



January 19, 2004: Professor Jürgen Habermas speaking with then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at the Bavarian Catholic Academy in Munich. Used by permission.

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# The Church and the Secular Establishment

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A Philosophical Dialog between  
Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas

DIALOGS BETWEEN LEADING THINKERS of the Roman Catholic Church and other philosophies, theologies, or bodies of opinion and power are not a novelty. In fact, it would be correct to say that they have been a characteristic of the Catholic tradition over centuries or millennia, and that they constitute a salient difference between Catholicism and most other confessions or religions. Intersections and combinations with Platonism and Aristotelianism date from the very beginnings of Christianity. The Catholic Church or some of its leading intellectuals have responded in nuanced and complex ways to philosophies such as rationalism (Descartes), the classical and romantic movements, phenomenology, and even extreme left- and right-wing ideologies. One small example of such a dialog was a very few years ago the exchange of public letters between Archbishop and Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini and the semiotic critic and philosopher Umberto Eco.

Some of these dialogs have proved to be highly fruitful and enriching, while others turned out to be dead ends or even deleterious. We can leave history the privilege to make detailed judgments on each of these, but we can also agree, I think, that this incessant

process maintained the healthy liveliness of Catholic intellectual life. That is why the discussion between Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger (as the future Pontiff Benedict XVI was called at the time and as I shall call him throughout this presentation) stirred unusually high waves in European intellectual life.

It is perhaps redundant, but I will nevertheless introduce the two figures by short summaries of their careers and views.

### *Overview of the Work of Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas*

Joseph Ratzinger's academic career covered the period 1953–77. In 1977 he became archbishop of Munich and Freising, soon thereafter cardinal, and by 1981 he moved to Rome in the high position of Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which he held for twenty-four years, although he continued to write, publish, or give public lectures and scholarly papers, over and beyond the production of official doctrinal documents and statements. During his years of doctoral and post-doctoral studies (doctorate and "Habilitation" under the German university rules), between 1953 and 1959, he worked on Saints Augustine and Bonaventure. He taught at the universities of Bonn, Münster, Tübingen, and Regensburg, and he was also one of the cofounders of the extremely important quarterly theological journal *Communio*. This journal was the brainchild of Hans Urs von Balthasar, arguably the greatest Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, and continues to appear in twelve languages and variants.

It is somewhat difficult to assess accurately the number of publications by Ratzinger, since some of them tend to overlap and the versions in different languages are not always identical. Nevertheless, we can speak about approximately twenty-five books. It is clear that Ratzinger's thinking derives from that of Hans Urs von Balthasar: a mode of thought that is extremely difficult to assign to either ecclesiastical "conservatives" or "liberals," a thinking that goes back to the Patristic sources of Christianity, beyond its me-

dieval structures and somewhat distanced from the pre-Vatican II neo-Thomism (though not necessarily hostile to it), and a mode of thought that admits the importance of the Beautiful at the level of the True and of the Good. However, unlike Balthasar, and even his close counterpart the Jesuit priest (and eventually cardinal) Henri de Lubac, Ratzinger was more decisively steeped in the sociohistorical issues of contemporaneity.

Ratzinger's most important theoretical contributions could be divided in two broad categories. The first are prevalently theoretical or research works. Chief examples would be the contribution to the monumental Auer/Ratzinger *Dogmatic Theology* (vols. 2 and 9 specifically), the 1968 introduction to Christianity, and numerous other works.<sup>1</sup> It should be said that this kind of writing (this "register") continued even after Joseph Ratzinger became Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: thus it would be appropriate to consider the pontifically approved Declaration *Dominus Jesus* (2000) as belonging to this set of theoretical and dogmatic works. Many have seen this part of Ratzinger's work as being strict and rigid. This is an incorrect assessment. In the wake of Balthasar, Ratzinger articulates, summarizes, and crystallizes the mainstream of the tradition of Catholic thinking, in fact, as mentioned, with some slight distancing from the structures of Thomism and neo-Thomism.

The second category (or register) is composed of writings that are not only "lighter," that is to say presented in a more colloquial tone, but also much more open, more experimental, sometimes almost playful. Among these I would include Ratzinger's autobiography, along with books written in the form of interview and dialog.<sup>2</sup> One might say that in this second category of works Ratzinger absorbed the mode of communicating of the German Protestant School, not excluding Bultmann. On the other hand, unquestionably, the opposition to materialism and relativism remains completely clear, and there is no doctrinal concession. It is just the case that we are dealing in the second register of discourse with

*applicative* materials, with interactions with concrete situations of the contemporary world. This is an area that was either avoided by Lubac and Balthasar or else treated in a much more theoretical and abstract style. Thus, for instance, there is no doubt that Henri de Lubac's *Drame de l'humanisme athée*<sup>3</sup> is a work of durable worth and eloquence, or that Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Schleifen der Bastionen*<sup>4</sup> is an important document arguing thoughtfully in favor of some of the changes implemented by the Second Vatican Council. Still these were on the whole highly theoretical works. By contrast, Joseph Ratzinger's works referring to contemporary issues explain in a tranquil and patient way ecclesial positions toward topics of immediate sociohistorical interest. If they are innovative at all, then it is primarily in their discursive mode. It should be added that this distinction in two registers does not indicate in any manner a kind of intellectual schizophrenia or some hesitancy between two alternative positions. On the contrary, what the reader undoubtedly admires is the seamless continuity between the levels of this coherent and organic thinking system.

In turn, Jürgen Habermas has been for decades a venerated figure in German and Continental philosophy as a whole, considered a sovereign judge of what is true and what is not, of what is right and what is wrong. He is a direct descendant of the highly influential neo-Marxist Frankfurt School (active from 1924 to 1950 in Frankfurt first and New York thereafter but with some later continuations in both places), a disciple of Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno and of Max Horkheimer, but also for a while a protégé of figures such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl Löwith who, of course, cannot be suspected of leftist ideological leanings. He taught briefly at the University of Heidelberg but spent virtually all his academic career at the University of Frankfurt (until 1993 when he had to move to emeritus status under German law) with the long interruption of 1971–83 when he codirected one of the key institutes of the Max Planck Foundation, Germany's most prestigious and most opulent dispenser of research funds in all fields of knowledge.

Habermas achieved his towering academic position through two shrewd strategic moves. The first was of a scholarly nature. He realized that continuing without change the Marxist argument would have led him nowhere. To begin with, already his neo-Marxist predecessors had known how to pick some principles from *Lebensphilosophie*, from phenomenology, and from the classics of traditional sociology in order to liven up their Marxist tenets. Additionally, Habermas borrowed freely and copiously from communication theories as developed around the middle of the twentieth century by Austin and Searle and earlier by the great American pragmatists. He thus constructed a system that established itself as the foundation of social democracy in Germany and Europe, much as the system of John Rawls had done in North America. According to this project, any communicative act has an implicit and inevitable *telos*: mutual understanding among human beings. This state of things, he said, was the broadest framework for “human emancipation,” equality, and justice. The democratization and rationalization of society are just the institutionalizing of human communicative competence. The great adversary of this (evolutionary) process is the “strategic/instrumentalist” use of rationality, according to Habermas. He thus found his adversary in the remarkable sociologist and philosopher Niklas Luhmann, in the brilliant anarchist thinker Peter Sloterdijk and even, though to a lesser extent, in the moderate liberal Ralf Dahrendorf, who was closer to Anglo-Saxon theoretical discourses. He also distanced himself from the older generation of Max Scheler, Nikolai Hartmann, Karl Jaspers, and Helmuth Plessner for instance, whom he regarded as too idealistic. Habermas’s main works include *The Theory of Communicative Action* and *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*.<sup>5</sup>

The second strategic move was that of imposing himself as a kind of authoritative referee of the politics of post-war Germany—in-  
deed of the West as a whole—by measuring different contemporary activities and events with the standards of his presumably infallible principles of political philosophy. Thus he rebuked sternly

the German historians whom he judged as guilty for pointing out similarities between Communist and National-Socialist principles and practices, a position already well formulated by Hannah Arendt decades earlier (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1951) and a position casually familiar in English and American theoretical and historical writing.<sup>6</sup> He also condemned “neoconservatism,” an umbrella term for him that included real conservatism, classical liberalism, and even structuralism. He tried to define a middle ground between the positions of violent student protests and what he saw as the actual need for social reform.<sup>7</sup> Few had the courage to challenge Habermas’s moral-political normative edicts. He was supposed to be the supreme judge in matters of democratic, progressive, cosmopolitan, and secular constitutionalism.

Therefore, a number of his statements and position papers in the last few years were received with surprise and a degree of vexation in intellectual European circles. Habermas’s comments seemed to indicate that he believed in a certain role for the religious dimension of human existence inside his political-ethical project, not least in a two-way understanding of tolerance: the church–state relationship began to be looked at by him in a different manner, one based upon reciprocity. This was in Europe—particularly for the politically hegemonic strata—a thorny, delicate, and, in fact, embarrassing topic.

In all fairness, Habermas was not the only intellectual in whom one can recognize some signs of “turning.” Several prominent European figures sent out similar signals. Thus the now deceased Italian Norberto Bobbio, a philosopher and law scientist who in the last twenty years of his life (1984–2004) was appointed “senator ex officio,” sought to articulate a kind of skepticism tempered with religious inclination in his later works.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Jacques Derrida, the grand master of radical skepticism and relativism (now also deceased), spent the last ten years of his life exploring the apophatic potential of Jewish spirituality.<sup>9</sup> To cite just another example among others, the tremendous belated success of Emmanuel Lévinas,

whose writings<sup>10</sup> are usually cloying and opaque, but whose philosophy is categorically religious, should be included here.

Perhaps the first major “coming out” of Habermas took place when, on October 14, 2001, at the renowned Frankfurt Book Fair, he held a speech accepting the Peace Prize bestowed upon him by the German book industry. The title of his speech was “Glauben und Wissen” (“Faith and Knowledge”). On that occasion Habermas—who was, after all, the ultimate voice in “political correctness”—unveiled outspokenly his newly found flexibility. He specifically demanded that the “public square” should make room for religious discourses. (In passing be it said, although the “Eurocracy” of Brussels and Strasbourg did not seem in a hurry to execute this kind of demand, it at least caused a stir inside intellectual circles.) More specifically Habermas rejected the transformation of science into an “alternative faith” (which was a goal that had been pursued in the West for a good one hundred fifty to two hundred years), and he broadly requested the constitution of some “synergies” between the religious and the secular, which might be in a position to rein in modernity in ways in which a purely informational or media-driven society would not be able to achieve. In fact, the essays collected in *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*<sup>11</sup> are all milestones on the path of Habermas’s changing dynamic that can be followed over three decades at least.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Ratzinger/Habermas Dialog on January 19, 2004*

We will, however, not follow this meandering path; the present review article will focus on the Ratzinger/Habermas debate that represents the second important turning point of Habermas’s thinking in connection with religion. This took place on the evening of January 19, 2004, and was hosted by the Bavarian Catholic Academy in Munich as a discussion under the title “Vorpolitische moralische Grundlagen eines freiheitlichen Staates” (“Pre-political moral foundations in the construction of a free civil society”)—could be one

translation). The session was moderated by the Academy president, Dr. Florian Schuller, and the audience was restricted to about thirty persons, including two cardinals, a few Bavarian statesmen including the Land prime minister (Vogel), and some prominent intellectuals such as the essayist Robert Spaemann and the theologian Johann Baptist Metz (both of whom also took part in the subsequent short period of questions and comments). On the other hand, the texts of the two main statements were soon published. Summaries with detailed, sometimes pointed comments appeared immediately in prominent and widely read European intellectual journals such as *Die Zeit*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Rheinischer Merkur*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, *La Repubblica*, and others yet, while the prestigious French monthly *Esprit* translated and published Ratzinger's and Habermas's interventions in their entirety (July 2004); the book *Dialektik der Säkularisierung: über Vernunft und Religion*<sup>13</sup> appeared soon thereafter authored by Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger and edited by Florian Schuller—it contained essentially the two texts. What did the two say?

Jürgen Habermas's position paper was organized in five sections. The first two of these were somewhat repetitive, in the sense that they reiterated (but also synthesized) many of the philosopher's older and well-known positions. Habermas declares himself a descendent of "Kantian republicanism." This, we might gloss, is not entirely exact since there is a rather obvious neo-Hegelian aspect (via Marx) in his thinking; it is also worth noting that no allusion is made to neo-Kantianism, again, probably because it would seem too "idealistic" philosophically. He further reaffirms his "post-metaphysical" and nonreligious standpoint.

From the very beginning, however, Habermas admits the legitimacy of the question as to whether the secularized and rights-founded state is not nourished from normative premises that are alien to its own nature and antedate it. "This would raise some doubts as to the ability of the constitutional democratic state to renew its existential foundations from its own resources, rather than

from philosophical and religious, or at least from a general ethical communal prior undergirding.”<sup>14</sup> Incidentally, I will add that questionings of the same type had emerged early on, for instance, in connection with one of the genitors of modern liberalism, such as Wilhelm von Humboldt.

Nevertheless, Habermas used almost half of his presentation arguing step-by-step that “the constitution of the liberal state finds a self-satisfying legitimation out of the cognitive funds of an argumentation budget that is independent of religious and metaphysical traditions.” This purely rationalist position is not devoid, Habermas was quick to concede, of a cultural-historical context or tradition, and it does not appear without an evolutionary process. (In fact he includes the late-Scholastic debates on human rights in this evolution.) He argued, however, that natural and divine right can provide no input. Constitutional self-government in a legal state can be exclusively motivated by and founded on rational and consensual judgments of freely participating citizens and voters, or at least upon those of majorities. Accepted values derive from, to the same extent that they inform or shape, such rational libertarian judgments and are ultimately combined in a “constitutional patriotism.”

Habermas’s presentation becomes truly interesting only in its third part, when he begins to express openly and honestly his own misgivings. The modernization project as begun by the Enlightenment age is clearly the victim of “derailments” (*Entgleisungen*). Thus individualist and selfish centrifugality changes the codes of human rights into arsenals providing armament and ammunition in the conflicts between groups and between individuals each seeking higher moral validation and, basically, a larger slice of the socioeconomic pie in general. The dynamics of an ever more globalized economy and of markets in general, Habermas notes with some indignation, are clearly outside the control of consensual rational judgments, no matter what the constitutional contract may require or declare. Not only do citizens become “depoliticized,” but they seem to show indifference to the glaring inequalities between different zones of

our planet. Habermas seems stunned that third-world intellectuals (he refers specifically to a personal visit in Iran) take up positions that remind him of the conservatism (which he had clearly hoped was a thing of the past) of Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, or Leo Strauss. The philosopher is reluctantly inclined to believe that we are indeed on the verge of entering a “post-secular” historical phase. The term itself, it should be explained here, gained a surprisingly wide acceptance in a great variety of thinking traditions, both in the West and outside the West.<sup>15</sup>

And so, at the end of his section three, and in more detail in the last two sections of his argument, Habermas comes out with the kind of innovative changes that are so symptomatic for the slow but significant change and, in my view, enrichment of his thinking. He notes the “renewed resonance found by the theorem that a contrite modernity can find help in letting itself out of its dead-end only through a religious orientation (*Ausrichtung*) toward a transcendent point of reference.” While, as we shall see, Habermas hesitates to fully adopt this “theorem” (as he calls it), he certainly shows himself willing at least to examine empirically the undoubted fact of the “continuity of religion in secularized environments” and to respond earnestly to the cognitive challenge of this phenomenon (for him somewhat unexpected, we read in the tacit subtext).

Habermas now articulates more clearly the concessions to religion that have so much perturbed European intellectual circles over the last few years. “Sacred scriptures and religious traditions have preserved over millennia, in subtle formulation and hermeneutics, intuitions about error and redemption, about the salvational outcome of a life experienced as hopeless.” Thus religious life keeps intact, the celebrated philosopher continues, a number of sensitivities, nuances, and modes of expression for situations that neither his own “post-metaphysical” approach nor an exclusively rationalist society of professional expertise can deal with in a fully satisfactory manner: “a mis-carried life, social pathologies, the failures of individual life projects, and the deformation of misarranged existential relationships.”

In a clear and unmistakable manner Habermas condemns all those who keep trying to sentence the religious discourse in the public square to silence, to eliminate and liquidate it altogether. "It is in the best interest of the constitutional state to act considerately (*schonend*) toward all those cultural sources out of which civil solidarity and norm consciousness are nourished." Communicativeness implies necessarily and by its very definition the effort of mutual understanding. This is not to say that the philosopher himself is now ready to approve this discourse or to subscribe to it, but it does mean that for Habermas a true tolerance is one that ought to be sufficiently spacious to include the religious.

Habermas concludes by suggesting what for him would be the ideal formula: accepting a good many religious values and concepts as soon as they are *translated* in a secular idiom. He provides one possible example: "The translation of the likeness of the human to the image of the divine into the equal and absolutely respected dignity of all human beings." I will say here that Habermas does not quite reach the outspoken position of Charles Taylor (who, at least among normative philosophers, is nowadays justly considered by many as the leading figure) with his categorical repudiation of "exclusive humanism" (that is to say one that refuses any transcendent point of reference in public debate—the kind of position nowadays embraced legally and politically by the hegemonic forces of the European Union, the United Nations, and the like). Still, he has stepped closer to it than one would have thought possible in the past.

Cardinal-theologian Ratzinger did not begin his response with comments on religion, but rather with a diagnosis of the state of affairs in the world at this moment. In his opinion two major factors (with a third deriving from them) have to be considered. The factors are first, the rise of a globalized society in which political, economic, and cultural forces are closely intermeshed. The second, perhaps more momentous, is the accelerated increase of the human potential for construction and destruction. The third is that at the very moment when a firm common ethical ground would

be needed, relativism weakens or corrodes the possibility of such a common ethical horizon. Few would deny, Ratzinger suggests, that power should be subordinate to right and lawful precepts, yet there are at least three obstacles to the implementation of this imperative. One is that creating legal values by way of majority decision is somewhat problematical: historical experience shows that injustices can be easily committed by fully valid majorities. The second is that diverse cultures may not agree with each other when it comes to the shaping of norms for civil rights. The third is that the dangers of “macro-war” are now replaced by those of “micro-war” (specifically terrorism), which justify themselves, at least sometimes, with religious reasons.

The Vatican Congregation Prefect (as he then was) clearly finds, however, that much more danger is carried by the human capacity for self-manipulation—what, I will add, one would illustrate as the complex of actions including cloning, arbitrary life production and life destruction, and the reification of the human body through its commercial uses (prostitution, pedophilia, euthanasia, organ trading, and others yet). Ratzinger himself uses the memorable phrase: “Man is climbing down through the fountain-house (*Brunnenhaus*) of power to the very well-springs of his own existence.” And a little earlier, but quite clearly: “Man becomes a product, and thus the relation to himself changes radically.”

It is only at this point—and one can only admire the great theologian’s combination of supple intelligence, diplomatic tact, and quiet, patient meekness—that Ratzinger introduced in his talk religion. Moreover, his first comments on religion were critical. He admitted the potential pathologies of the religious, using as a main example the actions of extreme Islamic fundamentalism, while immediately pointing out that these are partially stimulated by a desperate and exasperated need to affirm religious faith in an increasingly materialistic world.

I would like to note here that few will have forgotten the key role played by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of

Faith in the gesture of humble request of divine forgiveness for the faults and sins of the Church at different points during the centuries. This was of course not a simple admission but rather a unique action, the equal of which I for one cannot find with any other religious institution either inside Christianity or outside it. Ratzinger elegantly kept silent about this remarkable initiative. As reviewer, I feel that, simply for the sake of completeness, I ought to introduce this addition.

Where can we then seek for the beginnings of an answer? It is quite clear to everybody, Ratzinger maintained, that a mere scientific rationalism cannot generate a satisfactory ethos. What is more (and this may be seen as a surprising concession; certainly Robert Spaemann questioned it rather sharply as soon as the main dialog was over), not even natural reason or natural law is any longer fully serviceable. Ratzinger described it as somewhat “blunted down” (*abgestumpft*). Even in its current version, that of various common “declarations of human rights,” it seems no longer what it used to be and in need of some renewal or improvement.

The cardinal-theologian here arrives to his fundamental proposal. In our days Western civilization appears to be divided into two large branches. One is the rationalist-scientific *Weltanschauung* while the other is the Christian tradition. Each of these has certain drawbacks. The first one is not only limping in broadly ethical terms, it actually produces many of the dangers of contemporaneity. It is not exaggerated to speak about “pathologies of reason” and a “hubris of reason.” It makes sense, therefore, that secular rationalism should accept corrective controls and a reining in by religious values. “Reason has to accept warning as to its limits and must be willing to listen to the great religious traditions of mankind,” Ratzinger pointed out.

At the same time it is true that at this particular point in time Christianity does not (yet?) enjoy the capability of establishing a set of principles readily accepted on a universal level. Ratzinger admitted that a critical and “cleansing” potential of rational inquiry in religion is

desirable, and in fact, he added, it is a procedure that was already part of the functioning of Christian doctrine as early as the age of Patristic practice and theoretical meditation. What is needed in essential ways is a “correlation of reason and faith, of reason and religion, both being summoned to mutual cleansing and healing.” This mutual critical process is high on the agenda of our post-secular age.

For the cardinal-theologian this process of mutual criticism was not fully sufficient. He clearly stated that either of the two great branches of Western civilization can only legitimate themselves and gain universal acceptance by acknowledging the multicultural nature of our global society. They both have to face without hesitation the cognitive and existential horizons of the non-Western cultures that are our neighbors: Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist, and others yet. A renewed spiritual culture can be founded only on such forms of double dialog, particularly taking into account the apprehensions of these alternative cultures toward both Christianity, and even more, toward scientific rationalism. Both branches of Western intellectual life must “admit *de facto* that they are accepted only in parts of mankind and are intelligible only in parts of mankind.”

This is neither adversarial nor identical to the somewhat eclectic project of Hans Küng,<sup>16</sup> but confines itself, at least in its first stages, simply to a respectful mutual curiosity, to suggestions, and to a deeper reciprocal understanding. Nevertheless, the proposal is more sagacious and artful than it might seem at first sight, since these non-Western cultures are prevalently spiritual in their nature and cannot but raise question marks in the face of any arrogant or domineering rationalism, let alone that of any crass materialism (to speak candidly, with the risk of sounding a little naive).

Whoever has read attentively the work of Confucius will be inclined to look afterward at Plato and Aristotle as rather “liberal,” and (compared to the Quran and its commentaries) Saints Augustine, Aquinas, or Palamas might seem almost like “leftists.” Be that as it may, in this discussion Ratzinger concludes with the idea of *limitation*—that is to say of human restraint, finitude, humility, and

imperfection—in our reason but also in our spiritual capacities and certainly in the ability to build, based solely on our modes of understanding, human meaning in its entirety.

### *Reflections on the Dialog*

The audience as well as the later readers were all impressed by many things. One of them was the remarkable closeness of two very different thinkers on a number of points. There is for instance no question that Joseph Ratzinger was not at that point, nor is Pope Benedict XVI now, most likely, a political conservative. In fact he may well be closer to some kind of moderate social-democrat, European position. (“In many respects, democratic socialism was and is close to Catholic social doctrine and has in any case made a remarkable contribution to the formation of a social consciousness,”<sup>17</sup> Benedict XVI stated in a recent essay.) On the other hand, it was not difficult to notice clear-cut differences between the two scholars. A clarifying factor here might be the reference to the competent and articulate essay of George Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God*,<sup>18</sup> that runs parallel to and occasionally overlaps Ratzinger’s argument, with the exception that it formulates in a much more cutting and outspoken manner the issues raised by the future Pope. Weigel demonstrates without apologies and qualms, step-by-step, how the current wounds and drawbacks of the European continent (among other things in the process of a demographic meltdown) are to be understood as linked to its increasing separation from its own religious roots.

There are several other comments that seem obvious and indispensable after reading the text of the dialog. The first is that at least one of Ratzinger’s conclusions reiterated, in a summary form, the luminous general argument of the momentous and durable encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998). This should not surprise anybody, since of all the encyclicals signed by John Paul II *Fides et Ratio* is the one that is probably the most “universalist.” In other words, one can think

of few others that are equally broad, comprehensive, and acceptable not only to all Christians of normal and balanced judgment but probably to a good number of thoughtful followers of various other faiths and perhaps even to many honest persons of doubt, to the extent to which they are not narrow and intransigent in their thinking. In any case, Benedict XVI began his Petrine duties by reminding the Church that a “tyranny of relativism” is unacceptable. The plain fact (paradoxical or not) is that there are few places in the current world where reason finds a more reliable support than inside the Catholic magisterium. It is therefore understandable that the nexus of faith and reason becomes the basis for building bridges to thinkers such as Habermas, who remained uncommitted to a religious orientation while still seeking connections with the world of the religious.

Another quite important and, for many, surprising point to be made is that Habermas not only engaged in a dialog with Ratzinger, but both in this text and in subsequent or even previous ones shows himself much more inclined to interact with “classical” Roman-Catholic theological positions than with the “innovative” standpoints of Eugen Drewermann (closer to pantheism), Hans Küng (general ethicism), or of Johann Baptist Metz, who is also a personal friend. As a matter of fact, Habermas had occasionally expressed his respect for the architecture of the Thomist system and found a certain unsatisfactory quality in “modernizing” efforts by a number of recent theologians from Germany or from elsewhere. It might be said that Habermas short-circuits these approaches and seeks contact with the mainstream of Catholic and Christian thought.

This was clearly not a singular and idiosyncratic gesture of politeness. Religion, as already mentioned, had been a rather long-standing preoccupation for Habermas with a dynamic of its own. After the January 2004 dialog with Ratzinger, Habermas’s evolution unfolded as seen in his San Diego lecture of 2005<sup>19</sup> and his interview in *Die Welt* on May 4, 2005, in which he reiterated (in a more popular and journalistic tone) statements compatible to those made during the discussion of January 2004 with Joseph Ratzinger.

It is equally true that the leftist position of Habermas was often exaggerated both by his commentators and by himself. True, his roots and his early education are undoubtedly neo-Marxist, but he also made a point rather early on to critique Marxism in general and to define himself in a distinctive and different manner.<sup>20</sup> He declared that the economic causal explanations of classical Marxism were definitely too narrow and too rigid and thus unsatisfactory a century and a half after they had been enounced. He criticized Marx for his disinterest in freedom as a social issue and in the human dimension in general. This “orthodox” form of Marxism was for Habermas purely linear and thus erroneous because it ignored the impact of unpredictabilities in any social evolution. Revolution and class struggle were from the beginning dismissed by Habermas as consequential factors in his theories.

Not the least significant decision on the part of Habermas was the one to make use of the term post-secular—a concept used nowadays in the most different traditions. It can be found in Hindu (Pranakrishna Das, who is also known as Dr. Frank Morales), Buddhist (Debjany Ganguli), Judaic (Eliezer Schweid and James Diamond), Protestant and Catholic (John Polkinghorne and Thomas Oden), and post-Marxist (Slavoy Žižek) contexts and even in quite serious philosophy; thus it is used occasionally by the great Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, who, as said before, enjoys justly a very high standing among contemporary normative philosophers. Irrespective of the specific ways in which post-secular is defined, the common denominator of its different usages is a denial of the ideologized claims of purely rationalistic science and a refusal to keep science on some kind of pedestal, as a supreme and unshakable expression of truth against any other type of discourse. This is one of the curious consequences of the post-modernist relativism (as deplored by many, not least by Benedict XVI): a skepticism pursued consistently and honestly must end up by denying itself. (The kind of logical paradox that had been noticed already by some Greek-Roman philosophers of antiquity.) A certain equivalence

arises inevitably among diverse ideologies or philosophies, and it becomes impossible to keep religion out of this public sphere too long. It is quite clear to me that figures such as Charles Taylor (more openly and more emphatically) and Jürgen Habermas (more timidly and with more qualifications) felt the need to draw the logical conclusions of their own positions. Thus the debate about religion eventually turns into a conversation with religion, conceivably even a partnership.

Obviously, as mentioned before, Catholic Christianity was treated, even by Ratzinger, in its sociohistorical dimension rather than from the point of view of its metaphysical or transcendent claims. This should not bother anybody; on the contrary, it indicates a certain respect from the secular side by the very abstention of an intervention in the internal ecclesiological economy of the Church. It would be somewhat awkward and ultimately unacceptable to have religious matters submitted to the tribunal of rationalistic materialism; in a sense, this would be self-defeating and a return to procedures initiated ever since the Enlightenment project was set up. Also, and at the same time, nobody (least of all Catholic *Weltanschauung*) denied that religion is endowed with an incarnational and thus sociohistorical dimension, the side with which the Church responds to matters and issues of practical concern in the world. Although, in a way, such an approach is precisely the side where the Church is most vulnerable and most likely to err occasionally. It is not less true that this incarnational side is the one most appropriate to respond to challenges in an idiom easily understandable to a wide range of interlocutors. Thus it appears that Joseph Ratzinger was wise to accept a sociohistorical level of reference, rather than to withdraw haughtily into the domain of dogmatic theology as had been often done in the past. Such a withdrawal inevitably closes a number of doors and raises perhaps insuperable difficulties to a genuine dialog.

The names of Norberto Bobbio and Jacques Derrida were already mentioned above. Nevertheless, the context of secular critics

and thinkers who show stronger or weaker but in any case marked inclinations toward religion is considerably wider. In America, the famous Yale School of deconstructive criticism turned almost completely toward religion. J. Hillis Miller was always inclined toward Christianity, if discreetly. Geoffrey Hartman's latest works concentrate on the examination of parallels between Midrash or Kabbalah and literary criticism.<sup>21</sup> Likewise (though more vaguely), his colleague Harold Bloom spoke consistently about the connections between early Gnosticism and Romanticism. Two overlooked talks by Jacques Lacan, the structuralist psychoanalyst, appeared posthumously and recently under the title of *Le Triomphe de la religion*<sup>22</sup>—Freud is declared a “gross materialist,” and the author expresses confidence in the victory of religion over rival theories. Even more articulately than these, George Steiner developed in the last fifteen years a sophisticated explanation of the relations between literature and religion.<sup>23</sup> Stanley Fish, an able scholar who despite his abrupt and somewhat sensationalist (others would say cynical) ways, declared openly that he sees religion as replacing the heretofore prevalent race/gender/class trinity as a reference point in literary theory. Nicholas Boyle, a professor at Cambridge and perhaps the leading Goethe scholar in the world today, unexpectedly came out with an excellent theoretical work on the modes in which Catholic doctrine might undergird a theory of literature, a field usually reserved for Protestant scholars, Fr. Henri Bremond and Hans Urs von Balthasar being two prominent examples among the few Catholic exceptions.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps closer to the spirit and intentions of Habermas are a few leading hard-left ideologues, aptly analyzed by Paul Griffiths: Thomas Eagleton, Alain Badiou, François Lyotard, and Slavoj Žižek.<sup>25</sup> As I had personally argued already a number of years ago<sup>26</sup> one cannot pursue “critical studies” or “New Historicism” without taking into account the religious element that was usually the most important context of sociopolitical events as well as of intellectual and cultural figures of the past. The authors examined by Griffiths, however, go

farther and precisely in the direction outlined by Habermas, whether they do it consciously or not. They refer to and borrow from Christian sources; they do exactly what Habermas suggests or requires: they translate Christian values into secular ones. As George Steiner wisely and courageously said,

A [transcendent] postulate is often hidden; it is often left undeclared or exploited metaphorically and without consequence, in most of modern interpretative and critical practice. What would happen if we had to pay our debts towards theology and the metaphysics of presence? What if the loans of belief in transcendence, made to us since Plato and Augustine in reference to signifying form, were called in? What if we had to make explicit and concrete the assumption that all serious art and literature, and not only music to which Nietzsche applies the term, is an *opus metaphysicum*?<sup>27</sup>

Likewise debates in connection with “intelligent design” (when they are serious and theoretical, rather than political and demagogical—I may adduce here Jean Guitton as a good example<sup>28</sup>) suggest a “swing of the pendulum” away from reductive materialism.

Additionally, one cannot but suspect here the existence in intellectual as well as fictional works (below the text, below the subtext even) of that intensive and fundamental search, not to say thirst, for God and for the divine; a human need that seems to me and to many others, strictly pragmatically viewed, a constant dimension of any human soul and mind of any culture known to us, irrespective of what the authors themselves (in our case, Jürgen Habermas) may actually believe in that respect or what substitutive values they may resort to. (Max Picard’s *Die Flucht vor Gott* [1935] is one auxiliary tool that comes immediately to mind.)

If the commentaries above have some degree of truth, then Joseph Ratzinger was fully justified in adopting the discursive strategy that he did in his dialog with Habermas. He made full and intelli-

gent use of the two-register structure of his thinking in order to respond to his interlocutor and to create common space for and with him, always keeping in mind that the salvation of souls and the well-being of God's Church on earth must remain the paramount aim of any priest, prelate, or pope. The speculative question for those observing the unfolding of intellectual history from the angle of the history of culture will be what impact, if any, this two-register strategy might have once the cardinal-theologian finds himself entrusted with the throne and tasks of St. Peter. Several scenarios can be imagined. From the beginning, the errors of the vulgar (in the media for instance) may be easily discarded: the "hard-line inquisitor" cunningly modulating his tone (perhaps just verbally)—comments of this type do not even deserve attention.

On the contrary, it seems quite possible that the two-register mode might find itself bolstered, enhanced, and transferred on a global scale. Liturgical streamlining, strengthening, and even tightening inside the Latin Rite Church of the West do not have to contradict looser connections with other branches of Christianity or even with fresh adherences from outside the horizons of Christianity. Pope John Paul II had already suggested in the ground-breaking encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (1995) that exercising the Petrine role and duties might vary when related to various other branches of Christianity, and naturally enough there might be liturgical and ritual flexibility in relation with those branches. Such ecumenical efforts could extend beyond Eastern Orthodox to include to variable extents African Christian traditions or, if we want to think in a highly conjectural or imaginative mode, even a conceivable Christianized China—in the tradition of Matteo Ricci. This two-register approach also belongs to a deepened dialog with selected lay intellectuals, which does not involve doctrinal compromises but requires just the right tone of respect and openness.

As a matter of fact, we are entitled to note that, in a sense, one of the most interesting and encouraging sides of the whole episode related above was actually the *tone* of the discussion. Pleas-

antly missing were the gross verbal violences that one encounters in French or American politics or elsewhere. Nothing present in this dialog might justify even by far certain decisions envisaged by the American judiciary, by the European constitution builders, or by the French authorities when they endeavor strenuously to block any kind of public semantics of religion and thus forbid its presence in the public square. The repulsive brutalities and the tired simplicities of which Christianity had been the victim for over two hundred years in most of Europe find themselves evacuated like embarrassing impurities from a discussion at the level of the one between Ratzinger and Habermas. They are suddenly deprived of any kind of theoretical foundation in the light of a discussion of this kind: fertile, highly intelligent, subtle and well intentioned. Implicitly, the lack of absolute agreements or conclusions ought to be among the least of the readers' worries; in fact one wonders whether such accords would even be desirable. In the light of Ratzinger's repeated doctrinal utterances they would not be. It is much more important to be able to conclude (as one definitely can at the end of this dialog) that "Christophobia" is a social pathology, contemptible and harmful to individuals and to society, an obstacle in the path of any beneficial social evolution.

### *Conclusion*

The name predecessor of Benedict XVI (namely Pope Benedict XV, 1914–22) fought in a consistent and dignified, though inefficient, way for European peace during World War I. The name of Benedict, as has been often observed, is linked even more closely to that of St. Benedict de Nursia, the initiator of Western monasticism, who knew how to assure with notable success the continuity of the values of late antiquity and of early Christianity in a world in which he and his were minorities, were prone to persecution or to an uphill struggle at best. There is every reason to believe that this lesson is not forgotten by Benedict XVI: the lesson of the advantages car-

ried by a leaner and more muscular Christianity, one optimistic in the face of barbarisms that change historically more in appearance than in substance. It is equally essential (as Benedict XVI has from the very beginning underlined) to engage the Eastern Orthodox churches in the struggle that will begin in earnest once a relentlessly materialist Europe (united, pagan, and perhaps oppressive but surely opposed symmetrically to the one originally imagined by Adenauer, De Gasperi, and Schumann) will unveil its true face if it ever reaches mature implementation. As far as one can judge, Benedict XVI understands fully the perilous zone into which European Christianity now paces.<sup>29</sup>

The coming challenges can be faced only if all kinds of forces, both inside Christianity as well as among well-meaning or normal-thinking people temporarily outside Christianity, find some common ground. The dialog with Habermas shows that efforts in this direction are not entirely hopeless; it also exemplifies what some of the strategies and value idioms to be used might be. Nothing short of the survival of the Good in a possible humane and harmonious world is at stake.<sup>30</sup>

### Notes

1. Johann Auer and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dogmatic Theology*, 9 vols. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988; original German ed., 1977). Ratzinger signed volumes 2 and 9. Cf. also Heribert Rossmann and Joseph Ratzinger ed., *Mysterium der Gnade: Festschrift für Johann Auer* (Regensburg: F. Pustet, 1975). It is a token of the younger scholar's respect and admiration. Along this line other significant works might be Joseph Ratzinger, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre: Bausteine zur Fundamentalthologie* (München: Wevel, 1982); *Einführung in das Christentum* (München: DTV, 1968); *Fest des Glaubens: Versuche zur Theologie des Gottesdienstes* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1981), among many other writings.
2. Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927–1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998); *God and the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2002, original German ed., 2000); *Salt of the Earth* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997, original German ed., 1996), among many others.
3. Henri Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995, original French ed., 1945). A British translation appeared already in 1949. There

- is no question that the first large book by Balthasar makes a similar argument, although on much narrower grounds; cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele*, 3 vols. (Salzburg: Pustet, 1937–39).
4. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Schleifung der Bastionen* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1952) or *Cordula oder der Ernstfall* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1966), which, in fact, raises some questions about some orientations that derived from Vatican II).
  5. Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981); *Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983).
  6. For example, Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (New York: Knopf, 1992); John Lukacs, *June 1941: Hitler and Stalin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia* (New York: Norton, 2004); and many others.
  7. Jürgen Habermas, *Protestbewegung und Hochschulreform* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969).
  8. Among Bobbio's most influential theoretical works are *Giusnaturalismo e positivismo giuridico* (Milano: Edizione di Comunita, 1965) and particularly *Teoria della scienza giuridica* (Torino: Giapichelli, 1950). The "success" of Bobbio in Italy was due largely to his ability to take an "equi-distant" position between Marxism and classical liberalism, criticizing both.
  9. Summaries of these efforts of Derrida in the last ten or fifteen years of his life are to be found in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, *La religione* (Roma and Bari: Laterza, 1995). See also Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002) or Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992).
  10. For a handy summary, see Sean Hand's *The Lévinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999). (Lévinas usually publishes in French.)
  11. Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).
  12. Thus the volume mentioned in the text collects texts from 1982 to 2002, on both Jewish and Christian issues. Also, whereas in Habermas's crucial 1981–83 works (see note 5 above) the author dismisses the usefulness of religion, his writings at least after 2000 indicate a clearly different position. See also his *Zeit der Übergänge*, a collection of essays published in 2001 at Suhrkamp in Frankfurt; there the last essay is the most interesting.
  13. Habermas and Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung: über Vernunft und Religion* (Freiburg: Herder, 2005).
  14. The texts are taken from what seemed the most reliable source, the site <http://www.katholische-akademie-bayern.de>; in the section of "zur debatte" click on "Archiv Debatte," then "Jahrgang 2004," then "zur debatte Nr. 1 / 2004." The translations are my own; I tried to streamline and simplify the English version as much as I could (particularly in the case of the Habermas quotations) while remaining entirely faithful to the meaning of the original.

15. Habermas seems quite familiar with the political-ideological situation in Iran as one can observe, for example, by reading his interview in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on June 20, 2002; his judgments are, however, skewed because of his own preferences or biases. There is an amusing “misunderstanding,” when in his reply, Ratzinger cited Heidegger, Schmitt, and “Lévi-Strauss”; of course it is quite possible that he may just have misspoken, as Leo Strauss is not of much interest among Catholic intellectuals. A more suspicious mind might wonder, however, whether the “name replacement” was not a delicately sarcastic one. Now as to “post-secularism,” I am not in position to say when exactly the term was launched. As alternatives I have seen “radical orthodoxy” or “paleo-orthodox, post-modern Christianity” and others. Courses including the topic have been given in places as different as Calvin College, University of Copenhagen, and University of Nottingham; London Metropolitan University has a “Center for Post-Secular Studies.” Among the books cited are John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); Philip Blond, *Post-secular Philosophy: Between Theology and Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); Christos Yannaras, *Postmodern Metaphysics* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004).
16. Hans Küng, *Projekt Weltethos* (Zurich and Munich: Piper, 2002).
17. Benedict XVI, “Europe and Its Discontents,” *First Things* 159 (January 2006): 20.
18. George Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
19. Habermas went to San Diego for the fourth so-called Kyoto Conference, where he received an award (March 5, 2005) and gave a talk on “The Public Role of Religion in Secular Context,” tracing the evolution of the church and state separation from neutrality to intense secularism. He took a similar position in “Religion and the Public Sphere,” the opening talk of a seminar on “Philosophy. Religion. Society” in Lodz (Poland), April 18–19, 2005. The process is ongoing. Thus we have a quotation from Habermas that says: “Christianity, and nothing else, is the ultimate foundation of liberty, conscience, human rights, and democracy, the benchmarks of Western civilization” (Cf. “Europe’s Faith Is Still Alive: Perhaps the Old World is not as Godless as is often thought,” *Atlantic Times* sec. 2, June 2005, 6:C18).
20. One example could be Jürgen Habermas’s *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus* (Frankfurt A. M.: Suhrkamp, 1976).
21. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, ed., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).
22. Jacques Lacan, *Le Triomphe de la religion* (Paris: Seuil, 2005).
23. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); *Grammars of Creation* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2001); and to some extent *Antigones* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1979).
24. Nicholas Boyle, *Sacred and Secular Scriptures. A Catholic Approach to Literature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).
25. Paul Griffiths, “Christ and Critical Theory” in *First Things* 145 (August/September

- 2004): 46–53. The main works discussed are Terry Eagleton, *Saints and Scholars* (London: Verso, 1987). Jean François Lyotard, *La Confession d'Augustin* (Paris: Galilée, 1998); Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: La Fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris: PUF, 1998); Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute—Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000) and *The Puppet and the Dwarf: the Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
26. Virgil Nemoianu, “Some Intertextualities at the Borders Between Religion and Literature” in Richard Aczel and Peter Nemes, ed., *The Finer Grain. Essays in Honor of Mihaly Szegedy-Mászak* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 2003), 143–59. A shorter version of this article had been published as early as 1992.
  27. Steiner, *Real Presences*, 134.
  28. Jean Guittou, *Dieu et la science* (Paris: Grasset, 1991).
  29. The months that have passed since the election of His Holiness Benedict XVI have tended, on the whole, to confirm the general directions or speculations of the above essay. (Even by people who tended to write in a somewhat sarcastic register; see for example Margaret O’Gara, “Good Pope/Bad Pope” in *Commonweal* July 15, 2005). On the one hand, we have witnessed measures such as those meant to improve and tighten seminarial activity, as well as gently, but unmistakably bring the multitude of new religious movements under the general supervision of the traditional Church structures; the good intentions of the latter were recognized along with their need to avoid straying from Church disciplines. (One example among several would be the articulations that came in January 2006 regarding the Neocatechumen movement.). On the other hand, a variety of friendship and opening gestures toward other branches of Christianity no less than toward other religions (Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and others) have been frequent. Benedict XVI met equally with theologian Hans Küng and with representatives of the Lefebvre dissidence. The common denominator of all these activities seems to me a distinction between dialog and collaboration on one side versus relativistic pluralism on the other side. Of course the future will show better what kinds of Providential orientations will ripen and grow.
  30. I would like to thank Dr. Andrei Marga, chair of the philosophy department at the University of Cluj (Romania) and former Secretary of Education of his country for indications in connection with this review article. Professor Marga is also the author of a valuable book linked to the issues raised here: *Religia în era globalizării* (Cluj: Editura Fundației pentru Studii Europene, 2003). See also the translation and commentary of Andrei and Delia Marga in their adaption of the Habermas/Ratzinger debate mentioned in the text (see note 13).