

Religion and
the American Future

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Editors
Christopher DeMuth
Yuval Levin

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of
Elizabeth Brady Lurie
Scholar, philanthropist, friend*

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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.

PART I

Religion and Secularism

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

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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: