

## THEORISING POST-SECULAR SOCIETY

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### Abstract

In this article, I speak self-consciously as a man of faith addressing both believers and non-believers, but with the latter especially in mind. I suggest that we are currently witnessing (i) a highly significant departure from the ‘old’ model of liberal society that championed a sacred-secular divide, where the state was (only) a neutral umpire with a deliberately cultivated attitude of ‘studied public indifference’ to the ‘inner life’ of the vast host of (private) associations that it was obliged to impartially regulate, and (ii) a transition to a ‘new’ post-secular model of liberal society that champions and promotes a sacred-secular distinction (a complementary unity of distinct aspects), where the state is obliged to rethink itself and become (also) the state of its society. In this respect, it resembles the state in the era of Christendom. I hold that Rawls and Habermas are handicapped in their efforts to theorise post-secular society as a result of their strong anti-metaphysical posture.

In the *Dialectics of Secularisation* Habermas speaks self-consciously as a non-believer addressing both believers and non-believers, though he is especially mindful of the former. In this article, I wish to speak self-consciously as a man of faith addressing both believers and non-believers, but with the latter especially in mind. I will suggest that we are currently witnessing (i) a highly significant departure from the ‘old’ model of liberal society that championed a sacred-secular *divide*, where the state was (*only*) a neutral umpire with a deliberately cultivated attitude of ‘studied public indifference’ to the ‘inner life’ of the vast host of (private) associations that it was obliged to impartially regulate, and (ii) a transition to a ‘new’ post-secular model of liberal society that champions and promotes a sacred-secular *distinction* (a complementary unity of distinct aspects), where the state is obliged to

rethink itself and become (*also*) the state *of its* society; the post-secular liberal state is embedded in and part of its society, rather than floating above it with an attitude of studied indifference to the inner life of its citizens and associations. This development is, I believe, highly desirable and well overdue. What we need—and what, fortunately, is currently emerging—is a genuinely public discourse and a genuinely public realm which embraces within itself the sacred/secular distinction and allows a real conversation to take place between the believing and non-believing members of the *same* political community. However, this requires us to enlarge our understanding of the liberal state, to graft on to the notion of the state as ‘neutral umpire’ the notion of the state as ‘the integrating principle’ of its society and of its ‘single’ collective life, and to thus see the state as a ‘unity of and in differences’ as distinct from an aloof and independently existing ‘unity above diversity.’ The strictly neutral secular liberal state, we should note, is a state not *of its* society but *above* and apart from its life and values, not a ‘community of communities’ embracing and co-ordinating the distinctive values and outlooks of its constitutive groups and cultures, but an ‘external’ adjudicator of rights claims.

The key task of the post-secular liberal state is to be the unifying principle that pervasively informs all aspects of its society. As in the case of the ‘old’ secular liberal state, the ‘new’ post-secular liberal state will continue to maintain an impartial neutrality on questions of world views, allowing each to bloom without interference, but it will also seek out threads of unity between them. In this respect, it resembles the state in the era of Christendom. It is to this similarity that we will first turn our attention (section one), before looking at the way in which Rawls (section two) and Habermas (section three) are handicapped in their efforts to theorise post-secular society. I then turn my attention to the disadvantages or burdens that both Habermas and Rawls labour under when theorising public reason as a result of their strong anti-metaphysical posture (section four) and the advantages that they would gain from an explicitly and unashamedly metaphysical approach (section five). In the concluding section, I suggest that citizens of the contemporary post-secular state are required to make renewed efforts to re-integrate their various foundational beliefs and become members of a single political universe, and I briefly suggest

how we might approach and tackle the hard task of characterizing post-secular society's 'tension toward unity' in as universally acceptable a manner as possible.

### (i) Christendom and Post-Secular Society

The emerging post-secular world is in many key respects like the 'world of Christendom'; in this world, the church (the sacred realm) had two distinctive roles; firstly, it pointed to the origin and end of the political or secular/temporal realm; in this sense, in focusing upon the point and purpose of the state in whose name governments act, it was 'above' both society and government and it exercised (or at least its proper task was to exercise) an edifying, uplifting 'reminding' influence on the secular authorities. Secondly, the church was recognised as having a secular dimension, as being itself a part of the secular (of the living socio-political entity known as 'Christian society') and, like the universities and other corporate bodies, as having a voice in the secular (public/political) realm. In this second sense, the church, like every other association, had a legitimate voice but no public or political authority; its life was integral to the life of its wider society and it had every right to be heard in the public realm and to be duly taken into account, but in this respect it was no different from every other major social institution and body. From the point of view of the state/government as a living, operational, medieval 'community of communities,' the church was but one community among others, though from the point of view of the church as a sacred finger pointing to the divine font (the state) that legitimises government, it was a unique community with a special 'grounding' role and was universally acknowledged as such.<sup>1</sup>

In this medieval world, the secular-sacred distinction was alive and well. Of particular interest to us in the twenty first century is what we would nowadays call the 'grounding' role performed by the 'sacred' for the 'secular,' that is, the way in which the 'sacred' pointed permanently to the legitimate foundations of the 'secular' in Christendom. We could perhaps call this role the 'pre-political' role exercised by the 'sacred,' except that God as the origin and end of society was deemed to be 'always already' integral to the political life of Christendom, its ultimate and everlasting justification. Importantly, it is with regard

to this first role (the justification of the political/secular) rather than its second role (its routine participation in the life of secular society) that the 'sacred' was unintelligible apart from its contrasting and complementary relationship to the 'secular' and vice-versa. The routine or mundane relationship of the church (in effect, the Catholic church) with the political authorities in the public realm could be broadly understood and articulated by considering the church as one community among others (and the state as a relatively autonomous 'community of communities') and *not* by invoking the sacred/secular distinction (and the state as ultimately grounded in the divine). The fact that the state was ultimately grounded in the divine was generally a background assumption of political life in the Christendom era and was only called into the foreground as and when necessary.<sup>2</sup> Curiously, this resembles what is happening today. At present in the West, (i) the church is being more widely recognized than ever before as having a proper influence upon the public realm, as a community with a legitimate role to play in the wider community of the state, but at the same time (ii) the church seems to be increasingly expected to provide, either by its enhanced presence in the public sphere or in some other way, a 'sacred' solution to the crisis of legitimacy currently confronting Western societies. The recent work of Habermas provides us with an example of a major contemporary theorist who is attracted by, or at least strongly interested in, this 'double role' of religious belief in post secular society.

Habermas welcomes the enhanced presence of the 'sacred/religious' in the public sphere. He is convinced that we need to overcome the communicative chasm between 'the secular discourse that claims to be accessible to all men and the religious discourse that is dependent on the truths of revelation' (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 42) by establishing a public realm which allows communication between all groups (believers and non-believers) to take place. Certainly, he is in no doubt that it is important to cultivate a unifying spirit that does not stand neutrally above, and adjudicate impartially between, our religious and cultural differences but endeavours to harmonise them and treat them as integral elements of a common political world. He asks 'how we are to understand ourselves as [national citizens] and Europeans, given the plurality of our cultural ways of life, our world

views, and our religious convictions' (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 32) and his response is that a deeper sense of solidarity and commonly held principles of justice, sedimented historically in a way of life governed by a constitution (and practically and concretely real and 'alive' in hearts and minds) must penetrate 'more deeply into the ethical orientations in a given culture' (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 34); it is insufficient, he insists, to simply grasp with the intellect 'the moral substance of basic rights' (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 34), for such a grasp, even if part of a (merely cognitive) world wide consensus, 'would suffice only for the wafer-thin integration of the citizens of a politically structured world society' (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 34). What Habermas is interested in is socio-political integration that is real and genuine, rather than 'wafer-thin.' He is firmly against 'the political universalization of a secularist world view' and holds that non-believers 'must not deny in principle that religious images of the world have the potential to express truth' and must not 'refuse their believing fellow citizens the right to make contributions in a religious language to public debates' (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 51). In this open 'dialogical' society, the key task of Habermas's post-secular state is to embrace all of *its* religious and cultural differences within *its* single, collective, integrating, and unifying life. In a section entitled 'How should believing and unbelieving citizens treat one another,' he insists that the political integration of believers (religious fellowships) and unbelievers must go beyond 'a mere *modus vivendi*' (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 48); he draws support from John Rawls's notion of 'embedding' to put the final nail in the coffin (i) of the sacred-secular divide and *ipso facto* (ii) of the liberal state *merely* as neutral umpire above religious and cultural differences, and then commends for Western societies a move towards a sacred-secular dialectic (the dialectics of post-secularization), towards an understanding of 'sacred' and 'secular' as contrasting but complementary, different but 'communicating,' aspects of a single political whole (aspects ever distinct but ever in tension towards integrative unity):

[T]he universalistic legal order and the egalitarian societal morality must be inherently connected to the [religious] fellowship ethos in such a way that one consistently proceeds from the other. John Rawls uses the image of a module to express this "embedding":

although this module of secular justice is constructed with the help of foundations that are neutral in terms of worldview, it must fit the clusters of argumentation that are employed by each specific form of orthodoxy. (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 49)

Habermas goes further than Rawls in holding that in a post-secular society ‘there is an increasing consensus that certain phases of the “modernization of the public consciousness” involve the assimilation and the reflexive transformation of both religious and secular mentalities’ and requires them ‘to take seriously each other’s contributions to controversial subjects in the public debate’ (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 46–7).

We earlier noted that, as in the era of Christendom, the church today is (i) being more widely recognized than ever before as having a proper influence upon the public realm, and at the same time (ii) the church seems to be increasingly expected to help, in a significant way, to provide a solution to, or a ‘foundational recipe’ that somehow addresses, the crisis of legitimacy currently confronting Western societies. Habermas, as we have just seen, is clear and definite about (i), that is, he welcomes the enhanced presence of the ‘sacred/religious’ in the public sphere but he mainly does so because he sees this as helping to counteract the current shrivelling up of the cultural/motivational roots of Western societies. My own view is that the latter, the decline of the cultural/motivational roots of Western societies, is both cause and consequence of a deeper crisis of legitimacy which Habermas is unable to adequately grasp, and this is because he erroneously regards the political/secular realm as a *wholly* autonomous sphere neither needing nor requiring a justification beyond itself, whereas Christendom rightly understood this realm as a *relatively* autonomous sphere that requires a justification beyond itself. Now, at times, Habermas himself almost seems to acknowledge the current ‘justificatory deficit’ of Western societies. In calling for a ‘complementary learning process’ (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 47) between believers and non-believers, it’s as if Habermas addresses an appeal from ‘those who cannot believe’ to ‘those who can’ to hold firm and proclaim their continuing belief in the solidity of the foundations (ethical, divine and metaphysical) of the enterprise of Western liberalism. He holds that ‘it is in the interest of the constitutional state to deal carefully with all the cultural sources that nourish its citizens’ consciousness

of norms and solidarity' (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 46) but in this context what else can 'cultural resources' mean, one wonders, but 'what citizens fundamentally believe,' 'what grounds their being both as humans and as members of a particular state,' 'what gives them the courage to go on politically,' etc.? However, in *The Dialectics of Secularization*, he forcefully and all too clearly reaffirms his belief 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' (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 27) and this creates serious difficulties for him in 'theorizing' the emerging post-secular state. In brief, (i) his (merely) procedural approach is inadequate to the task of justifying the liberal state (secular or post-secular) and (ii) he does not grasp the seriousness of the loss of the metaphysical/religious foundations of the neutral 'secular' liberal state. It is this loss to which, indeed, the integral 'post-secular' state is a response. This post-secular state, or what we might call 'the medieval state of Christendom under modern conditions,' re-integrates the sacred into the collective life of a liberal society and in doing so, helps to redress the 'justificatory deficit' of the secular (merely procedural and neutral) liberal state. In the following sections we will consider the way in which Rawls and Habermas are handicapped in their efforts to theorise post-secular society by their failure to grasp and acknowledge that the shrivelling up of the cultural and motivational roots of Western societies has something to do with their loss of religious/metaphysical foundations.

#### (ii) Rawls

In *A Theory of Justice* (in a section entitled 'Some remarks about Moral Theory'), Rawls (1971) makes an interesting and useful comparison between moral theory and the theory of grammar. He holds that just as a theory of grammar is concerned to provide a systematic and coherent account of the way people actually speak and use a language, and of their largely implicit and unreflective 'knowledge' of grammar, so, too, a moral theory is concerned to achieve a coherent, conceptual grasp of our everyday moral judgments and to shed light on the basic intuitions and convictions of a particular society. Now the general tone and temper of Rawls's book, as well as his expressed desire to advance a conception of justice *sub specie aeternitatis*, certainly invited his readers

to construe the light shed by moral theory as a 'universal' light, and to likewise construe his presentation of a coherent theory of our first order moral judgments in *A Theory of Justice* as an attempt on his part, not just to systematize the values and principles that underlie our way of life in a liberal democratic society, but *also* to highlight the character of these locally operative 'liberal' principles (tolerance, individualism, etc.) as media or vehicles whereby the universal becomes concrete, or as the 'systematic' (coherent) form our 'universal' humanity assumes in a particular context. However, in his later works, Rawls (1985) withdraws his invitation, so to speak, to construe *A Theory of Justice* in this way, and we are urged instead to dismiss any attempt to focus upon the universal aspect of justice as 'metaphysical,' '*a priori*' or 'foundational.'<sup>3</sup> The more communitarian minded Rawls now abandons 'universality' *in favour of* 'coherence' as the key criterion of the moral and the central concept in moral theory. However, the problem he confronts by so doing is to invite the rejoinder that coherence, *by itself*, is a hopelessly inadequate criterion of the moral. It is surely vain to hope that merely to show that there is some kind of broad coherence among our first order moral data or that there would be with only minor modifications, will somehow justify or legitimate our everyday moral judgments. As T. M. Scanlon remarks, 'however internally coherent our moral beliefs may be rendered, the nagging doubt may remain that there is nothing to them at all. They may be merely a set of socially inculcated reactions, mutually consistent perhaps but not judgments of a kind which can properly be said to be correct or incorrect' (Scanlon 1982, 106). The 'best,' so to speak, that can be achieved by communitarian political thinkers is to show that our first order moral beliefs form some kind of internally coherent system but this is a rather dubious, even pointless, exercise *unless* the intention is to show (which clearly it isn't) that each moral belief, in its place and when properly acted on, is a 'concrete universal' or a 'universal being concretized,' and that the coherence of our particular set of beliefs is itself the 'unifying form' of 'the good' (the agathon, the absolute) discerned by us, operating through us, and locally sedimented in our own backyard; otherwise, one is left wondering how the coherence of our moral beliefs 'legitimizes' them.



What the ‘communitarian’ Rawls attempts to do, but what, in my view, he simply cannot do, is to localize, relativize and de-universalize *A Theory of Justice* (and, indeed, justice itself), whilst continuing to hold that it is possible to designate a particular set of political and social institutions as ‘just.’ He states that a publicly acceptable political conception of justice (note the awkwardness and unnaturalness of this expression, as compared to simply ‘justice’) ‘provides a publicly recognized point of view from which all citizens can examine before one another whether or not their political and social institutions are just’ (Rawls 1985, 229). However, by ‘are just’ Rawls, given the fact he has abandoned universality as a moral criterion, can now only mean ‘appears to be just to them’ or ‘are seen as being just from their point of view and in the context of their history and traditions.’ If someone asks ‘But *are* these social and political institutions *really* just? Does their acceptability from *our* local publicly recognized point of view make them so?’ Rawls can only reply—indeed in ‘Justice as Fairness: Political not metaphysical’ he has replied—that such questions are based on certain metaphysical assumptions, the correctness or otherwise of which he would prefer not to discuss, and that his own conception of justice now meticulously avoids making any controversial metaphysical claims. Similarly, if someone asks ‘Is *our* conception of the essential nature and identity of persons, which is so crucial to our view of justice, a genuine insight?’ and if that same someone is interested in pursuing a lively discussion about what really is the case about our nature and identity, they will surely be disappointed by the later Rawls’s communitarian response that this question is simply unanswerable.

Certainly, Rawls abandoned the simple and bold universalist/metaphysical claim that persons *are* centers of absolute value in favour of the view that, within a particular culture, a certain conception of the person is normally widely entertained and, given that conception, whatever it empirically happens to be, certain consequences for a theory of justice follow. It was unfortunate, in my view, that Rawls ceased providing intellectual support for the conviction that our culture, to the extent that it can claim to be a particular (and relative) realization of the (absolute) good, may be justified before the wider court of humanity. He conceded far too much ground to his communitarian critics on this vital point, holding that ‘moral objectivity

is to be understood in terms of a suitably constructed social point of view that all can accept,' and that 'what justifies a conception of justice is not its being true to an order antecedent and given to us, but its congruence with our deeper understanding of ourselves and our aspirations, and our realization that, given our history and the traditions embedded in our public life, it is the most reasonable doctrine for us' (Rawls 1980, 518).<sup>4</sup>

What I would like to emphasize here is that the simple philosophical advantage of the metaphysical claim that 'persons *are* centers of absolute value' is that it is one with which our fellow human beings can significantly disagree; it is a debatable metaphysical truth claim which, if debated, can elicit appropriate modifications in the course of discussion and lead to further insights, whereas the later 'communitarian Rawls' merely refers to the widespread empirical belief that 'persons are centres of absolute value' in a straightforward descriptive manner. He simply describes or outlines what is currently the case (empirically or as a matter of 'cultural fact') in a particular culture at a certain time. Now, instead of addressing the 'justificatory deficit' of liberal society, surely this communitarian approach simply ignores it or sidesteps it, for in order for us to have a sense of the legitimacy of our society, what is required is a sense of the *truth* (even if debatable and subject to modification by universal criticism) of our cultural beliefs, of their acceptability before the court of our common humanity, and not a reminder of the *fact* that we have them or believe them. If we regard post-secular society as a response to the 'justificatory deficit' and loss of cultural roots of Western societies, the early (universalist/implicitly metaphysical) Rawls is much more helpful than the later (communitarian/anti-metaphysical) Rawls as a thinker whose work contributes theoretically to the needs of post-secular society, that is, to the post-secular endeavour to acquire a renewed sense of legitimacy and 'self-belief.' Thus, although Habermas rightly draws our attention to the utility of the later Rawls's notion of 'embeddedness' in theorising post-secular society, yet so long as this embeddedness is 'de-universalised,' regarded as a characteristic of a society deemed to be self-justifying and cut off from the light of universal criticism, the theoretical benefits this notion undoubtedly offers come close to being nullified altogether. The same holds true, as we shall now see, of Habermas's work as well.

**(iii) Habermas**

Habermas believes that Rawls, whether intentionally or not, ‘adopts a concept of justice that is proper to an ethics of the good, one that is more consistent with Aristotelian or utilitarian approaches than with a theory of rights, such as his own, that proceeds from the concept of autonomy’ (Habermas 1995, 114). For Habermas an ‘ethics of the good’ is improper because it involves a metaphysical quest for what is substantively good and really ethical, and also a search for criteria and methods that would serve to reduce the errors and risks associated with this quest. Now it could well be argued, as I do elsewhere (2009), that what Habermas regards as improper and incorrect about the Aristotelian and utilitarian approaches is precisely what is proper, correct and useful about them, whatever other defects they may have, but the key point to be noted here is that Habermas decisively rejects such approaches as metaphysical and chooses instead the (in my view implausible and ultimately untenable) course outlined in the following passage where he subjectivizes the ‘good’ and objectivizes the ‘right.’

Norms inform decisions as to what one ought to do, values inform decisions as to what conduct is most desirable. Recognized norms impose equal and exceptionless obligations on their addressees, while values express the preferability of goods that are striven for by particular groups. Whereas norms are observed in the sense of a fulfillment of generalized behavioral expectations, values or goods can be realized or acquired only by purposive action. Furthermore, norms raise a binary validity claim in virtue of which they are said to be either valid or invalid: to ought statements, as to assertoric statements, we can respond only with ‘yes’ or ‘no’—or refrain from judgment. Values, by contrast, fix relations of preference that signify that certain goods are more attractive than others: hence, we can assent to evaluative statements to a greater or lesser degree. The obligatory force of norms has the absolute meaning of an unconditional and universal duty: what one ought to do is what is equally good for all (that is, for all addressees). The attractiveness of values reflects an evaluation and a transitive ordering of goods that has become established in particular cultures or has been adopted by particular groups: important evaluative decisions or higher-order preferences express what is good for us (or for me), all things considered. Finally, different norms must not contradict each other when they claim validity for the same domain of addressees; they must

stand in coherent relations to one another—in other words, they must constitute a system. Different values, by contrast, compete for priority; in so far as they meet with inter subjective recognition within a culture or group, they constitute shifting configurations fraught with tension. To sum up, norms differ from values, first, in their relation to rule-governed as opposed to purposive action; second, in a binary as opposed to a gradual coding of the respective validity claims; third, in their absolute as opposed to relative bindingness; and, last, in the criteria that systems of norms as opposed to systems of values must satisfy. (Habermas 1995, 114–5; see also Habermas 1996, 259)

Having thus subjectivized (or inter-subjectivized) the ‘good’ and objectivised the ‘right,’ and having dispensed with an ‘ethics of the good,’ Habermas is obliged to regard value judgments (or evaluative judgments concerning what is good) as *merely* expressing the preferability of goods that are striven for by particular individuals and/or groups. I deliberately emphasize the term ‘merely’ here because it is not at all clear, and Habermas fails to say, what else these judgments express (that is, other than subjective preferences). Now *if* values or judgments concerning what is good or valuable are no more than this, then there is no obvious reason why anyone should think or feel that, to use Habermas’s words in the above passage, ‘what one ought to do is what is equally good for all.’ Why, after all, should you—or one group or society—be interested in, let alone be interested in promoting, my subjective conceptions of the good (in the end, no more than my preferences or events taking place in *my* head) or what is accepted as good by another group or society (in the end, what is going on inside *their* heads)? The unconditional and universal duty mentioned by Habermas *only* makes sense on the metaphysical/ontological presupposition that ‘value’ or ‘goodness’ has a supra-subjective, substantive existence, one that is reflected and expressed subjectively in the circumstances of our lives through our value judgments and actions, even if fallibly and inadequately.

Habermas (1995, 122) takes Rawls to task for not making a sufficiently sharp distinction between acceptability and acceptance. By this important distinction, I take it that he means the difference between saying ‘*x ought* to be widely or even universally accepted’ and ‘*x is*, as a matter of fact, widely or even universally accepted.’ This certainly seems

to be the case for he says, in relation to Rawls's theory of justice, that 'a purely instrumental understanding of the theory is already invalidated by the fact that the citizens must first be *convinced* by the proposed conception of justice before . . . a consensus can come about. The conception of justice must not be *political* in the wrong sense and should not merely lead to a *modus vivendi*' (Habermas, 1995, 122). By emphasizing the word 'convinced,' Habermas obviously means that Rawls's citizens must acknowledge (and have their own sound reasons for doing so) that the proposed conception of justice *ought* to be accepted, for if they only have a 'purely instrumental understanding of the theory,' they will be rationally motivated *only* to seek some way of adjusting the manner in which they pursue their self interest to fit in with the pursuit by others of their self-interest. To search for this kind of pragmatic agreement between competing individuals would be to act politically 'in the wrong sense' or to engage in 'mere political practice.'

Now, I would suggest that it is ironic that Habermas should take Rawls to task in this way, for his own subjectivization of value collapses this crucially important distinction between what ought to be accepted/desired/valued and what is, as a matter of fact, accepted/desired/valued, with the result that his own theory cannot avoid being 'political in the wrong sense,' i.e., leading merely to a *modus vivendi*. For example, Habermas holds that discourse ethics 'views the moral point of view as embodied in an inter-subjective practice of argumentation which enjoins those involved to an idealizing *enlargement* of their interpretive perspectives' (Habermas 1995, 117). However, if we ask what is meant by an 'idealizing enlargement,' especially in the light of his subjectivist theory of value, it is difficult to see how it can mean more than the process whereby I endeavor to take into account your, and not just my own, conception of what is good. However, a subjectivist theory of value ensures that the point of this process is *not* for me to modify and refine my conception of what is good in order to bring it more closely into line with 'the good as such' (which *would* indeed be an idealizing enlargement) but merely to assist me to successfully accomplish a workable *modus vivendi*. In the absence of a 'metaphysical acknowledgment' of a real common good uniting us, one which we all *ought* to value and desire, how else is an 'idealizing enlargement' to be construed? In all fairness, Habermas scarcely ever talks about

the 'common good' or the 'general interest,' expressions which he no doubt (rightly) regards as hopelessly impregnated with metaphysical meanings and as too closely associated with a dangerous 'totalistic' political ontology. He speaks rather of a 'generalizable interest,' that is, one that we can all live with. Likewise, Habermas claims that Kant's categorical imperative requires us to 'will a just maxim as a general rule' but insists that so long as we apply this test 'in a monological fashion, it still remains individually isolated perspectives from which each of us considers privately what all could will' (Habermas 1995, 117). Again, however, so long as the truth of a subjectivist theory of value is assumed, it makes no difference whether we apply the exacting test of Kant's categorical imperative in a monological *or any other fashion* for the acid of subjectivism dissolves the possibility of an ideal enlargement and it *still* remains individually isolated perspectives from which each of us considers privately what all could will.'

Generally speaking, those who forthrightly reject the need for an (explicitly metaphysical) account of the mode of operation of substantive reason and value, of 'reason itself' or 'value itself,' so to speak, in collective human affairs, nevertheless implicitly and indirectly present such an account in their work. In the case of Habermas, his 'hidden' account of substantive value is a kind of 'hidden hand' account. Just as a radical right devotee of Adam Smith might argue that the rules governing the mechanism of a free competitive market economy are value-impregnated (i.e., 'good' producing/facilitating), in the sense that they operate in such a way as to (somewhat mysteriously) produce the best results in terms of overall human well-being (the more perfect the 'procedural' rules of competition, the 'better' the result), so too Habermas argues in an analogous fashion that the rules operative in an ideal speech situation are likewise value-impregnated (i.e., 'good' producing/facilitating) in the sense that they too operate (no less mysteriously) to produce the best results in terms of the overall well-being of a political community (the more perfect the procedural rules, the better the results). We find, then, that the hidden hand, whether operating in Smith's economic market place or Habermas's political discourse, is always a hand of virtue or the instrument of real, substantive value and that what we might call 'procedural ethicality' turns out to be symbiotically linked to 'substantive ethicality'; the

former naturally and spontaneously produces the latter. However, we need to clearly recognize and acknowledge that the hidden hand (of ‘substantive value’) only moves and guides the ‘to and fro’ of the discourse of a deliberating political community towards inter subjective agreement to the extent that its members are themselves oriented to substantive value (i.e., to their metaphysically/ontologically real, common good) and only because the realization of substantive value is the *point* of reaching inter subjective agreement. The resolutely anti-metaphysical Habermas, however, is shy about saying this; he is reluctant to accept that the *point* of political discussion and debate is to secure the maximum degree of common agreement concerning what really is best for a political community at a particular point in time, preferring rather to say somewhat nebulously that its point is to enable the better argument or best reasons to prevail (but why ‘better’ or ‘best,’ if not informing the public good?) or to bring about a generalizable interest but not—and why not?—*the* general interest.

Habermas is similarly vague and nebulous in his usage of the expression ‘procedural reason,’ which at one point he describes as a ‘reason that puts itself on trial’ (Habermas 1996, xli). Now it is my view that the latter expression is best understood as a process in which ideas are circulated and disagreements expressed by participants in a political discussion, in order that one-sided or narrow views may be corrected, enlarged and redeveloped to become proper receptacles of the ‘fullness of reason’ or to take their proper place in the ‘tapestry of reason.’ However, Habermas certainly does not have in mind this kind of ‘metaphysical engagement’ with truth itself (or Truth); he has no sense of democracy as a deliberative process whereby reason itself (or Reason) is maximally allowed to inform our political reasonings, and goodness itself (the Agathon) is maximally enabled to challenge our all too fallible, wayward and self-interested conceptions of the political good, thereby forcing us to subject our claimed insights into the good of our community to the ‘test’ of mutual criticism, and helping us to ensure that we are on, or have not strayed too far from, the pathway that leads us towards our true collective end, the common good. However, it is by no means clear what Habermas *does* have in mind. What is clear is that he disapproves of the kind of inter subjective process where competing (but hopefully in the end, complementary)

insights into the *real* common good of a political community are shared and debated in order that ‘reason itself’ or ‘the good’ might prevail and provide the dynamism—the life blood coursing through the veins—of sound and ethical political life. Instead, he forthrightly insists that ‘after a century that more than any other has taught us the horror of existing unreason, the last remains of an essentialist trust in reason have been destroyed’ and espouses ‘the radically anti-Platonic insight that there is neither a higher nor a deeper reality to which we could appeal’ (Habermas 1996, xli). Thus, for Habermas, liberal democratic citizens (and presumably post-secular citizens) should cease being oriented to—and must no longer feel themselves justified, fulfilled, fully human and liberated in their quest for—truth and reason, but must accept that ‘in the vertigo of this freedom, there is no longer any fixed point outside the democratic procedure itself’ (Habermas 1996, 186). His discourse-theoretic conception does not presuppose ‘the identity of a reason that is supposedly able to *discover* an underlying homogenous general interest’ (Habermas 1996, 185) or the reality and identity of a unifying popular will. He is adamant that whilst the inter subjectivity of the democratic procedure may provide ‘a glimmer of symmetrical relations marked by free, reciprocal recognition,’ at the same time, ‘this idea must not be filled in as the totality of a reconciled form of life and projected into the future as a utopia’ (Habermas 1992, 145).

This leaves us wondering what precisely the *point* or goal of politics is for Habermas, for surely we should at least be able to aspire, if not to ‘the totality of a reconciled form of life,’ at least to a *more* reconciled form of communal life, with ‘totality’ as the ultimate, even if unattainable, goal. What else, we may ask, is the goal of his politics? Surely it has more than the negative ‘aim’ of avoiding a useless life or of pursuing ‘a life that is not misspent’ (Habermas, 1992, 145–6). Moreover, without the elementary conviction that there is a higher and deeper universal reality to which we must appeal, we can no longer establish the legitimacy of our political systems and enterprises. Surely, too, Habermas is highly misleading in speaking of a reason that simply sees, or directly grasps (‘discovers’) a general interest/common good, as we might directly see a mountain or discover a ravine; rather the common good has traditionally been understood, not as a directly discernible



‘entity’ of some kind, but as an ontological/ethical demand, as ‘the intimations of Being in the realm of being,’ or as a ‘true state of affairs not yet in empirical existence which issues a prescriptive political call to a political community through its public representatives to become incarnate in its life.’ No doubt, Habermas would wish to insist that the ‘common’ in the ‘common good’ or ‘common will’ can only be regarded as such by virtue of the fact that it is arrived at by means of a certain procedure, i.e., if it is formed by a process of free, inter subjective discussion, the object of which is what he calls a ‘generalizable interest’ (see Habermas 1987, 92–3, 271–2; 1990, 65–8). But it surely makes more sense to speak of the (ethical/ontological) common good *itself* as inspiring and forming a common will in us, a will that is ideal/prescriptive as directed towards an end to be realised by us through our efforts, and yet also actual *in so far as* actually formed or ‘being formed’ in us (the ‘ontological’ become empirical or ‘ultimate being/reality’ made concrete). Certainly it is true that in a democratic community of free individuals who acknowledge *only* the intellectual ‘coerciveness’ of the better argument articulated in open debate and who refuse to allow any other limits upon their freedom, the ‘inter subjective’ participatory process is supremely important and is not just a (procedural) means to a (substantive) end. Democratic ‘leaders’ in an allegedly ‘free’ society who attempt to express the common will in the absence of this crucial, participatory medium of collective self-expression are, in effect (and by means other than the force of argument in open discussion) ‘forcing their citizens to be free.’ At the same time, however, it must be said that the process of participation, whilst necessary to the formation of *the* common will (Habermas, I think, would be more inclined here to say ‘a’ common will) and normally adequate to the task, is not always sufficient. Habermas rejects Hegel’s ‘higher level subjectivity of the state’ (Habermas 1992, 40) in favour of his own ‘higher-level inter subjectivity of an uncoerced formation of the will’ (Habermas 1992, 40) but surely the ‘inter subjectivity of discussion and participation is only describable as ‘higher level’ in so far as it serves as a *bona fides* collective medium through which the substantive (ontological/prescriptive) general will finds expression. As Hegel (I believe correctly) insists, it is not (or not only) the process whereby the common will is arrived at, but rather the universality

or generality of the common will itself (i.e., this will as it is open to, oriented to and informed by its real common interest, by the 'reason and truth' of its society) which enables us to legitimately employ the expression 'higher order.' As Ratzinger remarks concerning laws passed with perfect procedural propriety and supposedly in the public interest, 'the majority principle always leaves open the question of the ethical foundations of the law' (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 60). What post-secular society seeks, more self-consciously and urgently than ever before, is a clearer recognition (i) of the metaphysical foundation and goal that legitimates its existence, (ii) of its relation to the Absolute, however conceived and (iii) of the ontological origin and end of the temporal 'empirical/political' in Truth, Reason and Goodness.

Another way in which Habermas's anti-metaphysical stand adversely affects his theorising of post-secular society is that it impedes his grasp of the damage done to the cultural sources of solidarity by Western society's loss of its metaphysical/ontological and theological roots. He is well aware that 'the mutual compenetration of Christianity and Greek metaphysics' (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 44) has had a profound impact on Western thought and that philosophy in the West has 'transformed the original religious meaning' of a whole host of key terms ('responsibility,' 'autonomy,' 'justification,' 'emancipation'), 'but without emptying them through a process of deflation and exhaustion' (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 44–5). He says that '[o]ne such translation that salvages the substance of a term is the translation of the concept of "man in the image of God" into that of the identical dignity of all men that deserves identical respect' (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 45). However, Habermas fails to see that a good deal gets lost in this kind of 'translation,' that the ontologically and religiously grounded 'child of God' or 'image of God' has a depth and substance that 'universal dignity of all men' simply lacks. It can hardly be doubted that the present high rates of abortion in Western societies are due in part to the fact that the intellectual and cultural currency of the former (the theological and metaphysical conviction that the life of each child of God is sacred from conception to natural death) has been effectively replaced by the mere (that is, 'metaphysically evacuated') formality of the latter. The 'loss in translation' here is a serious one, involving indeed a degeneration from 'form as the

living conduit of the real' (or 'form as the ontologically real with prescriptive, practical force in empirical human and political affairs') to 'mere form,' from the status of 'solidly foundational' to the condition of being 'precarious and manipulable under political pressure.' However culturally pervasive a popular belief may be (such as belief in 'the priceless dignity of man'), it becomes weakened when it is cut adrift from its theological and metaphysical roots, from its link to Being as such (however conceived) and when it becomes 'merely political' in the later Rawlsian sense of 'being generally accepted, for whatever reason, to those inhabiting a particular political community.' Where foundational political principles are concerned, it is important that they be 'empirically accepted' *because* deemed to be 'eternally acceptable,' to issue, so to speak, directly out of the heart of 'Truth itself' or from the source and summit of life and Being itself.

**(iv) Habermas and Rawls; The Divine/Absolute Public Sphere**

Another disadvantage of Habermas's anti-metaphysical posture is that he is unable to deal with the following difficulty; he wishes to ascribe an absolute or Godlike quality to the 'public use of reason' (to the proper use of reason in the public sphere) and to fully support Rawls's insistence that 'comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons—and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines—are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support' (Rawls, 1997, 783). However, he is confronted with, and takes seriously, the objection of Paul J. Weithman that this (in my terms, the absolutization or deification of Rawls's 'values of public reason') unfairly disadvantages religious believers. Weithman holds that the good work done by churches in encouraging 'their members to accept democratic values as the basis for important political decisions and to accept democratic institutions as legitimate' (Weithman 2002, 91) would be jeopardized by a strict adherence to the requirements of Rawlsian public reason and that it is unfair and unreasonable to put believers under an obligation, incumbent only upon them, of finding an equivalent in a universally accessible language for every religious statement that they pronounce. Likewise, because the 'totalizing trait of a mode of

believing that infuses the very pores of daily life runs counter . . . to any flimsy switchover of religiously rooted political convictions onto a *different* cognitive basis' (Habermas 2006, 8), Habermas takes seriously what he calls the 'compelling objection' of Nicholas Wolterstorff that '[it] belongs to the religious convictions of a good many religious people in our society that *they ought to base* their decisions concerning fundamental issues of justice *on* their religious convictions' (in Audi and Wolterstorff, 1997, 105). However, he is seriously perturbed when Wolterstorff reveals, firstly, that (in Habermas's words) he 'does not wish to subject the political use of religious reasons to any restraints whatsoever' (Habermas 2006, 11) and secondly that (in my words) religious world views have an absolute ('immune to criticism') quality that makes democracy, especially in ideologically or religiously divided societies, a competition between 'rival gods' where the best that can be hoped for is some kind of pragmatic *modus vivendi* (Audi and Wolterstorff 1997, 160).

In my view, Habermas adopts an implausible and unconvincing response to Wolterstorff's strategy of (in my terms) de-deifying and de-absolutizing 'public reason' in order to deify and absolutize 'private reason' or, more specifically in this case, 'reason exercised by citizens or groups thereof in terms of, and expressed through, the concepts and categories of a comprehensive world view, religious or non-religious.' Habermas's response or 'counter-strategy' is to restrict the divinity or absolute quality of the public sphere to formal and 'proper,' as opposed to informal and 'wild,' political discourse. He holds that 'the polyphonic complexity of public voices' (Habermas 2006, 10) and religiously inspired contributions to public debate are permissible *only* in the 'wild' informal public/political sphere; we are, he holds, to regard 'the institutional thresholds between the "wild life" of the political public sphere and the formal proceedings within political bodies [as] a filter that from the Babel of voices in the informal flows of public communication allows only secular contributions to pass through' (Habermas 2006, 10). Indeed, he goes so far as to say—and here the divine or absolute quality he ascribes to the strict or proper public sphere becomes most pronounced—that in parliament 'the standing rules of procedure of the house must empower the house leader to have religious statements or justifications expunged from the

minutes' (Habermas 2006, 10). This is tantamount to saying that *only* politicians, using a filtered, 'purified' language, are fit to enter into and fully participate in (or 'worship' at the shrine of) 'public reason.'

Rather than ascribing a Godlike, absolute quality to 'public [universal] reason,' as in the case of Rawls and Habermas, or to 'private [worldview] reason,' as in the case of Wolterstorff, we should, rather, acknowledge the Godlike, absolute quality of Reason itself, regarding its demands upon us as alone absolute and ultimate, putting ourselves ever under an obligation to ascertain as best we can its dictates for us in our present circumstances, and judging the propriety of each actual political usage of reason (public or private, in the formal or informal political/public sphere) in terms of its claim to be in conformity with, or to be a concrete expression of, 'reason' itself (or Reason). By 'us' or 'we,' I have in mind here persons acting in *any capacity whatsoever* that relates to their being as citizens (as individual voters, as church members, as public representatives, etc.), for there is no sphere of the collective life of a political community that is beyond the 'light of reason' or that is immune to universal criticism. In effect, Habermas and Rawls put severe limits on the use of strictly political/public reason and the language in which it is expressed, for they propose, in effect, outlawing from the political public sphere the use of language that (i) originates from, and is peculiar to, a body of citizens who share a particular world view and (ii) that is not readily accessible or translatable into a publicly intelligible and accessible form. The implication here is that citizens can meaningfully communicate politically with each other *only* by meeting in a common public space using a common public language, that is, by encountering each other in an elevated realm above and beyond the murky, separate sub-realms of 'difference' beneath them and between which real communication (the genuine exercise of political/public reason) is impossible. However, to acknowledge the sovereignty of 'reason' and its universal presence (ethical and actual, ideal and already embodied, 'bringing to birth' and 'already born') in all spheres of society and the body politic, is to see that its 'vertical descent' is the effective guarantee and precondition of real (genuine, fruitful and productive) horizontal communication between citizens inhabiting different 'world view universes' and at the same time the 'promise' that their differences are differences *of a*

single political universe. At times, 'public reason-informed' (horizontal) communication 'across' or 'above' world views requires citizens to rise above their world view differences and to use what we might call 'readily and immediately intelligible public language,' somewhat in the manner that Habermas and Rawls outline, but at other times 'vertically descending reason' requires them to speak to each other 'out of the very heart of' their world view differences, so to speak, to enable these differences to become integrated into the tapestry of socio-political unity.

Only a genuine openness of the various groups (religious, ethnic, feminist, etc.) in a liberal democratic society to the universal and unifying 'vertical' descent of 'reason' can ensure meaningful, mutually intelligible, productive communication between them and the various world view universes that they each inhabit; the former (vertically descending 'reason') is the metaphysical/ontological pre-condition and guarantee of the latter (real and effective horizontal communication). Not the jettisoning of language that originates from, and is peculiar to, a particular world view, but the use of such language in a publicly accessible manner, in a way that promotes mutual intelligibility and in a way that can be universally understood as relating to and promoting the common good, is what an ethics of citizenship requires. Thus, for example, a Marxist (or feminist, or Christian, or atheist . . .), whilst engaged in public debate (at the pub or in parliament) is perfectly at liberty to use concepts and categories deriving from a Marxist world view ('proletariate,' 'surplus value'), even though the propriety and utility of these terms may not be acknowledged outside Marxist (or feminist, or Christian, or atheistic . . .) circles, provided that what they say (i) can be understood by those outside these circles and (ii) its claimed relation to the public good can be understood. A liberal democratic ethics of citizenship requires citizens, especially if they subscribe to a comprehensive doctrine (religious or non-religious), to seriously endeavour to understand where other major groups in society are 'coming from' and why they interpret the common good in the way that they do.

**(v) Habermas and Rawls: Foregrounding Metaphysics**

Habermas, Rawls, Weithman, and Wolterstorff, each in their own way, feel (and feel ‘uncomfortably’) that religious citizens are required (rightly and fairly in the case of Habermas and Rawls but wrongly and unfairly in the case of Weithman and Wolterstorff) to translate their religiously inspired views into neutral ‘secular’ terms before they can be allowed access to the political/public sphere and that they are unfairly burdened in a way that non-religious citizens are not. However, the concern of Rawls and Habermas is, I think, misplaced and may be addressed by drawing attention to the underlying metaphysical meaning of what they themselves say. When, for example, they speak about the ethics of citizenship—when Habermas says that ‘when it comes to contentious political issues [citizens] are expected to look for a way to reach a rationally motivated agreement’ (Habermas 2006, 5) or when Rawls speaks of ‘the values of public reason’—we should, I suggest, understand them in a way that brings the underlying metaphysical/ontological meaning of what they have to say to the fore, or at least we should not give what they have to say the resolutely anti-metaphysical meaning that they both intend. This would enable us to think and speak, in a simple way, of the ethical requirements of public reason falling equally and identically (it is always the voice of the same ‘Reason’) on *all* citizens (religious or non-religious, ‘comprehensive doctrine holders’ or ‘non-comprehensive doctrine holders’), rather than being obliged to think in a Rawlsian manner of the ethical requirements of citizenship falling unequally and hence unfairly on different citizen groups.

Taking the vertical relation to ‘reason’ into account, and giving his words a metaphysical meaning that he did not intend, we can see that Rawls is perfectly right to insist, as we saw earlier, that ‘comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons—and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines—are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support’ (Rawls 1997, 783). Under this proviso (‘Rawls’s proviso’), the political opponents of those expressing political views that issue from a comprehensive doctrine will be able to understand, and perhaps even sympathise to a degree

with, the *suggested* vertical link between the ‘doctrine-inspired’ political proposal and the voice of ‘reason’/the common good (the ‘rubric of Reason’). Claimed insights as to what ‘reason’ requires of a political community are *always* politically contestable and should therefore be vigorously contested in the ‘refining fire’ of public debate, but without ‘mutual intelligibility’ between political opponents this kind of refining public debate simply cannot take place. This surely is the gist, the key point and purpose, of Rawls’s proviso; what it means, when simply expressed in metaphysical terms, is that an openness to Reason is always and everywhere required. Whether religious or non-religious, each of us is required by the ‘rubric of Reason’ to undertake a universalisation test when making public/political proposals from our (always unique) first person perspective. Surely, too, this universal openness to Reason and Truth is the metaphysical underpinning of Habermas’s claim that the democratic constitutional state ‘is, as it were, truth sensitive’ (Habermas 2006, 18), for it is only by means of the ‘metaphysical discovery’ of a truth-sensitivity at the core of the inner being of each person/citizen and of each group as a ‘collective person’—a truth sensitivity that is both a ‘fact’ as an ever present human orientation and an ‘ethical obligation’ in so far as it must be cultivated and acted upon—that Habermas’s ‘normatively charged self-understanding of Modernity’ (Habermas 2006, 18) is viable or even possible at all. What Habermas fails to see, or to acknowledge, is that ‘the terrain where the normative arguments no longer suffice’ (Habermas 2006, 19) is a metaphysical terrain and that only a metaphysical construction of the public use of reason (i) as public discussion concerning the demands of Reason itself upon all citizens under particular circumstances and (ii) as the outer expression of each citizen’s own inner need to grow in the Truth, can ultimately justify the liberal state in laying upon its citizens constitutional norms of the type insisted upon by Rawls and Habermas.

At the same time, by foregrounding metaphysical presuppositions in this way, we can also see how Weithman, who is critical of ‘Rawls’s proviso,’ is right to insist that it would be unreasonable to interpret it in such a way that religious citizens feel that they are required to find corresponding equivalents in a universally accessible language to replace all the religiously inspired political statements that they



utter. The attempt to effect such a direct, horizontal translation from ‘religious statements’ to publicly accessible statements, or to find some kind of horizontal one-to-one correspondence between them, is mistaken and misconceived. As we saw earlier, it is not the jettisoning of religious language, nor its (direct, horizontal, one-to-one) translation into a publicly accessible form, but the use of such language in a way that can be universally understood as relating to and promoting the common good, that both effective communication and an ethics of citizenship require.

**(vi) Conclusion: The Tension towards Unity and Identity Formation in Post-Secular Society**

Habermas is right to point out that there is currently a widespread awareness that the cultural sources of solidarity need to be renewed and that the constitutional state must ‘deal carefully with all the cultural sources that nourish its citizens’ consciousness of norms and their solidarity’ (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 46). However, what this means is that each citizen must no longer live (or must not *only* live) with likeminded fellow citizens in a socially solipsistic universe with its own ‘comprehensive doctrine’ or ‘private foundations’ (religious or non-religious, ‘gay’ or ‘straight,’ conservative or radical/feminist) but that *all* citizens must make renewed efforts to re-integrate their various foundational beliefs and become members of a single political universe, enriched by the robust diversity of their viewpoints. Habermas is both sanguine and insightful in his assessment of what this involves for believers but is less clear on what it involves for non-believers. For the former (believers), it engenders, he says, ‘the possibility of bringing their influence to bear on society as a whole, via the public political sphere’ (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 49) but at the same time, he adds, liberal abortion laws impose upon them an ‘asymmetrical’ burden of tolerance (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 49–50); for the latter (non-believers), it involves a self-reflexive encounter ‘with the boundaries of the Enlightenment’ (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 50). Now what precisely this means for the ‘anti-metaphysical’ Habermas is not entirely clear, but for me, what corresponds to the ‘hard requirement’ of tolerance imposed upon believers by liberal abortion laws is the requirement on non-believers (i) to seek assiduously and

unceasingly for the sources of social and political solidarity, (ii) to acknowledge (a) that the liberal state is not self-justifying or susceptible to a merely procedural and metaphysically neutral justification, (b) that the liberal freedoms and diversities we prize have their font in a deeper, embracing unity that needs to be further explored and (c) that the belief that the liberal state can autonomously justify itself without theological or metaphysical foundations leads in the end to its decay, and (iii) to seriously consider the possibility that (i) and (ii) might be intimately related or even mutually dependent. Thus, when Habermas holds that ‘we should understand cultural and societal secularization as a double learning process that compels both believers and non-believers ‘to reflect on their own respective limits’ (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 23), what he says is perfectly true, but what I wish to note here is that it was also true of the dynamic or ‘limit encounters’ of the sacred-secular relation (the sacred-secular ‘dialectic’) during the era of Christendom. In both cases, we are not here speaking of ‘limit’ in the sense (i) of a football field being ‘limited’ by an adjacent rugby field but rather of limit in the more Hegelian sense (ii) of a tension beyond itself (a ‘border’ tension) towards unity with the other (*its* other), as illustrated for example in the way in which a husband is limited or ‘negated’ by his wife. ‘He’ is not ‘his wife’; she is ‘other’ but ‘his’ other, and vice versa; there is a mutual and complementary attraction towards a ‘border-crossing’ envelopment in a transcendent unity.

When theorising post-secular society (and especially when considering its need for legitimacy and a sense of significant identity), it is important to distinguish broadly between ‘who we are’ issues on the one hand and ‘what to do’/ ‘how to do it’ issues—with which, to this point, we have been largely concerned—on the other. The Rawls/Habermas approach is helpful in addressing the latter but of limited value in addressing the former (broadly, identity issues or what our collective historical experience up to this point has made us). Their neutrality principle, for example, ‘according to which all enforceable political decisions *must be formulated* in a language that is equally accessible to all citizens and it *must be possible to justify them* in this language as well’ (Habermas 2006, 12; see also Rawls 1997, 783) is perfectly reasonable and unexceptionable when applied to ‘what to do’

issues, even to such controversial issues as abortion and gay marriage, but it is inappropriate and unrealistic when applied to the kind of 'who we are' issues that are generated when the changing ethnic-religious composition of a people poses challenges to its historically acquired and inherited sense of identity. The failure to make this elementary distinction has had costly consequences in Western societies, for it has made it difficult for us to see that what is crucially required to effectively deal with 'who we are' issues is for citizens to be reasonable in the sense of having appropriate, symmetrical 'tolerance expectations' of each other, requiring for example 'Christian heritage' citizens in a predominantly Christian society to have the same 'tolerance expectations' of their fellow Muslim citizens as they would regard as reasonable if or when expected of Christians in a society with a strong Muslim legacy. What can, I believe, be reasonably expected, for example, of Muslims living in a Western society with Judaeo-Christian origins that continue to be publicly acknowledged and celebrated in various ways, is (i) to be as tolerant as possible towards the way in which the community's religious past continues to be integral to its identity and (ii) to be sensitive and considerate in their efforts to integrate (or 'graft') aspects of their own religion into the public expression of national identity. (For example, members of significant Muslim minorities in Western societies could reasonably expect their non-Muslim fellow citizens to consider joining with them in a public 'feast day' to mark and celebrate the end of Ramadan.)

It is important, then, to acknowledge that what we might call 'This is us' rituals, such as the recital of public prayer before parliamentary/congressional sittings or the celebration of public holidays such as Christmas, Easter and Good Friday, raise issues of identity that need to be addressed *as such*. We need to formulate criteria and standards of reasonableness (symmetrical tolerance expectations) that specifically address these issues and, rather than seeking to create an empty, characterless public space (which seems, unfortunately, to have been the intent of the U. S. Supreme Court in banishing from the public sphere any historically generated forms of identity-representation), we need to foster all of the vibrant ethnic-religious traditions that nurture the motivational roots of society, and we need to cultivate a culture of civility and tolerance that engenders and sustains amicable relations between them.

Finally, I have argued that Habermas's 'dialectics of secularization'—so described in the title of the book (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006) he co-authored with Cardinal Ratzinger but more aptly called 'post-secular dialectics'—operate today as the functional equivalent under modern conditions of Christendom's sacred-secular distinction and its 'tension towards unity in and under Christ.' However, determining how this post-secular tension towards unity in contemporary Western societies is to be characterised is no easy task. It is difficult to find a phrase, or unifying rallying cry, which precisely expresses the key features of the new 'post-secular' society envisaged by Habermas or the essence of a society practising in an ideal fashion his 'dialectics of secularization' or as I would prefer to say, 'post-secular dialectics.' It would seem to me that, in line with his thinking in *The Dialectics of Secularization*, the most appropriate functional equivalent at the present time of the 'tension towards unity in and under Christ' that characterised Christendom's sacred-secular relation would be the 'tension towards unity in and under God and the good' that characterizes the sacred/metaphysical-secular/political relation in contemporary post-secular Western societies. The idea of a 'society under God and the good' would of course have to be understood in as catholic and 'socially integrative' a manner as possible to be acceptable to the non-believing Habermas. It is true that the full range of meanings associated with this expression cannot claim universal endorsement; it can be accepted only by religious believers (wholeheartedly) and by the vast majority of 'nominal believers' (in a matter-of-fact manner). However, *many* of these meanings *can* also be readily accepted by 'principled atheists,' such as Habermas. I have in mind here the 'Godlike' quality connoted by 'the good,' the sovereign demand it makes of us all as citizens, which Habermas, it seems to me, despite his resolutely anti-metaphysical stand, acknowledges much more clearly and forcefully in *The Dialectics of Secularization* than in his earlier works. He says, for example, that citizens are expected to exercise 'their rights to communication and to participation, not only in what they rightly take to be their own interests, but also with an orientation to the common good' and he refers to this as a 'costly commitment' (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 30). As a principled atheist, Habermas might reject the expression 'under God and the good' in favour of 'under the good as God' but he might be prepared to accept the former as, in

effect, connoting the latter for him and his fellow atheists. Also, as we have seen, he is certainly sanguine in his acknowledgement that the dialectics of secularization involve a hard testing of mutual tolerance. Given that (i) he is gracious enough to acknowledge that the believer pays no small cost in a post-secular liberal society in accepting abortion rights (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 49–50), which for believers comes close to tolerating the absolutely intolerable, (ii) that he fully believes in a socio-political ‘unity-of-differences’ and accepts the tensions it inevitably generates (Habermas and Ratzinger 2006, 50–1) and (iii) that he has profound and genuine respect for the believers with whom he disagrees, Habermas might be prepared, regarding this expression, to pay ‘the hard price of tolerance’ that he expects of others.

### Notes

1. In *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*, Oliver O’Donovan (2003) presents a critical evaluation of Christendom that does not overlook the positive features of the Christendom era and that helps to counteract the less critical and generally negative account of Christendom found in works such as *Resident Aliens* by Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon (1989). In my *Christ, Society and the State* (2009), I attempt to theorize our contemporary post-secular society in a way that highlights its ‘empirical resemblance’ to Christendom and its ‘theoretical resemblance’ to the kind of relation between the secular and the sacred envisaged by Martin Luther in his ‘two kingdoms’ doctrine.
2. Interestingly, the same could be said of the founding ‘pattern’ of the United States, where the secular state is endowed with a pro-religious meaning and, in the words of David Martin, ‘[a]n almost unqualified pluralism becomes associated with an almost universal popularized religious culture’ (Martin 1978, 5), in contrast to the founding ‘pattern’ of post 1789 France where ‘[c]oherent and massive secularism confronts coherent and massive religiosity’ (Martin 1978, 6).
3. See Rawls 1985. In his introduction to this article, he states the following: ‘In this discussion I shall make some general remarks about how I now understand the conception of justice that I have called “justice as fairness” (presented in my book *A Theory of Justice*). I do this because it may seem to some that this conception depends on philosophical claims I should like to avoid, for example, claims to universal truth, or claims about the essential nature and identity of persons. My aim is to explain why it does not’ (Rawls 1985, 223).
4. In the light of this comment by Rawls, one is puzzled, to say the least, by Habermas’s remark that ‘of course, Rawls does not wish to limit himself solely to the fundamental normative convictions of a *particular* political culture: even the present-day Rawls, *pace* Richard Rorty, has not become a contextualist.’ See Habermas 1995, 120.

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