A Postsecular World Society?

On the Philosophical Significance of Postsecular Consciousness and the Multicultural World Society

An Interview with Jürgen Habermas

by Eduardo Mendieta

Translated by Matthias Fritsch

EM: Over the last couple of years you have been working on the question of religion from a series of perspectives: philosophical, political, sociological, moral, and cognitive. In your Yale lectures from the fall of 2008, you approached the challenge of the vitality and renewal of religion in world society in terms of the need to rethink the link between social theory and secularization theory. In those lectures, you suggest that we need to uncouple modernization theory from secularization theory. Does this mean that you are taking distance from the dominant trends in social theory in the West, which began with Pareto, continued through Durkheim, and reached their apogee in Weber, and thus also from its explicit and avowed Eurocentrism?

JH: We should not throw out the baby with the bathwater. The debate over the sociological thesis of secularization has led to a revision above all in respect to prognostic statements. On the one hand, the system of religion has become more differentiated and has limited itself to pastoral care, that is, it has largely lost *other* functions. On the other hand, there is no global connection between societal modernization and religion's increasing loss of significance, a connection that would be so close that we could count on the disappearance of religion. In the still undecided dispute as to whether the religious USA or the largely secularized Western Europe is the exception to a general developmental trend, José Casanova for example has developed interesting new hypotheses. In any case, globally we have to count on the continuing vitality of world religions.

In view of the consequences of which you speak, I consider the program of the group around Shmuel Eisenstadt and its comparative research on civilizations promising and informative. In the emerging world society, and concerning the social infrastructure, there are, as it were, by now only modern societies, but these appear in the form of multiple modernities because the great world religions have had a great culture-forming power over the centuries, and they have not yet entirely lost this power. As in the West, these "strong" traditions paved the way in East Asia, in the Middle East, and even in Africa for the development of cultural structures that confront each other today—for example, in the dispute over the right interpretation of human rights. Our Western self-understanding of modernity emerged from the confrontation with our own traditions. The same dialectic between tradition and modernity repeats itself today in other parts of the world. There, too, one reaches back to one's own traditions to *confront* the challenges of societal modernization, rather than to succumb to them. Against this background, intercultural discourses about the foundations of a more just international order can no longer be conducted one-sidedly, from the perspective of "first-borns." These discourses must become habitual [*sich einspielen*] under the symmetrical conditions of mutual perspective-taking if the global players are to finally bring their social-Darwinist power games under control. The West is one participant among others, and all participants must be willing to be enlightened by others about their respective blind spots. If we were to learn one lesson from the financial crisis, it is that it is high time for the multicultural world society to develop a political constitution.

EM: Let me come back to my original question: If we no longer can explain modernization in terms of secularization, how then can we speak about societal progress?

JH: The secularization of state power is the hard core of the process of secularization. I see this as a liberal achievement that should not get lost in the dispute among world religions. But I never counted on progress in the complex dimension of the "good life". Why should we feel *happier* [glücklicher] than our grandparents or the liberated Greek slaves in ancient Rome? Of course one

person is luckier [*hat mehr Glück*] than another. As if at sea, individual fates are exposed to a sea of contingencies. And happiness [*das Glück*] is distributed as unjustly today as ever. Perhaps something changed in the course of history in the subjective *coloration* of existential experiences. But no progress alters the crises of loss, love, and death. Nothing mitigates the personal pain of those who live in misery, who feel lonely or are sick, who experience tribulations, insults or humiliation. This existential insight into anthropological constants, however, should not lead us to forget the historical variations, including the indubitable historical progress that exists in all those dimensions in which human beings can *learn*.

I do not mean to dispute that much has been forgotten in the course of history. But we cannot *intentionally* go back to a point prior to the results of learning processes. This explains the progress in technology and science, as well as the progress in morality and law—that is, the decentering of our ego- or group-centered perspectives, when the point is to nonviolently end conflicts of action. These social-cognitive kinds of progress already refer to the further dimension of the increase in reflection, that is, the ability to step back behind oneself. This is what Max Weber meant when he spoke of "disenchantment."

We can indeed trace the, for now, last socially relevant push in the reflexivity of consciousness to Western modernity. In early modernity, the instrumental attitude of state bureaucracy toward a political power largely free of moral norms signifies such a reflexive step, as does the instrumental attitude, appearing at about the same time, toward a methodologically objectified nature, which first of all makes possible modern science. Of course, I have in mind, above all, steps of self-reflection to which, in the seventeenth century, rational law and autonomous art owe themselves; then, in the eighteenth century, rational morality and the internalized religious and artistic forms of expression of pietism and romanticism; as well as, finally, in the nineteenth century, historical enlightenment and historicism. These are cognitive pushes that have widespread effects—and which do not permit themselves to be easily forgotten.

It is also in connection with this widespread push toward reflection that we have to view the progressive disintegration of traditional, popular piety. Two specifically modern forms of religious consciousness emerged from this: on the one hand, a fundamentalism that either withdraws from the modern world or turns aggressively toward it; on the other, a reflective faith that relates itself to other religions and respects the fallible insights of the institutionalized sciences as well as human rights. This faith is still anchored in the life of a congregation and should not be confused with the new, deinstitutionalized forms of a fickle religiosity that has withdrawn entirely into the subjective.

EM: For over two decades already, you have been arguing for an enlightenment of philosophical thinking in terms of "postmetaphysical thinking." You have characterized postmetaphysical thinking in terms of the re-articulation of reason as procedural—that is, thoroughly linguistified—and at the same time historically situated, which has lead to the deflation of the extraordinary. Postmetaphysical thinking, thus, is parsimonious, fallibilistic, and humble in its claims. In your recent work, however, you claim that postmetaphysical thinking forces us to take the next step—namely, the postsecular step. You talk about a "postsecular world society" as a sociological condition, as a socio-cultural fact. In what sense, then, is postsecular reason catalyzed by

social developments and in what sense is it the result of the inner dynamic of postmetaphysical thinking?

JH: Your question alerts me to a terminological lack of clarity. The widespread fashion of distinguishing all kinds of new phenomena from familiar phenomena merely by the preposition "post" has the disadvantage of indeterminacy. Postmetaphysical thinking remains secular even in a situation depicted as "postsecular"; but in this different situation, it may become aware of a secularistic self-misunderstanding. It seems I should have prevented the misleading equation of "postmetaphysical" with "postsecular."

In considering Kant the first "postmetaphysical" thinker, I simply follow a convention. His "transcendental dialectic" ends the bad habit of applying the categories of the understanding, which are cut out for inner-worldly phenomena, to the world as a whole. This devaluation of essentialist statements about nature and history as a whole is one of the far-reaching consequences of the "nominalist revolution" of the High Middle Ages and early modern thought. The anthropocentric turn toward the world-constituting achievements of subjectivity or language—that is, the paradigm shift toward the philosophy of consciousness and of language—goes back to this revolution as well. Already in the seventeenth century, the objectifying natural sciences led to the separation of practical and theoretical reason. This separation in turn provoked the attempts of rational law and rational morality to justify obligations and world views merely on the basis of practical reason, rather than out of the "nature of things." Finally, with the emergence of the humanities since the early nineteenth century, a historical thought, which devalues—up to a point—even the transcendental approaches, forced its way through. Furthermore, the results of hermeneutics confront us with a split in our epistemic access to the world: the lifeworld that discloses itself to our understanding only as (at least virtual) participants in everyday practices, cannot be described from the natural-scientific perspective in such a way that we are able to recognize ourselves in this objectifying description.

The sciences emancipate themselves from the guidelines [*Vorgaben*] of philosophy in *both* directions: they sentence philosophy to the more modest business of retrospective reflection on, on the one hand, the methodologically proper advances of the sciences, and, on the other, on the presumptively universal features of those practices and forms of life that are for us without alternatives, even if we find ourselves in them contingently. In other words, the uncircumventable [*nicht-hintergehbaren*] universal structures of the lifeworld in general replace the position of the transcendental subject. Along the paths of a *genealogy of modern thought*, merely sketched here, a differentiation took place to which the strong, metaphysical claims fell victim. We can also think of this differentiation process as a sorting-through of reasons that alone still "count" for postmetaphysical thinking. By contrast, the statements concerning essences [*Wesensaussagen*] that are typical of the metaphysical thought of the one-all [*Alleinheitsdenken*], and the categories of reasons that metaphysical thinking could mobilize, have been *prima facie* devalued.

By contrast, the expression "postsecular" is not a genealogical but a sociological predicate. I use this expression to describe modern societies that have to reckon with the continuing existence of religious groups and the continuing relevance of the different religious traditions, even if the societies themselves are largely secularized. Insofar as I describe as "postsecular," not society itself, but a corresponding change of consciousness in it, the predicate can also be used to refer to

an altered self-understanding of the largely secularized societies of Western Europe, Canada, or Australia. This is the cause of your misunderstanding. In this case, "postsecular" refers, like "postmetaphysical," to a caesura in the history of mentality. But the difference is that we use the sociological predicate as a description from the observer's perspective, whereas we use the genealogical predicate from the perspective of a one who shares in the goal of self-understanding.

I merely choose the discussion about the secularization thesis as a starting point for a question that aims at clarifying the self-understanding of postmetaphysical thinking. For the nominalist revolution yielded yet another outcome, namely, that in the seventeenth century theology lost the connection with contemporary science that Aristotle's philosophy of nature, with its teleologically structured worldview, had offered to it. Since then philosophy has sided with the sciences and more or less ignored theology. In any case, since that time a change in the distribution of the burden of proof has occurred. Even the philosophers of German Idealism, who *assume* the heritage of the Judeo-Christian tradition, simply take for granted their authority to be able to say what is true in religious contents and what is not. They too still consider religion essentially a configuration of the past. But is it?

For philosophy, there are *empirical* indications that religion has remained a *contemporary* configuration of spirit [*Gestalt des Geistes*]. In addition, philosophy also finds *internal* reasons for this, reasons in its own history. The long process of translating essential, religious contents into the language of philosophy began in late antiquity; we only need to think of concepts like person and individuality, freedom and justice, solidarity and community, emancipation, history, and crisis. We cannot know whether this process of appropriating semantic potentials from a discourse that in its core remains inaccessible has *exhausted* itself, or if it can be continued. The conceptual labor of religious writers and authors such as the young Bloch, Benjamin, Levinas, or Derrida speaks in favor of the continuing productivity of such a philosophical effort. And this suggests a change of attitude in favor of a dialogical relationship, open to learning, with *all* religious traditions, and a reflection on the position of postmetaphysical thinking *between* the sciences and religion.

This reflection pushes in two directions. On the one hand, it turns against a secularist self-understanding of philosophy that aspires to merge with science, or to emerge into one. Every assimilation to the sciences withdraws the reflective dimension that distinguishes philosophy's labor of self-understanding from research. The methodologically oriented sciences direct themselves without mediation to their object domains, thus without reflexive verification [*reflexive Vergewisserung*] of the inevitable contribution of science's own research practices to its results. They have to pretend to look upon the world from nowhere. This self-forgetting is acceptable. It becomes a problem only when philosophers dress up as scientists to then surreptitiously totalize—that is, to extend to the world as a whole—the object domains of the sciences. For the "nowhere" that is then still assumed without reflection, and from which the naturalistic worldview of hard scientism is projected, is nothing but the clandestine accomplice of metaphysics' vacant "divine standpoint."

On the other hand, we should not blur the difference that exists between faith and knowledge in the mode of taking-to-be-true. Even if thinking about the postsecular situation should result in an altered attitude toward religion, this revisionism may not change the fact that postmetaphysical

thinking is a secular thinking that insists on distinguishing faith and knowledge as two essentially different modes of taking-to-be-true. I repeat: at most, we may call "postsecular" the situation in which secular reason and a religious consciousness that has become reflexive engage in a relationship, of which, for instance, the dialogue between Jaspers and Bultmann is exemplary.

EM: In your manuscript "The Sacred Roots of the Axial Age Traditions," you offer us a sweeping and synoptic overview of anthropological and social theory in order to explore the relationship between myth and ritual. You set out to demonstrate that symbolic interaction has its anthropological roots in ritual practices. While you acknowledge the difficulty of acquiring archeological evidence for the priority of ritual to mythological narratives, you do seem to argue that the propositional dimensions of linguistically mediated interaction go back to the evolution of ritual, which, at the very least, we know antedates their symbolic representation in the form of cave paintings. Are you suggestion that before humans became Homo sapiens, *we were* Homo ritualis?

JH: You are referring to a chapter of a work in progress. In it, I resume an old theme in light of new investigations: the origins of language, that is to say, the use of symbols that have the *same* meaning for members of a collective. In the broad temporal periods of the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, our ancestors must have had this use at their disposal at, at the latest, the point at which groups organized their living together by means of symbolically generalized kinship relations—that is, when they lived together in families. All parents, uncles, and children are assigned the same status as parents, uncles, and children. Since grammatical languages have a complex structure that—*pace* Chomsky—cannot have emerged overnight, today one rather (or, better: again) supposes a prior level of gestural communication that is not yet propositionally differentiated. And, apparently, the ritual practices we know from cultural anthropology belong to this level, even if they distinguish themselves from everyday communication between sender and recipient by means of their strangely circular and self-referential structure. Thus, there is some evidence for the view that, in terms of developmental history, ritual is older than mythical narratives, which require a grammatical language. Be that as it may, this time I am interested in the complex of ritual and myth, not for social-theoretical reasons (as in the *Theory of Communicative Action*), but because ritual survives in the communal cult practices of world religions. When we ask ourselves today what distinguishes "religion," in this narrower sense of the still formative "strong" traditions, from other world views, then these practices are the answer.

Religions do not survive without the cultic activities of a congregation. That is their "unique distinguishing feature" [„*Alleinstellungsmerkmal*"]. In modernity, they are the only configuration of spirit [*Gestalt des Geistes*] that still has access to the world of experience of ritual in the strict sense. Philosophy can only recognize religion as a *different* and yet contemporary configuration of spirit if it takes this archaic element seriously, without devaluing it *a fortiori*. After all, ritual has been a source of societal solidarity for which the enlightened morality of equal respect for all does not provide a real, motivational equivalent—nor do Aristotelian virtue ethics and the ethics of the good. This of course in no way precludes the possibility that this source, protected in the meantime by religious communities, and often used toward politically questionable ends, will run dry one day.

EM: In this same manuscript you make the following claim: "I would like to examine whether the common origin of metaphysics and monotheism in the revolution of worldviews of the 'Axial Age' also transforms the perspective from which postmetaphysical thinking encounters religious traditions that continue to make their voices heard effectively in debates over the self-understanding of modernity. Perhaps the self-understanding of philosophy in relation to religious traditions, and to the phenomenon of faith and piety in general, would change if it learned to understand the contemporary constellation of postmetaphysical thinking, science, and religion as the result of a learning process in which "faith" and "knowledge" (at least viewed from the perspective of their history in the West) have engaged one another. Admittedly, we pursue this genealogical trace as modern 'Western' contemporaries." There are actually several claims here, but I want to ask you about only two in particular. On the one hand, are you claiming that postmetaphysical thinking deceives itself if it does not acknowledge its common origins with monotheism; in other words, that self-reflexive thinking must acknowledge its common roots with the great Axial Religions?

JH: There is a certain self-deception in the secularist self-understanding of a "scientific" philosophy that sees itself exclusively as the heir of Greek philosophy and as a natural adversary of religion. That is wrong in several respects. First of all, the religious character of the Platonic origins of philosophy is misrecognized: the ascent to the ideas is a genuine path to salvation, which characterizes Greek philosophy, as we can also see in Pythagoras or Empedocles, as a phenomenon parallel to other East Asian cosmologies and religions (such as Confucianism and Buddhism). However, philosophy never took root in the ritual practices of the Greek polis, and with Aristotle, it soon took on a worldly and scientific orientation. This may explain why the path to salvation through contemplation could merge with the Christian path to salvation in the monastic culture of the Middle Ages—most closely, of course, in Christian mysticism.

Secondly, the secularist self-understanding suppresses the conceptual traces, mentioned above, left in philosophical thought by the monotheistic traditions by way of the symbiosis of Greek philosophy with Pauline Christianity. The nominalist revolution in medieval thought paved the way for the emergence of modern science, for humanism, and for the new epistemological and rational-law approaches, as much as for Protestantism and the mundanization [*Verweltlichung*] of Christianity—that is, for what the Catholic Church first meant by "secularization" from its perspective (Chuck Taylor has recently emphasized this in his *A Secular Age*). Insofar as these complex developments may also be understood as learning processes from which no reasonable path leads back to a point prior to them, our self-understanding thus simply *expands* itself.

Such an *expanding* genealogy, by the way, renders futile the alternative presented by Carl Schmitt and Hans Blumenberg. In its political and spiritual forms, modernity is not a *mere* result of secularization, a result that *remains* dependent on its theological roots—for in that case, one would not have *learned* anything. Nor does the thinking that since then has operated under the premise *etsi deus non daretur* [as if there were no God] owe itself to a mere separation from the theological heritage to which it remains in opposition. For the levels of this genealogy that have been critically overcome enter the postmetaphysical self-understanding that sees itself as the result of learning processes. Consciousness-raising critique joins a redemptive memory [*rettende Erinnerung*].

EM: The second question that is suggested by your claim has to do with how postmetaphysical thinking that has, through self-reflexivity about its origins, overcome its secularistic mentality is related to a modern, rather than a Western, attitude. Do you consider the formation of a post-metaphysical thinking, which has overcome this perspective, as an achievement that is only relevant to the West, or as an achievement that has universal human relevance?

JH: This alternative is perhaps a little too simple. Again, it is only secularism that leads philosophy astray into its self-understanding as a science. Philosophizing is a scientific activity, but predicating "scientificity" of philosophical argumentation does not mean that philosophy's generalizing labor of self-understanding is *exhausted* in science. Philosophy's royal path [*Königsweg*] is self-reflection. That is why it is a discipline, but not a "normal" science next to other sciences, and for this reason, it is not indifferent to the same extent to similar philosophical attempts at self-understanding in *other* cultures. On the other hand, self-understanding regarding postmetaphysical thinking does of course also aim at the delimitation of an interculturally shared "space of reasons."

In this, however, we must carefully distinguish between, on the one hand, philosophical analyses—that is, proposals about the right understanding of the kind of reasons that today may *prima facie* be reckoned with and, also, expected to "count" interculturally—and, on the other, the arguments factually used in the corresponding attempts at self-understanding, which provide the material, as it were, for such a retrospective philosophical analysis. To this extent, you are right: the attempted reconstruction of postmetaphysical thinking is a meta-philosophical proposal that is to apply, not only to Western thought, but to contemporary thought in general. Like all other philosophical contributions, this one, too, is exposed to critical discussion among disciplinary peers. On the other hand, when we *participate* with such a self-understanding in intercultural discourses about some *specific* political or cultural topic or other, we comport ourselves as second persons to participants from other cultural backgrounds. In that case, we do not comport ourselves as philosophers who wish to discover the characteristics of reasons that we presume to be universally acceptable, but we direct ourselves to the problems to be solved *themselves*. In this *performative* role, we may be able to learn of the need to correct our possible Western biases in the reconstruction of postmetaphysical thinking. For fallibilist consciousness naturally belongs to postmetaphysical thinking.

EM: You return to Karl Jaspers's genealogical theory of the Axial Age, partly because in his proposal we find a global, rather than restrictively Eurocentric, approach to the cognitive accomplishments of humanity. Indeed, the Axial Age allows us to think of cognitive and societal accomplishments in terms of a global learning process that belongs to the human species as such, and not to one civilization. Reading your recent text, one is left with the strong implication that you take it that we are on the threshold or, perhaps, in the thick of something like a new Axial Age. Is the rise of a "postsecular world society" an anticipation or expression of a new Axial Period?

JH: A reflective push in three dimensions may be read in the worldview development of the Axial Age: a historical consciousness emerges with the dogmatization of a doctrine that is traced back to founding figures; from a transcendent viewpoint internal or external to inner-worldly events, one can get into view the entirety of interpersonal relations and judge them according to

universal commands; and because individual fates separate themselves from the fate of the collective, the consciousness of personal responsibility for one's own life emerges. We can also describe this as a differentiation of lifeworlds in the course of increasing social complexity: a reflexive relation to traditions and to social integration emerges, an integration that now reaches beyond kinship groups and even beyond political borders; in the relation of individuals to themselves, reflexivity emerges as well. In European modernity, we observe a further cognitive push in the *same* dimensions. We observe a sharpening of the consciousness of contingency and an extension of futural anticipation; egalitarian universalism becomes more pointed in law and morality; and there is a progressive individualization. In any case, we still draw our normative self-understanding from this (disregarding short-winded, fashionable denials).

Of course, we should not view this as a linear development, despite certain evolutionary thresholds. The postcolonial encounter with other cultures in the 20th century brought to our attention the wounds of colonization and the devastating consequences of decolonization, and thus also the shocking dialectic of higher-level reflexivity. Today we find ourselves in the transition to a multicultural world society and are wrestling with its future political constitution. The outcome is entirely open-ended. To me, global modernity looks like an open arena in which participants, from the viewpoints of different paths of cultural development, struggle [*streiten*] over the normative structuring of social infrastructures that are more or less shared. It is an open question whether we will succeed in overcoming the atavistic condition of the social-Darwinist "catch as catch can," still dominant today in international relations, to the point at which capitalism, globally unleashed and run wild, can be tamed and channeled in socially acceptable ways.

EM: I would like to take the bait of that critical reference to unchained and rapacious capitalism, but that is another topic for another conversation. You argue that postmetaphysical thought must be critical of secularist seductions, and that a way of holding in abeyance such a temptation is to approach the question of religion as a "contemporary intellectual configuration" that cannot be properly understood if it is observed solely from the epistemological standpoint. In order to overcome this "cognitivistic" reduction of religion, you turn to the study of ritual and myth, and you write: "Today when the members of the religious community perform their ritual practice they seem to be seeking assurance of a source of solidarity that is no longer accessible by any other means." Can it not be claimed that non-religious citizens have been able to engage in "ritual practices" that are non-religious, and in which they can find assurances of solidarity? Take, for instance, the practices of volunteering to do voter registration, or political canvassing, marching to Washington, working in soup kitchens, visiting inmates in prisons, helping build houses for the homeless. There is a plethora of non-religious "rituals"—let us call them "civic rituals" —that can be said to give all citizens access to this sense of solidarity that you think religious citizens alone seem to have access to.

JH: In his book *After Progress*, Normen Birnbaum has described the religious roots of the motivational background of those socialist and progressivist movements in the US and Western Europe that co-determined the social history of the West for more than a century, up until the collapse of the Soviet regime. These social movements were, according to their own self-understanding, thoroughly atheist. One could speculate that in this sense, civic [*zivilgesellschaftlich*] engagements, even among non-religious citizens in some cases, retained some of the edifying and disburdening character of participation in the Sunday cult of a congregation. For, as

we know, this kind of volunteerism is one of the distinguishing traits of US political culture. What is revealed in this volunteerism seems to be less the similarity between religious and civic [*staatsbürgerlich*] *ritual* than the enduring motivational potential of a religious socialization that often continues to be unconsciously effective.

I do not think much of the fashion, widespread among sociologists, to apply the very specific concept of ritual to each and every repetitive conduct. It seems, by contrast, that the essential sources of solidarity-providing energies in the rituals described by anthropologists are those ideas and experiences that owe themselves to a very peculiar form of communication. This form distinguishes itself, first, by the *absence of a relation to the world* in a self-referential communal practice circling around itself. Second, it distinguishes itself by the *holistic semantic content* of an undifferentiated, or not yet propositionally differentiated, use of different iconic symbols (such as dance and song, pantomime, decorations, body painting, etc.). I would like to maintain that today, only religious congregations, by way of their cultic practices, keep open the access to archaic experiences of this sort. These experiences remain closed to those who are unmusical in religious matters; the likes of us have to content themselves with aesthetic experiences as a highly sublimated substitute. This analogy indeed motivated Peter Weiss to find political hope in an "aesthetics of resistance," that is, in the eye-opening and solidarizing power of an art that "breaks over into life." Even if this hope, inspired by surrealism, has faded in the meantime, there is of course no reason to now count *blindly* on the motivational powers of religion against the neoliberal desolidarization of society. As we know, these motivational powers are politically highly ambivalent. The democratic constitutional state does not harmonize with every, but only with a non-fundamentalist, religious practice.

EM: You have been arguing that the secularist ideology of modern constitutional democracies deprived their public spheres of semantic contents that are indispensable to the moral health of their polities. For this reason, you advocate greater tolerance, or even an accommodation within the public sphere, of the kinds of arguments that religious citizens could make. Now, from the perspective of the US, your call for a postsecular public sphere is in fact very reminiscent of what already takes place. What if I were to say about your proposal for a postsecular public sphere what Rorty said about Rawls, namely, that his political liberalism was the philosophical-political articulation of the political practices of US citizens? In other words, what your theory expresses is a very local practice, namely the kind of civil religion and acculturation through denominational identification that is only unique to the US.

JH: I understand why this impression comes about. My criticism is directed against the laïcist [*laizistisch*] understanding of the separation of state and church. This is a European view. In this country, in which the President publicly prays in office, the criticism that orients itself by the same principles should aim in the opposite political direction. In my view, positions that do not wish to subject the political influence of religious voices to formal constraints blur the limits without which a secular state cannot maintain its impartiality. What must be safeguarded is that the decisions of the legislator, the executive branch, and the courts are not only *formulated* in a universally accessible language, but are also *justified* on the basis of universally acceptable reasons. This excludes religious reasons from decisions about all state-sanctioned—that is, legally binding—norms. Apart from that, I do not believe that secular citizens can learn anything from fundamentalist doctrines that cannot cope with the fact of pluralism, with the public authority of

the sciences, and with the egalitarianism of our constitutional principles. On the other hand, you are right that the political cultures are already so different between our Western societies that the universal principles for the public role of religion—in general, for what we in the West call the "separation of church and state"—would have to be specified and institutionalized differently in each local context.

EM: Now, in your essay "What Is Meant by 'Post-Secular Society'?" from a discussion on "Islam in Europe" in your recent book Europe, the Faltering Project, *you refer to three phenomena that can explain the change in consciousness that you call "post-secular." First, the way in which a global media continuously impresses upon global subjects the ceaseless role of religion in fostering both conflict and reconciliation; second, the ever growing awareness of how religious convictions shape and direct public opinion through their interventions in the public sphere; and third—and this is where I want to focus my question—by the way in which in "European societies" have not yet made the "painful transition to post-colonial immigrant societies" (65). Are you suggesting, then, that postsecular consciousness must be linked to a post-colonial type of citizenship, in which citizens are linked as equals, regardless of their race and religious convictions?*

JH: There certainly is a connection between the emergence of postsecular consciousness and the new migration flows that fundamentally pose two problems for nation-states. First, the naturalized immigrants from a different culture must be integrated socially and economically, and they must be given space for the assertion of their collective identity. Second, non-naturalized, partly illegal aliens who do not enjoy citizenship rights have to be put on an equal footing with national citizens, at least as concerns their civil law status. This problem is posed, for example, in the US today in relation to a health care reform that was originally meant to include illegal inhabitants.

Classical immigrant societies cope better with the first problem than European societies that either opened themselves primarily to immigrants from their own colonies (like Great Britain and France) or to foreign workers (like Germany). In our much more homogenous—also, more religiously homogenous—societies, we Europeans understood and applied constitutional principles to date in light of our national cultures. However, the increasing cultural and worldview pluralism blasts open this fusion. We learn that the abstract legal principles that promise all citizens equal rights have to be detached from what the majority culture hitherto implicitly took for granted. One example is the verdict of the German Constitutional Court about crosses in the classroom. A more wide-meshed political culture has to form itself and grow beyond majority culture, so that *all* citizens can find a place in it.

The other problem is caused by the uncontrolled influx of economic immigrants and refugees. If I see correctly, all states have a hard time with the legalization of "grey" immigration. Your proposal of a postcolonial citizenship would aim in its consequence and direction at an unlimited right to asylum for immigrants of all kinds. Even disregarding the xenophobic reactions ("the boat is full") that are common everywhere, I would not consider such a proposal practically feasible, even for strictly economic reasons. Rather, this itchingly urgent topic directs our attention to the continuing formation of a more just international order. The constitutionalization of international law would promote a political constitution for the multicultural world society, and thus enable a global domestic politics that could tackle the root of worldwide migratory flows, that is,

that could fight not the consequences of immigration but the causes of emigration. In general, one does not emigrate for pleasure and thirst for adventure.

EM: You have been leading a seminar here at Stony Brook University in which we are studying the works of Schmitt, Strauss, Metz, and Rawls. I wonder if you can share with us your own goals in studying some thinkers that are as far as anyone can be from your own philosophical intuitions and positions.

JH: I am interested in the question of whether one can give an innocuous meaning to the normatively charged concept of "the" political, despite the various misuses of its metaphysical and theological connotations. Next to the social-scientific concepts of the "political system" and "politics." "the" political does not—*pace* Derrida—seem to find a useful place. Descriptively, the concept may no longer refer to anything but the symbolic field in which the first state-organized societies represented themselves to themselves. *The political* refers to the symbolic presentation and collective self-identification [*Selbstvergewisserung*] of those early high cultures that differ from the *quasi-naturally integrated* tribal societies by, among other things, the becoming-reflexive of a political, and that means *consciously enacted*, social integration. With the, in evolutionary terms, new complex of law and political power, a completely new kind of need for legitimation came about at that time: it is not natural that one person or several people may make collectively binding decisions for all. Only the persuasive connection with religious ideas and practices secures for the rulers the legal obedience of their populations. While the legal order is stabilized by the sanctioning power of the state, political rule, in turn, has to draw on the legitimizing power of sacred law in order to be accepted as just. It is in this symbolic dimension that the legitimizing alloy of politics and religion emerges, and the concept of the political refers to this alloy. "Religion" draws its legitimizing power from the fact that it possesses its own root, *independent of politics*, in the ideas of salvation and misery [*Heil und Unheil*] and in the practices of dealing with salvation-promoting and apotropaic forces.

But we owe the first *conceptions of the political* to the *nomos*-thinking of Israel, China, and Greece, and, in general, to the articulatory force of the metaphysical and religious worldviews then emerging. As soon as the human spirit liberates itself for the individual search for salvation from the snares of events whose flow is narratively ordered and dominated by mythical powers—a liberation accomplished by reference to a god beyond the world or to the world-immanent vanishing point of a cosmic lawfulness—the political ruler can only be perceived as the human *representative* of the divine, and no longer as its own *embodiment*. As a human person, he too is from now on *subject* to the *nomos*, by reference to which all human action is measured. What comes about finally in the West are those unlikely constellations that made possible both the ascent of Pauline Christianity to the Roman state religion and the productive confluence of theology with Greek metaphysics. It is only in these historical contexts that the thinking oriented by the concept of the political can be explained—a mode of thinking which Leo Strauss could link to the political philosophy of the Greeks and Christian natural law, and Carl Schmitt to a political theology that has left profound traces in the Christian West since the days of Augustine.

These highly developed conceptions of the political had, however, lost their "place in life" under the entirely different conditions of modernity. Still, Strauss wanted to keep open the dimension of the political, even under modern conditions, by way of directly reverting to traditional natural

law, while Carl Schmitt recognized in the sovereign rule of the early-modern state a reformed structure of the unifying power of *the political*. Under conditions of an authoritarian democracy of the masses, he wished to renew the concept of the political from the historical viewpoint of an epoch of statehood that was coming to an end. In my view, both conceptions failed, but one must beware of confusing Schmitt's clerical fascism with Strauss's excellent hermeneutical re-actualization of classical natural law. However, the concept of the political retains a peculiar pertinence in the face of "postdemocratic" developments that dispel from public consciousness politics as a possible means for the active promotion of an egalitarian and inclusive societal integration. This too may explain the subterranean actuality of Strauss and Schmitt, whose theories are being appropriated uncritically even on the left, and which poison political thought in this crude form.

It is, by the way, no accident that I pick up this topic under conditions of a paralyzing intimidation: I am astonished at the absence of every kind of spontaneous protest against the glaring social injustice of trillion-dollar bailouts favoring banks at the expense of future taxes and increasing unemployment, at the expense of the public and private impoverishment of primarily those classes, sectors, and domains of life that need government services the most.

For this reason, in our shared seminar I wanted to test, by reference to the counterexample of John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*, whether under the sober conditions of liberal, constitutional democracy, a reasonable meaning may be given to the association-rich concept of the political after all. To at least hint at this thesis, we must understand one of the consequences of the fact that the secularization of the state may not be confused with the secularization of civil society. As long as religious traditions and organizations remain vital forces in society, the separation of church and state in the context of a liberal constitution cannot result in a *complete* elimination of the influence that religious communities may have upon democratic politics. To be sure, the secularization of state power demands a constitution that is neutral among worldviews, and the impartiality of collectively binding decisions structured by the constitution in the face of competing communities of worldviews and religions. But a constitutional democracy, which explicitly *authorizes* citizens to lead a religious life, may not at the same time discriminate against these citizens in their role as democratic co-legislators. For a long time this hint of a paradox has stirred up ressentiment against liberalism—unjustly, unless one equates political liberalism with its laïcist [*laizistisch*] interpretation. The liberal state may not in the political public sphere, that is to say, at the root of the democratic process, censure the expressions of religious citizens, nor can it control their motives at the ballot box.

To this extent, the collective self-understanding of a liberal polity should not remain untouched by worldview pluralism in civil society. To be sure, the content of religious expressions must be translated into a universally accessible language before it can make it onto official agendas and flow into the deliberations of decision-making bodies. But religious citizens and religious communities retain influence precisely in those places in which the democratic process *originates* in the encounter between religious and non-religious sections of the population. As long as politically relevant public opinion is fed by this reservoir of the public use of reason by religious and non-religious citizens, it must belong to the collective self-understanding of *all* citizens that deliberatively formed democratic legitimation is nourished *also* by religious voices and confronta-

tions stimulated by religion. In this sense, the concept of "the political," thus *displaced* from the state to civil society, retains a reference to religion even within the secular constitutional state.

EM: As a follow up, I have been pleasantly surprised to hear in our seminar discussions that you have a different take on Schmitt vis-à-vis Strauss, on the one hand, and Metz, on the other. There are, as you expressed it, two forms of political theology: one that is anti-Enlightenment and another pro-Enlightenment. Could I say, then, that Metz's version of political theology embodies the kind of postmetaphysical religious enlightenment that you advocate in your own political philosophy? Is Metz your ideal religious postsecular dialogue partner?

JH: That is to express it in a catchy phrase, but it is not entirely mistaken. Metz's great merit is to have thematized the temporal sensitivity of postmetaphysical thinking without any contextualist blackouts, in such a way that the theme can serve as a bridge to contemporary theology. In part by way of Metz's influence, a younger generation of theologians emerged in Germany. This generation no longer shares the view that was expressed by the Pope in his Regensburg speech. The members of this generation start theologically, as it were, *after* Kant's critique of reason, so they do not lament nominalism as the gateway to modernity's history of decay. Rather, they also recognize in postmetaphysical directions of thought the learning processes from which these directions emerged.