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Religion and Integration Beyond the Nation-State:
Habermas's Theological Turn and the Origins of European Unification¹

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ABSTRACT Jürgen Habermas's recent work is defined by two trends: an engagement with the realm of the sacred and a concern for the future of the European Union. Despite the apparent lack of connection between these themes, I argue the early history of European integration has important implications for his conclusions about the place of faith in public life. Although Habermas's work on religion suggests that the sacred contains important normative resources for postsecular democracies, he continues to bar explicitly religious justifications from discourse in state institutions. I question this exclusion of the sacred by historically reconstructing the role that political Catholicism played in the early history of integration. Focusing on two of the most important actors involved in the creation of the first European Community, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman and German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, I show how the explicitly religious reasons can broaden political perspectives, resulting in the creation of new, inclusive postnational forms of communal life. Pushing Habermas to accept the implications of his theological turn, I argue that pluralistic, nondogmatic and nonauthoritarian religious claims should be allowed to enter into the formal public sphere through a discursively determined interpretation of secular translation.

KEYWORDS Religious Rationality, Secular Translation, European Integration, Jürgen Habermas, Postsecularism

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Religion and Integration

As an heir to the Frankfurt School's praxis-oriented tradition of critical theory, Jürgen Habermas analyzes social pathologies through critical "diagnoses of the present" (*Zeitdiagnosen*). His recent work has thus been defined by two trends. The first is what Austin Harrington describes as a "theological turn" motivated by the attacks of 9/11 and the violence that followed in their wake. The second is his concern for the "faltering project" of European integration, which has been threatened by a number of ongoing challenges resulting from the union's eastern enlargement into postcommunist Europe, the failure of the Constitutional Treaty (2004), the Great Recession of 2008 and the divisions emanating from the crisis of the Eurozone.¹

At first glance these themes appear to be driven by different parts of Habermas's theoretical system. However, I contend that the example of European integration has important implications for Habermas's writings on religion. Although religion is often seen as a source of violence, intolerance and disagreement, the origins of the European Union (EU) demonstrate that faith can act as a constructive political resource when it is articulated in pluralistic, nondogmatic and nonauthoritarian terms. I present the Schuman Plan (1951) as a study of how modern religious consciousness can act as a cognitive, motivational and justificatory resource for postnational politics.²

Habermas endorses religion in public life insofar as it expands the cognitive and motivational capacities of individuals and communities. However, he rejects the sacred as a source of public justification. Habermas argues that reasoning based on faith should be articulated within state institutions only after it has undergone a "secular translation" into "postmetaphysical" terms, i.e. into language that is accessible to believers and non-believers alike.³

The early history of European integration violates the restrictions Habermas places on the sacred. Two of the most important leaders involved in the foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman and German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, both drew heavily on the “world-disclosing power of religious semantics.” The political Catholicism that animated Europe’s postwar Christian Democratic parties helped them not only to *conceive* and *motivate* this move “beyond the nation-state,” but also to *justify* it using explicitly religious vocabulary.⁴ I argue that the early history of integration presents an internal challenge to Habermas’s theory of secular translation because of his vocal support for the *projet européen* and his desire to integrate theoretical reflection with real world events.⁵

The implications of my argument go beyond intellectual history. By investigating the role of religion in the creation of the first European Community, I provide a concrete example of how faith can help create more inclusive forms of communal life. In an increasingly globalized world, where migration, trade and information technology makes interaction with other cultures and traditions inevitable, conceptions of the sacred that encourage dialogue between atheists, Christians, Muslims and other believers, will be crucial to forging new forms of politics where citizens can live together in more than a *modus vivendi*.⁶

In the first part of the argument I outline Habermas’s use of religion to salvage “important resources of meaning” for a “postsecular world.” I then turn to the role that political Catholicism played in pushing postwar European leaders to take the historically radical step of giving up sovereignty to institutions outside the constitutional architecture of the nation-state. I argue that it is highly unlikely that the “reflexive assimilation of religious contents” into secular terms would have been

enough to stimulate this move towards postnational political community on its own.⁷ I then consider the standing of this example for Habermas's understanding of the relationship between politics and religion. In the penultimate section I argue that secular translation is a process that should continue within state institutions by bridging the public divide between believers and non-believers through a gradual process of familiarization. I conclude by reflecting on the need for increased mutual understanding in an age of increasing globalization.

Religious Rationality in a Postsecular World

Since the eighteenth century, philosophy has sought to banish religion from the public sphere. Immanuel Kant thus interpreted the Enlightenment as “the genuine age of criticism, to which everything must submit.” He argued that society must liberate itself from the “tutelage” (*Unmündigkeit*) of religion, respecting “only to that which has been able to withstand the free and public examination of reason.”⁸

A century later Karl Marx was even more forceful in his rejection of religion. He presented faith as “the opium of the people...the illusory sun about which man revolves so long as he does not revolve about himself.” Marx saw religion as a source of repression used by the ruling class to convince the masses to accept their meager fate in this life in exchange for salvation in the next.⁹

Whereas Marx pleaded for the active rejection of religion, in the twentieth century Max Weber and Émile Durkheim saw the deterioration of faith as an epiphenomenon of modernization. Weber argued that the rationalization of society into separate spheres would lead to the “demystification” (*Entzauberung*) of the world, while Durkheim linked this differentiation to the division of labor in society. Later sociologists combined these arguments into the secularization thesis, which links the “progressive shrinkage and decline of religion” to the onset of modernity.¹⁰

Habermas's intellectual development mirrors this trajectory. In his early work, he engaged with religion through the prism of Marxist ideology critique. In the 1980s, however, Habermas's work shifted across two dimensions, departing from critical theory's traditional skepticism towards the realm of the sacred.¹¹ In *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) he (1) took up religious themes explicitly and (2) did so in a manner more reminiscent of Durkheim than Marx. In line with his intersubjective discourse theory, he restated the secularization thesis in terms of the "linguistification of the sacred" (*die Versprachlichung des Sakralen*). Habermas argued that the process of modernization had translated the basic insights of the sacred into a secular vocabulary accessible to all.¹²

This shift is due at least in part to Habermas's recognition of the theological origins of Enlightenment philosophy. He notes, "Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love." Habermas has even confessed that "my conception of language and of communicative action oriented toward mutual understanding nourishes itself from the legacy of Christianity." Although postmetaphysical philosophy might wish to distance itself from Judeo-Christian theology, "Up to this very day there is no alternative to it."¹³

Habermas's recent work thus goes beyond even Durkheim in admitting "the possibility of a continued 'migration of theological contents into the secular.'" Given the growing awareness that "something is missing" in our "ambivalent modern age," he affirms not only that "philosophy must be ready to learn from theology," but also that "religious convictions have an epistemological status that is not purely and

simply irrational.”¹⁴ Religion is no longer simply part of the genealogy of reason; it is also a source of normative inspiration in the present.

Habermas’s shift parallels the broader failure of the secularization thesis. As Peter Berger points out, “Our age is not an age of secularization. On the contrary, it is an age of exuberant religiosity.” Given the continued salience of religion, secular Europe has become an outlier: “Viewed in terms of world history, Max Weber’s ‘Occidental Rationalism’ now appears to be the actual deviation.”¹⁵

In order to capture this transformation, Habermas introduces the term “‘postsecular’ as a sociological description of a shift in consciousness in largely secularized or ‘unchurched’ societies that by now have come to terms with the continued existence of religious communities, and with the influence of religious voices both in the national public sphere and on the global political stage.” In the spirit of critical theory’s commitment to bridging the divide between theoretical reflection and empirical research, this descriptive statement also contains a normative claim. While society can no longer count on the disappearance of religion, Habermas argues that society can benefit from the presence of believers, who can “salvage” (*bergen*) valuable resources from their faith traditions.¹⁶

This inclusive desire to allow religious perspectives into the public sphere conflicts with his Kantian commitment to reason “to which everything must submit.” Habermas resolves this problem by turning to John Rawls’s concept of public reason. In *Political Liberalism* (1993) Rawls argued that while believers could participate freely in civil society, they had to state their arguments in terms of a secular “public political culture” anytime they were acting as judges, legislators, public officials or candidates for public office.¹⁷ Rawls later softened his position, utilizing what he called a “secular translation proviso.” He argued that religious ideas “may be

introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons...are presented.”¹⁸

Habermas accepts Rawls’s basic intuition. However, he argues that even Rawls’s relaxed proviso places unequal burdens on the faithful, who have to treat their beliefs as placeholders for secular reasons. To rectify this imbalance Habermas turns secular translation into an *institutional* proviso. First, he differentiates between the *formal* and the *informal* public spheres. Habermas endorses the need for secular translation in “arranged publics,” which he defines as including “parliaments, courts, ministries, and administrations.” Whereas “politicians and officials within political institutions” must use “language that is equally accessible to all citizens,” Habermas argues that citizens in the “weak publics” of civil society should be allowed to express their ideas in explicitly religious terms.¹⁹

Second, he seeks to ensure that public deliberations do not place an “unreasonable mental and psychological burden [on] religious citizens.”²⁰ Under Rawls’s proviso, the onus to present “proper political reasons” falls purely on the shoulders of believers. However, just as philosophers must remain open to the normative potential contained in the sacred, Habermas contends that “the religiously unmusical” (Weber) must keep an open mind regarding the reasons provided by citizen-believers. He concludes that secular citizen-atheists are obliged to assist believers in the process of translation.

The success of Habermas’s institutionalization of Rawls’s proviso in equalizing the asymmetry between religious and non-religious citizens is open to debate.²¹ However, by calling on all citizens to participate in secular translation, Habermas does secure more space for citizen-believers. Although he argues that public reason must maintain its “methodological atheism” on the level of the formal justification,

Habermas allows religion to influence the process of opinion-formation in civil society.²²

In addition to acting as a reservoir of new ideas, religion is also an important motivational resource. Inspiring adherence to the dictates of reason has been a problem ever since G.W.F. Hegel criticized Kant for “turning the form of right” into a “*cold, dead letter*.”²³ Although Habermas admits that “Kant had rather too much confidence in the motivational force of good reasons,” he rejects Hegel’s critique. Instead, Habermas proposes a division of labor between philosophy, whose task it is to explicate the moral point of view, and “pre-political” cultural traditions, including religion, that “*anchor* the moral point of view in the hearts of acting subjects.”²⁴

Nicholas Wolterstorff points out that religion is an important source of motivation precisely because “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.”²⁵ Excluding these convictions from public life not only runs the risk that the cognitive resources hidden within religious rationality will be lost, but also that its motivating power will dissipate as believers are alienated from the public sphere. Whereas secular morality is highly individualized and “not inherently embedded in communal practices,” religious consciousness, which “preserves an essential connection to the ongoing practice of life within a community,” is an important source of social cohesion.²⁶

If maintaining fellow-feeling is a problem for existing national communities, it is an even greater issue when trying to go push politics beyond the state, as the European movement has done. The major world religions – especially those institutionalized in supranational structures, like the Roman Catholic Church – link citizens across state and national boundaries through “the observances of united

global communities of all of the faithful.” Faced with the atomizing tendencies of secularization, Habermas believes that religion might be able to help disseminate universalistic forms of transnational solidarity, i.e the ability to see individuals living in other states as members of the same community.²⁷

In the next section, I argue that Catholic social thought played an important role in the early history of European integration. As a matter that is “close to Habermas’s heart,” European integration represents an interesting case study of what faith has to offer the postnational constellation.²⁸ A closer examination of the origins of the European Union (EU) confirms Habermas’s belief in the importance of faith as a source of normativity and transnational solidarity. However, I argue that religion must surpass the cognitive and motivational boundaries Habermas sets for it if it is to serve this purpose.

Christian Democracy and European Integration

My examination of the creation of the Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) focuses on French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman and German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. My argument about the role that religion – in the form of Christian democracy – played in the origins of European integration is not meant to downplay the importance of economic, geopolitical, military and strategic factors.²⁹ However, I want to draw attention to “the fundamental role of Christian Democracy in all phases of integration.” Wolfram Kaiser concludes that this movement was indispensable for “creating political trust, deliberating policy...marginalising internal dissent within the national parties, socialising new members into an existing policy consensus, coordinating governmental policy-making and facilitating parliamentary ratification of integration treaties.”³⁰

Although Schuman and Adenauer were both affiliated with nondenominational parties, as Roman Catholics they were able to draw on a rich tradition that had “evolved from Catholic confessional parties created in the second part of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century.” I argue that this movement, which Stathis Kalyvas and Kees van Kersbergen refer to as “Christian democracy (or political Catholicism),” played a key role in Schuman and Adenauer’s cognitive acceptance of supranationalism and in their motivation to pursue a European solution to the continent’s problems.³¹ However, in violation of the normative barriers in Habermas’s theory of the legitimate use of religion, I show that these two leaders drew on directly and publically on faith-based justifications for integration.

When “the Six” – Italy, Germany, France, Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands – created the ECSC, their governments all contained powerful Christian Democratic parties. Drawing on the social and political teachings of the Catholic Church, the leaders of this movement believed that the “national community is just one among others—locality, workplace, religion— and not fundamentally different from a supranational community.”³² This fractal view of society as a set of Russian Matryoshka dolls, with each exponent exhibiting the same characteristics on a different scale, helped to lay the cognitive foundations for supranational integration.³³

On a motivational level, many leaders were committed to the ECSC not only due to their experience of war and the perceived economic benefits of integration, but also because continental unity had become a priority for the Roman Catholic Church.³⁴ After the war Pope Pius XII emphasized that “an essential point in any future international arrangement would be the formation of an organ for the maintenance of peace, of an organ invested by common consent with supreme power

to whose office it would also pertain to smother in its germinal state any threat of isolated or collective aggression.”³⁵ Building on programs designed by Catholic intellectuals, he connected this remedy to the idea of continental integration through institutions with direct decision-making power.

In 1948 Pius XII presented his vision to the Convention of the Union of European Federalists in Rome. He urged the leaders of the “great European nations of the continent, with their long histories filled with memories of glory and power...to disregard [*faire abstraction*] their past greatness in order to fall into line with a higher political and economical unity.” The pope also expressed his hope for a new era in which the ties between religion and European civilization would be reestablished. He declared 1950 to be a Holy Year dedicated to peace, which he believed could be achieved through integration.³⁶

Robert Schuman saw the Pope’s support as a sign that “the providential moment had arrived.”³⁷ This conclusion rested on his wartime experiences. After serving as Under-Secretary of State for Refugees before the German invasion of France, Schuman spent the first years of the war as a Nazi prisoner. He devoted his time in captivity to reading and reflecting on the social and political teachings of the Catholic Church. He realized, “There is only one salvation [*Rettung*] for Europe – that is the United States of Europe.”³⁸ His use of the language of salvation and reconciliation points to the influence of Catholicism on his politics.

Schuman was convinced that any attempt at European integration would have to be based on shared economic interests that went beyond trade liberalization. In 1947 he commented on the need to “plac[e] at the service of the nations a team of leaders, apostles of reconciliation and artisans of a new world, which will, after fifteen war-ravaged years, begin a vast social transformation.” Schuman’s status as an

“exemplary Christian” and the “holiness of his politics,” has even led to an initiative to canonize him as the first saint to be recognized for his political vocation since Thomas More.³⁹

Schuman’s support for the plan to create a coal and steel community that ultimately bore his name was crucial for many reasons, including his role in securing the approval of the French cabinet. It was also important in recruiting the second major actor, Konrad Adenauer.⁴⁰ Like Schuman, the German chancellor had spent long parts of the war in internal exile, hiding from the Gestapo in Catholic monasteries. This gave him the opportunity to reflect upon *Rerum novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo anno* (1931), the Papal Encyclicals that defined Catholic social teaching.

This experience reinforced the religious dimensions of Adenauer’s politics, leading him to formulate his “two Germanies thesis.” With this idea Adenauer connected the underlying conditions that had brought about National Socialism to the Protestant east of Germany dominated by Prussia. By contrast, the second Germany stressed the country’s Catholicism and its “traditional connections...to its western neighbors” dating back to the Holy Roman Empire.⁴¹

The two Germanies thesis incorporated a historical narrative of the West as unified Catholic *Abendland* (“evening” or “western” country). The *Abendland* gave Adenauer powerful cognitive resources to think about the future that were not associated with the nationalism that had led Germany into two World Wars. His goal was to rebuild Germany by helping to “bring the old traditions back to life and to breathe new life to the spiritual life of our homeland.”⁴² The connection of western Germany to the Roman and Carolingian past further distanced Adenauer’s thinking from nationalism. He repeatedly emphasized “the change for the better brought about

by the entry of Christianity into the imaginative and intellectual world of the *Abendland*.⁴³

The past was also crucial in Adenauer's motivational prioritization of *Westbindung* ("binding to the west") as the primary goal of his chancellorship. Just months after the war, Adenauer had resigned himself to the fact that eastern Germany had been "lost for a time that cannot be estimated."⁴⁴ He placed a higher value on what he described as the "cultural and foreign policy unification with western Europe" than on the unity of the German nation.⁴⁵

While it is clear that the framework of political Catholicism played an important cognitive and motivational role for both these leaders, they also drew heavily on religious language in their political rhetoric. Schuman repeatedly stressed the importance of the shared spiritual heritage of Europe. He looked back to the history of unified Christendom as a model for supranationalism. Explaining his decision to abandon the statist tradition of French diplomacy in favor of supranational unification, Schuman noted, "For the first time in a thousand years we [have been] given the opportunity to rebuild Europe spiritually and materially."⁴⁶

In particular, he hoped that "the follies of the past" would not obscure "what Christian Europe had in common." In his speeches he argued that supranationalism was a return to the continent's prenational past:

The realities of our Western Civilization have revived and overcome the passions which had temporarily succeeded in obscuring our common patrimony. The Europe that we have founded will be thus...[a] return to perennial tradition which a momentary aberration had succeeded in making us forget.⁴⁷

Steeped in Church history, Schuman's attempt to reinvigorate the intellectual traditions of the past recalls an age when theological arguments were broadly accepted in the public sphere.

Adenauer also drew on religious themes in his electoral campaigns and in his arguments for integration in the German parliament. He spoke of integration as encompassing “the entire Christian *Abendland*.” He saw the unification of western Europe as a bulwark against “godless communism.” The image of Christian Europe standing up to the geopolitical threats emanating from the communist bloc played an important role in all of Adenauer’s electoral campaigns as the leader of the German Christian democrats, as well as in his public support for the Schuman Plan and integration more generally.⁴⁸

Despite “the odor of incense that clung to the movement,” the transnational solidarity revealed in the origins of European integration also shows that religious justifications can be constructive resources for postnational politics.⁴⁹ Without the vocal, public support of Schuman and Adenauer the ECSC may never have come into existence; it most certainly would not have taken the shape that it did. A supranational Europe organized around shared, community institutions was not the only possible form of intra-European cooperation after World War II, nor was it the most likely. Both the traditional model of a dismembered Germany and the confederal model based on intergovernmental organizations had broad support. Europe only took the supranational path only because key leaders “used a series of *fait accomplis* to resolve a wider battle over alternatives to Europe.”⁵⁰

It is unlikely that the ECSC could have been founded on supranational principles without the support of both Schuman and Adenauer, who fought to push it through the governmental apparatus of France and Germany respectively.⁵¹ It is also unlikely that they would have been so committed to this project without the *cognitive*, *motivational* and *justificatory* resources of the political Catholicism that animated their personal religious faith and the Christian democratic movement. The direct

connection Schuman and Adenauer drew between faith and European political integration shows that religion can be an important political resource for the postnational constellation.

The Meaning of the EU's Origins for Habermas

To the extent that religious cognitive and motivations resources prompted the extension of solidarity across borders in the informal public sphere, Habermas can accept this as an example of how “‘the political’ has not completely lost its association with religion.” However, my reconstruction of the foundation of the ECSC also shows that religion played an important justificatory role in the formal public sphere. Both Schuman and Adenauer made explicitly religious claims in public institutions as representatives of their respective states. From this perspective the project was founded on a violation of Habermas’s institutional account of secular translation, which “obliges politicians and officials within political institutions to formulate and justify...measures exclusively in a language that is equally accessible to all citizens.”⁵²

I argue that this case study has important implications for Habermas’s argument on the place of religion in the public sphere. Most theorists could sidestep my critique by noting that this historical example has no bearing on their normative reflections. However, this defense is more difficult for Habermas given his connection to the Frankfurt School, which “understand[s] itself as a theoretical reflection of the emancipatory moments of the age.”⁵³

Habermas has repeatedly demonstrated his commitment to this principle in his political writings (*kleine politische Schriften*), where he seeks to meet historical developments “halfway.”⁵⁴ Insofar as Habermas shares in critical theory’s “dialectic of immanence and transcendence,” he cannot simply brush off this historical

evidence. Given Habermas's methodological commitment to understanding social movements as affecting "two worlds," i.e. both in social reality and in the normative dimension of philosophical critique, he has to take the social movements into account.⁵⁵

The Frankfurt School's methodological engagement with historical developments and its traditional desire to integrate empirical research does not, however, mean that historical developments can simply "disprove" philosophical conclusions. Seyla Benhabib points out that within critical theory, historical examples do not have the status "of what empirical political scientists would name a 'case study.'" On the contrary, "they are offered to show how the very abstract considerations of normative political thought...shape the actions and movements of political agents."⁵⁶

This does not imply that Habermas must simply accept the theoretical implications of my historical argument. For example, he could claim that the religious claims made by Schuman and Adenauer have undergone secular translation since the 1950s. Such a response would obviate my critique by setting the European project on normatively justified postmetaphysical grounds in the present. This defense would be in line with Habermas's contention that it is possible for social actors to legitimize past actions by "[d]istinguishing between the legacy we appropriate and the one we want to refuse."⁵⁷ Contemporary Europeans could thus appropriate integration in the present while rejecting its religious origins.

This may be precisely what Habermas believes. In considering the features of a common European political identity – which defines "how Europe at large presents itself to non-Europeans" – Habermas lists secularism alongside the continental faith in government, a preference for the welfare state, a suspicion of markets, an aversion to

the use of force and a desire for multilateral diplomacy. He could therefore argue that the claims to Christian solidarity made by Schuman and Adenauer have since been translated into the secular terms of “the Enlightenment project of democracy, rule of law, respect for the differences of others, and the principles of rational discourse and science.”⁵⁸

Such a response is cogent. Unfortunately, it also undermines the motivations behind Habermas’s theological turn. The whole point of secular translation is to ensure that the normative potential of religion is not lost to “a kind of evacuating depleting secularization.”⁵⁹ There is little point in allowing communities to “empower themselves by creating new subjectivities in the public sphere, new vocabularies of claim making, and new forms of togetherness” through the use of religious semantics only to prohibit them from acting on these insights. Since there is no epistemic guarantee that a secular translation of religious language exists – or is available at the moment necessary for political action – this seems to obviate the benefits Habermas endorses.⁶⁰

Given Habermas’s commitment to engaging with historical developments, he has to confront the implications of the EU’s religious origins. I argue that he can do so by expanding the purview of the sacred within political life. Pushing Habermas to accept what I see as the implications of his theological turn, I contend that Habermas should allow pluralistic, nondogmatic and nonauthoritarian religious claims into the formal public sphere as part of the process of secular translation.

Religion and the Formal Public Sphere

Even acknowledging the implications of this historical example, Habermas can still present a number of objections to further opening his institutional account of

secular translation. To start, allowing faith into the political process is potentially dangerous, as non-believers might experience religious justifications as “imposing views of what is true and what is right and presenting these as unquestionably valid.” However, it is unclear if this threat is intrinsic to religious arguments, or only to certain uses of the sacred. Maeve Cooke defends the latter position. She argues that public uses of religion are problematic only if: 1) they deny the fact of pluralism in modern society; 2) they are dogmatic, shutting down the discursive process of reasoning that underlines democratic practice, and; 3) they are authoritarian, rejecting the possibility of reasonable disagreement.⁶¹

Habermas’s institutional appropriation of the Rawlsian paradigm of public reason is designed to defend the rights of secular citizens from theocratic oppression by believers. However, his political theory already guards against nonpluralistic, dogmatic and authoritarian uses of religion by other means. Before being eligible for participation in the informal public sphere and submitting their claims to institutional translation, Habermas argues that believers must first display what he calls a “modern religious consciousness.” Such an understanding of faith must meet three preconditions:

first, come to terms with the cognitive dissonance of encountering other denominations and religions. It must, second, adapt to the authority of the sciences which hold the societal monopoly of secular knowledge. It must, last, agree to the premises of a constitutional state grounded in a profane morality.⁶²

These criteria are designed to ensure that citizens accept the presence of multiple of viewpoints and common rules for self-governance in modern societies that are defined by the presence of “deep religious and ideological divides.”⁶³ The demands of such an understanding of the sacred are quite effective on their own. The requirements Habermas places on modern religious consciousness already defend

citizen-atheists from nonpluralistic, dogmatic and authoritarian religious worldviews without the need for the additional protection of secular translation.

Although their use of religious reason as a justification in the formal public sphere overstepped the boundaries of the institutional translation proviso, Schuman and Adenauer did not violate any of Habermas's three preconditions for modern religious consciousness. Neither sought to convert non-believers, made any dogmatic epistemic claims or undermined the democratic political process in arguing for integration in explicitly religious terms. On the contrary, they deployed faith in order to spur their citizens into more inclusive understandings of solidarity that went beyond the borders of the nation.

Although their rhetoric alarmed secularists, Schuman and Adenauer disputed exclusionary, nonpluralistic interpretations of their appeals to faith. When asked about the possibility of Turkey joining the European Communities in 1953, Adenauer was unperturbed by the prospect of allowing a country with a majority Muslim population into the ECSC. On the contrary, he exclaimed, "Turkey? It would make me very happy." Unfortunately, since then European leaders have religious language in exclusive, nonpluralistic ways to bar Turkey from the EU since it is not part of "Christian Europe." However, this is not an argument against Schuman and Adenauer, but for the illegitimacy of these more recent, nonpluralistic uses of religion.⁶⁴

In addition to overt theological domination, allowing faith-based arguments into the formal public sphere raises red flags for Habermas given his commitment to the idea that democratic communities must act on the basis of *mutually acceptable, shared reasons*.⁶⁵ Habermas's limits on secular translation seek to ensure that the institutions of will-formation, where laws are debated and adopted, are governed

using reasons that all citizens could understand and adopt as their own. He argues that faith-based justifications violate this requirement, as citizen-atheists cannot be expected to understand the arguments provided by citizen-believers since they do not share the same principles of epistemic validation.

I am sympathetic to this issue. Habermas is right in pointing out that theological claims rest on different assumptions than those that have been put “to the test of migrating into the realm of the secular, the profane” (Adorno). However, it is not clear that religious arguments are necessarily untranslatable or incomprehensible to non-believers.⁶⁶ As the use of the phrase “for the sake of argument” implies, individuals are able to suspend their beliefs in order to argue for positions using assumptions that do match their actual beliefs. It is even possible to engage in religious arguments without believing in God, as the presence of atheist theologians demonstrates. Benhabib concludes, “Radical incommensurability and radical untranslatability are incoherent notions. . . . If radical untranslatability were true, we could not even recognize the other set of utterances as part of a language, that is, a practice that is more or less rule-governed and shared in fairly predictable ways.”⁶⁷

Religious arguments are not always incommensurable, nor are they necessary dogmatic. As Maeve Cooke points out, Habermas seems to “conflat[e] religious arguments with *authoritarian* arguments.” Faith can certainly be interpreted in authoritarian or dogmatic ways, as is the case in fundamentalist movements that rely on literal readings of holy texts and the unquestionable authority of religious leaders. However, such an “authoritarian attitude toward knowledge is not a *necessary* ingredient of religious faith.”⁶⁸

Given the hierarchical organization of the Catholic Church under an infallible pope, it is understandable that secular citizens and non-Catholics would be wary of

the pontiff's influence. However, while Roman Catholics recognize the absolute authority of the pope in matters of faith and dogma, the political influence of the Bishop of Rome is fairly limited. Unlike Islamic muftis, who can issue *fatwas* (legal ruling) that are considered directly binding on Muslims who have pledged themselves to that scholar, the pope has no formal power over Catholics in political affairs, which are a matter for the believer's individual conscience.⁶⁹

Although Schuman and Adenauer were inspired and motivated by Pius XII's support for integration, they did not dogmatically follow his orders in bringing the ECSC into existence. On the contrary, they drew on the Pope's words – and on their faith – to expand their cognitive, motivational and justificatory capacities to see integration beyond the nation-state as both possible and desirable. The ability to draw on the pope's arguments for inspiration is not limited to Catholics or religious believers. Despite his background as a Jew and a communist, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has used Pope Francis's religiously inspired arguments against the “building of new walls in Europe” to argue for greater openness and solidarity with refugees fleeing civil wars in Africa and the Middle East.⁷⁰

These examples demonstrate that reducing all religion to authoritarian dogmatism is both sociologically reductionist and essentialist. As Habermas himself admits when considering the civil rights movement in America, “churches and religious communities generally perform important functions for stabilizing and advancing a liberal political culture.”⁷¹ In such cases, even non-believers seem to be able to reasonably assent to religious arguments, even if they do not share their epistemic preconditions.

It is important to remember that political arguments made within the formal public sphere have a different status than those made within a philosophical context.

In a democracy – even one that falls short of Habermas’s deliberative ideal – no decision is made once and for all. On the contrary, laws are “the *fallible* result of an attempt to determine what is right through a discussion that has been brought to a *provisional* close under the pressure to decide.”⁷² Just because the officials acting within political institutions are forced to make decisions, this does not mean that their conclusions cannot be revisited in the future. The minority – even when it disagrees with the justifications provided – can consent because it is protected both by democratic procedures and by the conditional nature of all decisions.

In addition to fears about theocratic oppression and the lack of common epistemic foundations, Habermas is also concerned that religious arguments in the formal public sphere will undermine the neutrality of the state vis-à-vis concrete ethical doctrines. However, it is unclear why he differentiates religious ideals from comprehensive understandings of the good life that rely on commitments that are not universally shared. In his critique of Habermas, Charles Taylor notes, “There is no reason to single out religion, as against nonreligious, ‘secular’ (in another widely used sense), or atheist viewpoints.” Taylor compares philosophical ethical doctrines to religious ones:

A Kantian will justify the rights to life and freedom by pointing to the dignity of rational agency; a utilitarian will speak of the necessity to treat beings who can experience joy and suffering in such a way as to maximize the first and minimize the second. A Christian will speak of humans as made in the image of God. They concur on the principles, but differ on the deeper reasons for holding to this ethic. The state must uphold the ethic, but must refrain from favoring any of the deeper reasons.⁷³

Taylor calls for a more pragmatic, less demanding approach to political agreement in an age of radical pluralism.⁷⁴ Instead of eliminating references to religion outright, such an approach would allow “otherworldly” appeals into the public sphere, “provided the reasoning in question satisfies the epistemological and

ethical requirements of...non-authoritarian thinking.” Cooke argues that Taylor’s interpretation is “the appropriate counterpart to what Habermas refers to as a ‘postsecular society.’”⁷⁵

If we take Habermas’s “postsecularization thesis” to require a reexamination of the limits of *both* reason and religion, it seems natural to consider whether reason should be allowed to claim sole jurisdiction in the formal public sphere. The desire to purge politics from all traces of the sacred dates back to the Enlightenment, which assumed that the decline of religion was a necessary epiphenomenon of modernization.⁷⁶ The rejection of the secularization thesis has already broken the connection between the empirical observations of the decline of religion and its normative desirability. Habermas pushes these implications even further, arguing that “we should understand cultural and societal secularization as a double learning process that compels both the traditions of the Enlightenment and the religious doctrines to reflect on their own respective limits.”⁷⁷

Although he is prepared to reexamine its role in the informal context of civil society, Habermas argues, “The secularization of the state is not the same as the secularization of society.” However, given the demise of the Enlightenment’s predictions about secularization – and his own recognition of the inherent value attributed to the worth and value of substantive conceptions of the good that are not universally shared – he must also reconsider the role of religion in formal institutions.⁷⁸ This argument is strengthened by the fact that the preconditions he places on “modern religious consciousness” already protects non-believers from theocratic oppression before institutional translation even begins.

In presenting his argument for the need to loosen the restrictions on religious reason in “weak” publics, Habermas argues that the disenchantment with secular

models of modernization evident in the fundamentalist attacks on the West since 9/11 cannot be countered without drawing on the resources of faith. However, combining this with the ambivalence and meaninglessness experienced by many within the West, it seems right to ask whether secularist arguments “are still powerful enough today to justify the ways in which it undermines the political autonomy of citizens who do not subscribe to postmetaphysical thinking.”⁷⁹ Based on my philosophical reflections and the example of European integration, I argue that they are not.

Adjusting Habermas’s theory to account for the objections I have raised is relatively simple. It requires changing the “institutional translation proviso” into a *discursively determined* translation proviso. This revised principle would require citizens and their representatives in state institutions to collectively determine what forms of religious argument are nonauthoritarian, nondogmatic and pluralistic through public debate, instead of excluding all religious reasons from the formal public sphere via philosophical fiat.

Such an approach has a number of advantages. To start, it allows for geographic flexibility in terms of what forms of religious argumentation different communities admit into the formal public sphere. It also enables citizens within a single community to become more or less open to religious arguments over time. Most importantly, it makes Habermas’s views on religion more faithful to his procedural commitment to democracy as an open form of politics based on communicative action.

Whereas determining acceptable political arguments *ahead of time* and *from the outside* is not a problem for monological theorists like Rawls, for a discourse theorist like Habermas the rules of a communicatively open deliberative democracy ought to be discursively determined by the participants themselves. While Habermas may still argue that “rules of procedure must empower the house leader [in parliament] to strike

religious positions or justifications from the official transcript,” his broader philosophical commitments require him to concede that these rules and their application be based on what citizens debating in the informal public sphere deem to be institutionally admissible claims, not on transcendental, prepolitical boundaries.⁸⁰

Thinking pragmatically about these issues involves acknowledging that it is impossible to prevent individuals and office-holders, who believe in the sacred from reasoning based on these presuppositions in practice. Indeed, in many cases religious and secular reasons are so intertwined that it may be impossible to unwind them.⁸¹ In the end, it is up to citizens in the informal public sphere to exercise their judgment and discursively decide whether to accept these arguments as institutionally admissible.

While non-pluralistic, dogmatic and authoritarian religious claims ought to be excluded from the political public sphere, this revised, discursive proviso leaves room for “reasonable” faith-based conceptions of the good life to enter into the formal public sphere as part of a broader public discourse over the role religion can and ought to play in public life. For Habermas, only ethical doctrines that reject “violence in spreading their beliefs and imposing them on their own members, let alone manipulation inducing suicide attacks, deserve the predicate of ‘reasonable.’”⁸² On these criteria, justifications based on reasonable religious views pose little danger to the autonomy of non-religious citizens. While my argument would require the flexible boundaries between the formal and the informal public spheres to be communicatively determined, this position is more faithful to Habermas’s discursive understanding to politics.⁸³

Integrating Religion and Reason

In light of Habermas's theological turn and his emotional pleas (*Plädoyer*) on behalf of the EU, it is hardly surprising that Peter Gordon is able to discern "certain affinities with the postwar discourse of Christian Democracy" in his recent work. Drawing on the role religious justifications played in the early history of European integration, I argue that even Habermas's "*chastened secularism*" sets the limits of religious reason too narrowly.⁸⁴ The EU, whose founders drew on explicitly religious justifications as representatives of their respective states, is thus a powerful counter-example to Habermas's theory of the role of religion in public life. I conclude that pluralistic, nondogmatic and nonauthoritarian religious claims should be allowed to enter into the formal public sphere through a procedural interpretation of secular translation.

Despite this criticism, I share Habermas's basic framework for a pluralistic deliberative democracy. This is hardly uncontroversial. In his reflections on Habermas's "theological turn," Harrington objects forcefully to this approach. Drawing on a metaphor from international relations, he interprets Habermas's religious writings to be presenting a static "picture of two or more countries coming to represent themselves to one another, as if through ambassadors, in a single section of time." He argues that "good diplomacy between people do[es] not seem an entirely appropriate model for our understanding of the conflict between knowledge and faith." Harrington fears this process will ultimately degenerate into "a diplomatic stand-off, dominated by procedural questions of the conditions of cohabitation and toleration, which all really substantive moment of dispute is deferred."⁸⁵

I agree that religion and secular reason are incommensurable in the sense that they will never succeed in fully bridging their differences.⁸⁶ However, unlike Harrington, I see this as an advantage. If faith ever merged with secular knowledge,

then it could no longer serve as the canary in the coalmine of modernity, i.e. as a resource for critical diagnoses of the present.

In this context it is important to remember that Habermas's communicative approach to politics builds on Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of a "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Under this model the goal of interaction is not assimilation, but a convergence of perspectives where each side learns to see the world from the perspective of the other without giving up its unique identity.⁸⁷ The fact that reason and religion have not unified does not mean that the diplomatic process has failed or must remain synchronically stuck in time and space. On the contrary, it holds out hope for gradual mutual understanding without total integration.

The implications of this interpretation of the relationship between faith and knowledge can be illustrated by applying Harrington's image of diplomacy to the EU. Ever since the formation of the modern state system in the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), the emerging nation-states of Europe communicated via ambassadors. These negotiations often failed to even achieve even the barest *modus vivendi*, as is demonstrated by Europe's long history of warfare. However, in part by drawing on the religious resources of transnational solidarity in the aftermath of the Second World War, representatives of these states have finally succeeded in reaching an understanding that has brought peace to Europe, turning it into what Alessandro Ferrara refers to as "a special area of human hope."⁸⁸

Although the EU does not supersede or eliminate existing states, it does bring them together in shared political institutions that go far beyond the bilateral diplomacy of ambassadors. Habermas's hope is that the schema of political *Horizontverschmelzung* might serve as a model for other regions and for the world as a whole, which could make the transition from international diplomacy to a "global

domestic policy” (*Weltinnenpolitik*) that extends solidarity to encompass the entire globe.⁸⁹ If this vision is to be realized, world leaders will most likely have to violate the boundaries Habermas sets for religious reason by drawing explicitly on faith-based perspectives to provide the normative resources of transnational solidarity necessary to *conceive, motivate* and *justify* the creation of a flexible global order without world government.

¹ Austin Harrington, "Habermas's Theological Turn?" *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 37:1 (2007): 45-61; Giovanna Borradori, ed., *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Jürgen Habermas, "Does Europe Need a Constitution?" in *Time of Transitions* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 89-109; Jürgen Habermas, *Europe: The Faltering Project* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

² I use these terms in a descriptive sense. For more on these categories, see Peter J. Verovšek, "Expanding Europe through Memory: The Shifting Content of the Ever-Salient Past," *Millennium* 43:2 (2015): 535.

³ See Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 217; Ernst B. Haas, *Beyond the Nation-State: Functionalism and International Organization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964).

⁵ For more on immanent critique, see Peter J. Verovšek, "The Immanent Potential of Economic and Monetary Integration: A Critical Reading of the Eurozone Crisis," *Perspectives on Politics*, Forthcoming (2017); Alessandro Ferrara, "Varieties of Transcendence and their Consequences for Political Philosophy," *The European Legacy* 20:2 (2015): 111.

⁶ David Ingram, "How Secular should Democracy be? A Cross-Disciplinary Study of Catholicism and Islam in Promoting Public Reason," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 15:3 (2014): 380-400.

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 109; Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 228.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Preface to the First Edition, 100-1, translation modified; also Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 17-23.

⁹ Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction" in *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 54, emphasis in original.

¹⁰ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 20. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1985); Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Free Press, 1968).

¹¹ See Peter E. Gordon, "Critical Theory between the Sacred and the Profane," *Constellations*, Forthcoming (2016).

¹² Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984/1987), vol. II: 77-112. See Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 247.

¹³ Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, 160, 149; Ferrara, "Varieties of Transcendence," 112.

¹⁴ Jürgen Habermas, "Reply to My Critics" in *Habermas and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 353, emphasis in original; Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas,

Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 43, 50; Jürgen Habermas, *An Awareness of what is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010). Also Simone Chambers, "How Religion Speaks to the Agnostic: Habermas on the Persistent Value of Religion," *Constellations* 14:2 (2007): 219-21.

¹⁵ Peter L. Berger, "Globalization and Religion," *Hedgehog Review* 4:2 (Summer, 2002): 10; Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 116; Gordon, "Critical Theory between the Sacred and the Profane," 2-3.

¹⁶ Habermas, "Reply to My Critics," 348.

¹⁷ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 58-66.

¹⁸ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 462.

¹⁹ Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 130; Camil Ungureanu, "The Contested Relation between Democracy and Religion: Towards a Dialogical Perspective?" *European Journal of Political Theory* 7:4 (2008): 405-29.

²⁰ Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 130.

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²² Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, 160.

²³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Preface, 17, emphasis in original.

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²⁶ Habermas, *An Awareness of what is Missing*, 75.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 75. Also Chambers, *How Religion Speaks to the Agnostic: Habermas on the Persistent Value of Religion*, 211, 218-221; Richard Wolin, "Jürgen Habermas and Post-Secular Societies," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52:5 (23 September, 2005): 16-18.

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- ⁷⁸ Habermas, "The Political", 23; Maeve Cooke, "Beyond Dignity and Difference: Revisiting the Politics of Recognition," *European Journal of Political Theory* 8:1 (January, 2009): 79, 88.
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- ⁸⁰ Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 131.
- ⁸¹ Jorge M. Valadez, "The Implications of Incommensurability for Deliberative Democracy" in *Deliberative Democracy in Practice* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 155.
- ⁸² Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 104.
- ⁸³ Allen, "Having One's Cake and Eating it Too", 151.
- ⁸⁴ Jürgen Habermas, "Europapolitik in der Sackgasse: Plädoyer für eine Politik der abgestuften Integration" in *Ach, Europa: Kleine politische Schriften XI* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2008); Peter E. Gordon, "Between Christian Democracy and Critical Theory: Habermas, Böckenförde, and the Dialectics of Secularization in Postwar Germany," *Social Research* 80:1 (Spring, 2013): 179, 197.
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- ⁸⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001); Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 463-490.