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Ten Years Later

Lessons from the Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger Debate

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*The only strength with which Christianity can make its influence felt publicly is ultimately the strength of its intrinsic truth. This strength, though, is as indispensable today as it ever was, because man cannot survive without truth. That is the sure hope of Christianity; that is its enormous challenge to each and every one of us.*¹

The focus of this lecture is the Habermas and Ratzinger debate in Munich, at the invitation of the Catholic Academy of Bavaria, on January 19, 2004.² The then Joseph Ratzinger, Cardinal-theologian, Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, and now Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, and Jürgen Habermas, who for decades has been a leading figure in German and Continental philosophy as a whole addressed the question regarding the pre-political normative presuppositions of the democratic constitutional state and whether or not it can justify those presuppositions without appealing to religious or metaphysical foundations. Before zooming in on that exchange of views itself in the second part of this lecture, I want to frame it in the larger picture of their understanding of the relationship of faith and reason because that understanding shapes their reflections on secularization and the role of religion and reason in a post-secular society, meaning thereby a pluralist society. I contend that there is much to learn from this exchange, and hence I shall conclude by drawing some lessons from it for a Christian orientation in a pluralist democracy ten years after the debate.

Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age

My starting point for considering their understanding of the relationship of faith and reason is, surprisingly, the First Vatican Council's teaching regarding a "duplex ordo cognitionis." The latter refers to a "twofold order of knowledge [that is] distinct both in principle and also in object," according to the dogmatic constitution of that 1870 Council on the Catholic faith, *Dei*

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, "A Christian Orientation in a Pluralistic Democracy [1984]," in *Church, Ecumenism, & Politics*, Translated by Michael J. Miller, et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008 [1987]), 193-208, and at 208.

² Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization, On Reason and Religion*, Translated by Brian McNeil, C.R.V., Edited with a Foreword by Florian Schuller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006). In my opinion, a better translation of these addresses is found in *Political Theologies, Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, Edited by Hent De Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), Jürgen Habermas, "On the relations Between the Secular Liberal State and Religion," and Joseph Ratzinger, "Prepolitical Moral Foundations of a Free Republic," 251-260, and 261-268, respectively. Both translated by Anh Nguyen. I will be citing from the Nguyen translation.

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filius.³ “In its principle, because in the one we know by natural reason, in the other by divine faith; in its object, because apart from what natural reason can attain, there are proposed to our belief mysteries that are hidden in God that can never be known unless they are revealed by God.”⁴ Corresponding to the epistemological distinction between faith and reason are the lines of demarcation between the disciplines of theology and philosophy. Theology, which presupposes the truth of the Christian faith, is the disciplined exploration of the content of revelation; it is faith seeking understanding of that truth-content received from revelation, with the aim of understanding the truths of revelation in their inner coherence, intelligibility, and justification. Philosophical knowledge, in contrast, remains within the bounds of unaided reason, that is, independent of the truths of revelation, aiming at the kind of knowledge that reason as such can gain by itself. In principle, both Habermas and Ratzinger share this “duplex ordo cognitionis” as a starting-point in their reflections. Still, their interpretation of the “duplex ordo” sharply differs, and that is clear from the answer they give to the following question raised by Ratzinger: “Can philosophy and theology [and hence faith and reason] still enter into any kind of mutual relationship at the level of methodology.”⁵

Ratzinger responds to this question by arguing that the “duplex ordo” “could be expressed using the formula that the Council of Chalcedon adopted for Christology: philosophy and theology must be interrelated ‘without confusion and without ‘separation’. ‘Without confusion’ means that each of the two must preserve its own identity. Philosophy must truly remain a quest conducted by reason with freedom and responsibility; it must recognize its limits and likewise its greatness and immensity.” Still, the interrelationship is such that there must be a balance of “without confusion” and “without separation.” “For philosophy and, albeit in a different way, for theology, listening to the great experiences and insights of the religious traditions of humanity, and those of the Christian faith in particular, is a source of knowledge, and to ignore it would be an unacceptable restriction of our listening and responding.”⁶ Furthermore, adds Ratzinger, “The truth of revelation does not superimpose the truth achieved by reason; rather, it purifies and exalts reason [in its own order], thereby enabling it to broaden its horizons to enter into a field of research as unfathomably expansive as mystery itself.”⁷ In short, for Ratzinger—and I would say for Aquinas, down to Leo XIII and then to Vatican I and

³ Heinrich Niebecker calls this twofold order of knowledge ‘das erste grosze Wesensgesetz des katholischen Offenbarungs-begriffs’ [the first great essential law of the Catholic notion of revelation] (*Wesen und Wirklichkeit der übernatürlichen Offenbarung—Eine Besinnung auf die Grundlagen der Katholischen Theologie* [Herder: Freiburg, 1940], 198).

⁴ Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matter of Faith and Morals*, edited by Peter Hünermann, 43rd Edition, Translated and edited by Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), §3015.

⁵ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Faith, Philosophy and Theology,” in *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, Translated by Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 13-29, and at 17.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Regensburg Address, “Faith, Reason, and the University,” *A Reason Open to God, On Universities, Education & Culture*, With a Foreword by John Garvey, Edited by J. Steven Brown (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 7-19, and at 18. Pope Benedict XVI, “Christian Faith Forms Reason to be Itself,” *A Reason Open to God*, 27: “Philosophy does not start again from zero with every thinking subject in total isolation, but takes its place within the great dialogue of historical wisdom, which it continually accepts and develops in a manner both critical and docile. It must not exclude what religions, and the Christian faith in particular, have received and have given to humanity as signposts for the [philosophical] journey.”

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, “The Achievement of Reason,” *A Reason Open to God*, 32-36, and at 35.

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John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio*—the Christian faith “is a purifying force for reason, helping it to be more fully itself.”⁸ In his address at the Catholic Academy, Habermas a couple of times refers explicitly to the Catholic tradition, as he understands it, in precisely the terms of the “duplex ordo.”⁹ Unlike Ratzinger, however, Habermas's view of this “duplex ordo” reminds me of the neo-Scholastic interpretation¹⁰—found in Heidegger, Jaspers, and Copleston, *et al.*—which is indebted more to Descartes than to Thomas Aquinas, and his neo-Thomist interpreters, Gilson¹¹ and Maritain,¹² regarding the answer to the above question. For instance, regarding the matter of “grounding” of morality and law, the natural law is always defined by Thomas in reference to the eternal law. “It should be said that the natural law is a participation of the eternal law, and therefore endures without change owing to the unchangeableness and perfection of divine reason.”¹³ Habermas isn't clear that the Catholic tradition does not hold that natural law is grounded in, rather than known by, human reason; otherwise, human reason would subvert the metaphysical order laid out in the *Summa*. In other words, while many things are known from the bottom up, as it were, they are not “grounded” in this way. In short, a metaphysics of theism is not something that may or may not be stuck onto an ethics or law presumed to be all it should be in itself. This Cartesian inspired interpretation of the “duplex ordo” claims not only a valid disciplinary autonomy for philosophy but also a self-sufficiency of rational thought. Philosophy is based solely upon a “nonreligiously informed” reason “just in case it is based solely on premises and inferences that all cognitively competent adult human beings would accept if those premises and reasons were present to them, if they understood them, if they possessed the relevant background information, and if they freely reflected on them at sufficient length.”¹⁴ Where it critically differs from any Neo-Scholastic interpretation of the

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, “Christian Faith Forms Reason to be Itself,” *A Reason Open to God*, 28.

⁹ Habermas, “On the Relations between the Secular Liberal State and Religion,” 252, 257.

¹⁰ Neo-scholasticism maintains that philosophy is self-sufficient in the natural realm of reason, that it must not be influenced by faith in that realm, and that there is no such thing as Christian philosophy. Of course they affirm that the philosophical reflection of Christians should be true and compatible with the Christian faith, but such reflection should stand on its own, being the exclusive work of autonomous reason in the natural realm, unaided by faith, and indebted to faith no more than their secular counterparts in philosophy. Indeed, the concept of “Christian philosophy” makes no more sense to a neo-scholastic than it does to Martin Heidegger. He wrote famously, “A ‘Christian philosophy’ is a round square and a misunderstanding. There is, to be sure, a thinking and questioning elaboration of the world of Christian experience, i.e. of faith. That is theology” (*An Introduction to Metaphysics*, translated by Ralph Manheim [Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961], 6. In line with Heidegger, well-known historian of philosophy Frederick Copleston, S.J., succinctly writes, “The most that the phrase ‘Christian philosophy’ can legitimately mean is a philosophy compatible with Christianity; if it means more than that, one is speaking of a philosophy which is not simply philosophy, but which is, partly at least, theology” (*A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 2, *Mediaeval Philosophy*, Part II, *Albert the Great to Duns Scotus* [Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1962], 280-281).

¹¹ Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, Gifford Lectures 1931-1932, translated by A.H.C. Downes [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940], 1-41. See also, “The Idea of Philosophy in St. Augustine and in St. Thomas,” and “What is Christian Philosophy?,” in *A Gilson Reader, Selections from the writings of Etienne Gilson*, Edited, with an Introduction by Anton C. Pegis (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1957), 68-81, 177-191, respectively. Etienne Gilson, *Christianity and Philosophy*, translated by Ralph MacDonald, C.S.B., (London: Sheed & Ward, 1939).

¹² Jacques Maritain, *An Essay on Christian Philosophy*, Translated by Edward H. Flannery (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955).

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia* I-II, q. 93, a. 2, resp.

¹⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Jürgen Habermas on Postmetaphysical Philosophy, Religion, and Political Dialogue,” in *Habermas and Religion*, Edited by Craig Calhoun, et al. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013),

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“duplex ordo” is that the Neo-Scholastic held that not only may philosophical conclusions *not* conflict with the givens of revelation but also metaphysics is a foundational philosophical discipline. By contrast, according to Habermas, there is a necessity for a post-metaphilosophical philosophy, meaning thereby that it “refrains” from making “ontological pronouncements on the constitution of being as such.”¹⁵ He explains the reason for the necessity of post-metaphysical philosophy: “The secular awareness that we live in a post-secular world is reflected philosophically in the form of post-metaphysical thought.”¹⁶ Habermas makes clear the difference between *secularistic*¹⁷ and the *secular* character of post-metaphysical philosophy. This philosophical position is, he claims, agnostic, and hence not *anti*-metaphysical philosophy, non-reductionist, suspends judgment on religious truths, and rejects scientism, its naturalistic worldview,¹⁸ and the corresponding epistemology that excludes theological judgments from the genealogy of reason. Elsewhere he says that this is “a philosophical reason which had become self-critical to break with metaphysical constructions of the totality of nature and history.”¹⁹ Again, in his address to the Academy, he says that a “nonreligious and postmetaphysical justification of normative foundations of the democratic constitutional state . . . is part of the tradition of rational law, which does without the ‘strong’ cosmological or salvation-historical [*heilsgeschichtlich*] assumptions found in classical and religious teachings of natural law.”²⁰ I shall return below to the significance of Habermas’s claim that those rights which human beings enjoy by the very fact of their humanity have no need of any metaphysical or religious grounding.

Still, Habermas insists on drawing a strict line between faith and knowledge, “In my view, a philosophy that oversteps the bounds of methodological atheism loses its philosophical

92-111, and at 97-98. Charles Taylor makes a point similar to Wolterstorff’s about how Habermas seems to “reserve a special status for nonreligiously informed Reason (let’s call this ‘reason alone’) in his essay, “Why we need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism,” *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, Edited and Introduced by Eduardo Mendieta, et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 34-59, and at 53.

¹⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, Translated by Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005), 140.

¹⁶ Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Square,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 14:1, 1-25, and at 16.

¹⁷ Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, Philosophy must overcome “a narrow secularist mindset” (140). Habermas explains: “As long as secular citizens are convinced that religious traditions and religious communities are, as it were, archaic relics of premodern societies persisting into the present, they can understand freedom of religion only as the cultural equivalent of the conservation of species threatened with extinction. Religion no longer has any intrinsic justification in their eyes. . . . Clearly, citizens who adopt such an epistemic stance toward religion can no longer be expected to take religious contributions to contentious political issues seriously or to participate in a cooperative search for truth to determine whether they may contain elements that can be expressed in a secular language and be justified by rational arguments” (139).

¹⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “An Awareness of What is Missing,” in *Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, Jürgen Habermas et al., Translated by Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), 15-23, and at 22: “Given the spread of a naturalism based on a naïve faith in science, this presupposition [treating religious expressions as simply irrational] cannot be taken for granted. The rejection of secularism is anything but a trivial matter. It touches in turn on our initial question of how modern reason, which has turned its back on metaphysics should understand its relation to religion.”

¹⁹ Habermas, “An Awareness of What is Missing,” 16.

²⁰ Habermas, “On the Relations between the Secular Liberal State and Religion,” 252.

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seriousness.”²¹ In other words, he writes: “[post-metaphysical philosophy] treats revelation and religion as something alien and extraneous. . . . The cleavage between secular knowledge and revealed knowledge cannot be bridged.”²² Summarily stated, post-metaphysical philosophy, says Habermas,

can draw *rational* sustenance from the religious heritage only as long as the source of revelation that orthodoxy counterpoises to philosophy remains a cognitively unacceptable imposition for the latter. The perspectives which are centered *either* in God *or* in human beings cannot be converted into *one another*. Once the boundary between faith and knowledge becomes porous, and once religious motives force their way into philosophy *under false pretenses*, reason loses its foothold and succumbs to irrational effusion.²³

Habermas emphasizes the anthropocentric character of post-metaphysical philosophy. Whereas the assertion, more precisely, a metaphysical claim about God’s existence that is inherent to faith’s knowledge of God makes it clear that “theocentric thinking, by definition, is not post-metaphysical philosophy.”²⁴ In short, epistemologically and hence methodologically speaking, philosophy *qua* philosophy has nothing to do with theology, and reason with revelation. On this view, as Ratzinger clearly puts it, “It must be granted, in fact, that if a reason entirely neutral vis-à-vis the Christian faith is part and parcel of the philosophical act, and if philosophical knowledge necessarily excludes any prior given which streams into thinking from faith, then the philosophical activity of a believing Christian must indeed appear to be something of a fiction.”²⁵

But we don’t have the full picture yet of Habermas’s view. He advances what he calls a *dialogical* approach to the relation between theology and philosophy, revelation and reason. He distinguishes this approach from not only the Hegelian or Marxist approach that intends to subsume the substantial truth of faith into philosophy but also the rationalistic one denying “religion any rational content.”²⁶ Post-metaphysical philosophy does not presume “to decide what is true or false in religion,” but rather it “leaves the internal questions of the validity of religion to disputes within rational apologetics.”²⁷ Says Habermas, “Faith remains opaque for

²¹ Jürgen Habermas, “A Conversation about God and the World,” Interview with Eduardo Mendieta in *Religion and Rationality, Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, various translators (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 147-167, and at 160.

²² Habermas, “An Awareness of What is Missing,” 17. See also, *idem*, “Religion in the Public Square,” 17: “Philosophy circles the opaque core of religious experience when reflecting on the intrinsic meaning of faith. This core must remain . . . abysmally alien to discursive thought.”

²³ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, Translated by Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005), 242-243.

²⁴ Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Jürgen Habermas,” 98. See Habermas “An Awareness of What is Missing,” 16, “We should not try to dodge the alternative between an anthropocentric orientation and the view from afar of theocentric or cosmocentric thinking.”

²⁵ Ratzinger, “Faith, Philosophy and Theology,” 17.

²⁶ Habermas, “An Awareness of What is Missing,” 18.

²⁷ Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 245. Habermas “An Awareness of What is Missing,” 42: “It differs from Kant and Hegel in that this act of drawing the grammatical borders [between faith and reason] does not make

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[philosophical] knowledge in a way which may neither be denied nor simply accepted. This reflects the inconclusive nature of the confrontation between self-critical reason which is willing to learn and contemporary religious convictions. This confrontation can sharpen post-secular society's awareness of the unexhausted force [*das Unabgeholte*] of religious traditions. Secularization functions less as a filter separating out the contents of traditions than as a transformer which redirects the flow of tradition."²⁸ So, Habermas holds that a dialogical approach in philosophy to religious traditions is "open to *learning* from them." This approach aims "to salvage cognitive contents from religious traditions. All semantic contents count as 'cognitive'," he adds, if they "can be translated into a form of discourse decoupled from the ratcheting effect of truth of revelation. In this discourse, only 'public' reasons count, . . . reasons that have the power to convince also beyond the boundaries of a particular community."²⁹ In this connection, Ratzinger asks the right question: "In what way is philosophy *open* to faith and oriented from *within* toward dialogue with its message?"³⁰ Well, the brief answer to this question here is that a philosopher's philosophical views is, according to Habermas, not altered from within by the ontological content of the biblical revelation and hence is philosophically open to the Christian faith. Rather, according to Habermas, the philosopher's interest in religion is only "as a potential source of insights that can be appropriated for his own purposes."³¹

To get at the precise nature of appropriation, we shall need to distinguish it from what Habermas sometimes calls "translation." The difference is made clear by Wolterstorff:

We have all had the experience, upon listening to someone of a quite different persuasion from our own, of seeing the reality that he was trying to get at even though we ourselves would never put it that way. Though we dissent from the propositions he affirms, we see what he was trying to get at. We then put that in our own words; we *appropriate* it. We don't translate *what he said* into a different language; we appropriate *what he was trying to get at*. Habermas's thought is that appropriation, so understood, is what the postmetaphysical philosopher mainly aims at in his dialogue with religion.³²

To translate *what is said* into a different language such that the translator also affirms the *idem sensus* of cognitive contents—*eodem sensu eademque sententia*—presupposes the distinction between propositional truth and its historically conditioned formulations, between form and content, truth-content and context, This distinction was also invoked by John XXIII in his opening address at Vatican II, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, and this has been viewed by many as a clear indication that he wished the considerations begun by the *nouvels théologiens* to be given continued study. The pope made this distinction between truth and its formulations in a famous statement at the beginning of Vatican II, which I quoted above: "The deposit or the

a philosophical claim to determine what (apart from that knowledge of the world which in institutionalized in human society) may be true or false in the contents of religious traditions."

²⁸ Habermas, "An Awareness of What is Missing," 18.

²⁹ Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 245.

³⁰ Ratzinger, "Faith, Philosophy and Theology," 23; italics added.

³¹ Wolterstorff, "An Engagement with Jürgen Habermas," 102.

³² Wolterstorff, "An Engagement with Jürgen Habermas," 100.

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truths of faith, contained in our sacred teaching, are one thing, while the mode in which they are enunciated, keeping the same meaning and the same judgment [*eodem sensu eademque sententia*], is another.” The subordinate clause in this passage is part of a larger passage from Vatican I, *Dei Filius* (Denzinger 3020), and this passage is itself from the *Commonitorium primum* 23 of the fifth century monk, Vincent of Lérins (died c. 445): “Therefore, let there be growth and abundant progress in understanding, knowledge, and wisdom, in each and all, in individuals and in the whole Church, at all times and in the progress of ages, but only with the proper limits, i.e., within the same dogma, the same meaning, the same judgment.” So, we can say with justification that John XXIII framed the question regarding the nature of doctrinal continuity in light of the Lérinian thesis, received by Vatican I, that doctrine must progress according to the same meaning and the same judgment (*eodem sensu eademque sententia*).

Clearly, Habermas doesn’t have the main claim of hermeneutical projects, such as the Lérinian one, in mind when he talks about “translation of their [religious traditions] rational content.”³³ Pace Habermas, given his post-metaphysical philosophical perspective it seems that he cannot be engaging in the “potentially translatable *truth content* of religious utterances.”³⁴ Still, he recognizes that philosophy “has long since appropriated biblical motifs.” Some examples of appropriation by philosophy of genuinely Christian ideas are as follows:

This work of appropriation found its expression in heavily laden, normative conceptual networks, such as: responsibility; autonomy and justification; history and memory; beginning anew, innovation, and return; emancipation and fulfillment; or externalization, internalization, and embodiment; individuality and community. It is true that the work of appropriation transformed the originally religious meaning, but without deflating or weakening it in a way that would empty it out. The translation of the notion of man’s likeness to God into the notion of human dignity, in which all men partake equally and which is to be respected unconditionally, is such a saving translation. The translation renders the content of biblical concepts accessible to the general public of people of other faith, as well as to nonbelievers, beyond the boundaries of a particular religious community.³⁵

Appropriation, then, removes the insight—say, the identical dignity of all men that deserves unconditional respect—from the revelational narrative of creation, fall and redemption and from the ontological content of the theocentric language in which it was asserted, formulating this insight in its own anthropocentric secular language—“suppressed or untapped moral intuitions”³⁶—and justified by secular arguments whose premises express the basic principles of egalitarianism in law and morality as well as the authority of natural reason as manifested in

³³ Habermas, “An Awareness of What is Missing,” 22.

³⁴ Jürgen Habermas, “‘The Political’ The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology,” 14-33, and at 32n22.

³⁵ Habermas, “On the Relations between the Secular Liberal State and Religion,” 258. See also, idem, *Essays on Faith and Knowledge*, 1.41, cited in Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Jürgen Habermas,” 99-100; and Habermas, “A Conversation about God and the World,” 157.

³⁶ Habermas, “‘The Political’ The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology,” 27.

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the institutionalized sciences.³⁷ Furthermore, given the universalization of religious freedom and the concomitant recognition of irreducible religious diversity, in assent and practice, says Habermas, “religion has had to give up the claim to interpretive monopoly and to a comprehensive organization of life.”³⁸ In all of these instances, religious traditions experience “cognitive dissonance,” according to Habermas, and hence self-reflective accommodation is required, for example, by the Christian faith, given irreducible religious diversity, the secularization of knowledge and its institutionalized monopoly by modern scientific experts, and the priority of or “the precedence of secular reasons and the institutional translation requirement”³⁹ in anthropocentric secular language. Habermas assures us that religious traditions, such as Christianity, hold on to their exclusive truth claims, with the autonomous progress in secular knowledge and egalitarianism in law and morality being consistent with their faith.⁴⁰ Still, given this demand of accommodation, religious traditions seem to be asymmetrically burdened since those whom Habermas calls “enlightened secular citizens . . . are not exposed to similar cognitive dissonances.” Habermas denies this asymmetry arguing that secular citizens living in a post-secular society must also “epistemically adjust” by grasping that “their conflict with religious opinions [is] a reasonably expected disagreement.” “An epistemic mindset is presupposed here that would originate from a self-critical assessment of the limits of secular reason. However, this cognitive precondition indicates that the version of an ethics of citizenship I have proposed may only be expected from all citizens equally if both, religious as well as secular citizens, already have undergone complementary learning processes.”⁴¹

I am not persuaded by Habermas’s assurances that their cognitive burdens are symmetrical and that the corresponding learning processes are complementary. And I don’t think Ratzinger would be either. Yes, Ratzinger agrees broadly with Habermas in rejecting secularism, scientism, naturalism, urging the importance of expanding the concept of rationality, and the like. Regarding the broadening of our understanding of rationality, Ratzinger/Benedict XVI writes, “A correct understanding of the challenges posed by contemporary cultures and the formulation of meaningful response to those challenges must take a critical approach toward narrow and ultimately irrational attempts to limit the scope of reason. The concept of reason needs instead to be broadened in order to be able to explore and embrace those aspects of reality that go beyond the purely empirical.”⁴² However, Ratzinger makes a point that highlights a crucial difference between himself and Habermas: “To cease asking questions about the origin and goal of the whole of reality [of being as such] is to leave out the characteristic element of philosophical questioning itself.”⁴³ In particular, consider Habermas’s demand that “methodical atheism” defines the boundaries of serious philosophy. This surely means that a Christian way of philosophizing, a philosophical reasoning conceived and practiced in dynamic union with, or vitally conjoined to, faith, is ruled out of bounds as a

³⁷ Habermas, “An Awareness of What is Missing,” 21.

³⁸ Habermas, “On the Relations between the Secular Liberal State and Religion,” 259.

³⁹ Habermas, “Religion in the Public Square,” 15.

⁴⁰ Habermas, “Religion in the Public Square,” 14.

⁴¹ Habermas, “Religion in the Public Square,” 15-16.

⁴² Pope Benedict XVI, *A Reason Open to God*, 238, and also 29-32, and 61.

⁴³ Ratzinger, “Faith, Philosophy and Theology,” 21.

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sham.⁴⁴ Also, consider his disavowing, or at least forgoing, metaphysics from philosophical inquiry, which leads to a notion of rationality that is not inherently “open to God.” On Habermas’s view, philosophy cannot be open to faith and hence oriented from within toward dialogue with the Christian faith because he thinks—given his methodical atheism—that to take seriously “the answers of the Christian faith . . . is to cut off the path of thought.” Ratzinger disagrees. “Might it not be that it is only such answers that give questions their true depth and drama? Could it not be that they radicalize not only questioning but thinking itself, setting it on its path instead of obstructing it?”⁴⁵

This is particularly the case if the prior claim of the biblical revelation itself advances an ontological judgment, as Ratzinger puts it, “when it professes the existence of God, indeed, of a God who has power over reality as a whole.” This is, Ratzinger adds, “a statement about reality as it is in itself.” Christianity has hitched its philosophical wagon, as it were, with the movement of the logos against the myth, with the God of philosophers against the gods of religion, or as he also puts it, “against the myth of mere custom for the truth of being.”⁴⁶ He says:

This breakthrough [from mythos to logos] in thinking about God to a fundamental claim on human reason as such is wholly evident in the religious critique of the prophets and the biblical wisdom literature. If the prophets ridicule man-made idols with mordant acerbity and set the only real God in contrast to them, in the wisdom books the same spiritual movement is at work as among the pre-Socratics at the time of the early Greek enlightenment. To the extent that the prophets see in the God Israel the primordial creative ground of all reality, it is quite clear that what is taking place is a religious critique for the sake of a correct understanding of this reality itself. Here the faith of Israel unquestionably steps beyond the limits of a single people’s peculiar worship: it puts forth a universal claim, whose universality has to do with being rational. Without the prophetic religious critique, the universalism of Christianity would have been unthinkable. It was this critique which, in the very heart of Israel itself, prepared that synthesis of Hellas and the Bible which the Fathers labored to achieve. For this reason, it is incorrect to reduce the concepts *logos* and *aletheia*, upon which John’s Gospel centers the Christian message, to a strictly Hebraic interpretation, as if *logos* meant “word” merely in the sense of God’s speech in history, and *aletheia* signified nothing more than “trustworthiness” or “fidelity.” For the very same reason, there is no basis for the opposite accusation that John distorted biblical thought in the direction of Hellenism. On the contrary, he stands in the classical sapiential tradition. It is precisely in John’s writings that one can study, both in its origins and in its outcome, the inner

⁴⁴ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, 1998, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 76.

⁴⁵ Ratzinger, “Faith, Philosophy and Theology,” 17-18.

⁴⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *A Reason Open to God*, 31. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, Translated by J.R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004 [1968]), Chapter 3. See also, Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture, The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism*, Gifford Lectures, 1992-1993 (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1993), for extensive support to Ratzinger’s thesis about the swing from mythos to logos.

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movement of biblical faith in God and biblical Christology toward philosophy
philosophical inquiry.⁴⁷

The upshot of this long passage is in the concluding sentence where Ratzinger suggests that the fundamental affirmation of “Christ the Logos” radicalizes philosophical reflection by setting it on a path where philosophy inquires about truth, being and reason. Implicit, then, in this fundamental affirmation is a two-part statement: “1. In the Christian faith, *reason* comes to light; precisely as faith it demands *reason*. 2. Reason comes to light through the Christian *faith*; reason presupposes the *faith* as its living space.”⁴⁸ This is not just a claim about theological method as the project of faith seeking understanding (*fides quarens intellectum*). Rather, it “expresses the conviction that what is reasonable, indeed, fundamental reason itself, comes to light in the Christian faith.” What exactly does the biblical revelation that Christ is Logos bring to light about fundamental reason itself? That is, says Ratzinger, “it means to say that the very foundation of being is reason, and that reason is not a random byproduct of the ocean of irrationality from which everything actually sprang.”⁴⁹

Thus, on the one hand, the reasonableness of reality must be understood as an essential conviction of the Christian faith. On the other hand, as philosophical reason sets out on her search for truth, Ratzinger adds, “faith commissions her to recognize in the faith the prerequisite that makes her [reason’s] own operation possible and not to pursue her claim to comprehensiveness to the point of abolishing her own foundation, for that would mean that she was mistaking herself for divine reason and thereby abandoning communication with the divine reason on which her life depends.”⁵⁰ That is, in response to the question as to how the mind and language are fit to grasp the reality of things as they are, Ratzinger answers that the intellectual structure of the human subject and the objective structure of reality coincide because “it is ‘one’ reason that links them both.” In short, “our reason could not discover this other reason were there not an identical antecedent reason for both.”⁵¹ This means that theocentric thinking, for whom God is *prima veritas*, in God, and only in God, are knowledge and reality, not only in correspondence, but directly known to correspond. Only in him do truth and knowledge of truth, alethiology and epistemology, coincide.⁵² Consequently, continues Ratzinger, “if it [reason] no longer recognizes this prerequisite for its own existence and exaggerates its own absolute character beyond this previously assumed absoluteness of the truth, it reverts by an inner logic to a justification of the irrational and makes reason itself out to be an irrational accident.”⁵³ In conclusion of this section and in preparation for the next, let me say that if Habermas aims at learning from the Christian tradition, as he insists, then it is

⁴⁷ Ratzinger, “Faith, Philosophy and Theology,” 24-25.

⁴⁸ Ratzinger, “Theology and Church Politics,” 148.

⁴⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, “Theology and Church Politics [1980],” in *Church, Ecumenism, & Politics*, 148-159, and at 148.

⁵⁰ Ratzinger, “Theology and Church Politics,” 149.

⁵¹ Pope Benedict XVI, “The Harmony of Faith and Knowledge,” 92.

⁵² Pope Benedict XVI, “The Objective Structure of the Universe and the Intellectual Structure of the Human Being Coincide,” in *A Reason Open to God*, 268-271, and at 270: “The objective structure of the universe and the intellectual structure of the human being coincide: the subjective reason and the objectified reason in nature are identical. In the end it is ‘one’ reason that links both and invites us to look to a unique creative Intelligence.” This is the view of Thomas Aquinas and Herman Bavinck.

⁵³ Ratzinger, “Theology and Church Politics,” 149.

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unacceptable to insist on a “post-metaphysical standpoint.” “The secular awareness that we live in a post-secular world is reflected philosophically in the form of post-metaphysical thought.” Christian orthodoxy demurs. Given the priority Habermas ascribes to the “secularization of knowledge” and the corresponding post-metaphysical standpoint, he “takes it for granted that human knowledge is self-sufficient, and in no need of any metaphysical, or religious grounding.”⁵⁴ But philosophical inquiry must address the question regarding the implication of whether or not God exists. There are only two options in response to this question.

Either one recognizes the priority of reason, of creative Reason that is at the beginning of all things and is the principle of all things—the priority of reason is also the priority of freedom—or one holds the priority of the irrational, inasmuch as everything that functions on our earth and in our lives would be only accidental, marginal, an irrational result—reason would be a product of irrationality.⁵⁵

Ratzinger invites human reason, philosophical inquiry, to set out ever anew in its search of what is true and good, indeed, in search of God. Says Ratzinger, “The Question of God is the *Crucial Question*.” He explains: “The theological horizon can and should value all the resources of reason. The question of the Truth and the Absolute—the question of God—is not abstract investigation divorced from daily life, but is the *crucial question* on which the discovery of the meaning of the world and life defends.”⁵⁶ According to Ratzinger, God himself is Logos, the rational primal ground of all that is real, the creative reason that is the origin of the world and that is reflected in the world. It is here that the idea of universal human rights, rooted in the nature of the person, and drawing their legitimacy in the objective and inviolable demands of a universal moral law, finds its deepest metaphysical foundations.

The “end of metaphysics,” which in broad sectors of modern philosophy is imposed as an irreversible fact, has led to juridical positivism, which today especially has taken on the form of a theory of consensus: if reason is no longer able to find the way to metaphysics as the source of law, the state can only refer to the common convictions of its citizens’ values, convictions that are reflected in the democratic consensus. Truth does not create consensus, and consensus does not create truth as much as it does a common ordering. The majority determines what must be regarded as true and just. In

⁵⁴ Roger Trigg, *Religion in Public Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 43.

⁵⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, “The Harmony of Faith and Knowledge,” in *The Garden of God, Toward a Human Ecology*, With a Foreword by Archbishop Jean-Louis Bruguès (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 91-94, and at 93. See also, in this book, the Easter Vigil Homily, April 23, 2011, “The World is a Product of Creative Reason,” 65-71, and at 68. Elsewhere Ratzinger writes, “Is the world to be understood as originating from a creative intellect or as arising out of a combination of probabilities in the realm of the absurd” (“Faith, Philosophy and Theology,” 25).

⁵⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, “The Question of God is the *Crucial Question*,” in *A Reason Open to God*, 244-248, and at 245. Josef Schmidt, S.J., “A Dialogue in Which there Can Only Be Winners,” in *Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, 59-71, and at 70. “The question concerning the metaphysical constitution of this . . . reality cannot be rejected, however, and faith can recognize in this the point of departure for the enduring discussion-worthiness of the idea of God.”

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other words, law is exposed to the whim of the majority and depends on awareness of the values of the society at any given moment, which, in turn, is determined by a multiplicity of factors. This is manifested concretely by the progressive disappearance of the fundamentals of law inspired by the Christian tradition.⁵⁷

I zoom in now on the exchange between Habermas and Ratzinger in order to show the philosophical relevance, indeed, necessity of metaphysical and religious grounding.

The Pre-political Foundations of the State

There are two major questions addressed in the Habermas and Ratzinger exchange. First, can the normative bases of the validity of a free, secular democratic constitutional state, governed in its innermost core by the rule of law and human rights, be justified independently of religious and metaphysical grounding? Second, what binds us together with an orientation to the common good in a democratic constitutional state in which the freedom of the individual to order his own life is declared to be the real goal of societal life? Both these questions pertain to pre-political foundations.

I shall limit myself to the first question in this lecture. In reply to the first question, Habermas says “yes.” He attempts to justify “a rational law that does without the ‘strong’ cosmological or salvation historical assumptions found in classical and religious teachings of natural law.”⁵⁸ The difference between a “strong” and a “weak” justification of the validity of law and human rights is that the former thinks there is a “deficit of validity” without a metaphysical or religious grounding—this is Ratzinger’s view—whereas the latter thinks that, according to Habermas, “the liberal state is self-sufficient with regard to its need for legitimation, that is, that it can draw upon the resources of a set of arguments that are independent of religious and metaphysical traditions.”⁵⁹ What, then, are the “normative contents” of a secular democratic constitutional state that needs justification?

Habermas argues that secular justification of the democratic process is possible in virtue of two components that make up the practice of democratic self-determination, or the deliberative mode of democratic will formation: first, the equal participation of all citizens in the democratic process, guaranteeing the basis of mutual respect among them as free and equal members of the political community—this is the core of civic solidarity that interconnects democracy and human rights from the very outset; and second, the epistemic dimension of a deliberation that can be justified in light of generally accessible reasons—the so-called nonreligiously informed use of reason—and that grounds the presumption of rationally acceptable outcomes. “This grounding strategy refers to the constitution that the consociated citizens give to themselves and not to the domestication of an existing state authority, as the

⁵⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, “Crises of Law,” in *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI, His Central Writings & Speeches*, Edited by John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne, Introduction by D. Vincent Twomey, SVD (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 376-380, and at 376-377.

⁵⁸ Habermas, “On the Relations between the Secular Liberal State and Religion,” 252.

⁵⁹ Habermas, “On the Relations between the Secular Liberal State and Religion,” 253.

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latter should be created only through the democratic drafting of the constitution. A 'constituted' (rather than a merely constitutionally tamed) state authority is governed to its very core, so that the law completely penetrates political authority."⁶⁰ In addition, says Habermas, "the legal institutionalization of the procedure of democratic legislation requires that *both* liberal *and* political basic rights [*Grundrechte*] be guaranteed simultaneously" because "democracy and human rights co-originally interpenetrate each other in the process of drawing up constitutions."⁶¹ In reply to the criticism that the free, secularized democratic constitutional state cannot itself guarantee the foundations of its validity—of law and of human rights—and hence is in need of pre-political metaphysical, or religious, grounding, Habermas says that this conclusion overlooks "the point that systems of law can be legitimated only in a self-referential manner, that is, on the basis of legal procedures born of democratic procedures."⁶²

In response to Habermas, Ratzinger is unpersuaded by his ultimate appeal to democratic procedures, that is, to the idea, as Habermas puts it, "whereby legitimacy is generated by legality."⁶³ Some four years after his exchange with Habermas, Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, addressed the members of the General Assembly of the United Nations, making a point aimed at positions like those of Habermas:

Experience shows that legality often prevails over justice when the insistence upon rights makes them appear as the exclusive result of legislative enactments or normative decisions taken by the various agencies of those in power. When presented purely in terms of legality, rights risk becoming weak propositions divorced from the ethical and rational dimension which is their foundation and their goal. The *Universal Declaration*, rather, has reinforced the conviction that respect for human rights is principally rooted in unchanging justice, on which the binding force of international proclamations is also based. . . . Since rights and the resulting duties follow naturally from human interaction, it is easy to forget that they are the fruit of a commonly held sense of justice built primarily upon solidarity among the members of society, and hence valid at all times and for all peoples. . . . Human rights, then, must be respected as an expression of justice, and not merely because they are enforceable through the will of legislators.⁶⁴

In his Address to Representatives of British Society, Benedict XVI raises the same point about where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found. "Each generation, as it seeks to advance the common good, must ask anew: what are the requirements that governments may reasonably impose upon citizens, and how far do they extend? By appeal to what authority can moral dilemmas be resolved? These questions take us directly to the ethical foundations of civil discourse. If the moral principles underpinning the democratic process are themselves

⁶⁰ Habermas, "On the Relations between the Secular Liberal State and Religion," 252-253.

⁶¹ Habermas, "On the Relations between the Secular Liberal State and Religion," 25-26.

⁶² Habermas, "On the Relations between the Secular Liberal State and Religion," 27.

⁶³ Habermas, "On the Relations between the Secular Liberal State and Religion," 28.

⁶⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, Meeting with the Members of the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization, New York, Friday, April 18, 2008.

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determined by nothing more solid than social consensus, then the fragility of the process becomes all too evident—herein lies the real challenge for democracy.”⁶⁵

Furthermore, adds Ratzinger, “Since unanimity among people is rarely achieved, democratic will-formation must rely on one of two essential tools, either delegation or majority decision, in which, according to the importance of a question, different ratios for a majority might be required. But majorities too can be blind or unjust. History makes this quite clear. When a majority, however large it may be, represses a minority—for example, a religious or a racial one—by means of oppressive laws, can one still speak of justice, of law?” Ratzinger explains: “It is in this way that the principle of majority rule still leaves the question of the ethical bases of the law unanswered, still leaves open the question whether there is anything that can never become law, that is anything that always remains unlawful in essence or, conversely, anything that by its very nature is unalterably a right and precedes every majority decision and must be respected by it”⁶⁶ What things are these?

Briefly, these are the normative elements in, for instance, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) that define some inalienable rights of the human person. Such rights transcend the positive law of states, serving both as a reference and norm for a lawmaker. They are pre-political rights, possessing objective existence, existing prior to any decision of the lawmaker. Yes, democracy is necessary precisely in order to secure and protect these rights. But as Ratzinger says, “Law and freedom can never mean robbing another person of his rights. And this means that a basic element of truth, namely, ethical truth, is indispensable to democracy.”⁶⁷ Continues Ratzinger: “Modernity has formulated a reserve of such normative elements in the different declarations of human rights, thereby withdrawing them from the discretion of majorities. Now, one may well, in the present state of affairs, be content with the inner evidence of these values. But even such a deliberate restriction of the question has a philosophical nature. There are, then, values that follow, in and of themselves, from the essence of human existence and that are, for that reason, inviolable for everyone who is human.”⁶⁸ Ratzinger gives the following examples of unconditional values: it is never right to kill innocent persons, equality of men regardless of race, the equal dignity of the sexes, freedom of thought and belief, and the right to life for every person, that is, the inviolability of human life in all its phases from conception to natural death, and others.

What, then, are the presuppositions of law, the deeper grounds for law and human rights other than legality? The brief answer to this question here is that these rights would be incomprehensible without the presupposition that man as such, in virtue of his human nature, is the subject of rights.⁶⁹ Human rights are “rights inherent in every person and prior to any Constitution and state legislature.” Such rights acknowledge, protect and secure, the worth and dignity of every individual as a human being irrespective of race, ethnicity, creed, political views, or social class. Indeed, human rights are universal because “there is a human nature

⁶⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, “Religion: Vital Contributor to the National Conversation,” in *A Reason Open to God*, 211-216, and at 212-213.

⁶⁶ Ratzinger, “The Prepolitical Moral Foundations of a Free Republic,” 262-263.

⁶⁷ Ratzinger, “What is Truth? The Significance of Religious and Ethical Values in a Pluralistic Dignity,” in *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, Translated by Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 53-72, and at 55.

⁶⁸ Ratzinger, “The Prepolitical Moral Foundations of a Free Republic,” 263.

⁶⁹ Ratzinger, “The Prepolitical Moral Foundations of a Free Republic,” 266.

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shared by everyone.” Such rights manifest the genuine dignity and objective value that every individual person actually possesses—an intrinsic value of the objective order of creation not only linked to our human nature but also to a universal moral order, which is evidence that “we do not live in an irrational or meaningless world.”⁷⁰ Here we return to the fundamental question whether the objective reason that manifests itself in nature presupposes a creative a *Creator Spiritus*.

As I argued earlier, Christians would see this universal moral order, or a moral logic, as John Paul II called it,⁷¹ which is built into human life reflecting the objective and inviolable demands of a universal moral law, “as connected with Creation and the Creator.”⁷² Furthermore, adds Ratzinger, “man’s existence bears in itself values and norms that are to be found but not invented,”⁷³ which is the reflection of a law that derives from nature and nature’s God. These human rights are correlative to duties. There is a limitation of the language of rights, however. Rights are not separate entities; rights are intelligible only in terms of duties, and duties must be reduced to principles. Moreover, natural human rights are not cultural constructions for they are grounded in an objective ontological criterion, a higher order of moral reality that depends on truth, corresponding to true requirements of human existence. At its core here is “the absoluteness that must be affirmed with regard to human dignity and human rights. This is antecedent to every law promulgated by the state. . . . This validity of human dignity, which counts before all political action and decision making, points ultimately to the Creator. It is only he who can posit laws that are rooted in the essence of man and that no one may alter. This means that an essential Christian inheritance is codified here in its own special form of validity. The fact that there exist values that no one may manipulate is the real guarantee of our freedom and of our human greatness. Faith sees therein the mystery of the Creator and of the divine likeness that he has bestowed on man. Hence, this proposition protects an essential element of the Christian identity of Europe in a formulation that even the nonbeliever can understand.”⁷⁴ Essential elements of Europe’s cultural heritage, such as, “the conviction that there is a Creator God is what gave rise to the idea of human rights, the idea of equality of all people before the law, the recognition of the inviolability of human dignity in every single person, and the awareness of people’s responsibility for their actions. Our cultural memory is shaped by these rational insights.”⁷⁵

In this connection, Ratzinger notes that this complex of ideas—the legal enactment of the unconditional value and dignity of man, of freedom, equality, together with the principles of a democratic constitutional state, and of the rule of law in society—that entails an image of man, a moral option, and a concept of law that is a pre-political foundation is not at all self-explanatory, possessing a genuinely evidential character that a “nonreligiously informed reason,” that is, unaided reason could perceive. Rather, adds Ratzinger, “The developments of

⁷⁰ John Paul II’s “Address to the United Nations General Assembly,” October 5, 1995, in *Make Room for the Mystery of God: Visit of John Paul II to the USA 1995* (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1995), 20-21.

⁷¹ John Paul II’s “Address to the United Nations General Assembly,” 21.

⁷² Ratzinger, “The Prepolitical Moral Foundations of a Free Republic,” 266.

⁷³ Ratzinger, “The Prepolitical Moral Foundations of a Free Republic,” 266.

⁷⁴ Ratzinger, “Europe’s Identity,” in *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, 129-150, and at 146-147.

⁷⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, “The Listening Heart: reflections on the Foundations of Law,” in *A Reason Open to God*, 216-224, and at 223.

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the twentieth century have taught us that this evidential character—as the subsistence and reliable basis of all freedom—no longer exists. It is perfectly possible for reason to lose sight of essential values.”⁷⁶ This is precisely where the Christian tradition remains a vital force in civil society in restoring the moral dimension and rational dimension knowledge of its evidential quality that was lost when the historical basis of a culture and the ethical-religious insights that it preserves were no longer taken seriously will it contribute to the legitimation process of a democratic constitutional state. In order to grasp the evidential quality of these unconditional values a corresponding moral consciousness must be developed anew. In short, the “truth about the good supplied by the Christian tradition becomes an insight of human reason and hence a rational principle.”⁷⁷

In other words, Christianity is considered here as the source of moral knowledge, antecedent to the political action on which it sheds light. Christianity, not as a revealed religion, but Christianity as a leaven and a form of life which has proved its worth in the course of history. “The Catholic tradition maintains that the objective norms governing right action are accessible to reason, prescinding from the content of revelation.” In other words, Christianity “has pointed to nature and reason as the true sources of law—and to the harmony of objective and subjective reason, which naturally presupposes that both spheres are rooted in the creative reason of God.” According to this understanding, Ratzinger adds, “the role of religion in political debate is not so much to supply these norms, as if they could not be known by nonbelievers—still less to propose concrete political solutions, which would lie altogether outside the competence of religion—but rather to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles. This ‘corrective’ role of religion vis-à-vis is not always welcomed, though, partly because distorted forms of religion, such as sectarianism and fundamentalism, can be seen to create serious social problems themselves. And in their turn, these distortions of religion arise when insufficient attention is given to the purifying and structuring role of reason within religion. It is a two-way process. Without the corrective supplied by religion, though, reason too can fall prey to distortions, as when it is manipulated by ideology or applied in a partial way that fails to take full account of the dignity of the human person.”⁷⁸ Christian faith, argues Ratzinger, has proved to be the most universal and rational religious culture. Even today, it offers reason the basic structure of moral insight which, if it does not actually lead to some kind of evidential quality, at least furnishes the basis of a rational moral faith without which no society can endure. In sum, the state may and must acknowledge the basic values without which it would not have come into being and without which it cannot survive. “*A state based on abstract, ahistorical reason has no future.*” Here in this pithy formulation we find Ratzinger’s rejection of Habermas’s “nonreligiously informed reason” because the Christian faith forms reason to be fully itself.

If reason, out of concern for its alleged purity, becomes deaf to the great message that comes to it from Christian faith and wisdom, then it withers like to a tree whose roots

⁷⁶ Ratzinger, “Freedom, Law, and the Good, Moral Principles in Democratic Societies,” in *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, 45-52, and at 50.

⁷⁷ Ratzinger, “What is Truth? The Significance of Religious and Ethical Values in a Pluralistic Dignity,” 64.

⁷⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, “Religion: Vital Contributor to the National Conversation,” 213-214, and 219.

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can no longer reach the waters that give it life. It loses the courage for truth and thus becomes not greater, but smaller. Applied to our European culture, this means: if our culture seeks only to build itself on the basis of the circle of its own argumentation, on what convinces it at the time, and if—anxious to preserve its secularism—it detaches itself from its life-giving roots, then it will not become more reasonable or purer, but will far apart and disintegrate.⁷⁹

This means in practical terms that we Christians must join all our fellow citizens in elaborating a moral justification of law and of justice that is nourished by fundamental Christian insights, no matter how the individual would justify these and no matter how he connects them to the totality of his life. However, such shared rational convictions will be possible, and “right reason” will not forget how to see, only if we live our own inheritance vigorously and purely. This will make its inherent power of persuasion visible and effective in society as a whole.

Lessons from Habermas and Ratzinger for a Christian Orientation in a Pluralist Democracy

I turn now to state four lessons from this debate for a Christian orientation in a pluralist democracy.

First, the upshot of this debate is that there is a basic difference between a *secularistic* society and its attending thinly-disguised totalitarianism (to borrow a phrase from John Paul II⁸⁰) that squeezes religion out of the public realm by privatizing it to a religious realm in which it makes no difference, purporting to leave us with a “naked public square,” on the one hand, and a post-secular or pluralist society, on the other, in which reasoned public debate between the religious and irreligious, engaged in a mutual learning process, about the foundations of society is necessary. Habermas is right that “The secularization of the state is not the same as the secularization of society.” Religious communities play a vital role in civil society and the public square. Deliberative politics and its corresponding ethics of citizenship entail the duty of reciprocal accountability of all citizens, religious and secular citizens. The latter, in particular, says Habermas, “are obliged not to publicly dismiss religious contributions to political opinion and will formation as mere noise, or even nonsense, from the start. Secular and religious citizens must meet in their public use of reason at eye level. For a democratic process the contributions of one-side are no less important than those of other side.”⁸¹ Ratzinger registers his broad agreement with Habermas’s remarks about a post-secular society, that is, the willingness to learn and mutual self-limitation between religious and secular citizens.⁸²

Second, Ratzinger holds, rightly in my claim, that the Christian faith’s claim to truth is *per se* a public claim. Of course he insists that this claim “must not be detrimental to the

⁷⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, “Christian Faith Forms Reason to be Itself,” *A Reason Open to God*, 29.

⁸⁰ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Centesimus Annus*, May 1, 1991, no. 46.

⁸¹ Habermas, “‘The Political’ The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology,” 26.

⁸² Ratzinger, “The Prepolitical Moral Foundations of a Free Republic,” 267.

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pluralism and religious tolerance of the state.” Significantly, however, Ratzinger urges that “from this one cannot conclude that the state is completely neutral with respect to values. The state must recognize that a fundamental system of values based on Christianity is the precondition for its existence. In this sense it simply has to know its historical place, so to speak: the ground from which it cannot completely detach itself without falling apart. It has to learn that there is a fund of truth that is not subject to consensus but rather precedes it and makes it possible.”⁸³ We find a well-articulated version of what Ratzinger is getting at in Jacques Maritain’s vision of a democratic society.⁸⁴ This involves respecting the diverse philosophical and religious creeds and traditions of contemporary society. In his public philosophy, Maritain develops with sophistication the prospects for a common foundation in religiously and philosophically pluralistic societies. He advances a *chartered pluralism*⁸⁵ that is able to explain (a) the pluralist principle in democracy, (b) the charter and basic tenets that are at the core of its existence, and (c) the philosophical and religious justification of the democratic charter. Briefly, this charter includes:

[R]ights and liberties of the human person [and] corresponding responsibilities; . . . functions of authority in a political and social democracy, moral obligation, binding in conscience, regarding just laws as well as the Constitution that guarantees the people’s liberties; . . . human equality, justice between persons and the body politic, civic friendship and an ideal of fraternity, religious freedom, mutual tolerance and mutual respect between various spiritual communities and schools of thought; . . . obligations of each person toward the common good of the body politic and obligations of each nation toward the common good of civilized society, and the necessity of becoming aware of the unity of the world and of the existence of a community of peoples.⁸⁶

Third, Natural law is appealed to by the Church in three principal contexts. One such context has been discussed in this lecture. The Church faces an aggressive secularism that wants to exclude believers from public debate, by referring to the interventions of Christians in public life on subjects to which the natural law pertains: the defense of the rights of the oppressed, justice in international relations, the defense of human life, from conception to natural death, and of the family and marriage, religious freedom and freedom of education, and others. These natural law arguments “are not in themselves of a confessional nature, but derive from the care which every citizen must have for the common good of society.” There are three other contexts where natural law may be invoked. For instance, there is the context of a

⁸³ Ratzinger, “A Christian Orientation in a Pluralistic Democracy,” 207.

⁸⁴ On Jacques Maritain’s public philosophy, see my article, “Nature and Grace: The Theological Foundations of Jacques Maritain’s Public Philosophy,” in the *Journal of Markets & Morality* 4, No. 2 (Fall 2001): 240-268. On line: <http://www.marketsandmorality.com/index.php/mandm/article/viewFile/577/568>.

⁸⁵ This is how Os Guinness describes Maritain’s public philosophy whose influence, along with that of John Courtney Murray, S.J., he acknowledges on his own views. On this, see *The American Hour: A Time of Reckoning and the Once and Future Role of Faith* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 239–57, at 251 and 254. See also Murray’s important and influential study, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1960). 49. Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 110.

⁸⁶ Maritain, *Man and the State*, 109.

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culture that limits rationality to the natural sciences and abandons the moral life to relativism. In this connection, the natural law insists on “the natural capacity of human beings to obtain by reason ‘the ethical message inscribed in the actual human being’”⁸⁷—as Benedict XVI put it in an Address to the International Congress on Natural Moral Law.⁸⁸ Also, to know in their main lines the fundamental norms of just action in conformity with man’s nature and dignity so that a basis in reason and nature for the rights of man is provided.

There is a second context to which appeal is made to the natural law, that is, the presence of relativistic individualism. The latter “judges that every individual is the source of his own values, and that society results from a mere contract agreed upon by individuals who choose to establish all the norms themselves.” To this view, the natural law urges us to consider the natural and objective character of the fundamental norms that regulate social and political life. As I argued in the second lesson, “the democratic form of government is intrinsically bound to stable ethical values, which have their source in the requirements of natural law and thus do not depend on the fluctuations of the consent of a numerical majority.”⁸⁹

Of course I understand that the term “natural law” is a source of numerous misunderstandings in our present cultural context. The International Theological Commission described these misunderstandings and possible corrections:

At times, [1] it evokes only a resigned and completely passive submission to the physical laws of nature, while human beings seek instead – and rightly so – to master and to direct these elements for their own good. At times, [2] when presented as an objective datum that would impose itself from the outside on personal conscience, independently of the work of reason and subjectivity, it is suspected of introducing a form of heteronomy intolerable for the dignity of the free human person. Sometimes also, [3] in the course of history, Christian theology has too easily justified some anthropological positions on the basis of the natural law, which subsequently appeared as conditioned by the historical and cultural context.

And hence a better understanding is needed that responds to these objections:

But a more profound understanding [4] of the relationships between the moral subject, nature and God, as well as a better consideration of the historicity that affects the concrete applications of the natural law, help to overcome these misunderstandings. It is likewise important today [5] to set out the traditional doctrine of the natural law in terms that better manifest the personal and existential dimension of the moral life. It is also necessary [6] to insist more on the fact that the expression of the requirements of the natural law is inseparable from the effort of the total human community to transcend egotistical and partisan tendencies and develop a global approach of the

⁸⁷ International Theological Commission, “In Search of a Universal Ethics: A New Look at the Natural Law,” no. 35.

⁸⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, “*Lex Naturalis*,” in *A Reason Open to God*, 207-211, and at 209.

⁸⁹ International Theological Commission, “In Search of a Universal Ethics,” no. 35.

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“ecology of values” without which human life risks losing its integrity and its sense of responsibility for the good of all.⁹⁰

Four, Ratzinger holds that the Church cannot close her eyes to the pathologies of religion and secularism who, in the name of an ideology which purports to be scientific or religious, claim the right to impose on others their own concept of what is true and good. As John Paul II said, however, “*Christian truth* is not of this kind. Since it is not an ideology, the Christian faith does not presume to imprison changing socio-political realities in a rigid schema, and it recognizes that human life is realized in conditions that are diverse and imperfect. Furthermore, in constantly reaffirming the transcendent dignity of the person, the Church’s method is always that of respect for freedom.”⁹¹ Yet, significantly, the Catholic tradition holds that freedom attains its full development only by accepting the truth. For in a world without truth, freedom loses its foundation and man is exposed—as I said earlier in lesson three—to the violence of passion and to manipulation, both open and hidden. In accordance, however, with its respect for freedom, “The only strength with which Christianity can make its influence felt publicly is ultimately the strength of its intrinsic truth.”⁹² Alternatively put, the Declaration on Religious Freedom of Vatican II states, “The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power.”⁹³ Yes, the Church respects the legitimate autonomy of the democratic order. But her deepest contribution to the civil order and hence by implication to the political order is precisely her vision of the dignity of the person revealed in all its fullness in the mystery of the Incarnate Word. “It is only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word that the mystery of man takes on light.”⁹⁴

⁹⁰ International Theological Commission, “In Search of a Universal Ethics,” no. 10.

⁹¹ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 89.

⁹² Ratzinger, “A Christian Orientation in a Pluralistic Democracy,” 208.

⁹³ *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 1.

⁹⁴ *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22.