The Habermas-Ratzinger Discussion Revisited: 
Translation as Epistemology
Andrew Cummings

In 2004 a much-publicized discussion took place between the political philosopher Jürgen Habermas and the Catholic theologian Joseph Ratzinger (the future Pope Benedict XVI). Essentially, the role of religion in the public sphere was at stake. Habermas, speaking of a “post-secular” age, attempted to find a more vocal place for religious views, subject to a “translation proviso.” Ratzinger, while acknowledging the need for better dialogue between the religious and the secular, argued that there was no longer a common basis for it in “natural reason.” Both figures can be seen as speaking to the practical and the theoretical aspects of the dialogue, respectively. Once this difference is understood, Habermas’s suggestions can be accepted.

Although the meeting of Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger at the Catholic Academy of Bavaria came as something of a surprise to many, it was quickly seized upon by the media and by the intellectual community at large. The discussion that took place between these two figures extended to such questions as the foundations of western secular society and the future role that religious discourse should play in the public sphere. Nevertheless, it took on a quasi-symbolic function, appearing to encapsulate many of the worries of thoughtful people on either side of the secular-religious divide. In light of the events of September 2001, as well as the continuing saga of Europe’s struggle with its increasingly complex cultural identity, it seems to have been felt that such a discussion was inevitable, and would have occurred somewhere, somehow, even if under different circumstances. Having said as much, in what follows I would like to focus on the Habermas-Ratzinger dialogue, using it to bring out what I take to be one of the most interesting features of the secular-religious discussion—namely, its almost symbiotic relationship with certain diverging epistemic worldviews. As became clear from the aforementioned meeting, as well as from further documents by both thinkers (which can be seen as a continuation of what that meeting began), Habermas is intent on affirming what he believes to be a modern conception of reality which is, to all intents and purposes, stripped of all the old metaphysical baggage. Effec-
tively, this means emphasizing the achievements of the empirical sciences, as well as a constructivist model of social organization. Ratzinger, on the other hand, later used the occasion of his infamous Regensburg Address to insist on what he views as a recovery of the full range of human reason, extending all the way to traditional metaphysical speculation. Unsurprisingly, this would include the recognition of what is accomplished in theology, and in religious discourse at a general level.

This is perhaps unremarkable in itself. However, in attempting to articulate a view of how religious discourse should be allowed to make inroads into the public sphere of political deliberation, Habermas underlined the importance of what has been called a “translation proviso.” It is, he says, necessary that religious statements, views, and arguments be “translated” into a language that is “universally accessible” to the public at large, without any reliance on the context-specific deliverances of any particular religious tradition. In making this claim, Habermas is following through on similar claims made by the American political theorist John Rawls, who had also allowed religious discourse into the public sphere, on the condition that it be pared down eventually to a politically acceptable core. Furthermore, the extent to which overtly religious language can be allowed in public political discourse at all has itself been the topic of some lively exchanges. What is striking about Habermas’s contribution is the unabashed way in which he draws epistemic considerations into the discussion. And what is striking about the response of Ratzinger is, of course, how he responds in kind.

In the first section of what follows I will outline the respective positions of Habermas and Ratzinger on the role that reason is to play for religious people in the public sphere. It will turn out that they part company on exactly what “reason” means. In order to develop this point I will turn to the notion of a translation-proviso, and what that involves. This proviso draws attention to how epistemic differences are playing a role in the secular-religious debate. In the second section, I will argue three related points: 1) Habermas is advocating primarily a practical translation, which is aimed at grounding common moral initiatives in society; 2) Ratzinger is concerned primarily about the theoretical meaning of such translation, and worries that it involves a conceptually compromised religious standpoint; 3) there is a deeper concern of Ratzinger’s to the effect that bracketing the theoretical, conceptual standpoint of religious populations ends up relativizing the practical moral patterns of society. I maintain that this last concern is unfounded, and that, seen in a certain light, Habermas’s proposals may represent an attractive opportunity for Christianity today, even within the confines of a secular society.
In a recent essay, Jürgen Habermas has spoken of a general malaise that seems to have settled on western liberal democracies. He states that “the erosion of confidence in the power of collective action and the atrophy of normative sensibilities reinforce an already smoldering skepticism with regard to an enlightened self-understanding of modernity.” Habermas can be understood as speaking of the manner in which modern liberal democracies understand their own foundations, and hence, legitimacy. It would seem that he has partially rethought his older conceptions of the secular society—a society which would unambiguously see itself as set apart from religious viewpoints. We are now, he tells us, living in a post-secular age. At the very least, he thinks, a post-secular state involves a reconsideration of the way in which the state interacts and relates to all of its citizens, including its religious citizens. Religiously-inclined citizens of the state are now to be encouraged to contribute their religious views to the discussion taking place in the public sphere. While they can do so without restraint in what might be called the “informal” public sphere, religious discourse must be “translated” into a universally accessible language before it reaches the “formal” public sphere (e.g., parliaments, courts).

This greater openness is an important move for Habermas, as he believes that the state cannot function properly without the genuine support of all its citizens. Indeed, “it requires the support of reasons which can be accepted in a pluralist society by religious citizens, by citizens of different reli- gions, and by secular citizens alike.” However, it is anticipated that some citizens with religious viewpoints might be suspicious of this translation proviso, and the way in which it shaves off a degree of religious content. Or, to put their concern slightly differently, does allegiance to the liberal state involve, at least to that extent, a betrayal of allegiance to the religious content and context? Habermas feels that this is not the case. Spelling out in greater detail the nature of his translation proviso, he says: “instead of grudging accommodation to externally imposed constraints, the content of religion must open itself up to the normatively grounded expectation that it should recognize for reasons of its own the neutrality of the state towards worldviews, the equal freedom of all religious communities, and the independence of the institutionalized sciences.” What is striking about this statement is Habermas’s belief that at least a portion of one’s religious worldview can be stated in neutral, translated form, and yet all the time be supported by deeper religious views. The latter need not be stated in order for a religious person to endorse portions of discourse at the translated level—but neither need they be denied.
When matters are stated in this way, it seems difficult to see why certain religious populations would be uncomfortable with Habermas’s point here, or his translation proviso. Despite the notoriously obscure questions that surround the whole notion of translation in general, surely enough sense can be made of it in this context. James W. Boettcher has argued that Habermas only means to endorse a “weak” notion of translation here. Boettcher explains,

[A] strong interpretation of the translation proviso suggests that some religious claims and arguments are equivalent or at least sufficiently semantically similar to corresponding secular claims and arguments. A weaker interpretation suggests that politically relevant religious judgments are sufficiently supported by secular reasons which bear some meaningful resemblance to underlying religious premises, perhaps by addressing the same themes or values.10

In cases where there is a sufficient resemblance then, what grounds would there be for complaint about the translation? A fortiori, Habermas reminds his Catholic audience, during his meeting with Ratzinger, that the tradition of “natural reason” within traditional philosophy and theology should be more than happy with his proposals about translation, and what that involves. He says, “if I have understood it correctly, the Catholic tradition, which is comfortable with the lumen naturale, has no problem in principle with an autonomous justification of morality and law (that is, a justification independent of the truths of revelation).”11 When such a religious population is willing to translate its religious language into a universally accessible idiom, it will involve “a quite demanding epistemic mindset.”12 Among other criteria, such a mindset will be one that “leaves decisions concerning mundane knowledge to the institutionalized sciences.”13 Although Habermas has never been one to advocate a crude naturalism or scientism, it is important to see that the authority of the sciences seems to override any kind of metaphysical perspective on reality; indeed, he speaks of “the scientific monopoly on the production of factual knowledge.”14

This is perhaps the best place to consider the objections that Joseph Ratzinger brings to Habermas’s translation proviso. To begin with the original meeting of the two men, Ratzinger argues that “philosophy must sift the non-scientific element out of the scientific results with which it is often entangled, thus keeping open our awareness of the totality and of the broader dimensions of the reality of human existence—for science can never show us more than partial aspects of this existence.”15 This does not really signal a decisive break with the position of Habermas. Surely the latter could also agree that reason should reflect critically on the findings of science—after all, this was the point of his rejection of certain
forms of naturalism. As one commentator put it, “Habermas rejected the transformation of science into an ‘alternative faith’ (which was a goal that had been pursued in the West for a good one hundred fifty to two hundred years”).

One must look further to find the root of the disagreement. A clue is contained in the notion of “natural law,” itself an application of “natural reason,” to which Habermas alluded. If the central point of appealing to natural reason was to show that knowledge-claims can be defended without appeal to divine revelation, then the point holds good in regard to natural law theory. For, its defenders maintain, there is “by nature” a certain orientation towards the fulfillment of our proper end as human beings. Quite obviously, this is to appeal to a language out of touch with much of the world of contemporary thought. But this may in fact be Ratzinger’s central point. It might even be viewed as misleading of Habermas to appeal to “nature” in this vein. Continuing with this notion of natural law, Ratzinger admits that “the natural law has remained (especially in the Catholic Church) the key issue in dialogues with the secular society and with other communities of faith in order to appeal to the reason we share in common and to seek the basis for a consensus about the ethical principles of law in a secular, pluralistic society.” But, he points out, “this instrument has become blunt. . . . [T]he idea of the natural law presupposed a concept of nature in which nature and reason overlap, since nature is itself rational. With the victory of the theory of evolution, this view of nature has capsized.” Ratzinger makes a number of sweeping assumptions in the above statements, but what stands out about his position is his apparent refusal to recognize a common rational ground. Or, if that is too much, to recognize that the rational ground of his tradition is the rational ground of the tradition Habermas espouses.

In order to appreciate more fully the force of Ratzinger’s point, something should be said about these non-commensurate views of “nature.” Although this particular issue in the history of western thought seems to defy any attempt at a brief summary, some broad contours can be sketched. Adriaan Peperzak attempts such a sketch, in a short essay on the relevance of natural theology today. Nature, he tells us, began to take on a meaning peculiar to the Renaissance era when it appeared to describe whatever was common to human societies despite the vast differences that were becoming apparent in the course of global exploration and travel. Indeed, the term *natural* was even used to argue for a “natural religion,” prior to the so-called historical and revealed religions. In any case, as the contemporary Scientific Revolution got under way, “nature,” with many of the connotations of innocence and the pristine which seemed to be implied
in the term, gradually “crumbled and lost its religious, metaphysical, and moral connotations. The normative significance of nature as a criterion of purity was despiritualized. ‘Nature’ became synonymous with organic life, unconscious affective drives, vital energy, matter, or other physically determined substance.”

Thus, Peperzak concludes, although nature “was invented to save the core of Western European culture through critique and reorientation . . . it did not prove solid enough to withstand the undermining effects of an extended critique.”

This last point could, of course, be debated. But surely it often appears to many that it could not stand up to critique. Peperzak’s words serve to indicate what Ratzinger has in mind when he denies to Habermas a common ground for discussion in the concept of nature. Indeed, Ratzinger laments the fact that all that remains is “nature’s capacity to be exploited for our own purposes, and here only the possibility of verification or falsification through experimentation can yield decisive certainty.” However, it is important to recognize that although Ratzinger criticizes the modern view of nature, and of what is considered the “rational” approach to it, he is at the same time keen to insist on a return to a more robust viewpoint. Reason should embrace the entire scope of reality, he thinks, and not simply a narrowed-down, scientific reduction of reality. In this sense, and speaking of his experience as a former professor at the University of Regensburg, an adequate grasp of reality should respect the “profound sense of coherence within the universe of reason.”

Such, in brief, are the deeper-seated worries that lie behind Ratzinger’s questioning of Habermas’s appeal to the “natural light of reason.” But at this point we must ask whether or not each figure has truly grasped the significance of what his interlocutor is saying. Has Habermas fully appreciated the conceptual integrity of religion and theology, with his insistence on the translation proviso? Has Ratzinger overstated the case against a rational accord with secular society, with his challenge to the tradition of natural reason? In the next section these questions will be taken up in more detail. Essentially, I will argue that both figures are in some sense correct in their viewpoints, although they can be seen as speaking to significantly different aspects of the situation. In a certain sense, they are speaking about different things.

II

The first question to be taken up is whether or not Habermas has imposed an unfair requirement on religious citizens in regard to the translation proviso. It was noted above that Ratzinger insisted on a recovery of the full range of reason and truth, which would include religious language/
thought and many of its metaphysical principles. An interesting example arises when it comes to reaching a foundational conceptual understanding of the typical liberal democratic State today. For Ratzinger might well be understood as suggesting that recourse to explicitly religious/metaphysical principles is desirable. In a lecture given in 2005, entitled “Europe’s Crisis of Culture,” Ratzinger spoke disapprovingly of “the attempt to build the human community absolutely without God.” This way of representing society as essentially Godless, he tells us, “is incomplete. It consciously severs its own historical roots, depriving itself of the regenerating forces from which it sprang, from that fundamental memory of humanity, so to speak, without which reason loses its orientation.” For his part, Habermas is quite clear that in terms of the rational justification of democracies and their constitutions, “democratic legitimacy is the only one available today. The idea of replacing it or complementing it by some presumably ‘deeper’ grounding of the constitution in a generally binding way amounts to obscurantism.” It would appear then that a religious citizen would be mistaken in insisting on explicit mention of God, and/or other religious beliefs, when it comes to the rational legitimization of the State. In effect, “Habermas rejects the thought that it should be possible to arrive at a moral platform for the state and for society apart from what can be discovered in the free public discourse.” But again, does this amount to some kind of unfair burden on religious citizens?

I would like to maintain that even given the demands of a translation proviso, this still does not amount to an unfair burden. That is, the purported unfairness is usually held to consist in a sort of conceptual gag order, whereby religiously inclined citizens are told to check their metaphysical-religious claims at the door. However, it would seem that, regardless of what Habermas really thinks about the conceptual content of religious claims, he is simply insisting on the moral content of such claims. Speaking of how secular citizens should in turn understand the contributions of their religious counterparts, he observes that “the insight that vibrant world religions may be bearers of ‘truth contents,’ in the sense of suppressed or untapped moral intuitions, is by no means a given for the secular portion of the population.” Secular citizens, Habermas believes, need to be reminded of the potential stockpile of moral insights that religious traditions possess, and which (via the translation proviso) are awaiting appropriation. It would appear that Habermas’s notion of the translation proviso then, is not intended by him to be a conceptual shortcircuited of religious language and its role. He simply means that we should focus on whatever practical moral insights can be gleaned from it, regardless of the background rational justification and contextualization. Thus the kind
of translation he has in mind might consist of “translating words into actions,” where the actions (arguably) speak louder than words.

Habermas even states that “although religion can neither be reduced to morality nor be assimilated to ethical value orientations, it nevertheless keeps alive an awareness of both elements.” This last statement is an indication that, despite the dominant interpretation of Habermas’s translation proviso as the enunciation of a (reductive) theoretical standpoint, it actually has more to do with a practical reduction, where he leaves untouched the conceptual status of theoretical presuppositions. Having said as much, it remains true that a number of leading Catholic intellectuals, including of course Ratzinger himself, felt strongly that the conceptual claims of Christianity, and in the area of theory, were heavily at stake in this dialogue. As Ratzinger puts it, “in the so-necessary dialogue between secularists and Catholics, we Christians must be very careful to remain faithful to this fundamental line: to live a faith that comes from the Logos, from creative reason, which, because of this, is also open to all that is truly rational.” In this particular context, one suspects that to “bracket” the fuller conceptual content/language of religious claims, is for Ratzinger, to accept a rationally enfeebled Christian faith, and arguably, a rationally enfeebled moral practice. I will return to this point towards the end of the article.

If Habermas’s central point about religious citizens and the practical need to translate religious language and concepts is thus acceptable, then why should Ratzinger (as well as others) have objected? I would like to argue that his main objection is theoretical in nature, and concerns the proper understanding of Christian faith, as well as the practice of theology. It is, I believe, the implied impact that Habermas’s proposals have on the practice of theology and the rational understanding of faith that lie behind his reservations. This can best be seen when Habermas’s translation proviso is itself viewed as a secularized form of theological reflection, or fides quaerens intellectum. I will take up each of these points in turn.

To begin with, it is hardly surprising that Ratzinger should insist on a fully rational understanding of the Christian faith. As indicated earlier, part of his overall objection to Habermas’s attempt to ground dialogue in a notion of “natural reason” is that the “universe of reason” itself had come under fire as a viable viewpoint. Insisting, as he does, on the universal scope of rational inquiry and the interrelatedness of all of its components, the Christian faith itself has a remarkable contribution to make. By its very nature, he tells us, “the faith of the Church has always insisted that between God and us, between his eternal Creator Spirit and our created reason there exists a real analogy.” With this position on the inner conso-
nance between reason and faith in mind, he goes on to say that “theology rightly belongs in the university and within the wide-ranging dialogue of sciences, not merely as a historical discipline and one of the human sciences, but precisely as theology, as inquiry into the rationality of faith.”

So far there is nothing surprising in these remarks. They represent a constant, if too-little heeded, basis for theology in the Catholic faith.

However, it is significant that the practice of theology itself is singled out. The very notion of *fides quaerens intellectum*—faith seeking understanding—overlaps in a curious way with Habermas’s translation proviso. There has been a dominant understanding of theology in the West which sees it as a certain progression from the dimly grasped to the more-fully grasped. In fact, one of the figures usually quoted in this regard is St. Anselm, who states that “the understanding which we gain in this life stands midway between faith and revelation. It follows, in my view, that, the nearer someone comes to attainment of this understanding, the nearer that person approaches to revelation, for which we all pant in anticipation.”

Although Anselm was writing from a medieval worldview, the central point is that the theological grasp of the content of faith involves an advance from the way in which matters are grasped from a pre-reflective perspective.

In order to see how Habermas’s translation proviso might be viewed from such a perspective, it is necessary to take one more point into consideration. There is, as it were, a historically-conditioned development in how theology, or faith seeking understanding, came to be viewed. Although there is a risk of oversimplification here, one could well claim that the transition from pre-reflective faith to rational appropriation thereof began to be measured by criteria *immanent* to reason. That is, someone at the level of faith essentially has a confused manner of thinking about things. Theological reflection comes to be seen more as a case of reason setting its own house in order. Reason can clarify faith, because faith was originally inchoate reasoning. One of the most striking examples of this model of theology can be found in Hegel’s thought, where faith works at the level of “representation”—a one-sided form of thought, often called “picture-thinking”—and where the rational comprehension of faith works at the level of the “concept,” which is a reconciliation of the one-sidedness of representation, a bringing-out of the kernel of truth in faith. This modern view of theological reflection is actually something of a departure from Anselm’s medieval viewpoint, which measures both faith and rational reflection by *transcendent* criteria. For Anselm, both faith and reason would be inadequate attempts to come to terms with a transcendent, mysterious truth.
It is the modern understanding of theological reflection, or faith seeking understanding, which bears some resemblance to what Habermas means in his translation proviso—or, at least, a resemblance which is described by Ratzinger. Now, admittedly, even the modern, “Hegelian” conception of theological reflection was primarily intended to be true to the positions that faith held to, “to understand the significance already inherent in representation, to bring it to a further explicitness.” But difficulties remain with this model, and arguably are there in the translation proviso. For rational reflection, in “translating” the implicit content of religious representations, is trusted to remain true to their meaning/content. And yet, oddly, the suspicion that something has been lost in the translation cannot be fully articulated because of the very inchoate nature of religious thinking. In effect, this appears to mean that there is a one-directional movement whereby the translating reason critiques the religious content, the religious position itself being incapable of critiquing its own “translation.” At times the impression has been created that suspicion of a given translation on the part of religious populations could amount to a refusal to be fully rational. As applied to Habermas’s translation proviso, where secular reason is the translation, Charles Taylor summarizes the resulting predicament: “what underpins this notion is something like an epistemic distinction. . . . [R]eligious reason either comes to the same conclusions as secular reason, but then it is superfluous, or it comes to contrary conclusions, and then it is dangerous and disruptive.”

Strictly speaking, it is the first part of this dilemma that is pertinent to our discussion. The superfluity of the original religious representation, once “translated” into secular terms, seems to be at the root of Ratzinger’s worries about a truncated form of reason. Even if Habermas protests that religious communities are free to maintain their own religious narrative about decisions taken in the public sphere of reason, it often still sounds as though Habermas is speaking about a theoretical, conceptual translation, not just a practical one. Someone as historically informed as Ratzinger would be well aware of how the ambiguity of the “rational translation” of religion lent itself to the reductive humanism of, for instance, a Feuerbach. But the central point I wish to make here is that while Habermas may well have intended religious utterances to be translated into practical directives, Ratzinger—as well as many reflective religious people—seem to fear the theoretical/conceptual violence that such an effort might work on religious faith.

It would be too simplistic at this stage to suggest that the Habermas-Ratzinger encounter came down to the ambiguity of a word, and an ensuing confusion. There is clearly more at stake. As a concluding reflection, I
would like to draw attention to what is perhaps a deeper element of Ratzinger’s overall position on the secular-religious dialogue. It might be put in the following way. Let us grant that Habermas primarily intends an emphasis on practical action, via his translation proviso. Let us also grant that Ratzinger is concerned primarily with the negative connotations that a translation proviso might carry for the internal coherence and integrity of religious/theological language. Nevertheless, Ratzinger remains uncomfortable, it would seem, with even the practical limitations of such translation into secular terms. Why? The issue was already somewhat broached in regard to modern liberal democracies, and essentially had to do with the issue of foundations. A similar sort of concern for foundations emerges when Ratzinger speaks of law, an issue clearly germane to our topic since it is allied so closely with the practical, moral condition of a society. He tells us that “if reason is no longer able to find the way to metaphysics as the source of law, the state can only refer to the common convictions of its citizens’ values, convictions that are reflected in the democratic consensus.” This would be perfectly acceptable, as far as Habermas is concerned, and he might even refer to a search for the metaphysical foundation of law as “obscurantist,” as he did with the sought-after foundations for liberal democracy. But Ratzinger has a quite simple point to make. It is the specter of relativism that he fears. As he puts it, “Christian faith respects the nature of the state itself, especially the state of a pluralist society, but it also feels responsibility to ensure that the fundamentals of law continue to remain visible and the state is not deprived of direction and left at the mercy of changing currents.” Ratzinger appears to be claiming that, deprived of adequate metaphysical principles, modern liberal democracy will be vulnerable to passing, whimsical, and even (as a consequence) poorly thought-through moral directives.

This general attitude regarding the connection between practical mores and conceptual presuppositions can be thought of as the top-down approach. It has a long history within Catholic thought, receiving one of its most eloquent expressions in the opening paragraphs of the encyclical Aeterni Patris (ostensibly dealing with the renaissance in Thomistic philosophy): “a reason for the troubles that vex public and private life . . . lies in this: that false conclusions concerning human and divine things, which originated in the schools of philosophy, have now crept into all the orders of the State, and have been accepted by the common consent of the masses.” I refer to it as the “top-down” approach because it seems to presuppose that the first principles of metaphysics (to use the chosen example) directly “trickle-down” and influence the thinking and acting of society at large.
I would like to suggest that although there is certainly an impact on the thinking of society from the intellectual sector—today, one thinks especially of our leading scientists—it is doubtful that this impact relies on anything more than an implicit trust. Few can appreciate the niceties of metaphysical, or physical, reasoning. It is almost as though, once accepted, a principle is capable of guiding action and thinking, without itself necessarily being fully understood. But if this is the case, then even a fully rational, plausible viewpoint, is capable of irrationally (because without comprehension) influencing people in their thoughts and actions. This is hardly a reliable, and may even be a dangerous phenomenon, especially when it comes to something as momentous as the ethical practice of an entire society. Therefore, it may be time to attempt more emphatically a “bottom-up” approach. Perhaps the Christian faith would be better served in making a practical common cause with others in society. A religiously-informed practice, even when subjected to the translation-proviso, is arguably more potent in changing the attitudes of society at large. Arguing from metaphysical foundations in an attempt to convince others to act in certain ways is only one approach. As a practical alternative, one could take action, ideally overlapping with the way in which others act in society, and others might be led to ask about the metaphysical beliefs behind those actions.

It might be asked, however, what specifically Christian contribution is made in such a situation. Arguably, even when Christians are acting in the same way as, for instance, secular humanists, the Christians should be able to evince a greater confidence in the ultimate worth of what they are doing. It appears plausible to maintain that at least part of the force of holding to the Christian meta-narrative is that there is a certain energizing potential to those beliefs. There is already, after all, broad agreement on the content of various ethical imperatives in society, such as caring for the sick and the vulnerable. The spiritual reserves that Christianity might claim to possess concern the ultimate point of undertaking such initiatives in a world where the outcome is at best uncertain. The explicit content of the (suppressed) Christian meta-narrative is not in competition with Habermas’s translated statements. Rather is it the case that the Christian meta-narrative takes what is of value in the social order to an ultimate consummation. The hope for such consummation is that I have called “energizing.”

In any case, even if religious citizens found that they were in disagreement with a societal practice, this would hardly be the time for metaphysical confrontation—it would be time to act, in very practical ways. When matters are looked at in this way, the suggestions of Habermas may appear more palatable to religious populations. Not the abandonment, but rather
The Habermas-Ratzinger Discussion Revisited

the bracketing of explicit religious language could be a welcome tool of evangelization. Time will tell.

I will finish with a quotation from Pope Francis, who, it would seem, is largely in favor of the bottom-up approach. Speaking on the subject of popular movements and the need to take common action, he says, “we are moved because ‘we have seen and heard,’ not a cold statistic, but the pain of a suffering humanity. . . . This is something quite different from abstract theorizing.”

Notes

1. In one work Habermas says, “with the transition to modernity . . . the subject objectifies external nature as the totality of states of affairs and events that are connected in a law-like manner. . . . [T]he subject expands the familiar social world into an unbounded community of all responsibly acting persons.” Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 148.

2. The talk stirred up a lot of anger within Muslim communities around the world, who felt that the integrity of their religion had been called into question, and Islam represented as a violent, irrational faith. Ratzinger denied any intention of making these claims (the offensive portion of the talk had actually been a quotation from a historical document). Nevertheless, if nothing else, the reaction reaffirmed the sheer difficulties which accompany any attempt to characterize religious viewpoints in ways acceptable to their communities. For an interesting angle on the Muslim reaction, see Al Makin, “Benedict XVI and Islam: Indonesian Public Reactions to the Regensburg Address,” Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations 20(4) (October 2009): 409–21.


4. See Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997). The encounter between these two philosophers draws the line between “inclusivists” like Wolterstorff, who have no problem letting “unfiltered” religious language into the arena; and “exclusivists” like Audi, who opt for a relatively stripped-down version.


6. Brian T. Trainor summarizes, “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. . . . [A]s 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
Andrew Cummings


8. Ibid., 21. Italics added.


13. Ibid.


15. The Dialectics of Secularization, 57.


17. Ibid., 69.

18. Ibid.


20. Ibid., 52.


22. Ibid., 131.


24. Ibid., 331.


27. Ibid., 27.


31. Ibid., #57, 145.

33. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that Anselm was not advocating what might be called an “intellectualist” understanding of faith. In another work, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, trans. Richard Regan, he tells us that “if one can understand one should thank God; if one cannot, one should bow one’s head in veneration. . . . [I]f persons think they know something, they do not yet know, before they have spiritual wings through solidity of faith, how they should know it.” Ibid., 235.


37. Ibid., 380.


39. Joseph Ratzinger actually took part in a theological dialogue some years ago on the question of whether there is a specifically Christian ethics. Indeed, it may be the case that he is viewing some of Habermas’s suggestions through the lenses of that debate. For more on this, see his contribution, “Magisterium of the Church, Faith, Morality,” in *Readings in Moral Theology, No. 2, The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

40. This is, of course, in continuity with the traditional notion that “grace completes nature.”