

Christof Voigt, Prof. of Philosophy and Biblical Languages at Reutlingen School of Theology (Germany):

Christianity beyond Secularism

1. Some Words about religious Contexts in Germany (the Germanspeaking Countries/ Western-Europe)

On the one hand the constitution ensures the separation of state and church (religion). So freedom of religion is guaranteed, and this in a negative and a positive sense: One can't be forced to belong to a church or to be influenced by a religion: so one may be free of religion. The positive sense: You are free to belong and adhere the confession you choose. And f.e. Sunday services or public prayers are allowed and (within certain limits) under the protection of the state. - Again, state and church a seperated by constitution.

On the other hand (and this seems to be a special situation in Germany) the two big churches (as they call themselves): the roman-catholic church and about 25 regional protestant churches get a church-tax that is taken and managed by the state. It is taken from all those who are members of one of these churches (and it may happen that you move and when you register the new address at the administration you have at that moment become a member of the regional state church, although you are a methodist). - Furthermore the state pays for the social work of the church (kindergardens etc.), for some bishops, for the professors of theology in the state universities and so on. -- So separation of state and church seem to be a peculiar thing in Germany.

So far to the legal/ juridical situation. And now some remarks on the real one:

We are living in a complete secularized area of the world. Think especially of the former GDR where the religion of the state has been atheistic for 40 years (not to mention the nazism).

In the average about less than 30% of the population are still belonging to the catholic and other less than 30% to the protestant churches. The Methodists with 0,05% of the population are extremely busy at their places but in relation to the whole society they have no importance.

These are numbers. But who goes to the sunday service? Between 2 and 5% of the church members (not the population!) depending on the part of Germany: less in the northern, more in the southern parts.

These numbers are decreasing and the (still very rich) churches are coping with down-sizing their administration and the work in their congregations.

In many cases the church is not able to finance their buildings; until today we have churches (very old ones among them) in each single village. Churches began to sell them. Especially in eastern Germany associations of culture (or similar societies) arise that fight for the maintenance of "their churches" as buildings of historical or cultural interest. But those people never would go there!

Maybe three years ago the UMC left a church-room (not even a church) to an islamic congregation. The consequence: There were some interconfessional problems with the protestant state church that had decided to prefer the destruction of a church to the sale to the muslim community.

One could tell lots of stories about the end of a christian tradition (What is the meaning of Christmas or Easter? Who is this dead guy on the wooden cross in front of this impressive building? Who could have the arrogance to say "I am the truth"? and so on). But I will quote just one classical sentence from an opinion poll in Berlin: A young man was asked "Are you religious or areligious?" He answered: "Oh, neither nor. I am just normal!"

Christianity is out. Religion is at best syncretistic and esoteric individualized patchwork-religiosity.

2. A Different Perspective

These developments were - by sociologists - seen as confirmation of the standard theory of secularization: The more modernity (constitutional state, organised welfare, free research of science and powerful applied sciences, free economics, etc.) - the less religion = the more secularism. For at least the last 100 years this was our point of view of the social process. Now we learn two things: (1) This is probably not true (to be brief: religion is - at least globally seen - still vital), (2) the Western-European way was a special way, and the theory of secularization was not a standard theory with global weight.

Jürgen Habermas, a well-known german philosopher and sociologist, publishes in the last years a lot about this learning process. He is discovering the importance of Christianity (and religiosity in general). Nevertheless he is defending the secularized society which he considers as a result (not a necessary but a possible one) of reformation and enlightenment (that can be understood as a consequence of reformation).

So if our Oxford Institute discusses "... the World Beyond Christianity" I - at the hand of Habermas - want to go beyond the limits of Christianity and take a look on a secularized world and discover Christianity beyond this secular world.

3. Jürgen Habermas

...born in 1929 is a German philosopher and sociologist, associated to the Critical Theory of Society (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse) respectively the Neomarxist "Frankfurter Schule". By Craig Calhoun (US-american sociologist and since last year director of the London School of Economics) Habermas is considered to be the most important theoretician of society and the most important political philosopher of our time (Mendieta, VanAntwerpen, 170).

As one of the world's leading intellectuals he - since decades - discusses actual social, political and philosophical resp. scientific trends with international partners.

For a long time his main interest was the history of public sphere, the importance of communicative rationality and discours ethics; since the early 80-ies he emphasizes the *modern* character of his thinking (vs. postmodern philosophers as Jacques Derrida and others).

Since 2001 Habermas appears as a philosopher who is interested in religion, in the relation of secular society and religion, knowledge and faith. After his academic career this is very astonishing.

I will give some dates that seem to be the highlights of this process:

- 2001, October: Habermas makes a speech about faith and knowledge to thank for the peace-award of the German book-trade. The scientific community is extremely astonished.

[Jürgen Habermas: *Glauben und Wissen*, 2002; engl. ?]

- 2004, January: Jürgen Habermas meets Joseph Kardinal Ratzinger (at that time: chief of the Congregation of Faith in Rome; later: Pope Benedict XVI.) to discuss "Prepolitic moral fundaments of liberal states"

[J. Habermas und J. Ratzinger: *Dialektik der Säkularisierung. Über Vernunft und Religion*, Freiburg 2005; engl.: id.: *The Dialectics of Secularization (About Reason and Religion)*, Ignatius Press 2007]

- 2004, March: At a conference to the 200. anniversary of the death of Immanuel Kant in Vienna, Austria, Habermas presents "At the boundaries between faith and knowledge. The Reception and actual importance of Kants Philosophy of Religion"
 - [Jürgen Habermas: *Die Grenze zwischen Glauben und Wissen. Zur Wirkungsgeschichte und aktuellen Bedeutung von Kants Religionsphilosophie*, in: Nagl-Docekal et al. ..., 2004; in:]
- 2005: Jürgen Habermas: Between Naturalism and Religion: *Philosophical Essays*, 2008
 - [orig.: Jürgen Habermas: *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, 2005]
- 2005, September: Philosophical-theological conference in Vienna, Austria. 13 presentations discuss "Religion in the Modern Society" (related to Habermas). Habermas replies.
 - [Nagl-Docekal et al.: *Glauben und Wissen*, 2007; engl. ?]
- 2007, February: Habermas gives a lecture at the university of the Societas Jesu (SJ) in Munich. Title: An Awareness/ A Consciousness of what is Lacking.
 - [Jürgen Habermas: *Ein Bewusstsein von dem, was fehlt. Über Glauben und Wissen (faith and knowledge) und den Defaitismus der modernen Vernunft* (the defeatism of modern reason); in: *NZZ* 10.2.2007; in: Michael Reder und Josef Schmidt [ed.], 2008]
- 2009, 18th June: Habermas is 80 years old. The prominent protestant bishop Wolfgang Huber (professor for social ethics and president of the council of the protestant state churches in Germany) complains in a published statement, that Habermas looks for the dialogue with roman catholic theology (and papable persons) and Jesuits, but not with the protestant theology (that is to say: with him, Wolfgang Huber).
 - Habermas: "I became old, but not religious."
 - [Michael Funken (ed.): *Über Habermas. Gespräche mit Zeitgenossen*, 2008]
- 2009, October:
 - (1) in the Great Hall of the New Yorker Cooper Union: A public discussion (with 1000 visitors) takes place (5 hours long) between the global intellectuals Habermas, Judith Butler, Charles Taylor and Cornel West with the moderation of Craig Calhoun about the subject "Religion and Public Sphere".
 - [Eduardo Mendieta, Jonathan VanAntwerpen (ed.): *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 2011; dt. id.; *Religion und Öffentlichkeit*]
 - (2) New York University: A scientific symposium with outstanding personalities is arranged to the subject "Postmetaphysical Thinking and Religion"
 - [Cf. Jürgen Habermas: *Religion und nachmetaphysisches Denken*; in: id.: *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, 2012; engl. ?]
 - (3) Long Island: Dialogue between Habermas and Eduardo Mendieta (Philosopher, Stony Brook University) about "The New Philosophical Interest in Religion".
 - [*Ein neues Interesse der Philosophie an Religion*, in: Jürgen Habermas: *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, 2012; engl. ?]
- 2012, July, Munich: Habermas meets the extreme-liberal protestant theologian Friedrich-Wilhelm Graf to discuss "Politics and Religion".
 - [FAZ, 20.07.2012]

I report all these data here to underline that Habermas is an interesting witness for the subject of the Oxford Institute (in the perspective from outside). Especially because he stands in for a secular society and tries to give normative reasons for the open society - as a witness for the importance of religion he is unsuspicious. Think of him as a liberal representative of the 68-generation! - He is no saint, whom to follow we are obliged. But he can give us interesting impulses.

4. Habermas' Speech "Faith an Knowledge", October 2001 (book-trade)

In October 2001 I was invited to visit the awarding within the Frankfurt book-fare that is broadcasted by the main TV-stations. The attentive visitors had read the last publications of the well-known philosopher and expected a speech about some moral resp. normative problems and social consequences in relation to newest results of biological research.

But: The October 2001 was some weeks after 9/11. And Habermas had to deal with the return of religion in a secular society.

The decades before he had defended a classical theory of secularization that says, that modernization and secularization of societies walk hand in hand, id est: the more modernization - the less religion.

In his major work "The Theory of Communicative Action" [„Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns“] from 1981 Habermas assumes that the function of religion passes over to the secular rationality/ reason, and the authority of the holy goes over to the authority of consensus.

In his speech from 2001 he invents the controversial notion of a "postsecular society", a society that has to prepare for the situation that religion will in future be (become or remain) vital in a modern secular world.

So secularity and religion have to deal with one another. In the basic idea of his discours ethics he proposes that many voices are heard in the public discourse. So Habermas is against an unfair exclusion of religion form the public sphere. Even more: Habermas - suddenly - is sure that religion has sources of sense or - in his words - semantic potentials that are not yet used up/ worn out/ spent ["unabgegolten"] and vital for the future of the secular society.

Habermas demands a double translation: Religious people have to internalize a secularized rationality (f.e. the falsificationability of concepts or the predominance of law) - which should be no problem for Christians! On the other hand religious people should translate their traditions into a language that is accessible for all, especially for non-religious people.

Habermas several times quotes two exemples: the godlike image of man that motivates to respect dignity of man, and the biblical concept sin that is different from guilt and more than that and that is essential for a human anthropology.

And then Habermas invites and encourages the secular society to have an open mind for this religious semantic potentials.

Since he sees some threats for the modern society: Secularization historically considered is mainly a liberalisation from paternalism; nowadays secularization is at the same time the menace to homelessness; modernisation threatens to jump the track/ to be derailed ["entgleisen"]. A crude scientific naturalism (or materialism) and the mercantilisation of all human relations run the risk of converting man to a thing: That are exemples for our "beyond Christianity".

The sources of religion translated in accessible language (without giving up "irrational aspects") could help to hold open the human mind and widen the perspective of the secular society.

For the philosophical interest: Habermas distinguishes faith and knowledge; he does not take aime at a synthesis - like Immanuel Kant did; but he relates them in the presented way.

This speech from 2001 is many-faceted and contains all the topics that Habermas will roll out in the following years in regard to several questions concerning religion. As far as I know, this interesting speech has up to now not been translated into english.

5. The dialogue between Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Kardinal Ratzinger, 2004 (Munich)

Habermas arranges his presentation in 5 aspects:

1. The complete secularized state - by which normative sources does he justify itself?

Habermas is optimistic and maintains his secular thinking. He says: Strictly speaking the modern state does not need any supplementary sources, because the democratic procedure is a method to produce legitimacy by legality. Everything can be roused by law, which is constructed by discourse and consensus.

2. A pluralistic community - by which motivation can integration be achieved?

Habermas seems to be less optimistic: The motivation of the members of the society ["Gesellschaftsbürger"; Rousseau: bourgeois], to whom law is addressed, to participate as a citizen/ member of the state ["Staatsbürger"; Rousseau: citoyen], who takes part to address law, may appear - can, however, not be enforced.

So the question is unanswered: Where is a source of cohesion and unity of a secular society? The answer is moved to an accidental motivation of individuals - where ever it may have its sources.

3. Solidarity is threatened by a derailing ["entgleisend"] secularization.

The unifying tape (1 and 2) is threatened by a freewheeling ["ungezügelt"] globalisation - especially with its economic consequences - and the loss of function of democratic procedures.

Postmodern theories act defeatistic and take a radical sceptical point of view on human rationality. The explicit modern (not postmodern) philosophy of Jürgen Habermas and the catholic theology (Ratzinger!) still trust the human reason in a self-enlightened attitude. So philosophy may gain from a learning process with religion and theology and v.v..

I want to add a personal remark: In some texts Habermas seems to be desperate by the postmodern critique of reason (rightly so!) and he gives the impression to functionalise catholic theology to have a partner against this defeatism of reason.

4. Secularization leads to a learning process: Both enlightenment&reason and religion should reflect their boundaries.

In the holy scriptures and traditions kept something intact, what elsewhere got lost and what cannot be restored by scientific or democratic knowledge and experts: the sensibility and sophisticated expressions for missed life and for salvation/ redemption, for a rescue from a hopeless and unholy life.

Mutual penetration of Christianity and greek metaphysics may have transformed the original religious sense, but did not deflationate and exhaust it; for example the sensibility for justice. So the reciprocal learning process has its model.

5. The liberal state and the postsecular society: Which cognitive and normative attitudes should be expected from religious and non-religious members?

Religious communities have to internalize modernity. That's the conditio sine qua non to be a relevant partner in the discourses of the open society.

The secular society should demand their religious members, to put in the public discourse their semantic potentials (of sense and motivation) in a translation that is accessible for all. This translation (of religious contents) and this transformation of a secular society to a postsecular one has to happen in a manner that the original religious sense (which may differ from knowledge) is not emptied and lost.

6. An Awareness/ A Consciousness of what is Lacking (?) (Ein Bewußtsein von dem, was fehlt). A discussion with Jesuits in Munich 2007.

Habermas begins his presentation by telling his experiences with the funeral of the agnostic author Max Frisch in April 1991. Max Frisch had planned a ceremony for his own funeral: It took place in a big church in Zürich without a pastor and without any blessing, brief: without any Christian liturgy. Habermas felt very much that the rational modern times had no adequate equivalent for a religious coping with this situation.

So again he looks for a dialogue between anthropocentric and theocentric perspective.

Two conditions are inevitable:

1. The religious side has to accept the authority of natural rationality (in its scientific fallibility) and the principles of universalistic rights.
2. The secular reason must not judge the truths of faith (that principally have to be translatable in an accessible language).

Modern sciences forced the natural (philosophical) reason to say goodbye to a metaphysical construction of the whole. Nowadays we have to think postmetaphysical. So the synthesis of knowledge and faith (which was valid at least from Augustin to Thomas) is broken.

And this gives the opportunity that religion may be present in its own way.

So secularization does not function as a filter, but as a transformator (that does not stop the tradition, but switches it over).

Habermas mentions a very interesting motive for his work on faith and knowledge: To mobilise the modern (again: not postmodern) reason against the defeatism, that is breeding in it. He underlines that postmetaphysical thinking is able to deal on its own with defeatism of theoretical reason (f.e. in postmodernity and naturalism). But the practical reason needs good arguments for justice; on its own it is not able to win against a derailing modernisation. It needs arguments and motivational power to live solidarity. The decision to act with solidarity with the risk of personal disadvantages is not just a question of knowledge. So a religious influenced practical reason keeps awake an awareness of globally hurt solidarity, an awareness/ consciousness of what is lacking.

Habermas seems to give a secular definition of sin, and obviously wants to maintain its importance for a human anthropology.

7. Habermas meets Friedrich-Wilhelm Graf, a liberal protestant theologian, and discusses "Politics and Religion", Munich 2012

I want to close my presentation with a peculiar change: The originally left-winged philosopher Jürgen Habermas overtakes the very liberal protestant theologian F.-W. Graf at the conservative side.

It is the theologian who warns in this debate the secular society of the religious and pious people. Particular ideas of good living are spread with universalistic claims. Therefore they are reduced until they fit the profane reason.

Whereas Habermas considers religion as resource of philosophy, that is not narrow-minded like pure naturalism. He wants to gain the semantic potentials of religion in favour of a secular society that lives in solidarity.

Finally Habermas asks Graf, why theologians uncouple themselves from the ritual practices of congregations: The truth-claim of religion is valid not because of a doctrine, but in a lived orthopraxis.