion. With the Cold War rivalry against an avowedly secularist and materialist enemy to the East, West Germany's conservatives in both the CDU and the CSU endorsed Article 7(3) of the 1949 Grundgesetz or Basic Law, which mandated religious instruction in state schools. Animating this requirement was a crucial historical and ideological premise that modern democracy lacks its own secular norms of moral-political stabilization and for its own sake it must draw upon the resources of religious tradition and convey these values through compulsory instruction to the citizens of the next generation.

The idea that Christianity should play a leading role in the moral education of German citizens has both practical and theoretical implications. One of the practical effects can be seen in the paragraph 13, section 11 of the Bavarian General School Law (Volksschulordnung):

"The school supports the parents in the religious education of children. School prayer, religious service in school, and worship are possibilities of this support. In each classroom a cross it to be put up." It is well known that this law has provoked great controversy. In 1995, in the Bavarian town of Schwandorf, a legal complaint was brought against a local school (*Der Spiegel* 1995). The plaintiffs in the case, the family of Ernst Teler (followers of Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophist movement) objected that the Bavarian law violated their right to freedom of conscience and religion and violated the principle of state neutrality in religion. They further complained that the representation of the crucified Jesus would cause their children psychological harm. Local courts initially found against the plaintiffs and reconfirmed Bavarian law. But in May 1995 the Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe, determined that the Bavarian law contradicted Germany's Basic Law, or Grundgesetz.

The Constitutional Court's ruling provoked immediate complaint and critics were quick to note that the crucifix belonged to the everyday furnishings of Bavarian schooling. Even beyond the mainly Catholic regions of southeastern Germany, most Germans had long found the crucifix unobjectionable: only one quarter of the national population agreed with the Constitutional Court's ban on the display of crucifixes in the classroom. In an interview with *Der Spiegel,* the Bavarian minister-president Edmund Stoiber explained that

> in Bavaria we have according to the constitution a Christian
> community school. This was even ratified by popular deci-
> sion in 1968. The overwhelming majority of the population,
> including those who are remote from the official Church,
> agreed upon this constitutional decision. Values such as
> tolerance, brotherliness and social justice flow from [*sind
> Ausflüsse aus*] Christian ethical law [*Sittengesetz*].

In Stoiber's view it was simply incoherent that the constitutional court could simultaneously affirm the school's moral and historical

Christian imprint but nonetheless disallow the symbol that expressed this character. This perspective was broadly shared by representatives of Germany's center-right parties, including Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who warned that the ruling threatened "the values of occidental culture [abendländischen Kultur]" (Der Spiegel 1995).

The striking thing about this case is that conservatives were quick to evoke fears of occidental collapse. This is perhaps all the more surprising when we consider that the case concerned the historically resonant question of rights for religious minorities in Germany. But this could not challenge the overriding conservative logic that equated Christianity with Western civilization. Support for this equation could be found in older memories from the era of the Third Reich, when the Nazis had tried (albeit with ambivalent results) to bring Christianity into ideological alignment with the regime (Lewy 1964; Bergen 1996).

For Christian conservatives in postwar Germany, the memory of Nazi de-Christianization efforts helped to fortify their politically advantageous understanding of the Third Reich as a pagan regime whose rise was predicated upon the radical secularization of society and the concomitant destruction of Christian norms. Conservatives could therefore confirm an equation between Christianity and civilization that served to justify the continued presence of Christianity in the public sphere. Implicit in this assumption was the correlative belief that, absent the moral nourishment or value-orientations provided by Christianity, liberal democracy would suffer a normative deficit and might not long survive. Either it would ossify into the value-free nightmare of bureaucratic totalitarianism, or it would succumb once again to neo-pagan nationalism (as was the cautionary lesson of the Weimar Republic). The underlying logic of Christian Democracy is that the modern democratic order lacks sufficient moral-political substance because it is in essence little more than a procedure or "machine" (McCormick 1999).

The most famous exponent of this view was Carl Schmitt, who characterized liberalism as a system of legality without internal grounds for legitimacy. Schmitt's influence can be tracked well into the

German postwar era (Müller 2003), but it would be wrong to dismiss the critique as necessarily Schmittian in origin or intrinsically antagonistic to liberal modernity. On the contrary: buttressed by broad-minded appeals to a "Judeo-Christian heritage," the affirmation of religion and the correlative anxiety about mere proceduralism is a hallmark of the Christian Democratic consensus that has played an important role in shaping postwar Germany's self-understanding as a democratic polity (Huber 2008). It has informed not only practices in formal education but also the far broader conception of the formative role assigned to religion in the public sphere.

THE BÖCKENFÖRDE DICTUM

The idea of Christianity as a vital resource of normative instruction has also played an important role in German social thought. One of its most memorable proponents has been Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde, a Catholic associated with the so-called Ritter School in Münster, who is a social democratic judge and legal theorist best known for his attempts to "liberalize" without wholly abandoning the political-theological insights of Carl Schmitt.

Böckenförde's most important statement of the consensus view appeared in a lecture presented in Ebrach and published in 1967 as "The Rise of the State as a Process of Secularization" (2004, 213–230). In a grand survey of the past millennium, Böckenförde summarizes the rise of the European state as the gradual emancipation of state procedures from their original matrix in Christianity. Medieval Christianity originally conceived of itself as a total world order that united ecclesiastical and temporal functions in a *res publica Christiana*. But secularization entailed a growing divide between the nonpolitical tasks of religion on the one hand and the nonsacred tasks of political administration on the other. Böckenförde traces this process of separation from the eleventh-century Investiture controversy through the settlements of the Reformation and the Edict of Nantes—decisions that first made it possible to imagine the nonhomogeneity of religious identity within a single political regime. The French Revolution completed this process

of secular division when it redefined the political order as a system for safeguarding the rights of man understood in a wholly naturalistic sense even while it allowed for the persistence of religion in the privatistic and nonpolitical sense of individual faith.

The dilemma that Böckenförde presents in the conclusion to his essay is that religion had always been (in his words) *"the strongest bonding agent for the political order"* (emphasis added). The rise of modern democracy therefore confronts us with a new question of "how to integrate the emancipated individual" into a state that has no other function than the preservation of rights conceived as prior to its purely administrative existence. "People had to find a new togetherness," Böckenförde observes, "a new homogeneity," if the state was not to fall victim to the social atomism of merely procedural reason. This question of bonding prompts Böckenförde's famous formula (the first sentence is italicized in the original):

> *The liberal, secularized state is nourished by presuppositions that it cannot itself guarantee. [Der freiheitliche, säkularisierte Staat lebt von Voraussetzungen, die er selbst night garantieren kann.]* That is the great gamble it has made for liberty's sake. On the one hand, it can only survive as a liberal state if the liberty it allows its citizens regulates itself from within on the basis of the moral substance of the individual and the homogeneity of society. On the other hand, it cannot attempt to guarantee those inner regulatory forces by its own efforts—that is to say, with the instruments of legal coercion and authoritative command—without abandoning its liberalness and, at a secularized level, lapsing into that pretension to totality out of which it led the way into the denominational civil wars (Böckenförde 1976, 60).

From the perspective of social and legal theory, the dictum (as presented in italics above) suggests that liberal democracy finds its sources of both morality and cohesion in the prepolitical grounds of the Christian

religion. First, it is Christianity that provides citizens with the substantive moral orientation they require if they are to direct their conduct toward the greater welfare of the polity. Second, it is Christianity that furnishes a shared or "homogeneous" cultural framework for democratic citizens who would otherwise remain dissociated players in a norm-free game of social competition. These two principles find their common root in a deep anxiety about democracy as mere proceduralism: if secularization is allowed to progress unchecked, democracy will lack any unifying moral substance whatsoever and it will disintegrate into the norm-free materialism Christian Democrats have long feared.

It would be a mistake to dismiss Böckenförde's essay as merely the recondite reflections of an intellectual without influence. As a judge for the second senate of the German constitutional court from 1982 to 1996, Böckenförde helped the federal republic to navigate the uncertain waters of political unification and the ensuing period of transition ("*die Wende*"). In West German legal and political discourse, his argument for the Christian foundations of secular democracy has assumed such prestige that it is known simply as "the dictum." His opinions have also received considerable attention in the popular press (Böckenförde 2009).

Now, it should be noted that Böckenförde himself has resisted the more exclusionary conclusions of Christian Democratic conservatives. By party affiliation he is a social democrat, and he has stated his readiness to grant the legitimacy, alongside Christianity, of other sources of moral commitment. In a 2009 interview with the *Tageszeitung* he went so far as to *reject* the conservative inference that only Christianity could furnish the required prepolitical moral foundations for democracy, and he accepted the proposal that Islam might also be seen as a legitimate wellspring of prepolitical morals (Böckenförde 2009). But his argument was frequently perceived by conservatives in a more exclusivist sense. Seen in the broader context of postwar German ideology, the significance of the Böckenförde dictum derives from the way it compresses into a single phrase a host of claims that continue to animate public discussion concerning the relation between liberal democracy and its moral or cultural prerequisites. The dictum is not only a contribution

to theories of secularization—it also lends ideological support to the notion that the German government should be certain to welcome Christianity as the crucial resource for normative instruction, not only in educational settings but in society at large.

HABERMAS, CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY, AND ISLAM

In the most recent decades, discussion concerning the religious background for democracy has assumed greater intensity, chiefly in response to the growing prominence of the Muslim minority population whose normative-religious difference is seen by some critics as a potential threat to the cultural homogeneity and the moral orientation that a democracy ostensibly needs (Reimann and Riemann 1987; Hunn 2005; Chin 2007).

It is here—at the nexus between an older discourse concerning the Christian preconditions for democracy and a newer discourse concerning the possibility of Muslim inclusion—that we can begin to appreciate why Habermas has directed his attention in his latest writings to questions of religion. In 2004 Habermas met with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger for a public dialogue sponsored by the Catholic Academy of Bavaria for a discussion that was then published under the title "The Dialectics of Secularization."

In his opening remarks, Habermas makes a direct allusion to the Böckenförde dictum:

> The topic that has been proposed for our discussion reminds me of a question that Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde summed up in the mid-1960s in the following pregnant formula: Does the free, secularized state exist on the basis of normative presuppositions that it itself cannot guarantee? This question expresses a doubt about whether the democratic constitutional state can renew from its own resources the normative presuppositions of its existence; it also expresses the assumption that such a state is dependent on ethical traditions of a local nature. These may be

traditions of one particular world view or of a religion, but
in any case, they have a collectively binding character. In
view of what Rawls has called the "fact of pluralism," this
would indeed be an embarrassment to a state that was
committed to neutrality in terms of its world view; but this
consequence is not per se an argument against the assump-
tion (Habermas 2006, 21).

The mere fact that Habermas recalls Böckenförde does not imply he
endorses the dictum itself: allusion is not agreement. In fact, the very
title of his lecture contains an interrogative—"Prepolitical Foundations
of the Democratic Constitutional State?"—that may signal Habermas's
unwillingness to suppress doubts regarding the true force of the dictum.
In the remainder of his address, Habermas concedes the historical point
that modern democracy in Europe did in fact emerge from the seculariza-
tion of substantive moral and cultural insights that had their origins in
Christianity. Unlike Ratzinger, however, Habermas is reluctant to derive
from this historical observation the normative principle that modern
democracy must *necessarily continue* to rely upon these religious origins:

I myself think it better not to push too far the question
whether an ambivalent modern age will stabilize itself
exclusively on the basis of the secular forces of a commu-
nicative reason. Rather, let us treat this undramatically, as
an open, empirical question. In other words, I do not wish
to speak of the phenomenon of the continued existence of
religion in a largely secularized environment simply as a
societal fact: philosophy must take this phenomenon seri-
ously from within, so to speak, as a cognitive challenge
(Habermas 2006, 38).

The objection to Böckenförde is subtle and it injects a strong element
of conditionality into the proposal that secular society necessarily
requires religious instruction. Habermas counters this proposal with

the suggestion that we cannot yet know if secular society might arrive at a self-sustaining normative framework. To presume such knowledge would be to relapse into the dogmatism that postmetaphysical philosophy disallows.

To understand in greater detail just how Habermas differs from Böckenförde, we should take note of the fact that in recent years some political leaders in the CDU have sought to confirm a conservative version of the dictum. Germany, they say, should not surrender its cultural homogeneity, since democracy itself requires what is now popularly identified as a *"Leitkultur"* or "leading culture." In response to this conservative argument, Habermas took the unusual measure of publishing an editorial in the *New York Times* in which he condemned advocates of cultural homogeneity for lending a patina of legitimacy to anti-Muslim hatred. "To the present day," Habermas observed,

> the idea of the *Leitkultur* depends on the misconception that the liberal state should demand more of its immigrants than learning the language of the country and accepting the principles of the Constitution. We had, and apparently still have, to overcome the view that immigrants are supposed to assimilate the "values" of the majority culture and to adopt its "customs." That we are experiencing a relapse into this ethnic understanding of our liberal constitution is bad enough. It doesn't make things any better that today *Leitkultur* is defined not by "German culture" but by religion. With an arrogant appropriation of Judaism—and an incredible disregard for the fate the Jews suffered in Germany—the apologists of the *Leitkultur* now appeal to the "Judeo-Christian tradition," which distinguishes "us" from the foreigners" (Habermas 2010).

What is remarkable in this incident is the way that Habermas's intervention saw beyond the dirty business of anti-immigrant populism to address the underlying theoretical premise, namely, that a demo-

cratic polity requires shared cultural-religious norms. The Böckenförde dictum implied that democracy must ask for more than what Habermas himself has called "constitutional patriotism," an allegiance to democratic procedure (Müller 2000). While a conservative reading of the dictum implied that procedure would not suffice, Habermas saw that the requirement of cultural-religious homogeneity would only fan the flames of national chauvinism.

The historical struggle for acceptance of cultural heterogeneity in German society has been slow and subject to frequent contestation. Politicians on the right have long resisted *Multikulti* (multiculturalism), a term which only came into common usage in Germany in the year of reunification (Chin 2007, 191 and *passim*). Meanwhile, xenophobic militants have occasionally pursued the ideal of cultural homogeneity through violence and even murder. As the historian Rita Chin has observed, the series of violent (and sometimes lethal) xenophobic attacks on guest workers in the early 1990s revealed a reluctance among some Germans to accept "the primary lesson of migrant presence," that "Germany had become a multiethnic society during the postwar period and [that] the ideal of a reconstituted homogenous German *Volk* was no longer possible" (Chin 2007, 257).

Habermas's recent turn to the question of religion is a response to these new challenges. Since September 11, Habermas has grown ever more cognizant of the new visibility of religious minority cultures throughout Western Europe, and with this awareness has come a novel recognition of the need to reconceptualize (without wholly dismantling) the premise of secularization that buttressed his earlier sociohistorical theory of political modernity. When he now speaks with approval of "*post*secular society," it is largely because he understands how the new prophets of anti-Islamic intolerance all too often hide beneath the mask of a principled secularism (Habermas 2009). The struggle, especially in Germany, to secure a space of public acceptance for Muslim immigrants and the children of *Gastarbeiter* has moved him to formulate the requirements of liberal democracy as a *reciprocal* learning process:

On the one hand, those who are neither willing nor able to separate their moral convictions and vocabulary into profane and religious strands must be permitted to participate in political will formation even if they use religious language. *On the other, the democratic state should not overhastily reduce the polyphonic complexity of the range of public voices, for it cannot be sure whether in doing so it would not cut society off from scarce resources for generating meanings and shaping identities. Especially regarding vulnerable domains of social life, religious traditions have the power to provide convincing articulations of moral sensitivities and solidaristic intuitions.* What causes difficulties for secularism, then, is the expectation that the secular citizens in civil society and in the political arena must be able to encounter their religious fellow citizens face to face as equals (Habermas 2009, 76–77; emphasis added).

What is striking in this argument is its torn ideological allegiance. It simultaneously acknowledges the truth of Böckenförde's insight into the religious sources of democratic meaning, even while it dissents from the more conservative requirement of moral-religious homogeneity that originally served as the premise for Böckenförde's theory.

A skeptic might respond that such a balancing act cannot be sustained. For, on the one hand, Habermas grants that religion may serve as a reservoir of normative potentials for democracy. Indeed, he goes so far as to imply that democratic procedures *may very well need* the prepolitical instruction best found in religion. But he deploys this argument in such a way that it lends support to the voices of an otherwise excluded minority population whose religious identity has typically been treated not as a potential benefit to democracy but only as a threat. The result is a deeply conflicted theory: Habermas seems to accept the conservative critique of secularization as normative loss, even while he still embraces the secularist requirement that religious norms pass through a filter of translation. He recapitulates the conser-

vative argument for religion, but he transforms this argument into an appeal for pluralism and religious inclusion.

A WORKABLE PARTNERSHIP?

In his 2001 acceptance speech for the Frankfurt Peace Prize, Habermas warned against adopting the facile slogan of a "clash of civilizations," since it was clear that religious fundamentalism was a phenomenon of the Christian West as well as the Islamic East. "We must keep in mind," he declared, "that the dialectic of our own occidental process of secularization has yet not come to a close." The entire speech is a meditation on the significance of religion for the public sphere and it can therefore stand as a helpful summation of the arguments Habermas has been grappling with for the last decade.

The major concern of the address was to characterize the proper relation between substantive religious values and rational-secular norms within the framework of modern democracy. Like Böckenförde, Habermas granted that religion may contain normative insights that can be of service for a democratic polity. Religious language preserves and bears the capacity for expressing the sorts of "moral feelings" that secular modernity may have otherwise forgotten. But Habermas is reluctant to accept the conservative conclusion that Christianity must therefore retain a certain preeminence as the singular cultural foundation for democracy. Instead, he insists that if it is to retain its legitimacy as a genuinely open and democratic state, Germany must acknowledge its cultural and religious pluralism, since it cannot appeal to norms that are recognizable only to one religious community (Habermas 2005, 332).

Within a democracy, the only permissible language of public debate is one that remains in principle intelligible to all participants regardless of cultural or religious identity. This means that reasons animated by religious conviction must pass through a filter of translation. The idea of a translation proviso—that is, a translation from "comprehensive doctrines" into the language of public reason—is borrowed from the later Rawls. But Habermas has elsewhere expressed

certain reservations about the Rawlsian requirement that (as crit-ics like Nicholas Wolterstoff and Paul J. Weithman have complained) may impose an asymmetrical burden on religious citizens (Audi and Wolterstorff 1997; Lafont 2007). Other critics such as Maeve Cooke have suggested that the burden of translation does not differentiate between *two epistemic types of religious belief, authoritarian and nonauthori-tarian* (Cooke 2007). Against such critics Habermas seems to find the translation proviso unobjectionable insofar as it places *equal* burdens on both parties: just as the religious must make themselves intelligible in the universally accessible language of public reason, so too nonre-ligious citizens must adopt a certain humility and openness toward their religious co-citizens. Indeed, he prefers to emphasize the norma-tive *gain* to the public sphere if it opens itself up via translation to the "moral feelings" preserved in religious tradition: "Those moral feelings which only religious language has as yet been able to give a sufficiently differentiated expression may find universal resonance once a salvag-ing formulation turns up for something almost forgotten, but implic-itly missed. The mode for nondestructive secularization is translation" (Habermas 2005, 335–6).

   With the argument above, Habermas announces his allegiance to the long line of left-Hegelian theorists who have sought to harness the redemptive insights of the Western monotheistic tradition for a this-worldly realization of human happiness (Habermas 2005, 334). But more than Rawls, Habermas is keenly aware that the requirement of transla-tion may *seem* to place an unequal burden on religious citizens: "To date, only citizens committed to religious beliefs are required to split up their identifies, as it were, into their public and private elements. They are the ones who have to translate their religious beliefs into a secular language before their arguments have any chance of gaining majority support" (Habermas 2005, 332). In response to this perceived inequality, Habermas hastens to note that those of a secular orienta-tion also bear an important responsibility to their religious citizens: the secular side must remain "sensitive to the force of articulation inher-ent in religious languages." For it would be unfair to exclude "religions

from the public sphere" or to *"sever secular society from important sources of meaning"* (Habermas 2005, 332; emphasis added).

The argumentation summarized above leaves one with the distinct impression that Habermas is navigating between two ideological continents—the secularist premises of own left-Hegelian philosophy and the religious premises of a Christian Democratic ideology that is slowly adapting itself to the facts of religious pluralism. The secularist premises are easily discerned. After all, communicative reason imposes the proviso of public reason on all participants: The public sphere must remain open to citizens who draw their moral insights from religion, but those citizens are expected to present arguments for their policy claims in a profane language intelligible to all citizens irrespective of their private adherence to comprehensive doctrines. Here we might say that translation is merely the new name for what Habermas once called "linguistification." It is apparent that Habermas would *like* to understand the principle of translation as imposing an equal burden on both sides but it seems clear this is not actually the case. After all, translation is a more or less unidirectional phenomenon, a linguistic event of semantic transfer from a language of origin to a target language, or, in other words, from religion to the secular public sphere. In this principle, I would suggest, we can discern the way Habermas's earliest ideas concerning the character of public reason have not wholly lost their validity; the theory of translation is essentially a theory of unidirectional, consensus-oriented secularization that has been stripped of its historical meaning and has been mapped onto the horizontal experience of democratic discourse itself (Gordon 2012).

In this respect it may seem that Habermas remains faithful to the requirement of secularization. But this is only half the story. As I suggested earlier, the great irony is that Habermas has moved toward a more inclusive attitude about religion only because he has also accepted the critique of mere proceduralism that was a hallmark of the postwar Christian Democratic consensus. This critique shows up in his recent work as a nagging anxiety as to whether communicative reason could *ever* suffice for the moral orientation democracy seems to require.

Habermas goes well beyond entertaining the thought that religion could also serve as one among the many voices of moral insight in the public sphere. Had he opted to rest content with this more moderate and pluralistic claim, his thoughts on religion would be unremarkable and would not suggest a strong revision to the theory of communicative action.

Surprisingly, however, Habermas entertains the far more robust Christian Democratic stance that perhaps only religious traditions are suitable reservoirs of normative insight. In the key sentence quoted above, Habermas makes reference to those "moral feelings which *only* religious language has as yet been able to give a sufficiently differentiated expression" (my emphasis). He has also reconsidered the hypothetical telos of thoroughgoing secularization. Already in an essay from *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1988), Habermas had begun, albeit cautiously, to entertain the possibility that the process of linguistification might not come to an end:

> Philosophy, even in its postmetaphysical form, will be able neither to replace nor to repress religion as long as religious language is the bearer of a semantic content that is inspiring and even indispensable, for this content eludes *(for the time being?)* the explanatory force of philosophical language and continues to resist translation into reasoning discourses (Habermas 1994, 51; emphasis added).

The qualifications in this passage are legion: Habermas hesitates to affirm that religion bears meaning that is indispensable; and he hedges his bets on the outcome of the translation process with a parenthetical question. In the introductory remarks to his most recent collection of essays, he has introduced further nuance and complexity into the theme of a linguistification of the sacred (Habermas 2012). Such qualifications may be symptomatic of the fact that Habermas is attempting to navigate between two ideological continents that do not easily coexist. In a postsecular society, Habermas argues, the linguistification of the

sacred may never come to an end, and the procedures of democracy may forever need the instruction only religion can provide. This new perspective represents what one might call a *chastened secularism*. But its concession to the conservative critique of secularism is so pronounced that it places its secularist credentials in jeopardy.

When we consider the transformation of Habermas's philosophy as part of the *long durée of* European social democracy, his current stance appears less of a surprise. Ever since the great schism between revolutionary and revisionist social democrats in the years leading up to the first world war, the socialist movement in Western Europe was caught in a nearly irresistible flow of ideological routinization that eventually brought it into alignment with both parliamentarism and the welfare state. By 1959 it had cast overboard the last remnants of Marxian ideology that were threatening to sink the party ship, and following these adjustments European socialism won the first major victories—in 1969 with Willy Brandt in Germany and in 1981 with François Mitterrand in France. In the last decades of the twentieth century the confidential modernism of social democracy faced further challenges both from the left (chiefly from the Greens) and from the right (especially from the Christian Democrats under Helmut Kohl).

Social theory is not merely a seismograph of political change. But it is hard to resist the thought that Habermas's own philosophy, though long associated with social democratic reform, has now joined hands with one element of Christian Democracy in a kind of grand coalition. To be sure, we have long ago come to expect from Habermas an admirable ecumenicism and readiness to borrow from a wide variety of theoretical traditions whatever their ideological or political marks. But if the genealogy proposed above is correct, then Habermas now stands at the meeting point of two intellectual currents whose deepest principles may not prove wholly compatible. From a political point of view alone their partnership appears unlikely, since Christian Democracy draws upon numerous assumptions concerning the morally deficient materialism and normative impoverishment of the secular democratic order that have sometimes carried a distinctly antimodernist and illiberal

message—a message that is not easily harmonized with the modernist and rationalist underpinnings of critical theory.

But the true sources of potential friction between these two traditions lie deeper still. On the one hand, Habermas proposes that all citizens join together in the procedures of communicative reason, locating democratic legitimacy in nothing but the ungrounded activity of intersubjective discourse itself. On the other hand, he joins ranks with the conservative critique of proceduralism, extolling religion as perhaps the only resource strong enough to furnish the moral substance that democracy requires. The first extols modern reason precisely as an argumentative procedure that sustains rules of fairness for participation while it holds in abeyance any principles that would require all participants to commit themselves to a single and metaphysically substantive idea of the good. The second warns that such a procedure suffers from a deficit of normative insight and it therefore reaches beyond the structures of communicative rationality to religion as the most promising source of moral-political instruction. One school of thought detaches itself from what Rawls termed "comprehensive doctrines" and it embraces postmetaphysical thinking as the only nonauthoritarian logic for social cohesion. The other school of thought cannot wholly abstain from metaphysics without abandoning its distinctive character. For however much religious citizens may be willing to adapt themselves to the fallibilistic and relativistic premises of democratic debate, the grounding of normativity in metaphysical principles is precisely what distinguishes religious claims from those that are merely cultural, aesthetic, or emotive.

Habermas wishes to reconcile these two schools of thought through the nondestructive instrument of translation. But the viability of his proposal is questionable precisely because the Habermasian account of translation presumes a separation between semantics and metaphysics: if religion is a mere vehicle for semantic contents, then those contents can presumably be salvaged even if religion is destroyed. But if the very nature of those contents requires an ineliminable appeal to metaphysical principles then translation would prove fruitless, since

it would fail to convey the very contents religious citizens consider essential. The gap between critical theory and Christian Democracy is therefore formidable. Whether Habermas can succeed in achieving a workable partnership between these two ideological traditions remains to be seen.

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