
Korf, B
Catholic Academy, Munich, January 19, 2004: Jürgen Habermas meets (then) Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedikt XVI). The discourse ethicist encounters the chief doctrinaire of the Roman Catholic Church for an academic dispute on the “pre-political foundations of a liberal state”. But: “the dispute never took place”, as Edward Skidelski was surprised to note in Prospect (Skidelski 2005, 15). What was it that these two elderly gentlemen – coming from opposite intellectual camps – seemed to agree upon? And how did it happen that these two men, both aged 75 or above, finally met during their latter years?

The story starts in 2001. When Jürgen Habermas, key protagonist of the Frankfurt School, received the Friedenspreis des deutschen Buchhandels, he gave a widely acclaimed speech on Glaube und Wissen [Faith and Knowledge]. Habermas surprised the German public with a plea to acknowledge religion and faith as important allies of a liberal, secular state against the alienating forces of modernity. Although Habermas considered himself as a follower of Max Weber in that he sees himself as “tone deaf in the religious sphere” (“religiöser unmusikalisch”), he argued that religion was more than a relic from the past, and that a post-secular society had an interest in disentangling the ethical vision nurtured in religious institutions as a source of social solidarity. Coining the term post-secular, Habermas conceded that there was no purely secularized state or society and that, contrary to predictions of some secularization theories, religion and religious faith continued having some presence in liberal societies.

Habermas’ speech took many secular, left-wing intellectual colleagues and friends by surprise, but it opened doors for dialogue with the representatives of religious faith. Florian Schuller who organized the academic dispute writes in the Foreword that strangely, the Churches did not seem to “go through that particular door” (p. 12). Habermas’ meeting with Cardinal Ratzinger was the first of such an encounter, to be followed by others, e.g. a public debate with German Jesuits. But, as Florian Schiller notes, this dispute was not the first time that Catholic clergy engaged with an secular, agnostic or atheist philosopher. In particular, Italy had experienced some exciting intellectual exchanges. Think about the interesting exchange of letters between Umberto Eco and Cardinal Martini or the debate between Paolo Flores d’Arcais and Cardinal Ratzinger. All these debates at one point or the other come back to the question of the role of religion and faith in the public sphere.

The Habermas-Ratzinger dispute was coined around the theme of “pre-political foundations of a liberal state”. In fact, it is arguable that the debate is nothing more than a (significant, though) footnote to a famous dictum advanced by the German legal scholar and former constitutional judge Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde. Böckenförde expressed the subtle doubt whether or not the liberal, secularized state could exist on the basis of normative presuppositions that it itself could not guarantee [“Der freieitliche, säkularisierte Staat lebt von Voraussetzungen, die er selbst nicht geschafft hat”, Böckenförde ([1967] 1991, p. 112)]. The influential German Theologian Friedrich
Wilhelm Graf had noted that Böckenförde’s dictum has gained a “canonical” status within German debates on the relationship of religion, faith and (liberal) state. That Böckenförde, although being a social democrat and constitutional judge, was doubtful about the ethical substance of positive law and a liberal state is not surprising if we consider that he was influenced by the writings of Carl Schmitt who has been a fundamental critic of the liberal state.

Indeed, Habermas starts his exposition with Böckenförde’s doubt about the ability of liberal states to reproduce “the normative presuppositions of its existence” (p. 21); the liberal state seems to depend on ethical dispositions of a more traditional foundation. Habermas seems to suggest that Böckenförde is wrong to some extent, but some uneasiness seems to trouble him, when he concedes that the liberal state and positive law had emerged out of a Christian and Judaic ethical heritage (besides other sources, admittedly, such as Roman law) and the question was whether or not they could disregard that heritage without negative consequences for society and its internal solidarity. Is it possible, asks Habermas, to provide a secular justification of political rule, one based on positive law alone? Habermas concluded that the liberal state was, indeed, capable of “reproducing its own motivational presuppositions on the basis of its own secular elements [...]” The ‘uniting bond’ that Böckenförde seeks is the democratic process itself” (p. 31f.), something that Habermas likes to call constitutional patriotism. But some danger lurks through the background: modernity could get out of control, solidarity could crumble in face of penetrating market forces, increasing individualization and genetic engineering. And for those reasons, secular citizens were well advised to consider the ethical vision and sensibilities of religious faith. Even more, Habermas concludes that “when secular citizens act in their role as citizens of the state, they must not deny in principle that religious images of the world have the potential to express truth. Nor must they refuse their believing fellow citizens the right to make contributions in a religious language to public debates. A liberal political culture can expect that the secularized citizens play their part in the endeavors to translate relevant contributions from the religious language into a language that is accessible to the public as a whole” (p. 51f., my emphasis).

In his response, Joseph Ratzinger took up Habermas’ argument and emphasized the potential discriminating force that majoritarian rule could pose and the ambivalent relationship of power and law (or legality) inherent in a liberal state. This potentiality, for Ratzinger, made some pre-political (or pre-democratic) ethical foundation, a shared ethical vision of what is right or wrong, just and unjust in a social polity a necessary predicament of a liberal, secular state (p. 60). But is religion the source upon which such ethical vision can be built? Ratzinger concedes that religious fundamentalism was often identified as a pathology – religion and faith could be as much a healing as a destructive, archaic force. But in the same way, secularized reason could be called into question: reason fallen ill and religion abused could, indeed, result in similar pathologies. Ratzinger detects secular reason’s pathologies exemplified in the construction of the nuclear bomb, the attempt to clone humans (possibly for selection – we are reminded of the controversy in Germany around Peter Sloterdijk’s Elmenau speech on Regeln für den Menschenpark, which some interpreted as an argument in favor of human genetic engineering). For Ratzinger, reason and faith are both given by God – and therefore should also be seen as sisters who need each other to prevent their radicalization into dogmatism or fundamentalism. Religious pathologies, writes Ratzinger, needed to be controlled by the ‘divine’ light of reason (p. 78), while secular reason needed the reflective force of religious belief and tradition to
recognize its limits. Ratzinger sees here a purifying force emerging through the co-relationality of reason and faith.

To some extent, then, Habermas and Ratzinger seem to agree on a number of points. Did the dual then not take place? I don’t think Skidelski is correct in his analysis: while the Cardinal is, of course, happy to agree with Habermas that religion has some role to play in a secular, liberal state, the two men diverge in their analytics of why the secular state needs religion. For Ratzinger, clearly, a purely secular state would not be able to sustain its moral basis, pace Habermas (who, we remember, was convinced that Böckenförde’s missing uniting bond was the democratic process of communication itself). Also, what Ratzinger labels “reason” (and I have some suspicion here that the semantic connotation of the German term Vernunft carries a slightly different metaphysical semantics than the English term “reason”) is an all-encompassing Vernunft, one based on the Catholic Church’s natural law theory which had been one of the foundations for delineating fundamental rights based on each individual’s membership in the human species. While Ratzinger concedes, natural law theory has fallen victim to evolutionary theory (sic!) – Nature has no rational grounds to tell us what ought to be – he doesn’t offer us a way out. Ratzinger only sketches some preconditions to re-work an ethical vision of human rights and duties that opens up an inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. In this point, Ratzinger as member of a multi-cultural and global organization, seems to go beyond Habermas’ vision which concurs much more with the geographical imagination of “European enlightenment” and its genealogical linkages to Christian and Judaic faith.

The Habermas-Ratzinger debate does, indeed, open up some provocative points for the (political) geography of religion in a post-secular society and the concept of the secular itself. For Talal Asad (2003, 187), that “some enlightened intellectuals are prepared to allow deprivatized religion entry into the public sphere for the purpose of addressing ‘the moral conscience’ of its audience” is kind of naïve: how, he asks, can religion appeal to the consciences of “those who don’t accept its values”. And even more, what would such collective moral conscience or sensibilities look like, given the moral heterogeneity of modern, secular societies that Charles Taylor describes in his monumental oeuvre on The Secular Age (Taylor 2007)? Asad reminds us that only modern secularism has produced enlightened and tolerant religion and the insistence on a sharp separation between the religious and the secular seems paradoxical given that “the latter continually produces the former” (2003, 193) – an argument that resonates with Ratzinger’s co-relationality of reason and faith, albeit Ratzinger conceives this co-relationality as a two-way stream and from a normative point of view.

There is a particular geographical imagination that pushes the faith/reason debate forward, in particular as I read it in Germany. Since Habermas’ Friedenspreis speech and the Habermas-Ratztinger dispute, surprisingly many intellectuals in Germany who have commented on the theme have tended to comply with Habermas’ vision of post-secular society and the particular role of the Christian Churches in the public sphere (though few have had anything to say on other religions, such as Islam). In this sense, the faith/reason debate revolves around geographical imaginations of the “Christliche Abendland” and Europe’s Christian heritage (it’s “civilization”). There is a surprising blind spot in this geographical imagination – that is the question of Islam in Europe: “Muslims are clearly present in a secular Europe and yet in an important sense absent from it” (Asad 2004, 159). When
Habermas or Ratzinger celebrate the ethical sensibilities that faith brings into secular politics, they do
not mean the Imam, but the Catholic or Protestant bishop or the bible, not the Qur’an. In that sense, Ratzinger and Habermas share a very specific geographical imagination of European “civilization” and the religious spaces it entails.

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References


