

Religion and the American Future

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Introduction: Religion and the American Future

Yuval Levin

Modern liberal democracy has always seen the containment of religious passions as among its most crucial and most difficult tasks. Arising in the wake of bloody religious wars in Europe, the liberal project sought to quell the fighting by establishing a scheme of procedural justice which made actions, not beliefs, the measure of men and which did not depend on common answers to fundamental questions of divinity and humanity. The state would protect a few essential rights that might be grounded in broad premises about God but did not require very particular theological commitments, and religion would for the most part be a private matter, not a subject for public contention. “Everyone is orthodox to himself,”¹ John Locke wrote, and the liberal order he imagined would have its citizens respect that fact but also largely ignore it, for the sake of peace.

From the beginning, some have worried that this treatment of religious questions as not meriting the attention of the polity would smother religious belief, and flatten the souls and lives of citizens by rendering them ignorant of and uninterested in the deepest truths about themselves. And indeed the liberal democratic attitude toward religion, combined with the enormous material success achieved by the world’s liberal societies, has certainly led in many places to declining interest in religious tradition and practice.

But America has been something of an exception. “On my arrival in the United States,” wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835, “it was the religious aspect of the country that first struck my eye.”² A great many subsequent

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visitors have agreed. Yet here, too, the liberal order has done a fine job of averting religious conflict. Sectarian violence has been vanishingly rare, even as religious fervor and commitment have barely abated at all—and indeed in some respects have intensified through American history.

No one secret can explain this resilience of American religion. We are a different people than our European cousins, with a different history that has produced quite different instincts and habits. In America, rather than smother religious belief, liberal democracy has in some respects energized it through a constant—and, for the most part, a constructive—tension. Religious conflict has been avoided not by depleting the energy of our various sects but by uniting them in temperate but steady opposition to the cultural predilections of the liberal society itself.

Religion has become the chief foil of every prominent secular institution in America. Science—the flagship of the modern project—can hardly be discussed without mention of its religious critics. The law—the arena in which every important American notion eventually fights for its life—is ever confounded with complex dilemmas of religious freedom and coercion. The excesses of American art are held to account by almost no one except the religiously motivated. And in our politics these days, the religious voter is sought after with fervor, and displays of public religiosity unimagined a generation ago are common practice for politicians of both parties. Religion is an active, living force in every corner of American life and is everywhere in tense and often quite uneasy contact with the liberal society.

All of this has tended to unite the sects in America, and so to minimize interreligious conflict, yet at the same time it has energized the broad community of believers. In each of the areas of friction and tension, the secular faction and the religious faction both feel besieged and under threat by an overwhelming force threatening to crush them. Each somehow has managed to persuade itself it is fighting for its life against the other. The question of religion and secularism is therefore a live and open question in America in a way it has simply ceased to be in Europe (at least for now, while Europe remains largely blind to the challenge of Islam). And it is a question perhaps best understood as a series of individual encounters between religious believers and the institutions of the liberal society of which they are part: religion and science, religion and the law, religion and art, and so more broadly: religion and secularism.

In October of 2006, the American Enterprise Institute brought together a distinguished group of scholars to take up the question of religion in America on precisely these terms: to consider each of these encounters individually, to think through their combined significance, and to take into account also the very different but surely quite instructive experience of Europe. The workshop involved a series of prepared papers—one on each of the encounters just mentioned—with a brief prepared response to each, and then discussion of the subject. The participants sought, above all, to consider the future of American religion, and the place of religion in the future of the nation. This volume brings together those papers and responses, as well as brief selections from the ensuing discussion.

The papers and discussions defy a succinct summation, and reward a thorough reading. But if any single theme emerges from the whole, it is a sense that the constructive tension that has sustained American religion is here to stay, and with it also our uniquely religious and therefore uniquely serious liberal society. American religion faces profound threats from the secular society that surrounds it, and in some respects also poses deep challenges to that society. But these threats and these challenges continue to have the effect of sending Americans back to their first principles, and so of keeping us—more than any other modern society—constantly in contact with our founding ideals, secular and religious alike. That unending interaction with our past offers hope for religion, and so for the American future. And it offers hope as well that the liberal democratic experiment might not require the ultimate smothering of religious passions for the sake of secular peace. As this volume makes clear, there is much that should worry us as we cast our glance forward, but there is also much for us to draw upon in preparing for and contending with the challenges to come.

The workshop from which this volume emerges was sponsored by the W. H. Brady Program in Culture and Freedom at the American Enterprise Institute, and the papers and discussions that follow are a powerful example of precisely the kind of inquiry the program has always pursued: an engagement with the problems of freedom and culture in American society. They offer a glimpse into the future of American religion, and so of America itself.

Notes

1. John Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. James H. Tully (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 23.

2 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 282.

I

The End of the Secular Age

Michael Novak

We have, in recent years, observed two major events that represent turning points in the history of the 20th century. The first is the death of socialism, both as an ideal and as a political program, a death that has been duly recorded in our consciousness. The second is the collapse of secular humanism—the religious basis of socialism—as an ideal, but not yet as an ideological program, a way of life. The emphasis is on “not yet,” for as the ideal is withering away, the real will sooner or later follow suit. . . . If one looks back at . . . [the past] century, one sees the rationalist religion of secular humanism gradually losing its credibility even as it marches triumphantly through the institutions of our society—through the schools, the courts, the churches, the media. This loss of credibility flows from two fundamental flaws in secular humanism.

—Irving Kristol¹

After the death of Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), Professor Richard Wolin has called Jürgen Habermas the world’s greatest living philosopher.² For some decades now, Habermas has wished to be thought of as an atheist. Yet in the last seven years, in unmistakable ways, he has begun to question the limits of secularism. He has also begun to express appreciation for at least a few aspects of those religions that offer a dimension of transcendence, and yet also profoundly defend the dignity, liberty, and responsibility of each human individual. He seems to have in mind, implicitly but not often expressly, religions of the Jewish and Christian type.

Habermas begins his critique, formulated over a number of essays and lectures, by noticing what many willfully overlook. *Secularism has been pushed into a new position in world history; it now appears to be the persuasion of a fairly small minority in a sea of rising religious commitment.* Two new facts led him to this conclusion. First, the thesis that the human world is becoming increasingly secular—"the secularization thesis"—appears to have been decisively falsified, in part because of secularism's own internal weaknesses. Second, a powerful religious awakening in the Third World, but also in other regions such as the United States and Eastern Europe, suggests that secularist Europe is the anomaly, not the norm.³

In the lifelong project of Habermas's work, the key concept of morality is "communicative discourse," discourse which arises from the ability of each partner to stand in the other's moccasins and to learn to sympathize with a viewpoint quite different from his own. Only in this way do we escape from the narrow egotism of never having engaged in real discourse with others.

Given that the resurgence of religion bids to swamp the atheist sections of the world, can secularists offer a coherent theory of why this is happening, and can they summon up the moral strength not only to tolerate, but also to respect, and then to enter into the viewpoint of, believers? Can they do so after so many generations during which they have been teaching cultural contempt for believers in God, the unenlightened, the people of the dark? These are the sorts of questions raised by Habermas's work.

A quick glance back is in order here. Feuerbach taught us that the relation of God and man is a zero-sum game, such that what is given to one is taken from the other. He taught, in addition, that it is man who creates God out of his own emotional needs, not God who creates man. Feuerbach's most famous student, Karl Marx, set out to eradicate religion as a form of opium that enervates the proletariat and renders them passive. Thus many of the "enlightened" held that the advance of science would isolate religion ever more narrowly, until it finally disappeared. After some decades of such teaching, when Nietzsche succinctly announced that "God is dead," he was only saying in a shocking way what many sophisticated Europeans already believed. Sigmund Freud added that the future of religion is *The Future of an Illusion*. This illusion, moreover, at least among serious people, will fade away. Religion is a neurotic dependency.

Plainly, these great analysts overlooked some important sources of vitality in the world around them. By the end of the twentieth century, the burgeoning force of religion around the world was undeniable. The question now may be less whether religion will survive than in what form secularism will survive. Will it come to seem dumbstruck, unable to communicate in the new “tongues,” and increasingly isolated?

Habermas’s Critique of Secularism

Habermas raises four questions about the limits of secularism that I will take up in turn. But let us look first at some recent statements that suggest a new openness to religion and religious points of view. Shortly after September 11, 2001, when nineteen Muslims—mostly graduate students and young professionals—flew airliners laden with aviation fuel into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York and into the low-lying Pentagon, Habermas gave a lecture on the occasion of receiving a major prize from the German Publishers and Booksellers Association. He shocked most listeners by taking up the subject of “Faith and Knowledge.” His main theme was the need for toleration among secular humanists for religious people, and vice versa—and not just toleration, but mutual respect and open conversation.⁴ He believed the future of civilization demanded no less.

A year later, in a brilliant, impassioned book entitled *The Future of Human Nature*, Habermas spoke out forcefully against biological engineering and human cloning.⁵ He wrote of a human right to a unique human identity and expressed revulsion at a “human” artifact manufactured by others, a mere object among objects.

In 2004, he accepted an invitation—a challenge, in a way—to engage in public debate with Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, then head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and no liberal in theology, although a very learned, modest, and engaging man. (Ratzinger a year later was elected pope). Again, Habermas shocked many professors in the academy and journalists, too, by affirming openly the importance of religion for civilization and the obligation of secularism to engage with religion seriously and honestly. “Sacred scriptures and religious traditions,” Habermas argued, “have preserved over millennia, in subtle formulation and hermeneutics, intuitions

about error and redemptions, about the salvational outcome of a life experienced as hopeless.”⁶

A reliable commentator explicates what Habermas was adding here to his earlier work: “Religious life keeps intact . . . a number of sensitivities, nuances, and modes of expression for situations that neither his own ‘post-metaphysical’ approach nor an exclusively rationalist society of professional expertise can deal with in a fully satisfactory manner.”⁷

Cardinal Ratzinger, for his part, stressed the indispensable need for reason to diminish the “toxicity” sometimes present in religion. He also stressed the essential bond between Christianity and the Greek *logos*: reason and faith together, “summoned to mutual cleansing and healing.”⁸ This debate with Habermas foreshadowed the sturdy defense of reason that the new pope made at the University of Regensburg, where he had once been vice rector—the famous lecture to which many Muslims reacted not with reason but with violent demonstrations.⁹

The first question raised by Habermas’s new explorations of uncharted ground between the secular and the religious worlds was this: *Did most secularists have the tools and, as well, the moral stamina to carry out an honest, respectful conversation, after so many generations of contempt for religion?*

Habermas raises a second question in the context of an earlier and little-noticed vein of thought developed in his masterwork, the two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981). In a section that bears a title in almost untranslatable German, signifying something like “The Putting into Words of the Sacred,”¹⁰ Habermas argues that honesty commands secular people to recognize their linguistic and conceptual debts to Judaism and Christianity.¹¹ The question is, *Have secularists the honesty to admit these debts openly?*

Certainly Habermas is clear about the nature of these debts. For instance, he asserts that modern notions of equality and fairness are, as Richard Wolin puts it, “secular distillations of time-honored Judeo-Christian precepts.”¹² Further, the contract theories of modern secular philosophy can scarcely be understood apart from the great prestige attached to the covenants so central to both Jewish and Christian history. Habermas clarifies that he is not speaking merely of matters of etymology or intellectual history. He means also the reverence for such themes as moral obligation and justice maintained in Jewish and Christian preaching and living. Without these, he

judges, it is doubtful whether modern societies would be able to sustain their own scientific and political views.

In a more recent interview, Habermas names a substantial list of moral realities that secular life and thought do not sustain alone:

For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or a catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which spring *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.¹³

A third question about the limits of secularism arises out of Habermas's view that today we live in a postsecular society; certainly, he thinks, people in the United States do. Habermas sees this fact as having many benefits for secularism, but also as posing the danger that Judaism and Christianity might teach humans to undervalue worldly accomplishment, initiative, and action in favor of passivity before the will of God (Habermas is mindful of Nietzsche's impassioned claim that Judaism and Christianity are "slave religions," moved by passive-aggressive *ressentiment*). He also worries about those Christians who hold that the fall of Adam so seriously damages human nature that no intrinsic good can come from it.

Are there many such Christians left in optimistic America? Does Habermas correctly grasp the Christian theologies of the fall? A professor at a Calvinist college in the American Middle West once told me the best way to describe original sin: "Anyone who says that man is totally depraved can't be all bad." Has Habermas forgotten for a moment Max Weber's interpretation of the immense outburst of economic energy precisely among those Christians who most feared their own moral failures, failures that might indicate they were not among the elect? (I myself think that Weber was inexact in this diagnosis; but the workings of doctrine in daily life are quite subtle and complex.)¹⁴

Habermas's third question is, *Will most secular women and men see the wisdom in Habermas's diagnosis that, from time to time, the best and highest secular ideals—human rights, solidarity, equality—benefit, as Wolin writes, "from renewed contact with the nimbus of their sacral origins"?*¹⁵

In 2005, in a lecture at Lodz University in Poland on “Religion in the Public Sphere,” Habermas posed a fourth question for secular men and women: *Are they ready to admit that toleration is always a two-way street?* Religious persons, he suggests, must be ready to learn toleration not only for each other’s convictions and commitments, but also for those of atheists, agnostics, and other secularists. In a similar way, nonbelieving secularists must learn to appreciate the creeds, reasoning, and convictions of their fellow human beings who are believers. “For all their ongoing dissent on questions of world views and religious doctrines,” says Habermas, “citizens are meant to respect one another as free and equal members of their political community.”¹⁶ Those on all sides must be ready to stand in the shoes of the other in order to see the other’s point of view “from within.”

As Pierre Manent has pointed out, the history of the last six or seven generations seems to show that Christianity has had an easier time identifying with democracy, and has done so more successfully, than secular people have done in standing in the shoes of Christians and other citizens energized by ancient and constantly self-renewed religions in their midst.¹⁷ Habermas’s question, then, is whether secularists have sufficient moral energy to redress this imbalance.

For religious people, Habermas poses a test. Among themselves, they may explain their convictions and their reasons for holding them in the language of faith, and even of the Bible. But in public life, those believers who enter into politics or activism have a special obligation to employ a “neutral” secular language. Perhaps Habermas is thinking of the situation of France or other secular European nations with high proportions of Muslim citizens. Perhaps he wants to put pressure on Muslims to step out of their own traditional stances and enter into the viewpoints of others. Perhaps he believes that the preponderance of people in those nations are secular, so that among them secular speech is the most readily accessible. Whatever his motives, his warning is that unless language in the public sphere (and here he means specifically governmental offices) is solely secular, some religious groups will feel themselves slighted, and social divisiveness will result. Still, Habermas is far more open than John Rawls on these matters. In his lecture “Religion in the Public Sphere,” Habermas writes:

The citizens of a democratic community owe one another good reasons for their public political interventions. Contrary to the restrictive view of Rawls and Audi, this civic duty can be specified in such a tolerant way that contributions are permitted in a *religious as well as in a secular language*. They are not subject to constraints on the mode of expression in the political public sphere, but they rely on joint ventures of translation to have a chance to be taken up in the agendas and negotiations of political bodies. Otherwise they will not “count” in any further political process.¹⁸

In “Faith and Knowledge,” Habermas adds, “The liberal state has so far imposed only upon the believers among its citizens the requirements that they split their identity into public and private versions. That is, they must translate their religious convictions into a secular language before their arguments have the prospect of being accepted by a majority.”¹⁹ For his part, Habermas does not want to put believers at a disadvantage, although he holds that all parties, including believers, must do their best to give reasons understandable to the other parties. So he lays burdens on both believers and unbelievers: “The search for reasons that aspire to general acceptance need not lead to an unfair exclusion of religion from public life, and secular society, for its part, need not cut itself off from the important resources of spiritual explanations, if only so that the secular side might retain a feeling for the articulative power of religious discourse.”²⁰

By contrast, the assumption that Rawls and others make is that the secular mode of speech is actually “neutral.” In the experience of many believers of various faiths, it is anything but neutral. Speech limited to secular categories has its own totalistic tendencies. It penalizes or even quarantines those with religious points of view, whose insights and public arguments by this rule are not given due weight by narrowly secular officials. Curiously, in a set of lectures at the University of Virginia in 1928, Walter Lippmann made a parallel observation about the famous Scopes trial three years earlier. In a lecture framed as a conversation, the “Fundamentalist” says to his counterpart the “Modernist”:

In our public controversies you are fond of arguing that you are open-minded, tolerant and neutral in the face of conflicting

opinions. That is not so. . . . Because for me an eternal plan of salvation is at stake. For you there is nothing at stake but a few tentative opinions, none of which means anything to your happiness. Your request that I should be tolerant and amiable is, therefore, a suggestion that I submit the foundation of my life to the destructive effects of your skepticism, your indifference, and your good nature. You ask me to smile and to commit suicide.²¹

The Modernist does not grasp the total surrender he is asking the person of faith to make by submitting one source of knowledge (faith) to another (reason), when the latter seems to him inferior.²²

The parallel challenge that Habermas throws down for secular people, then, is an even newer one: since they now live in a postsecular age, they must not be content with understanding social realities only in a secular way. They must enter into dialogue with believers and be willing to see the world from their perspective, just as is expected of believers vis-à-vis secularists.

If the tender roots of something like universal democracy are ever to survive and spread around the world, these conceptions—these breakthroughs for a universal ethos of public communication, and mutual reaching out to understand others from within—make an indispensable contribution. But these new rules for public discourse also renegotiate the historical preeminence that “the enlightened” assign themselves, and the language of contempt by which they have taken believers less than seriously. These rules call upon secularists, too, to be learners, and to master the new morality of communicative discourse, a morality that calls for mutual respect.²³

Some Newly Discovered Incapacities of Secularism

For many generations secularists have assumed that the triumph of secularism is assured and, indeed, fast approaching. Predictions of the disappearance of religion have been many. So it has been difficult for secularists to absorb their new situation, and more difficult still to learn of significant deficiencies in their own philosophy and moral capacities. Their philosophy is noble, and we are all in its debt. Their moral resources are many and admirable. It is quite clear that without religion some can live good and

noble lives. But there are also in the secularist worldview certain significant incapacities.²⁴ Irving Kristol, who is cited at the start, mentions in particular two. The first is that

the philosophical rationalism of secular humanism can, at best, provide us with a statement of the necessary assumptions of a moral code, but it cannot deliver any such code itself. Moral codes evolve from the moral experience of communities, and can claim authority over behavior only to the degree that individuals are reared to look respectfully, even reverently, on the moral traditions of their forefathers. It is the function of religion to instill such respect and reverence. Morality does not belong to a scientific mode of thought. . . . One accepts a moral code on faith—not on blind faith but on the faith that one’s ancestors, over the generations, were not fools and that we have much to learn from their experience.²⁵

The prevailing moral code of the West was, for centuries, informed by the wisdom of our forefathers, but in the vision of human nature and destiny developed by secular humanism, that old code is no longer relevant. It has, accordingly, become more and more attenuated. That biting challenge of Nietzsche still nags at our conscience: if God is really dead, by what authority do we say any particular practice is prohibited or permitted? In the resulting moral disarray in our society, the most urgent moral questions have also become unsettled: “How shall we raise our children? What kind of moral example should we set? What moral instruction should we convey?” A society uncertain in its answer to these questions is likely to “breed restless, turbulent generations,”²⁶ some of whom are likely to seek more authoritative answers somewhere, anywhere. We know this can happen. It happened to a smart and amicable young German friend of Albert Camus, who took quite seriously the chatter in the cafes of Paris about the meaninglessness of individual life, and *therefore* joined the Nazi Party, and gave his all for the triumph of his nation, his greatest good.²⁷

The second flaw in secular humanism that Kristol identifies is even more fundamental:

If there is one indisputable fact about the human condition it is that no community can survive if it is persuaded—or even suspects—that its members are leading meaningless lives in a meaningless universe.²⁸

Secular humanism, Kristol goes on, instructs people to respond to the ultimate meaninglessness of human life by making something worthwhile of “autonomy” and “creativity.” Yet why, in a meaningless world, is creativity better than passivity, or autonomy better than submission? Thus even these bright goals are undermined by skeptical nihilists, neopagans, and tormented existentialists such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre. Later still, secular humanism has come to be mocked by postmodernists, deconstructionists, and structuralists. That is why something has gone out of the self-confidence of secularism. “Secular humanism is brain dead even as its heart continues to pump energy into all of our institutions.”²⁹

But these animadversions of Kristol address only some of secularism’s incapacities, as I will now suggest.

Secularism Cannot Combat Moral Decadence. Ever since the fall of Rome, historians and philosophers have noted how often civilizations fall by way of moral decadence. What tools does secularism possess to arrest such decadence? How does a secularist society even diagnose moral decadence? By whose standards?

The relativism in secularist thought, the tendency of secularism to make morality a matter of description rather than prescription, makes these questions hard to answer. The secularist emphasis on the autonomous and unencumbered individual often leads to a wholly relativistic theory of the good. For instance, Judith Jarvis Thompson argues that the good is whatever an autonomous person chooses as a good.³⁰ Such definitions deprive secularists of any ground on which to measure moral decadence, whether in a single person or in an entire culture. Moreover, precisely insofar as they define the good as whatever a person chooses, such definitions are inconsistent with everyday speech, and strip human critical faculties of any useful role.

By contrast, historians teach us that the United States, chiefly because of its Protestant heritage, has experienced at least three “Great Awakenings.” Nobel Prize–winner Robert Fogel has written that the country is in the

throes of a rolling wave, not yet crested, of a fourth Great Awakening.³¹ This return to tradition and family values, to serious work and self-discipline, is not limited to religious people, let alone the Religious Right. But the source of this and earlier renewals seems to be several important Jewish and Christian religious teachings: for instance, a high standard for what counts as fidelity to God and to moral duty (the opposite of sin); a call to repentance; a demand for conversion of life; and a possibility of “being born again” (not necessarily by accepting Jesus Christ, but at least by a new openness to the transcendent and to moral seriousness).

Thus, even among people fallen deep into the slough of moral decadence, an inner call to awaken and resume the path of duty, self-governance, and personal dignity can sometimes be faintly heard. This inner call (in the biblical view) bears the promise of divine assistance, which imparts inner powers entirely beyond the strength of the autonomous and unencumbered will. From this promise, many have drawn courage. Even those who do not believe in divine assistance may well observe changes in behavior among those who do.

Abraham Lincoln explained early in his political career why such new awakenings are necessary. Moral life, Lincoln observed, proceeds in cycles of three or more generations, cycles that end in a slow but steady decline. Thus, the generation that won the independence of the United States was revered for its courage and its amazing steadfastness in the face of defeat, desolation, and lack of popular support. (Almost two-thirds of the people either sided with the British or sat back to watch, uninvolved.) The children of this great generation tried to live up to the high example of their fathers but often failed. In the next generation, the grandchildren were weary even of hearing about their heroic grandparents, and preferred more pleasant paths. Lincoln called this process a bombardment of courage and devotion by “the silent artillery of time.”³²

For secularists, a kind of Newtonian law of inertial moral decline presents two problems, both noted at the beginning of this section: By what public moral standard ought decline and progress to be measured? And what tools are available to the secularist for converting citizens from their downward drift to new levels of discipline, self-government, duty, and honor? The progressive remedies are “consciousness raising,” “education,” and “raising public awareness.” But such remedies imply publicly available

universal standards, and moral exemplars to constitute, as it were, a moral avant-garde. The moral relativism of far too many secularists prevents these remedies from getting under way.

Secularism's Promise of a Universal Ethic of Reason Has Failed. The secularism stemming from the Enlightenment has been unable to keep its promise of forging a universal consensus about an ethic based on reason alone. Today ethical schools of thought may be more divided than ever. According to the distinguished philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, there is now so little common ground shared by the various schools of thought that rational ethical debate has been reduced to exclamatory cheering sections that, faced with an ethical proposition, erupt into "Hurrah!" or "Boo!"³³

Professors in countless classrooms in many different disciplines report that students have already been taught that when they are faced with any moral proposition, the proper response is: "That's just your opinion." They are resistant, then, to resolving disagreements by reasoned arguments. They aver: "You choose your goods, and I'll choose mine." Reasoned debate is replaced by naked will. I *choose*. Don't ask me to give reasons, I just choose.

This circumstance seems to be what Nietzsche meant when he observed that no man of reason should rejoice in the death of God. Experience would soon show, he was certain, that with the death of God arrives the death of reason. If reason is a compass, it requires a North Star. If it is a tool for getting to the truth, it presupposes about truth a regulative principle of this sort: *even if no one yet possesses the truth, we must agree that the presentation of evidence through reasoned argument is the most reliable path for coming closer to the truth—and that there is a truth to come closer to.*³⁴

Further, mutual conversation about evidence that is available to all parties is the best guide for figuring out how to come closer to the truth of things. An old way of putting this is that civilization is constituted by reasoned conversation. Civilized humans converse with one another, argue with one another, offer evidence to one another. Barbarians club one another.³⁵

Of course, the utility of evidence depends on there being truths to be discovered, or at least to be more closely approximated. Thus, a regulative idea of truth is an essential constituent of any civilization worthy of reasoning animals. Without it, no conversation can amount to more than

conjoined soliloquies. There is no evidence to point to, no mutual acceptance of rules of discourse.

But if God is dead, so also is the regulative idea of truth. If all is chance, random, and inherently meaningless, reason has no North Star; its needle spins aimlessly.

At the death of God, therefore, Zarathustra wept.

Secularism Cannot Address Human Suffering, Tragedy, and Evil. As Irving Kristol pointed out more than ten years ago, secularism has little to say about human suffering, brokenness, tragedy, remorse, and evil. Secularism is not altogether speechless in the face of death, sin, suffering, and human tragedy. Yet its voice does sound faint. It is simply not very satisfying to those who feel pain at life's extremities. And pain is unavoidable: hardly a conversation with a neighbor passes by without one learning of a person struggling with a horrible cancer or dealing with a terrible accident. It is not that secular humanism offers so little comfort, but that it cannot see *meaning* in suffering and self-sacrifice, which are everyday and common events.

Secularism also offers little in the way of remedy to those who have deliberately, consciously done something evil, and now repent of it. Such persons cannot be fooled by "therapy"; they know exactly what they did and that they chose deliberately to do it. They are not seeking "understanding," but rather the removal of real guilt for real evils that they have committed. Knowing that these deeds cannot be undone, they feel remorse bite the more deeply.

Nor is secularism comforting to the weak and the vulnerable, who in the mad struggle for survival of the fittest do not feel well positioned. What has secularism to say to the vulnerable that it does not borrow directly from Judaism and Christianity? Both Bertrand Russell and Richard Rorty have confessed that they simply stole one of their central social values, compassion (or, in the new word, solidarity), from Jesus Christ, and certainly not from Aristotle, Plato, Kant, or Nietzsche.³⁶ Borrow where you can, they say.

Secularism May Not Survive Islamofascism and Demographic Trends. What are the long-term prospects of existing secular societies such as those in Europe and the United States? Two difficulties stand out. The first is this: faced with an extreme ideology such as Islamofascism, which has been

conceived in white-hot passions (such passions as *ressentiment* and hatred, bloodlust, the death-wish), with what can relativism arm itself in its own defense? Some of the most sensitive members of a secularist community are liable to make excuses for murderous opponents, and to plead for better understanding, tolerance, and pacification. Since they have no standard of moral truth that they might appeal to, they may rejoice in bringing down their own leaders if these are of a different political party, even if this means giving heart to the enemy.

The second difficulty is a demographic one. Secularism seems to give no motive to young men and women to have children in sufficient numbers to reproduce themselves, plus a little more, to allow for future growth. In fact, secularism seems to serve up motives for *not* having children, whether out of perceived moral duties to “the environment,” or fears of “overpopulation,” or simply a preference for enjoying a relatively carefree life, unencumbered by the long-enduring and difficult responsibilities of child raising.³⁷ There appears to be very little writing in the contrary direction.

Possibly, too, the conditions of the social welfare state—high taxes, small apartments, heavily regulated living arrangements, the weakening of personal responsibilities both to the older and to the younger generation—have the unintended consequence of discouraging child raising. The unspoken but demoralizing perception that the welfare state has made far more promises than it can possibly satisfy only compounds this problem. In any case, a certain foreshortening of the future, a certain cultural pessimism, seems to be a natural concomitant of the social welfare society. Tocqueville predicted a “new soft despotism” that would result from an unchecked drift toward social equality, untempered by a fierce love for individual liberty and personal responsibility. In that event, under “democracy” he feared a dread sameness, an enervation, and a coarsening of life.³⁸

Secularism’s Atheism and Agnosticism Are Not Tenable. Since secularism means, and intends to mean, the death of God, can it propose an alternative to religion? Atheism is not a rational alternative; it is a leap in the dark. No person can possibly prove a negative and thus be certain that there is no God.

That is why agnosticism has come to seem a more modest, skeptically open, and humanistically attractive position. Yet it does have one central flaw. Cardinal Ratzinger and Marcello Pera point it out in their acute

diagnosis of the sickness of the West, *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*.³⁹

Pera and Ratzinger argue that the flaw in agnosticism lies in its holding back, which is appropriate only for those who do not act. As a spectator sport, agnosticism is at least understandable. Yet every day women and men have to go down into the arena of action. They must make decisions, and when they do, their actions fall under the principles of one theory—or else of that other one. They cannot go on making decisions *etsi Deus non daretur*, as if God does not exist, without having effectively made a pivotal decision about God. In every big decision they make they will, one way or the other, take sides. They will act in a way cognizant of God's will and respectful of it, as a friend would act in the presence of a friend. Or else they will act in a way that violates God's will, as if there were no God, or at least as if there were no way of knowing what his will is here and now. One can, in short, pretend to think as an agnostic, but the pressures of actually choosing how to act, this way or that way, oblige one to declare one's relationship to God, willy-nilly. In action, there are no agnostics.⁴⁰

Now it may be possible for extraordinary and unusual people to go on acting as if God does exist, even if they are atheists or agnostics. But it seems unlikely that whole societies can do that—and highly doubtful that ordinary, commonsense people can do that for long, across more than three generations. To be sure, religious societies are also riven by sin. (Every Catholic mass opens with the simple public confession of meeting as a community of sinners, much as a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous opens with a ritual by which one person after another rises to say, "I am an alcoholic." Not one word more, nor one word less. No excuses, no explanations.) And churches, too, have perennial problems with laxity, backsliding, and sheer moral disorder. But the churches also have means and methods for addressing the problem of moral failure.

Atheism and agnosticism do not, and where they flourish, one may expect to find a certain moral carelessness seeping into common life, a certain slacking off, a certain habit of getting away with things. Secularism may be livable among the highly educated or gifted, but its effects on the less educated seem to be less comforting.

One effect, for instance, may be a coarsening of daily intercourse, as we now seem to be experiencing in America, looking back nostalgically to the

time when one could leave home with the door unlocked. A number of British writers down the years have recalled with pleasure the old sweetness and courtesy imbued into the culture by Methodism in its early generations. Another effect, among the rough-and-tumble sort in any population, may be a greater sense that there is no price to pay (even within one's own conscience) for thuggishness and the exhibition of brute will.

Atheism and agnosticism, moreover, seem to offer few reasons why those who are religious—Muslims, for example—should change their religious commitments, even when these lead to violence. Why should they exchange experience, clarity, and certainty for relativism? And if they do not, what fault in that can relativists discern? To be alarmed by violence deployed in the name of religion—as in the bloody murder of Theo Van Gogh in the Netherlands—is to cease being relativist, to discover the reality of evil, and to stand on the verge of resolving to combat it. Judaism and Christianity, one may think, explain this sequence better than current-day secular humanism.

Secularism Weakens the Culture of Science. A pernicious result of the flourishing of atheism and agnosticism is an undermining of the power of reason. One hardly ever meets these days the cocky rationalist of one hundred years ago, secure in his powers of logic and scientific reasoning. The pretense of nihilism, exhibited by genteel people who lack seriousness in the poses they take, flies under the flag of “postmodernism.” Aiming to undermine all standards set by reason, postmodernism subordinates the strength and legitimacy of reason to the supervening interests of class, gender, sexuality, and race.

Postmodernism has already made crippling inroads into various fields of science (environmental sciences, for instance), and has begun to corrupt schools of medicine and law. It has aspired to rule the humanities and social sciences, even in major universities. One reason postmodernism has gone so far is that the sort of reason that lifted up the Enlightenment is not altogether well-suited to justifying itself. Reason, as we are learning again, can be used to undermine reason. Reason has also been used to undermine the morale and moral self-confidence of those whose whole lives have been committed to the Enlightenment, by calling them warmongers, or insensitive robots, and the like in order to impugn both their standing in the community and their own sense of self-worth.

Science depends upon a supportive culture, and a measure of social admiration, that make worthwhile all the sacrifices of acquiring a scientific education and professional practice—and that enable the scientist to stiffen the spine against temptation. Science is not just a methodology; it is a set of habits and practices, supported by a culture of a particular kind. This culture is characterized by commitment, discipline, and hard work; it requires honesty and trustworthiness in the reporting of findings, as well as cooperation with colleagues, since science these days is seldom for lone rangers.

If the life of reason is as much a culture as a method, then a great many persons and institutions must be committed to its disciplines, its aims, and its long-term support. Yet it is not clear that science alone, or reason alone, particularly on the basis of atheism or agnosticism, can long inspire such a cultural commitment. If everything is at the end of the day a result of chance, what exactly is the point of a commitment to reason? Reason seems to be out of harmony with the fundamental nature of reality. The humanist who in all things seeks reason while insisting that, at bottom, there are no reasons is tangled in a spider's nest of self-contradictions.

Sometimes reason is portrayed as a set of individual flashlights in a great darkness, held and directed by solitary individuals, committed like Sisyphus to climbing a steep and difficult mountain. Every time he approaches the top, however, Sisyphus is knocked meaninglessly back to the valley floor.

How long, in the face of ultimate pointlessness, can a culture sustain the experience of the frustration of reason and still continue to attract young people to the necessary disciplines? Say this much for it: classical metaphysics was at this point self-consistent.

Religio-Secular Pluralism

Whatever the incapacities of secularism—and surely there are others not enumerated here—it is not clear at this point whether secularism can endure much longer. There is a fifth question raised by Habermas, one that troubles him more than any of the others: *How can a small island of people committed to reason and to science long survive in a great ocean of peoples who see in science and reason engines of demoralization and cultural decadence?*⁴¹

André Malraux once wrote that “the twenty-first century will be religious, or not at all.” But I do not believe that the postsecularist age will necessarily be, or even should be, a religious age. It may be something altogether different.

What, then, might a postsecular age look like? Habermas seems to talk good sense when he writes that in the world after September 11, 2001, secular and religious women and men of the West need each other, not only if they are to survive, but also if they are to put together all the elements of a sustainable humanistic culture. While it is true that the long contest between secularism and religion is still in doubt—with the latter, at the moment, assuming more powerful dimensions than the former had long predicted—we may at least mark out a ground on which both the people of the “secular” order and the people of the “sacred/transcendent” order (as distinct from particular churches and particular cultures) can begin to learn how to cooperate, to the advantage of both.

That such cooperation is necessary was stressed by Cardinal Ratzinger in his debate with Habermas. (It is not as pope or cardinal that Ratzinger is worth learning from, by the way, but as a man of great erudition, superior penetration, openness, and sympathy.) Ratzinger made three surprising points. First, the secular intellect will always be necessary to curb and to correct some of the toxic temptations of religion. Second, neither contemporary secular reason nor any individual religion has as yet adequately come to understand other powerful cultural currents on earth, or adequately begun to converse with them intelligently and profoundly. Relations at this point remain woefully superficial. Christianity and scientific rationalism must “admit *de facto* that they are accepted only in parts of mankind and are intelligible only in parts of mankind.”⁴² If we are ever to attain a planetary consensus on the reasonableness of certain moral principles—such as the Western tradition of natural law—we will need to interact far more deeply than anyone as yet has done with the Indian tradition of karma, the Chinese traditions of the Rule of Heaven, and the Islamic tradition of the will of Allah.

Ratzinger’s third point, on which he seems to concur with Habermas, is that there are certain creative energies and intuitions that Christianity can bring to secular society. Christianity, after all, is by now found in virtually all nations on earth, and it numbers among its baptized members one-third

of all people on earth. It is a fount of practical knowledge about other cultures. The secular is a legitimate regime, with its own special autonomy, rules, and privileges; but also with its own responsibilities and self-inflicted limitations. There can be, is, and ought to be conversation between the religious and the secular: each must be properly distinguished from the other, but when they are incarnated in particular persons, particular practices, and particular institutions, each typically owes much to the other.

The Catholic Church, for example, has over the centuries learned much from successive secular orders. From the East it learned a sense of the great mystery and lordliness of God—a more mystical and contemplative cast of mind. From the ancient Greeks, it learned to love reason, proportion, and beauty. From the Romans it learned stoic virtue, universal administration, and a practical sense of law. From the French it learned the upward flare of the gothic and the brilliance of *idées claires* and rapid word-play; from the Germans, metaphysics, formidable historical learning, and metahistorical thinking; and from the Anglo-Americans, a dose of common sense (with its echoes of Aristotle) and a passion for the religious liberty of the individual conscience.

There is no point in repeating here the lessons that secularist culture, according to Habermas, has in its turn learned from Judaism and Christianity: intuitions; habits of mind, heart, and aspiration; new standards of compassion and even personal conscience; and the like. Even without sharing in Christian faith, secular persons ought in all fairness to give due recognition to their intellectual indebtedness.

Pluralism cannot mean mere mutual toleration. Even to say that pluralism means mutual respect, while far closer to the heart of the matter, is not enough. For the parties committed to it, pluralism must also mean learning from each other.

If a postsecular age is coming, it is not likely to be an age in which intelligent people set aside their skepticism about Judaism and Christianity, or their deep commitment to science and reason. But it will be, or ought to be, an age in which secular persons recognize at last that their own claim to universal superiority—the view of themselves as “enlightened” while others still walk in darkness—was premature. Not by pure secularism alone will the future be more fruitful than the immediate past. The times call for a planetary conversation among a multitude of human beings, for most of

whom a sense for the sacral and the transcendent is as important as science and reason.

The choice between science and religion, or between the ways of reason and the ways of faith, is not an adequate human choice. Better is to take part in a prolonged, intelligent, and respectful conversation across those outmoded ways of drawing lines.

Notes

1. Irving Kristol, “The Future of American Jewry,” *Commentary* 92.2 (August 1991): 24.

2. “It would seem that Habermas has justly inherited the title of the world’s leading philosopher. Last year he won the prestigious Kyoto Prize for Arts and Philosophy (previous recipients include Karl Popper and Paul Ricoeur), capping an eventful career replete with honors as well as a number of high-profile public debates.” Richard Wolin, “Jürgen Habermas and Post-Secular Societies,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 23, 2005, B16.

3. “At the beginning of the 20th century, a bare majority of the world’s people, precisely 50 percent, were Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, or Hindu. At the beginning of the 21st century, nearly 64 percent belonged to these four religious groupings, and the proportion may be close to 70 percent by 2025.” Timothy Samuel Shah and Monica Duffy Toft, “Why God Is Winning,” *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2006, 40.

4. “The boundaries between secular and religious . . . are tenuous. Therefore, fixing of this controversial boundary should be understood as a cooperative venture, carried on by both sides, and with each side trying to see the issue from the other’s perspective. Democratically enlightened common sense is not a singularity, but is instead the mental constitution of a public with many different voices.” Jürgen Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge” (lecture given upon his acceptance of the Peace Prize of the German Publishers and Booksellers Association, Frankfurt, Germany, October 14, 2001), available at <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0111/msg00100.html>.

5. Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2003).

6. Habermas, quoted in Virgil Nemoianu, “The Church and the Secular Establishment: A Philosophical Dialog between Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas,” *Logos* 9.2 (Spring 2006): 26.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Joseph Ratzinger, quoted in *ibid.*, 30.

9. On the Regensburg address, see the insightful essay by Lee Harris, “Socrates or Muhammad? Joseph Ratzinger on the Destiny of Reason,” *The Weekly Standard* 12.3 (October 2, 2006): 30–35.

10. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1981). The phrase Habermas uses to express his idea is “*Ver-sprachlichung des Sakrals*.”

11. Habermas affirmed this view in a 2005 lecture: “Ever since the Council of Nicaea and throughout the course of a ‘Hellenization of Christianity,’ philosophy itself took on board and assimilated many religious motifs and concepts of redemption, specifically those from the history of salvation. Concepts of Greek origin such as ‘autonomy’ and ‘individuality’ or Roman concepts such as ‘emancipation’ and

'solidarity' have long since been shot through with meanings of a Judaeo-Christian origin." Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere" (lecture presented at the Holberg Prize Seminar, November 29, 2005), 19.

12. Wolin, "Jürgen Habermas and Post-Secular Societies," B16.

13. Habermas, quoted in Wolin, "Jurgen Habermas and Post-Secular Societies," B16, emphasis added.

14. See Michael Novak, "Max Weber Goes Global," *First Things*, April 2005, 26–27.

15. Wolin, "Jürgen Habermas and Post-Secular Societies," B16.

16. Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere" (lecture, Lodz University, 2005), 7.

17. Pierre Manent, "Christianity and Democracy (Part I)," in *A Free Society Reader*, ed. Michael Novak, William Brailsford, and Cornelius Heesters (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), 109–115.

18. Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 12–13.

19. Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge."

20. *Ibid.*

21. Walter Lippmann, *The American Inquisitors: A Commentary on Dayton and Chicago* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928), 62–63, 65–66.

22. The Fundamentalist responds: "You admit that all history shows how few men have been able to live a moral life without the conviction that they were obeying a divine will. You then point out a few unusual men, a few stoics perhaps, a few Epicureans, a few followers of Spinoza, a few pure and disinterested spirits among the scientists, and you ask me to believe that what this trifling minority has achieved through innate moral genius, the great humdrum mass of mankind is to achieve by what you optimistically describe as education. I do not believe it." *Ibid.*, 56–57.

23. "In short, post-metaphysical thought is prepared to learn from religion while remaining strictly agnostic. It insists on the difference between certainties of faith and validity claims that can be publicly criticized; but it refrains from the rationalist temptation that it can itself decide which part of the religious doctrines is rational and which part is not." Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 20.

24. "Secular humanism gave us answers for 500 years that no longer seem adequate even to many who tried hard to be faithful to them. That is why so many far-seeing souls announce that we have come to the edge of the Enlightenment and are stepping forth into something new, untried, not yet transparent." Novak, "The Most Religious Century," *New York Times*, May 24, 1998.

25. Kristol, "Future of American Jewry," 25.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Albert Camus recounts a letter from a German friend: "The greatness of my country is beyond price. Anything is good that contributes to its greatness. And

in a world where everything has lost its meaning, those who, like us young Germans, are lucky enough to find a meaning in the destiny of our nation must sacrifice everything else.” Albert Camus, “First Letter,” *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), 5.

28. Kristol, “Future of American Jewry,” 25.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Judith Jarvis Thompson, *The Realm of Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

31. Robert William Fogel, *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

32. “A living history was to be found in every family—a history bearing the indubitable testimonies of its own authenticity, in the limbs mangled, in the scars of wounds received, in the midst of the very scenes related—a history, too, that could be read and understood alike by all, the wise and the ignorant, the learned and the unlearned. But *those* histories are gone. They can be read no more forever. They *were* a fortress of strength; but, what invading foeman could *never* do, the silent artillery of time has done; the leveling of its walls.” Abraham Lincoln, “Address to the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1838,” in *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings 1832–1858*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1989), 36.

33. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

34. For a fuller treatment of truth as a regulative ideal, see Novak, “Caritapolis: A Universal Culture of Mutual Respect,” in *The Universal Hunger for Liberty: Why the Clash of Civilizations Is Not Inevitable* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 37–38.

35. “Barbarism is the lack of reasonable conversation according to reasonable laws. The depreciation of language accompanies the depreciation of the currency in the decline of civilization. . . . Civilization is formed by men locked together in argument. From this dialogue the community becomes a political community.” Thomas Gilby, *Between Community and Society: A Philosophy and Theology of the State* (London: Longmans, 1953), 93.

36. In a review of *Plato and Europe* by Jan Patočka, the Czech philosopher and martyr (1907–77), Rorty writes: “Jerusalem should share the credit with Athens for making Europe what it has become. The Christian suggestion that we think of strangers primarily as fellow sufferers, rather than as fellow inquirers into Being, or as fellow carers for the soul, should have a larger role than Patočka gives it. The waves of joy of 1989 cannot plausibly be traced to the sense that judgment had been rendered on Socrates’ judges, as opposed to the belief that a lot of people who had been humiliated and shamed would now be able to stand up and to speak. Separating out the roles of Socrates and Christ in the history of Europe is a notoriously tricky business, but surely Patočka oversimplifies things

when, like Heidegger, he approvingly quotes Nietzsche's comment that 'Christianity is Platonism for the people.' Might not a sense that charity and kindness are the central virtues have caught on, and helped make Europe what it became, even if some eager Platonists had not grabbed control of Christian theology?" Richard Rorty, "Review of *Plato and Europe*," *New Republic* 205, no. 1 (July 1991): 37. Bertrand Russell makes an analogous argument in *Why I Am Not a Christian* (Girard, KS: Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1929). For more on this subject, see Novak, "How Christianity Changed Political Economy," in *Three in One: Essays on Democratic Capitalism, 1976–2000*, ed. Edward W. Younkens (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 194–201.

37. For more on demography, see Mark Steyn, "It's the Demography, Stupid!" *New Criterion* 24 (January 2006): 10.

38. "I am trying to imagine under what novel features despotism may appear in the world. In the first place, I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly circling around in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasure with which they glut their souls. Each one of them, withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest. . . . [Government] does not break men's will, but softens, bends, and guides it; it seldom enjoins, but often inhibits, action; it does not destroy anything, but prevents much being born; it is not at all tyrannical, but it hinders, restrains, enervates, stifles, and stultifies so much that in the end each nation is no more than a flock of timid and hardworking animals with the government as its shepherd." Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 691–92.

39. Joseph Ratzinger and Marcello Pera, *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*, trans. Michael F. Moore (New York: Basic Books, 2006). At the time he wrote the book, Pera was president of the Italian Senate.

40. Arguing against Derrida's deconstructionism, Ratzinger and Pera write: "People no longer believe in 'ultimate' foundations. . . . Only philosophers in their classrooms can afford the luxury of not taking practical decisions; not so the man of the street, the politician, the head of state." *Ibid.*, 19.

41. Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," German Publishers and Booksellers Association, Frankfurt, Germany, October 14, 2001.

42. Ratzinger, quoted in Nemoianu, "Church and the Secular Establishment," 30.

2

A Response to Michael Novak

Roger Scruton

I am in broad agreement with Michael Novak that the conflict between the religious and the secular worldviews has entered a new phase, that secularism has, for a variety of reasons, lost some of its militant character, and that a new dialogue is needed between believers and skeptics if the West is to face the future with confidence. I agree with him, too, in seeing the spread of postmodernism as in part the result of the loss of religious faith. In Novak's imagery, God was the pole to which the truth-seeking compass of reason once turned. Now the compass spins at random, coming to rest along no line of force.

However, there are one or two things with which I take issue in Professor Novak's argument, and one or two ways in which I would like to supplement its principal points. My first objection is to Professor Novak's opening sentence, which exhorts us to praise Habermas as the world's greatest living philosopher, and Derrida as his predecessor in that position. Derrida, it seems to me, was a charlatan, whose peculiar brand of intoxicating nonsense did much to create the postmodernist orthodoxy which Novak rightly deplores. Habermas is a better thinker than that—it would be hard to be a worse one. As last living representative of the Frankfurt School, he tinkered for many years with Marxist categories and tried to find new ways of shaping the anticapitalist message. His lifelong theme has been the crisis of legitimacy faced by capitalist societies, a crisis that could be overcome only by the usual alliance of left-wing intellectuals with carefully selected, and duly deferential, members of the working class.

Only in *The Theory of Communicative Action* did Habermas begin to grow up. And that book is to be commended in advocating dialogue, negotiation,

and sympathy in the place of the old Marxist “struggle.” But I cannot find anything new in it that helps me to understand what we should communicate about, or how we might give heart to our world. If the *only* message is, let’s talk, I wonder why we need two volumes of inspissated jargon to convey it. And the dialogues that Habermas now advocates, in the wake of September 11, are noticeable for the voices that they exclude: no nationalists, no social conservatives, no premodernists, and no fervent free-marketeers will be invited to the table when the postmodern future of mankind is plotted in the Habermasian bunker. By excluding so much of ordinary humanity from his chatter-house, Habermas *avoids* the real questions that confront us, recommending that we discuss them only to avoid discussing them.

The first of these questions has to do with human nature. Without a theory of human nature that shows the reality of our religious need, there is no way of pushing secularism into the corner that Professor Novak believes it to be already in. The most powerful current of secularism today is not, I think, the postmodernism to which Professor Novak takes exception, but the view advanced by Richard Dawkins and his followers, according to which human beings are “survival machines” in the service of their genes. This view is expressed by Dawkins, and his many followers, with a kind of militant zeal that recalls the dogmatic atheism of T. H. Huxley and the first Darwinians. According to Dawkins there is nothing more to human nature than the complex workings of a particularly sophisticated survival machine, and our own self-image as free agents animated by a rational soul is simply an illusion—a shadow cast by language, with no substance of its own. Dawkins goes on to argue that religion is both irrational and dangerous, the result of the colonization of the human brain by a peculiar virus or “meme,” which spreads from brain to brain like meningitis, and kills off the competing powers of rational argument. Like genes and species, memes are Darwinian individuals, whose success or failure depends upon their ability to find the ecological niche that enables reproduction.

Now, faced with a page of Derrida, and knowing that this drivel is being read and reproduced in a thousand American campuses, I have often found myself tempted by the theory of the meme. The page in my hand is clearly the product of a diseased brain, and the disease is massively infectious: Derrida admitted as much when he referred to the “deconstructive virus.” All the same, I am not entirely persuaded by this extension by analogy of genetics.

The theory that ideas have a disposition to propagate themselves by appropriating energy from the brains that harbor them recalls Molière's medical expert (*Le malade imaginaire*), who explained the fact that opium induces sleep by referring to its *virtus dormitiva*.

Nevertheless, even if we don't accept the theory of the meme, we still have to confront both the reductionist view of human nature that Dawkins advances, and the associated belief that there is no such thing as religious truth. The mysteries of religion, Dawkins will say, exist in order to forbid all questioning, thus giving religion the edge over science in the struggle for survival, but no edge at all in the search for truth. In any case, why are there so many competitors among religions, if they really are searching for the truth? Shouldn't the false ones have fallen by the wayside, like refuted theories in science? And how does religion improve the human spirit, when it seems to authorize the crimes now committed each day by Islamists, which are in turn no more than a shadow of the crimes that were spread across Europe by the Thirty Years War?

In the face of this kind of challenge, it is not enough to point, as Michael Novak does, to the fact that many of the most cherished values of the secular Enlightenment owe their origins and their propagation to our two great religions. That may show the innate superiority of Judaism and Christianity over Islam—but it is a superiority judged in secular terms. In a way, it is a point to the secularist when we argue that Christianity, for example, is the true source of values like democracy and human rights. For that is to justify Christianity in terms of the things of this world, rather than in terms of its vision of our final end. It is to justify Christianity as the precursor of Enlightenment, not Enlightenment as the residue of Christianity. To answer Dawkins and his followers, we need to show that our nature is not adequately represented by the theory of the selfish gene, that religious beliefs are not irrational viruses but doctrines which aim at the truth—even if it is a truth beyond the empirical world, concerning matters that lie outside the scope of natural science.

The great error of the selfish gene theory, it seems to me, is in misidentifying the kind to which we human beings belong. It is true that we are animals, and true therefore that the laws of genetics apply as much to us as they do to ants, bees, and tapeworms. But we are also persons; and it is as persons that we relate to each other, not as animals. What is needed is a philosophy

of the person that will show the ways in which interpersonal attitudes carve out a space for religion, and the ways in which they implant in us the states of mind—guilt, hope, longing, atonement—which point of their own accord towards a personal God. In the absence of this philosophy it will not really help us to describe the inadequacies of the secular vision, or the way in which, having lost confidence in God, it loses confidence in truth also. For there is a way of losing confidence which is also a way of gaining it: post-modernist skepticism can at any moment become postmodernism with teeth, tearing away at ordinary cultural certainties with all the ferocity of an inner disappointment. If we have no way of supporting those ordinary certainties, then we provoke the postmodernist attack on them. Remember that it is never strength that is attacked but only weakness.

I would hope, therefore, that Michael Novak would amplify his argument with a positive theory of human nature, one that will show just why the available secular visions are inadequate: just why they misrepresent what we truly are. As I see it, human conduct admits not merely biological explanation, but explanation of another kind, in which free choice, reason, accountability, and self-consciousness play a determining role. And this kind of explanation is, it seems to me, irreducible to the categories of biology. If it is possible to sustain that view, then we are on the way towards victory over secularism and all that it means. However, it is certainly not Habermas who is going to help us here; I place more trust in Max Scheler, though of course his phenomenological method belongs to the past, and needs to be sent to the Wittgensteinian laundry before it can be worn again.

There is one other thought that I should like to add to Professor Novak's exposition, which is this: the failure of secularism is not in the first instance an intellectual failure; it is a moral failure. It does not provide to people what they need in order to survive and flourish. It does not provide a crucial component in human earthly happiness, which is the sense of membership. Religions, by contrast, are a call to membership—they provide customs, beliefs, and rituals that unite the generations in a shared way of life, and implant the seeds of mutual respect. In a way, this is what provokes people to attack them. Like every form of social life, religions are inflamed at the edges, where they compete for territory with other faiths. Hence there are religious wars, and in these wars the gift of mercy is often in short supply.

Unlike Dawkins, I don't regard this fact as a damning criticism of religion. On the contrary. To blame religion for the wars conducted in its name is like blaming love for the Trojan War. All human motives, even the most noble, will feed the flames of conflict when subsumed by the territorial imperative. Take religion away, as the Nazis and the Communists did, and you do nothing to suppress the pursuit of *Lebensraum*. You simply remove the principal source of mercy in the ordinary human heart and so make war pitiless: atheism found its proof at Stalingrad.

Nevertheless, there is a tendency, fed by the sensationalism of television, to judge all human institutions by their behavior in times of conflict. Religion, like patriotism, gets a bad press among those for whom war is the one human reality, the one occasion when the Other in all of us is noticeable. But the real test of a human institution is in peacetime. Peace is boring, quotidian, and also rotten television. But you can learn about it from books. Those nurtured in the Christian faith know that Christianity's ability to maintain peace in the world around us reflects its gift of peace to the world within. It is that peace which secularism destroys: it leaves us without the principal resources of the lonely heart, which are prayer, confession, atonement, and the love of God—all of them paths back to membership in this world, and a preparation for blessedness in the next.

Muslims say similar things, and so do Jews. So who possesses the truth, and how would you know? We don't know, nor do we need to know. All faith depends on revelation, and the proof of the revelation is in the peace that it brings. Rational argument can get us just so far, in raising the monotheistic faiths above the muddled world of superstition. It can help us to understand the real difference between a faith that commands us to forgive our enemies, and one that commands us to slaughter them. But the leap of faith itself—this placing of your life at God's service—is a leap over reason's edge. This does not make it irrational, any more than falling in love is irrational. On the contrary, it is the heart's submission to an ideal, and a bid for the love, peace, and forgiveness that even that old bore Habermas is seeking, since he, like the rest of us, was made in just that way.

3

Commentary

Irving Kristol

I am not so certain that the kind of discourse and conversation Michael Novak envisages is the way to go. A German philosopher may have the perception that when the Second Coming eventuates, all the PhDs and all the Doctors of Divinity will be gathered in one place to engage in an endless conversation. If Dante is present, he will know exactly where to put that spectacle.

Arguing about religion makes no sense, in my opinion, if it means arguing about theology. Theology is a given; it's not going to change as the result of argument among the sects. It may change for other reasons, but no Christians are going to change their theology because Jews criticize them or vice versa. The more they know of their own theology, the more invincible they are to the force of that kind of argument.

More than thirty years ago, I was discussing with a good friend of mine, who is a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, what they did at the seminary. I said, "You know, you really need a good course on the history of Christian thought. After all, we live in a Christian civilization. Rabbis should know a lot more about Christian thought than they do." He flatly disagreed: "Jews are very suspicious of rabbis who claim to know a lot of Christianity. They're not going to give them positions in their community, taking care of their children." He had a point.

Theology is not a fruitful point of contact between the religions. Morality is. There is an important difference between Judaism and Christianity. In Judaism, morality trumps theology, practically always. In Christianity, theology trumps morality, frequently enough. After all, our revelation is the Ten Commandments, for ordinary people, in their daily life. It is not

intended just for saints or to effect the transvaluation of humanity—just what they eat, and how to eat it. I think, therefore, that Jews have no problem with other religions if their moral code is, more or less, parallel to the Jewish moral code. We let all righteous people into heaven. Not every religion does so, however.

I'm not certain, then, about the benefits of these "dialogues." They're best conducted not by people who have any connection with the religion, but by intellectuals who find fun fooling around with ideas, talking about this religion, about that religion.

Let me make one final point about religious awakenings. I would love to have a religious revival without a religious awakening. I am frightened by religious awakenings. I think we are witnessing a major religious awakening in the world right now in Islam. What's happening in Islam is a major awakening, based on a hatred of the West, and the discovery that there is a very effective technology with which you can fight the West, namely suicide bombers.

This awakening is transforming Islam. People who say that Islam needs a reformation generally imagine that such a reformation would make Islam more liberal. But it could just as easily make it more vivid and more ferocious. We have to remember, especially in our particular time and place, the danger of a religious awakening out of control.

Peter Berkowitz

I think there is an underlying shared logic to Michael Novak's argument and Roger Scruton's response. First, what most people now know as liberalism is one form of liberalism. Let's call it the reflection of secular triumphalism. Modern liberalism arose to grapple with a variety of problems, but especially to find a political solution to the wars of religion in Europe, a political solution to the problem posed by a multiplicity of religions. In a sense, then, early modern liberalism is more suited to our postsecular age than the liberalisms of Rawls and Habermas.

But early modern liberalism has a defect discussed by various authors in this volume, Leon Kass especially. That defect is reductionism. Liberalism cel-

celebrates rights but neglects duties. It reduces the moral life to the following of rules, or the computing of pleasure and pain, and it truncates the scope of reason, so that reason equals natural science—no more, no less.

Early modern liberalism had an antireligious tendency, even as it responded to a problem that is our problem: how do you deal with a world in which there are a multiplicity of clashing religions? Thus as we're entering this postsecular age, or having entered it, we need this early modern liberalism more than ever. Yet it has this defect.

Where do we go from there? Perhaps this is the key question: would it be helpful to work with some of the central goods of this early modern liberalism, but against its antireligious tendency? Among its goods are its respect for reason, its skepticism, understood as an insistence on the limits of reason, its generosity towards difference, its toleration of that with which it disagrees. Could we not focus on these goods within early modern liberalism to develop a way of thinking that was more open to traditions outside the liberal sphere, traditions that would leaven and enliven liberalism? Could doing so offer a way of thinking about politics that not only provides a framework within which various religions can live with each other, but is open to competing claims?