

# Exchange between Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger on the Dangers of Rational and Religious Extremisms (2004)

## Abstract

In this remarkable exchange, one of Germany's most noted philosophers of secular society and one of the leading German theologians of the Roman Catholic Church (who soon thereafter became Pope Benedict XVI) arrived at essential agreement on a hotly disputed question in the modern history of knowledge: Which deserves epistemological primacy in the organization of public life, secular reason or religious faith? In their own manners and styles, both Habermas and Ratzinger argue that secular reason and religious faith are interrelated and interdependent cultural resources that must exist in a dialogical and mutually respectful relationship. The secularization of public life was a defining feature of the modern world. If these two figures are to be believed, the postmodern world may look quite different.

## Source

### Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?

By Jürgen Habermas

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?<sup>[1]</sup> 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 assumption.

I should like to define this problem more precisely in two ways. Epistemologically speaking, this doubt evokes the question of whether, now that "law" is a straightforward matter of de facto legislation – and nothing else – it is still possible in any way to provide a secular justification of political rule, that is, a justification that is nonreligious or postmetaphysical (1). Even if such a legitimation be conceded, it remains doubtful, when we consider the element of human motivation, whether a society with a plurality of world views can achieve a normative stabilization – that is, something that goes beyond a mere *modus vivendi* – through the assumption of a background understanding that will at best remain on the formal level, limited to questions of procedures and principles (2). It may be possible to neutralize this doubt; but it still remains the case that liberal societal structures are dependent on the solidarity of their citizens. And if the secularization of society goes "off the rails", the sources of this solidarity may dry up altogether. This diagnosis cannot be dismissed out of hand, but we need not understand it in such a manner that it offers the educated defenders of religion an argument in support of their case (3). Instead, I

---

shall suggest that we should understand cultural and societal secularization as a double learning process that compels both the traditions of the Enlightenment and the religious doctrines to reflect on their own respective limits (4). Finally, with regard to postsecular societies, we must ask which cognitive attitudes and normative expectations the liberal state must require its citizens – both believers and unbelievers – to put into practice in their dealings with each other (5).

[...]

### **Excursus**

The starting point for the philosophical discourse about reason and revelation is a recurrent idea: namely, that when reason reflects on its deepest foundations, it discovers that it owes its origin to something else. And it must acknowledge the fateful power of this origin, for otherwise it will lose its orientation to reason in the blind alley of a hybrid grasp of control over its own self. The model here is the exercise of a repentance that is carried out (or at least set in motion) by one's own power, a conversion of reason by reason – irrespective of whether the starting point of one's reflection is the self-consciousness of the knowing and acting subject (as in Schleiermacher) or the historicity of the existential self-reassurance of each individual (as in Kierkegaard) or the provocative situation of an ethical disintegration (as in Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx). Without initially having any theological intention, the reason that becomes aware of its limitations thus transcends itself in the direction of something else. This can take the form of the mystical fusion with a consciousness that embraces the universe; it may be the despairing hope that a redeeming message will occur in history; or it may take the shape of a solidarity with those who are oppressed and insulted, which presses forward in order to hasten on the coming of the messianic salvation. These anonymous gods of the post-Hegelian metaphysics – the encompassing consciousness, the event from time immemorial, the nonalienated society – are an easy prey for theology. There is no difficulty in deciphering them as pseudonyms of the Trinity of the personal God who communicates his own self.

These attempts at the renewal of a philosophical theology in the aftermath of Hegel are at any rate more agreeable than the Nietzscheanism that merely borrows the Christian connotations of hearing and perceiving, devotion and the expectation of grace, arrival and event, in order to go behind Christ and Socrates and project into some indeterminate archaic period a thinking from which all propositions have been gouged out. – But a philosophy that is aware of its fallibility and of its fragile position within the differentiated structures of modern society will insist on the generic distinction (which is not at all meant in a pejorative sense) between the secular discourse that claims to be accessible to all men and the religious discourse that is dependent upon the truths of revelation. It differs from Kant and Hegel in that this act of drawing the grammatical borders does not make a philosophical claim to determine what (apart from that knowledge of the world which is institutionalized in human society) may be true or false in the contents of religious traditions. The respect that accompanies this refusal to utter a cognitive judgment is based on the respect due to persons and ways of life that obviously derive their integrity and authenticity from religious convictions. But more is involved here than respect: philosophy has good reasons to be willing to learn from religious traditions.

#### ***4. Secularization as a twofold and complementary learning process***

On the one hand, we have the ethical abstinence of a postmetaphysical thinking, to which every universally obligatory concept of a good and exemplary life is foreign. On the other hand, we find in sacred scriptures and religious traditions intuitions about error and redemption, about the salvific exodus from a life that is experienced as empty of salvation; these have been elaborated in a subtle manner over the course of millennia and have been kept alive through a process of interpretation. This is why something can remain intact in the communal life of the

---

religious fellowships – provided of course they avoid dogmatism and the coercion of people's consciences – something that has been lost elsewhere and that cannot be restored by the professional knowledge of experts alone. I am referring to adequately differentiated possibilities of expression and to sensitivities with regard to lives that have gone astray, with regard to societal pathologies, with regard to the failure of individuals' plans for their lives, and with regard to the deformation and disfigurement of the lives that people share with one another. The asymmetry of the epistemological claims allows us to affirm that philosophy must be ready to learn from theology, not only for functional reasons, but also (when we recall philosophy's successful "Hegelian" learning processes) for substantial reasons.

This is because the mutual compenetration of Christianity and Greek metaphysics not only produced the intellectual form of theological dogmatics and a hellenization of Christianity (which was not in every sense a blessing). It also promoted the assimilation by philosophy of genuinely Christian ideas. This work of assimilation has left its mark in normative conceptual clusters with a heavy weight of meaning, such as responsibility, autonomy, and justification; or history and remembering, new beginning, innovation, and return; or emancipation and fulfillment; or expropriation, internalization, and embodiment, individuality and fellowship. Philosophy has indeed transformed the original religious meaning of these terms, but without emptying them through a process of deflation and exhaustion. One such translation that salvages the substance of a term is the translation of the concept of "man in the image of God" into that of the identical dignity of all men that deserves unconditional respect. This goes beyond the borders of one particular religious fellowship and makes the substance of biblical concepts accessible to a general public that also includes those who have other faiths and those who have none. Walter Benjamin was a philosopher who sometimes succeeded in making translations of this kind.

When we see how the religious shell is stripped of potentially significant concepts in a manner that promotes secularization, we can give Böckenförde's theory a harmless meaning. I have mentioned the diagnosis that affirms that the balance achieved in the modern period between the three great media of societal integration is now at risk, because the markets and the power of the bureaucracy are expelling social solidarity (that is, a coordination of action based on values, norms, and a vocabulary intended to promote mutual understanding) from more and more spheres of life. Thus it is in the interest of the constitutional state to deal carefully with all the cultural sources that nourish its citizens' consciousness of norms and their solidarity. This awareness, which has become conservative, is reflected in the phrase: "postsecular society".<sup>[2]</sup>

This refers not only to the fact that religion is holding its own in an increasingly secular environment and that society must assume that religious fellowships will continue to exist for the foreseeable future. The expression "postsecular" does more than give public recognition to religious fellowships in view of the functional contribution they make to the reproduction of motivations and attitudes that are societally desirable. The public awareness of a postsecular society also reflects a normative insight that has consequences for the political dealings of unbelieving citizens with believing citizens. In the postsecular society, there is an increasing consensus that certain phases of the "modernization of the public consciousness" involve the assimilation and the reflexive transformation of both religious and secular mentalities. If both sides agree to understand the secularization of society as a complementary learning process, then they will also have cognitive reasons to take seriously each other's contributions to controversial subjects in the public debate.

##### ***5. How should believing and unbelieving citizens treat one another?***

On the one hand, the religious consciousness has been compelled to accept processes of accommodation. In its origins, every religion is a "world view" or a "comprehensive doctrine" in the sense that it claims the authority to give structure to an entire way of life. Under the conditions created by the secularization of knowledge, the

---

neutralization of the state authorities, and the universalization of religious freedom, religion was compelled to abandon this claim to a monopoly on interpretation and to a comprehensive structuring of human life. With the functional differentiation of societal subsystems, the life of the religious fellowship also becomes separated from the social milieus in which it exists. The role of the fellowship member is differentiated from that of the citizen of society. And since the liberal state depends on a political integration of the citizens which goes beyond a mere *modus vivendi*, the differentiation of these various memberships must be more than an accommodation of the religious ethos to laws imposed by the secular society in such a way that religion no longer makes any cognitive claims. Rather, the universalistic legal order and the egalitarian societal morality must be inherently connected to the fellowship ethos in such a way that the one consistently proceeds from the other. John Rawls uses the image of a module to express this “embedding”: although this module of secular justice is constructed with the help of foundations that are neutral in terms of world view, it must fit the clusters of argumentation that are employed by each specific form of orthodoxy.[3]

The normative expectation of the liberal state vis-à-vis the religious fellowships accords with their own interests, since this gives these fellowships the possibility of bringing their own influence to bear on society as a whole, via the public political sphere. As the more or less liberal regulations about abortion show, the burdens that this tolerance imposes are not symmetrically distributed on the shoulders of believers and unbelievers alike; but, on the other hand, the secular consciousness, too, pays its price for the privilege of the freedom not to be religious, since it is challenged to deal in a self-reflexive manner with the boundaries of the Enlightenment. The understanding of tolerance in pluralistic societies with a liberal constitution demands that in their dealings with unbelievers and those of different faiths, believers should grasp that they must reasonably expect that the dissent they encounter will go on existing; at the same time, however, a liberal political culture expects that unbelievers, too, will grasp the same point in their dealings with believers.

For the citizen who is “unmusical” in religious matters, this entails the demand – which is not in the least trivial – that he identify self-critically the relationship between faith and knowledge, on the basis of what all the world knows. This is because the expectation that there will be continuing disagreement between faith and knowledge deserves to be called “rational” only when secular knowledge, too, grants that religious convictions have an epistemological status that is not purely and simply irrational. And this is why, in the public political arena, naturalistic world views, which owe their genesis to a speculative assimilation of scientific information and are relevant to the ethical self-understanding of the citizens,[4] do not in the least enjoy a *prima facie* advantage over competing world views or religious understandings.

The neutrality of the state authority on questions of world views guarantees the same ethical freedom to every citizen. This is incompatible with the political universalization of a secularist world view. When secularized citizens act in their role as citizens of the state, they must not deny in principle that religious images of the world have the potential to express truth. Nor must they refuse their believing fellow citizens the right to make contributions in a religious language to public debates. Indeed, a liberal political culture can expect that the secularized citizens play their part in the endeavors to translate relevant contributions from the religious language into a language that is accessible to the public as a whole.[5]

## **That Which Holds the World Together The Pre-political Moral Foundations of a Free State**

By Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger

[...]

---

What, then, ought we to do? With regard to the practical consequences, I am in broad agreement with Jürgen Habermas' remarks about a postsecular society, about the willingness to learn from each other, and about self-limitation on both sides. At the end of my lecture, I should like to summarize my own view in two theses.

1. We have seen that there exist *pathologies in religion* that are extremely dangerous and that make it necessary to see the divine light of reason as a “controlling organ”. Religion must continually allow itself to be purified and structured by reason; and this was the view of the Church Fathers, too.[6] However, we have also seen in the course of our reflections that there are also *pathologies of reason*, although mankind in general is not as conscious of this fact today. There is a hubris of reason that is no less dangerous. Indeed, bearing in mind its potential effects, it poses an even greater threat it suffices here to think of the atomic bomb or of man as a “product”. This is why reason, too, must be warned to keep within its proper limits, and it must learn a willingness to listen to the great religious traditions of mankind. If it cuts itself completely adrift and rejects this willingness to learn, this relatedness, reason becomes destructive.

Kurt Hübner has recently formulated a similar demand. He writes that such a thesis does not entail a “return to faith”; rather, it means “that we free ourselves from the blindness typical of our age, that is, the idea that faith has nothing more to say to contemporary man because it contradicts his humanistic idea of reason, Enlightenment, and freedom”. [7] Accordingly, I would speak of a necessary relatedness between reason and faith and between reason and religion, which are called to purify and help one another. They need each other, and they must acknowledge this mutual need.

2. This basic principle must take on concrete form in practice in the intercultural context of the present day. There can be no doubt that the two main partners in this mutual relatedness are the Christian faith and Western secular rationality; one can and must affirm this, without thereby succumbing to a false Eurocentrism. These two determine the situation of the world to an extent not matched by another cultural force; but this does not mean that one could dismiss the other cultures as a kind of *quantite negligeeable*. For a western hubris of that kind, there would be a high price to pay – and, indeed, we are already paying a part of it. It is important that both great components of the Western culture learn to *listen* and to accept a genuine relatedness to these other cultures, too. It is important to include the other cultures in the attempt at a polyphonic relatedness, in which they themselves are receptive to the essential complementarity of reason and faith, so that a universal process of purifications (in the plural!) can proceed. Ultimately, the essential values and norms that are in some way known or sensed by all men will take on a new brightness in such a process, so that that which holds the world together can once again become an effective force in mankind.

## NOTES

[1] E. W. Böckenförde, “Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation” (1967), in *Recht, Staat, Freiheit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), pp. 92ff. (here: p. 112).

[2] K. Eder, “Europäische Säkularisierung – ein Sonderweg in die postsäkulare Gesellschaft?” *Berliner Journal für Soziologie*, Heft 3 (2002), pp. 331-43.

[3] J. Rawls, *Politischer Liberalismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1998), pp. 76ff.

[4] See, for example, W. Singer, “Keiner kann anders sein, als er ist: Verschaltungen legen uns fest: Wir sollten aufhören, von Freiheit zu reden”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 8, 2004, P- 33-

[5] J. Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen* (Frankfurt am Main, 2001).

[6] I have attempted to set this out in greater detail in my book *Glaube—Wahrheit—Toleranz*. See also M. Fiedrowicz, *Apologie im frühen Christentum*, 2nd ed. (Paderborn, 2001).

---

[7] K. Hübner, *Das Christentum im Wettstreit der Religionen* (Tübingen, 2003), p. 148.

Source: Exchange between Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger on the Dangers of Rational and Religious Extremisms, in *Dialektik der Säkularisierung: Über Vernunft und Religion*, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V. Freiburg: Herder, 2005, pp. 21–3; 40–52; and 77–80. © Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

Recommended Citation: Exchange between Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger on the Dangers of Rational and Religious Extremisms (2004), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-30>> [April 27, 2024].