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POLITICS AND RELIGION IN THE POST-SECULAR SOCIETY  
HABERMAS, RATZINGER AND THE THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL  
QUESTION\*\*

The aim of this paper is to answer the following question: can Christianity contribute to the common good in contemporary post-secular societies? And how?

Any affirmative answer to the first question is relevant if and only if we suppose that the political domain is not founded on itself. To answer the initial question therefore we are forced to ask another question: what is the ultimate ground of political institutions? How can they be legitimized? What is the relationship between the political domain and the truth which is supposed to back it?

In other words, we can solve our initial problem only if we look at it from the viewpoint of what contemporary political philosophy calls the *theological-political question*.

I.

According to Klaus Eder, what characterizes the post-secular society is a new way to organize the relations between politics and society, on the one hand, and the transcendent dimension, on the other. The crisis of the major religious traditions does not mean the end of religious beliefs. On the contrary, it entails the spread of a *direct* relationship between the individual and the divine. It is sociologically evident that the decline of 'belonging' does not necessarily involve the end of 'believing'. On the contrary, believing often becomes plural and autonomous from the traditional religious institutions and produces the rise of

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new religious movements. A relevant outcome of this social phenomenon is the growing presence of religions in the public sphere.

This evolution can be understood beginning from the profound modification of the international public sphere produced by the fall of the bipolar system of international relations after 1989. Klaus Eder holds that this modification is supported by the diffusion of a public discourse characterized by 'cultural claims-making' for the purpose of social and juridical recognition. Since most cultures claiming recognition have religious connotations, this discourse has a religious content. Those secular states which tried to neutralize this discourse produced the opposite effect and unintentionally supported the closing of these religious ethno-cultures.

## II.

This was the background of the encounter between Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger organized by the Catholic Academy in Bavaria (Munich) on January 19, 2004. More accurately, the main problem discussed during the meeting was the so called Dilemma of Böckenförde: *The free secular state lives according to presuppositions that it cannot itself guarantee*.

How does Habermas understand this dilemma?

For Habermas, a 'democratic constitutional state' (a liberal state) needs no extra support for the legitimization of its own institutions and procedures. The democratic process actually 'satisfies the conditions for an inclusive and discursive formation of opinion and will'. Democratic procedures therefore need to be seen as 'a method whereby legitimacy is generated by legality'.

But what about 'the motivations and attitudes expected of citizens in their role as democratic (co-)legislators'? Such citizens in fact are required to have a 'costly commitment and motivation' which cannot be imposed by law, such as 'to make active use of their rights to communication and to participation [...] with an orientation to the common good' going beyond their own individual interests. A democracy cannot exist without citizens practicing political virtues.

Here Habermas gets closer to the spirit of the dilemma. Even if he holds that the liberal state is capable of reproducing its own motivational presuppositions by granting freedom of communication, he recognizes that the status of each citizen is embedded in a civil society that is nourished by spontaneous and pre-political springs.

This is important when the modernization of society goes off the rails as is happening in the present process of world globalization: 'Markets [...] are taking over and increasing [the] number of regulatory functions in areas of life that hitherto were held together in a normative manner, that is, by political structures or via pre-political forms of communication'. This weakens the democratic bond

and the solidarity that the liberal state needs but cannot impose by law. When this happens, citizens are changed into 'isolated monads acting on the basis of their own self-interest' and using 'their subjective rights only as weapons against each other'.

In the context of the present growing *depolitization* of the liberal state, the persistence of religions is not just a matter of fact but is a resource. First, religions represent a positive 'cognitive challenge' for philosophy, as it has always been. Second, in religious traditions, we can still find 'intuitions' that make people more *sensitive* to societal pathologies and capable of expressing them adequately. Moreover, the mutual compenetration of Christianity and philosophy promoted philosophy's assimilation of genuinely Christian ideas that produced some 'normative conceptual clusters with a heavy weight of meaning, such as responsibility, autonomy, and justification; or history and remembering, new beginning, innovation, and return; or emancipation and fulfillment; or expropriation, internalization, and embodiment, individuality and fellowship'. Habermas emphasizes that philosophy transformed the original religious meaning of the words 'but without emptying them though a process of deflation and exhaustion'. The main example of this is the translation of the concept of man as an image of God into that of the 'identical dignity of all men that deserves unconditional respect'.

From this perspective, it is possible to look at the Dilemma of Böckenförde in a new light: as 'the markets and the power of bureaucracy are expelling social solidarity (that is, a coordination of action based on values, norms, and a vocabulary intended to promote mutual understanding) from more and more spheres of life', it is in the interest of the liberal state 'to deal carefully with all the cultural sources that nourish its citizens' consciousness of norms and their solidarity'. What Habermas means by 'post-secular society' is included in the awareness of this situation that reflects a 'normative insight' about the 'assimilation and reflexive transformation of both religious and secular mentalities'. In other words, both sides are required 'to understand the secularization of society as a complementary learning process'. A post-secular society is not just a matter of fact but a goal to be accomplished.

### III.

Compared with Habermas, Ratzinger is much less confident in the possibility of generating legitimacy from legal procedures. If power is limited by law, how can this be 'the vehicle of justice' rather than the privilege of those who made the law? We know that 'majorities, too, can be blind or unjust' and therefore 'the majority principle always leaves open the question of the ethical foundations of the law'.

According to Ratzinger, neither religions as such nor secularized reason are able to provide these ethical foundations. On the one hand, if nowadays ‘one of the sources of terrorism is religious fanaticism [...] is then religion a healing and saving force’ or the opposite? On the other hand, if men are now capable of producing themselves, the temptation to ‘experiment with human beings’ or ‘to see them as rubbish to be discarded’ is no longer a fantastic vision of pessimistic moralists. Neither religion nor reason are reliable *taken by themselves*. Ratzinger looks forward to the possibility of a *mutual purification* of reason and religion. This already happened at the beginning of the Christian tradition, when the new faith encountered philosophical reason. We need to focus on this event to understand Ratzinger’s viewpoint, according to which, when the Fathers of the Church confronted the pagan culture, they recognized—after many discussions and fights—the positive heritage of the philosophical tradition, first in the spiritual conception of God and second in the primacy of the ‘natural law’, due to its divine origins, over any human law. The major consequence of this is the recognition of the secondary nature of any political prince. In other words, there is incompatibility between the Christian faith and any ‘political religion’, i.e. any theory that makes the political power divine. This is true also when the political religions seem to be justified by the ideal of peace and order, as in the case of the Christianized Roman Empire. Human conflicts and divisions represent a sin and a punishment that human beings are not able to eliminate by themselves. With Jesus Christ comes the beginning of the new and final stage of humanity, true, but this is a journey that will be accomplished only with the final *parousia* at the end of all time.

In Ratzinger’s narrative, the first Christians avoided two main errors in the political domain: *monism* (typical of the Empire’s political theology, which identifies the political kingdom with the Kingdom of Heaven) and *dualism* (typical of the Gnostic currents that recognize no value in created beings, political entities included). Augustine was aware of this. If the created universe does not include anything absolute, it is true that everything created is valuable, political entities too. God is the Lord of history and distributes political power also to pagans to show that it is not the highest value. Therefore, politics as such is not condemned by Augustine and earthly kingdoms can even flourish when they are ruled with justice. However, political success can hide the active presence of a new thing, the *civitas caelestis*, the Church as the people of God, defined as ‘a community of martyrs in exile’ (it is interesting for our purposes to highlight Ratzinger’s definition of martyrs as those who ‘say *no!* to the powers that produce public opinion’).

This is the Augustinian background of Ratzinger. He appeals to it to answer our main question: how can Christianity contribute to the common good. The

best answer—as far as I know—given by Ratzinger to this question can be found in a paper written in 1984, ‘A Christian Orientation in a Pluralist Democracy?’, where he clearly states that modern democracy cannot stand on its own but needs extra moral resources to maintain itself. Here Ratzinger identifies three main threats to democracy that are strictly interwoven. The first is the belief that it is possible to achieve perfect justice by changing the economic, social, and legal structures of society. Were it possible, such a liberation would presuppose the abdication of personal responsibility and freedom, i.e. perfect tyranny. When human beings deal with political problems, they must never forget that any moral appeal based on the promise of a perfect future society is profoundly immoral as it encourages a *flight from morality*—from free prudential decisions and the practice of virtues—toward some form of utopia. The second threat identifies the theoretical roots of the first: the *one-sided concept of reason*. If anything that cannot be quantified, calculated, or verified by scientific experimentation is regarded as irrational, morality as such is reduced to the balance of costs and benefits justified by subjective preferences. In this situation, law can no longer be understood—as in the natural law tradition—as giving legal protection to that which is intrinsically good and forbidding what is intrinsically wrong, but it is instead conceived as a mere means for preventing opposing interests from clashing with one another. When moral reason is conceived this way—as a matter of subjective preference—the law is no longer an image of justice but it becomes a mirror of the social balance of power or of the predominant view among the experts (as was mentioned above about public opinion). The third threat is a direct consequence of the secularization of society. When people believe that there is nothing beyond what they can experience here and now, discontentment and boredom can only increase, with the result that more and more people will look for some kind of escape in search of ‘real life’ elsewhere: ‘The loss of transcendence evokes the flight to utopia’.

The above recognition that the liberal state is an imperfect society means that it cannot stand by itself but needs an extra source to survive and flourish. Before identifying this extra source as Christianity, Ratzinger criticizes Christianity as a historical entity. In the course of history, in fact, the religion has produced social tendencies that were unhealthy for political life. First, the utopist temptation to escape the imperfection of the human condition by bringing the Kingdom of God on earth has affected Christians too, but the most dangerous threat for the political sphere produced by Christianity is theocracy, the attempt to rule society according to religious beliefs. This happened when the Christian denial of the state’s requirement of absolute obedience changed once the Church became a political power.

Our initial question was re-formulated by Ratzinger into: ‘How can Christianity

become a positive force for the political world without, on the one hand, being turned into a political instrument itself and, on the other hand, grabbing the political world for itself?'. The answer is founded on the assumption that, from its origins in the life of Jesus, Christianity has refused to consider itself a political entity. Any possible interpretation of Matthew 22, 21 ('Give Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's') cannot help recognizing that, in the New Testament, there is a distinction between the political sphere and the Kingdom of Heaven. Therefore, the New Testament rejects any 'political theology', i.e. any political platform to change the world on the basis of revelation. Perfect justice is impossible. Justice cannot be achieved merely by changing the social structures; it is instead 'the temporary result of continued imperfect efforts' on the part of those who respond to the love of God. Politics is the realm of practical reason and human responsibility, which are always imperfect. The New Testament does not legitimize any political theology. On the contrary, it founds a *political ethos* 'endurance in trying to do what is right, to find the right solution to the practical difficulties that arise from daily life in common, is made possible by grace and the promise of everlasting life and ultimate victory in Christ' (V. Towmey). The Christian faith can bring about this ethos of society by *awaking conscience* and giving *content* and *direction* to practical reason. In this case, individual liberty is sensitive to personal and common good and capable of going beyond — and sometimes against — subjective preferences. If this does not happen, there are two possibilities, both negative: either the dissolution of society or the intervention of the state through juridical coercion, which would change the society into an authoritarian regime.

This is the way Ratzinger faces the Dilemma of Böckenförde. This perspective is very problematic, as Ratzinger himself recognizes. If the Christian faith in fact plays the essential role of educating the ethos of society, then the Christian community (the Church) cannot renounce its traditional privilege of determining practical reason to be something *absolutely relevant in the public sphere*. In other words, Christianity cannot be confined to the private sphere, as if it were 'one value system among other, equally valid one' (V. Towmey).

To hold this position means that the relationship between politics and religion cannot be reduced — as Habermas believes — to the relationship between state and civil society. Liberty, taken as the major outcome of the history of western civilization, cannot be considered as just the result of the dialectics between religious and secular ideas, but also as the product of the competition among different concurrent *institutions* and *regulations*, each one claiming primacy in the public sphere. In particular, the competition between the state (in its different historical forms, from the Roman Empire to the present) and the Church has kept society from the danger of a *juridical monism*. The recognition of two

different social identities and belongings also opened up new dimensions of liberty. In other words, not only religious traditions but also religious institutions and regulations play a major role in the flourishing of the state. This is the main reason why the competition can be and actually often has been polemical. It includes conflicts and the never-ending search for a new balance of power between two 'cities' which, in exceptional circumstances, can both require exclusive allegiance. From this viewpoint, a secular society can be conceived of as the outcome of a dual process of neutralization: the neutralization of religion when it uses juridical coercion in the spiritual domain and the neutralization of the state when it claims to be a 'perfect' community (M. Nicoletti). Since the balance of power between the two 'cities' is always fragile, this perspective is dramatic in the etymological sense of the word: it stresses the importance of free human actions in their relations with God.

This situation is summarized by Ratzinger in *a new dilemma*: if the Church gives up its universal truth and transcendence, it is unable to give the state what the state needs to live and flourish; if the state embraces the Christian claim as the truth, it can no longer remain pluralist. Achieving a balance between the two sides of this dilemma is the prerequisite — which can never be taken for granted — for the freedom of the Church and the freedom of the State.

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## ABSTRACT

The major aim of this paper is to answer the following question: How can Christianity contribute to the common good? After defining the meaning of "post-secular society" from a sociological viewpoint, I will focus on the possibility of a "political theology" (in the sense of Carl Schmitt) nowadays. In Italy this question was recently discussed with effect from the celebrations of the 1700th anniversary of the Edict of Milan (313 a.D.). In this occasion some scholars defended a perspective which can be defined as "neo-Augustinian". I will present and discuss Joseph Ratzinger's version of this perspective—which rejects Schmitt's political theology in favor of a political ethos—in the light of the so-called Dilemma of Böckenförde ("The free secular state lives according to presuppositions that it cannot itself guarantee"). According to Ratzinger, Augustine's doctrine of the "two cities" (the divine and the human) is still helpful as on one side it avoids any sacralization of social and political entities, while on the other side it recognizes their own autonomy and value. To preserve this healthy dualism it is necessary for the "divine city" to be present in the public realm not only through its single members but also as a community with its own juridical institutions. I will finally argue that a liberal state is required to take up the challenge of the "divine city" if it wants to defend its own liberal nature.