Reason and Faith in an Intercultural Context

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On January 19, 2004, a historic meeting took place, in Baviera, between one of the foremost philosophers of our times, Jürgen Habermas, and the then Prefect of the *Sacra Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei,* Joseph Ratzinger, later to be elected Pope under the name of Benedict XVI. The subject of the debate was the issue of whether a democratic political order required a pre-political foundation, that is, whether a link had to be postulated between the political community and a pre-existing national or religious culture. Not surprisingly, the two dialogue-partners disagreed on this issue. What was surprising was their near-coincidence on a related matter: the role of religion in the modern world.

Habermas answered negatively to the question posed by the organizers: no, no conceptual link was necessary, because political liberalism, in the version advocated by Habermas—that of Kantian republicanism—was fully capable of legitimizing a democratic State, without any need for a pre-political legitimation. This State is legimate, not because it corresponds to religious values or embodies cultural characteristics deriving from the history of a particular

community, but because it is based on procedures that take into account all points of view and in this sense lead to decisions which in principle are acceptable to all. The Constitution that citizens give themselves includes not only political rights, through which citizens are enabled to participate in the political process, but also liberal rights, which are enshrined in the Charter at the same time as the political rights and cannot therefore be viewed as extra-political, transcending the body politic, as assumed by theoreticians of natural law.

Ratzinger agreed that there were good grounds to consider democracy as the most adequate manner of organizing society politically, since the participation of all citizens in the formulation of law was a *prima face* guarantee that power would not be usurped by the few to the detriment of the many. But majority decisions can be unjust, and lead to the oppression of religious or racial minorities. Hence the need for ethical foundations going back to values shared by all human beings, and which must be considered valid even if rejected, at a given time, by contingent majorities.

This theoretical disagreement would seem to doom the very idea of a dialogue on religion. After all, in stressing the self-sufficiency of political liberalism, the former Marxist and agnostic thinker was in fact denying the necessity and validity of religious legitimations; by the same token, in stressing the need for an extra-political foundation, Ratzinger might be suspected of opening a space for the reentry of religion into the public sphere. Both would be acting in

character, according to their respective intellectual biographies: Ratzinger's "transcendentalist" position, in which the City of Man is always open to the divine, would never coincide with the secular "immanentism" of Habermas, apparently convinced that there is no place for the sacred in the world of human affairs.

Yet religion was precisely the area where the professor and the cardinal came closest to each other.

The fact that religion is not necessary to legitimize the political order does not mean, for Habermas, that it has no role to play in a democratic society. On the contrary, he recognizes it as a very active social force, with a positive role to play in a modernity that has become a victim to what he calls *Entgleisung,* de-railing, a condition induced by globalization, and that has among its characteristics anomy, political skepticism, privatism, narcissism, which transforms the democratic process into a routine and a parody. Religion could contribute to re-introduce civic solidarity and commitment into the political arena. It goes without saying that even then religious pluralism would be the rule and the State would be continue to be neutral among the various worldviews. But the State would not be secularist in the traditional meaning of relegating religion to the limbo of obscurantism. It would be post-secular, in the sense of paying greater attention to the semantic and motivational potential of religious tradition. There would still be a difference between a secular discourse open to rational arguments and a religious discourse dependent on Revelation, but religion would be

taken seriously. Conversely, members of religious communities would be receptive to secular rationality.

Instead of drawing from the pathologies of modernity the conclusion that a return to the religious tradition is needed, Habermas thinks of a twofold process of reciprocal learning, in which believers would learn from non-believers, and vice-versa. Post-secularization, in this sense, would take the relay of classical secularization, in early modernity. On the one hand, the secular consciousness would be expected to conduct a self-critical reflection of its relationship to the Enlightenment. In addition, the State would be expected to do more than just organize the peaceful coexistence of all religions: it should abstain even from spreading a secularistic world-view, because this would jeopardize its ideological neutrality. On the other hand, religious communities would be expected to re-think its negative attitude towards modernity. Post-secularization would push both traditions, that of religion and that of the Enlightenment, to a reflection on their respective limits. In a way, this has happened in the past, when Christianity absorbed some concepts of Greek philosophy, and philosophy assimilated and translated into its own language a large number of Christian categories, such as responsibility, autonomy, justification, new beginning, alienation, and above all the idea that all men are created in God's image, a doctrine that secular thought translated into the assertion hat all men have equal dignity. At that time, biblical concepts migrated from religious groups to the whole of society. Can't this happen

again? Religions have preserved the memory of historical injustice, of crippled lives, of betrayed hopes, and philosophy could well listen to their voices. The concept of post-secular society reflects the conviction that religion continues to exist, that it is still relevant, that religion can contribute to give meaning and direction to lives that are being eroded by market values, and that in this sense is indispensable to a vibrant political process and therefore to democracy itself.

So much openness to religion on the part of a philosopher who defines himself as religion-deaf, *religiös unmusikalisch,* may have contributed to Ratzingers's reciprocal gesture of agreeing with the substance of Habermas' practical recommendations. "Regarding the practical consequences, I find myself in broad agreement with what Habermas says about post-secular society, and about the readiness to learn and the self-limitation on both sides." He goes even further than Habermas, who had been too polite to denounce the evils of religion: the fact that some time ago the department he led had been called the Holy Inquisition did not prevent Ratzinger from attacking the "pathologies of religion" and from suggesting that reason should play the role of "control organ" in order to "purify" and "order" religion. Of course he is thinking mainly of Islamic terrorism, but the generality of his attack on religious pathologies makes it clear that he is also thinking of past Catholic sins. He goes on to say that there are "pathologies of reason" as well (atom bomb, genetic engineering) and suggests that it should be

controlled by religion, in the same way as religion should be controlled by reason. His idea is that there should be a correlation between reason and religion, so that they should "purify" and "heal" each other.

So far neither Habermas nor Ratzinger have broken really new ground. Habermas moves in the well-known conciliatory tradition according to which there is no intrinsic hostility between religion and science, and that there should be a mutually productive dialogue between the two areas. (Maritain, Jean Guitton, Teilhard de Chardin, Barbour) although his concept of dialogue is of course more of a moral than of a cognitive nature. The views by Ratzinger that we have examined up to now follow the traditional position of the Catholic Church on the complementary relationship between faith and reason, recently exemplified in the Encyclical "*Fides et ratio*."

What is new and potentially relevant to the international debate being carried out by Academy of Latinity is Ratzinger's view that this hoary and venerable theme should be inserted into the new context of interculturality. When we speak about the relationship between faith and culture we delude ourselves into thinking that we are speaking about universals, when we are in fact speaking only about Christianity and about secular rationality, that is, about two products of Western culture, that are by no means universal. Ratzinger has no such illusions. He believes, as we have seen, in the need for an ethical foundation of the political order, but he knows perfectly well that there is no global con-

sensus in this respect. The controversy on human rights illustrates this point. What conception of rights should we adopt as a pre-political basis? The Islamic? The Chinese? The Malaysian? The Latin American? All main cultural areas are going through tensions between faith and reason, and a meaningful debate on this issue has to take into account the fact that secularization can take different forms, depending on the religion to which it applies. It is one thing in Islamic countries, and another in Buddhist societies. In non-Western societies the tensions are aggravated by the fact that even if they are not universal, the two components of Western culture—Christianity and secular rationality—struggle for hegemony, and this circumstance adds nationalistic overtones to the problem, since all cultures want to preserve their identity.

All these complications make it extremely difficult to apply Ratzinger's rule about a mutually "purifying" correlation between faith and reason. But the attempt should be made. This presupposes that the two blocks of Western culture—Christianity and secular rationality—increase their listening potential, so that they can learn from other cultures, thus contributing to identify a common stock of values held in common by all men. In other words, Habermas' view about reciprocal learning as an essential component of the new concept of post-secularization should apply not only within societies but among them. In the intercultural perspective, post-secularization means a world in which reason will listen to the different world religions.

Shall we then say, with Ratzinger, that it will be a world in which reason and faith will correct each other? Personally, I would prefer to speak, not of the pathologies of reason, but of the pathologies induced by instrumental reason. The atom bomb and certain types of genetic engineering are not the products of reason as such, but of instrumental reason, a reason dissociated from the communicative context in which human beings come to an understanding about goals, in the medium of language. The "pathologies" occur when instrumental reason is set loose and runs amok. It occurs when the logic of the system (market and bureaucratic rationality) prevails over the logic of communication. It follows that instrumental reason should be reconnected to communicative reason. If this is true, the "purifying" and "healing" correlation would be between instrumental and communicative reason, and not necessarily between reason and faith. Reason would correct reason.

But as communicative reason needs religion in order to give meaning to the world and thus increase the political capacity to win back the territory annexed by system rationality, the correlation established by Ratzinger stands, and may be the basis for an intercultural utopia from which all kinds of fundamentalism—both the fundamentalism of religion and that of instrumental reason—will be banned forever.