Part I

Rationalization, Secularisms, and Modernities
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Exploring the Postsecular

Three Meanings of “the Secular” and Their Possible Transcendence

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Jürgen Habermas has been one of the most influential theorists of secular modernity. His theories of societal rationalization and rationalization of the lifeworld, his theory of linguistification of the sacred, and his theory of the public sphere all are grounded in the formulation of a master process of secularization which is, on the one hand, intrinsically related to processes of Western modernization and, on the other, is understood as the latest and most advanced stage within a general stadal and evolutionary process of human development (TCA; STPS; HE). In this respect, “secular” and “modern” had always been coterminous and intrinsically related within his theory.

It is therefore remarkable that Habermas has now initiated a new discourse of “postsecular” societies, the more so if one considers the fact that for decades he had resisted the new discourse of postmodernity, insisting on the need to defend and promote “the unfinished project of modernity” (PDM). Since one can assume that Habermas is not yet ready to abandon the discourse or the project of modernity, one must ask what can modern “postsecular” mean? In which way might modern individuals or societies be said to be “postsecular”?

In the following presentation, I would like to proceed by exploring, first, three different meanings of the term “secular,” to which would correspond three different understandings of the postsecular. Second, I would like to interrogate the extent to which Habermas’s conception of secularization is still too closely linked to particular European patterns of secularization, meaning that as a result he may maintain still too intrinsic a correlation between processes of modernizations and processes of secularization. Finally, I want
to offer a few remarks concerning the idea of a postsecular world society.

I Three Meanings of Secular

I would like to introduce an analytical distinction between three different meanings of the word secular, or three different ways in which one may be said to be secular, to which would correspond three different understandings of the process of secularization.

1. Mere secularity: living in the secular world and in secular time

This is the broadest possible sense of the term “secular,” which is derived from the medieval Christian theological transformation of the Latin term “saeculum.” Originally, the Latin word saeculum, as in per saecula saeculorum, only meant an indefinite period of time. But, as first used by Augustine, the “secular” referred to a temporal space between the present and the eschatological parousia in which both Christian and pagans could come together to pursue their common interests as a civil community.1 In this respect, the Augustinian use of “secular” is very similar to the modern meaning of a secular political sphere, that of the constitutional democratic state and that of a democratic public sphere, which is neutral with respect to all worldviews, religious as well as non-religious. Such a conception does not equate the secular with the “profane,” as the other of the “sacred,” nor is the secular the other of the “religious.” It is precisely a neutral space that can be shared by all who live in a society that is either not religiously homogeneous or is multicultural, societies which by definition will have different and most likely competing conceptions of what is “sacred” and what is “profane.” This was precisely the situation in late antiquity. Judeo-Christian monotheism led to a de-sacralization or disenchantment of the pagan sacred. Consequently, the Christians’ refusal to sacrifice to “pagan” gods or to worship the divine emperor earned them the epithet of “atheists.” The Christian sacred was the pagan profane and vice versa.

Eventually, however, with the consolidation of Western medieval Christendom and the hegemonic triumph of the Christian Church, the secular became one of the terms of a dyad, religious/secular, which served to structure the entire spatial and temporal reality of medieval Christendom into a binary system of classification separating two worlds, the religious/spiritual-sacred world of salvation and the secular/temporal-profane world. The sacred-profane and the religious-secular binary systems of classification became superimposed, and the secular became equated with the earthly city while the religious became equated with the heavenly city; thus, the distinction between the “religious” or regular clergy, who withdrew from the world into the monasteries to lead a life of Christian perfection, and the “secular” clergy who lived in the world along with the laity.

I is from this new theological perspective of medieval Christendom that the modern meaning of “secularization” emerges. To secularize means, first of all, to “make worldly,” to convert religious persons or things into secular ones, as when a religious person abandons the monastic rule to live in the world, or when monastic property is secularized. This is the medieval Christian theological meaning of the term “secularization” that may serve, however, as the basic metaphor of the historical process of Western secularization. This historical process needs to be understood as a particular reaction to the structuring dualism of medieval Christendom, as an attempt to bridge, eliminate, or transcend the dualism between the religious and the secular world. Even in the West, however, this process of secularization follows two different dynamics.

One is the dynamic of internal Christian secularization which aims to spiritualize the temporal and to bring the religious life of perfection out of the monasteries into the secular world. It tends to transcend the dualism by blurring the boundaries between the religious and the secular, by making the religious secular and the secular religious through mutual reciprocal infusion. This path was initiated by the various medieval movements of Christian reform of the saeculum, was radicalized by the Protestant Reformation, and has attained its paradigmatic expression in the Anglo-Saxon Calvinist cultural area, particularly in the United States.

The other different, indeed almost opposite, dynamic of secularization takes the form of laicization. It aims to emancipate all secular spheres from clerical-ecclesiastical control and in this respect it is marked by a laic-clerical antagonism. Unlike in the Protestant path, however, here the boundaries between the religious and the secular are rigidly maintained, but those boundaries are pushed into the margins, aiming to contain, privatize, and marginalize everything religious, while excluding it from any visible presence in the secular public sphere, now defined as the realm of laicus, freed from religion. This is the paradigmatic French-Latin-Catholic path of secularization, but it will find diverse manifestations throughout continental Europe.

With many variations, these are the two main dynamics of secularization which culminate in our secular age. In different ways, both paths lead to an overcoming of the medieval Christian dualism through a positive affirmation and revaluation of the saeculum, that is, of the secular age and the secular world, imbuing the immanent secular world with a
quasi-transcendent meaning as the place for human flourishing. In this broad sense of the term “secular,” we are all secular and all modern societies are secular and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, one could almost say per saecula saeculorum. Postsecular in this context could only mean a re-socialization or re-enchantment of modern societies within a sacred immanent frame akin to that of pre-axial societies, something that must be viewed not only as empirically unlikely but as practically impossible. This is certainly not the intended meaning of postsecular in Habermas.

I.i. Self-contained secularity within the immanent frame of the secular age: to be or not to be religious, that is the question!

There is a second narrower meaning of the term “secular,” that of self-sufficient and exclusive secularity, when people are simply “irreligious,” that is, devoid of religion and closed to any form of transcendence beyond the purely secular immanent frame. Here, secular is not any more one of the units of a dyadic pair, but is constituted as a self-enclosed reality. To a certain extent, this constitutes one possible end result of the process of secularization, of the attempt to overcome the dualism between religious and secular, by freeing oneself of the religious component.

In his recent work, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor has reconstructed the process through which the phenomenological experience of what he calls “the immanent frame” becomes constituted as an interlocking constellation of the modern differentiated cosmic, social, and moral orders. All three orders, the cosmic, the social, and the moral are understood as purely immanent secular orders, devoid of transcendence, and thus functioning *etsi Deus non daretur, “as if God would not exist.*” It is this phenomenological experience that, according to Taylor, constitutes our age paradigmatically as a secular one, irrespective of the extent to which people living in this age may still hold religious or theistic beliefs.

The question is whether the phenomenological experience of living within such an immanent frame is such that people within it will also tend to function *etsi Deus non daretur.* Taylor is inclined to answer this question in the affirmative. Indeed, his phenomenological account of the secular “conditions” of belief is meant to explain the change from a Christian society around 1500 CE, in which belief in God was unchallenged and unproblematic, indeed “naive” and taken for granted, to a post-Christian society today in which belief in God not only is no longer axiomatic but becomes increasingly problematic, so that even those who adopt an “engaged” standpoint as believers tend to experience reflexively their own belief as an option among many others, one moreover requiring an explicit justification. Secularity, being without religion, by contrast tends to become increasingly the default option, which can be naively experienced as natural and, thus, no longer in need of justification.

This naturalization of “unbelief” or “non-religion” as the normal human condition in modern societies corresponds to the assumptions of the dominant theories of secularization, which have postulated a progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices with increasing modernization, so that the more modern a society the more secular, that is, the less “religious,” it is supposed to become. That the decline of religious beliefs and practices is a relatively recent meaning of the term “secularization” is indicated by the fact that it does not yet appear in the dictionary of most modern European languages.

The naturalization of “unbelief” or “irreligiosity” as the normal “modern” human condition is a characterization that certainly applies to a majority of Western European societies. But it is not characteristic of the United States, where being religious is still the normal default option, while unbelief is the uncommon option which requires a reflexive commitment and is in need of justification. Indeed, the fact that there are some modern non-European societies, such as the United States or South Korea, that are fully secular in the sense that they function within the same immanent frame and yet their populations are also at the same time conspicuously religious, or the fact that the modernization of so many non-Western societies is accompanied by processes of religious revival, should put into question the premise that the decline of religious beliefs and practices is a quasi-natural consequence of processes of modernization. If modernization per se does not produce necessarily the progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices, then we need a better explanation for the radical and widespread secularity one finds among the population of Western European societies. The meaning of “postsecular” in this context would be that of individuals as well as societies becoming religious again, undergoing processes of religious revival, which would reverse previous secular trends. Peter Berger has used the expression “de-secularization of the world,” while David Martin asks whether “secularization (has) gone into reverse.”

There is little evidence, however, that individuals or societies in the heartland of secularization, Western Europe, are becoming postsecular. Habermas also does not appear to use “postsecular” in this second meaning of the term.

I.iii. Secularist secularity: secularism as stadial consciousness

I would like to maintain that secularization in the sense of being “devoid of religion,” does not happen automatically as a result of processes of
quasi-transcendent meaning as the place for human flourishing. In this broad sense of the term “secular,” we are all secular and all modern societies are secular and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, one could almost say per saecula saeculorum. Postsecular in this context could only mean a re-sacralization or re-enchantment of modern societies within a sacred immanent frame akin to that of pre-axial societies, something that must be viewed not only as empirically unlikely but as practically impossible. This is certainly not the intended meaning of postsecular in Habermas.

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I.ii  Secularist secularity: secularism as stadial consciousness

I would like to maintain that secularization in the sense of being “devoid of religion,” does not happen automatically as a result of processes of
modernization, but rather needs to be mediated phenomenologically by some other particular historical experience. Self-sufficient secularity, that is, the absence of religion, has a better chance of becoming the normal taken-for-granted position if it is experienced not simply as an unreflectively naive condition, as just a fact, but actually as the meaningful result of a quasi-natural process of development. As Taylor has pointed out, modern unbelief is not simply a condition of absence of belief, nor merely indifference. It is a historical condition that requires the perfect tense, “a condition of ‘having overcome’ the irrationality of belief.” Intrinsically to this phenomenological experience is a modern “stadiatal consciousness,” inherited from the Enlightenment, which understands this anthropocentric change in the conditions of belief as a process of matura-

tion and growth, as a “coming of age” and as progressive emancipation.

For Taylor, this stadiatal phenomenological experience serves in turn to ground the phenomenological experience of exclusive humanism as the positive self-sufficient and self-limiting affirmation of human flourishing and as the critical rejection of transcendence beyond human flourishing as self-denial and self-defeating.

In this respect, the historical self-understanding of secularism has the function of confirming the superiority of our present modern secular outlook over other supposedly earlier and therefore more primitive religious forms of understanding. To be secular means to be modern, and therefore by implication to be religious means to be somehow not yet fully modern. This is the ratchet effect of a modern historical stadiatal consciousness, which turns the very idea of going back to a surpassed condition into an unthinkable intellectual regression.

The function of secularism as a philosophy of history, and thus as ideology, is to turn the particular Western Christian historical process of secularization into a universal teleological process of human development from belief to unbelief, from primitive irrational or metaphysical religion to modern, rational, postmetaphysical, secular consciousness. Even when the particular role of internal Christian developments in the general process of secularization is acknowledged, it is not in order to stress the particular contingent nature of the process, but rather to stress the universal significance of the uniqueness of Christianity as, in Marcel Gaucher’s expressive formulation, “the religion to exit from religion.”

I would like to propose that this secularist stadiatal consciousness is a crucial factor in the widespread secularization that has accompanied the modernization of Western European societies. Europeans tend to experience their own secularization, that is, the widespread decline of religious beliefs and practices among their midst as a natural consequence of their modernization. To be secular is not experienced as an existential or historical choice which modern individuals or modern societies make, but rather as a natural outcome of becoming modern. In this respect, the theory of secularization mediated through this historical stadiatal consciousness tends to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is, in my view, the presence or absence of this secularist historical stadiatal consciousness that explains when and where processes of modernization are accompanied by radical secularization. In places where such secularist historical stadiatal consciousness is absent or less dominant, as in the United States or in most non-Western postcolonial societies, processes of modernization are unlikely to be accompanied by processes of religious decline. On the contrary, they may be accompanied by processes of religious revival.

Now that we have introduced a distinction between those three different meanings of being secular: (a) that of mere secularity, that is, the phenomenological experience of living in a secular world and in a secular age, where being religious may be a normal viable option; (b) that of self-contained, self-sufficient, and exclusive secularity, that is, the phenomenological experience of living without religion as a normal, quasi-natural, taken-for-granted condition; and (c) that of secularist secularity, that is, the phenomenological experience not only of being passively free, but actually of having been liberated from “religion” as a condition for human flourishing, we may be in a better position to address the question of the meaning of “postsecular” in Habermas’s own work.

Within the context of the third meaning of the term “secular,” that of secularist secularity, postsecular would imply reflexively abandoning or at least questioning the modern secularist stadiatal consciousness which relegates “religion” to a more primitive, more traditional, now surpassed stage of human and societal development. This appears to be the sense in which Habermas uses the term “postsecular,” not as a change in society itself, as a reversal of secular trends, but as a change in consciousness, as “an altered self-understanding of the largely secularized societies of Western Europe, Canada, or Australia.” Postsecular here would mean, first of all, becoming reflexively aware of what Habermas calls a “secularist self-misunderstanding.” But becoming aware in itself should not be sufficient. It should be accompanied, one may assume, with the overcoming, or at least with some correction of the secularistic self-

misunderstanding.

There is no doubt that Habermas himself in his later writings has adopted a postsecular reflexive attitude and has corrected the most blatantly secularistic self-misunderstandings built into his own theories. The question I would like to address in the following section is whether Habermas’s postsecular correction has gone far enough or whether his position is still tied to European (mis-)understandings of processes of secularization which irremediably tend to link intrinsically contingent
patterns of European Christian secularization with general processes of modernization. As Habermas indicates, after several decades of dispute between the European and American paradigms of secularization, it is "still undecided . . . whether the religious USA or the largely secularized Western Europe is the exception to a general developmental trend" (1:1).

But, in my view, it is precisely this way of putting the question, namely, the extent to which any particular supposedly contingent pattern is "exceptional" or resembles some general developmental trend, which has marred the debate between the European and American paradigms of secularization.

We need to reopen the question as to the relationship between particular contingent historical patterns of secularization and particular historical processes of modernization, both in Europe and the United States, so that we may then develop a more open global comparative historical perspective and examine the variable relations between patterns of secularization and patterns of modernization beyond the West.

II Modernization and Secularization: A Comparison of European and US Patterns

Over a decade ago, I suggested that in order to speak meaningfully of "secularization" we needed to distinguish three different connotations of the term:

(a) Secularization, as differentiation of the secular spheres (state, economy, science), from religion, usually understood as the "emancipation," of the secular from ecclesiastical institutions and religious norms and the concomitant differentiation and specialization of religion within a newly emerged religious sphere. In this respect both the religious and the secular are reciprocally and mutually constituted structures which first emerge with modernity.

(b) Secularization, as decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies, often postulated as a human universal developmental process. This is the most recent but by now the most widespread usage of the term in contemporary academic debates on secularization, although it remains still unregistered in the dictionaries of most European languages.

(c) Secularization, as privatization of religion, often understood both as a general modern historical trend and as a normative condition, indeed as a precondition for modern liberal democratic polities. My book, Public Religions in the Modern World, put into question the empirical as well as the normative validity of the privatization thesis.

Maintaining this analytical distinction, I argued, should allow us to examine and to test the validity of each of the three propositions independently of each other and thus to refocus the often fruitless secularization debate into comparative historical analysis that could account for different patterns of secularization, in all three meanings of the term, across societies and civilizations. We could distinguish secular differentiation, religious decline, and religious privatization respectively as Secularization I, Secularization II, and Secularization III. But this already points precisely to problems in our definitions and in our categories.

Since it appears that in Europe all three processes of secularization, namely, secular differentiation, religious decline, and privatization of religion, seem to be historically interrelated, they are perceived subsequently as three dimensions of the same general process of secularization. Indeed, European sociologists tend to view Secularization I and II as intrinsically related because they view the two realities, the decline in the societal power and significance of religious institutions, and the decline of religious beliefs and practices among individuals, as structurally related components of general processes of modernization.

American sociologists of religion tend to view things differently and practically restrict the use of the term "secularization" to its narrower more recent meaning of decline of religious beliefs and practices among individuals. It is not so much that they question the secularization of society, but simply that they take it for granted as an unremarkable fact. The United States was born as a differentiated modern secular society. Yet the sociologists see no evidence of a progressive decline in the religious beliefs and practices of the American people. Consequently, many American sociologists of religion tend to discard the theory of secularization, or at least its postulate of the progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices, as a European myth, once they are able to show that in the United States none of the usual "indicators" of secularization, such as church attendance, frequency of prayer, belief in God, and so on, evince any long-term declining trend.

The main disputes between the European and the American paradigms all turn around Secularization II, that is, on the contrast between the undeniable pattern of religious decline in Europe and the undeniable pattern of religious vitality in the United States. These general trends are not in dispute. What is in dispute is the relation between the divergent trends of religious decline in Europe and persistent religiosity in the United States with secular differentiation and with processes of modernization.
The new American paradigm has turned the European model of secularization on its head. In the extreme "supply-side" version of the rational-choice theory of religious markets, American sociologists use the American evidence to postulate a general structural relationship between disestablishment or state deregulation, open free competitive and pluralistic religious markets, and high levels of individual religiosity. What was until now the American exception attains normative status while the previous European rule is now denoted to being a deviation from the American norm. The low levels of religiosity in Europe are now supposedly explained by the persistence of either establishment or of highly regulated monopolistic or oligopolistic religious markets. But the internal comparative evidence within Europe does not support the basic tenets of the American theory. Monopolistic situations in Poland and Ireland are linked to persistently high levels of religiosity, while increasing liberalization and state deregulation elsewhere are often accompanied by persistent rates of religious decline.

An impasse has been reached in the debate. The traditional European theory of secularization offers a relatively plausible account of European developments, but is unable or unwilling to take seriously, much less to explain, the surprising vitality and extreme pluralism of denominational forms of salvation religion in America. The emerging American paradigm offers a convincing explanation of the US religious market, but is unable to account for internal variations within Europe. In fact, neither of the two theories can offer a plausible account of the significant internal variations within Europe.

Former East Germany, the Czech Republic, and France are probably the most secular of all European societies. These are the societies in which religion as a chain of collective memory is clearly disappearing. But it should be obvious that in all three cases those processes of secularization cannot be understood simply in terms of processes of modernization or in terms of persistent monopolistic conditions. I assume few people would be inclined to attribute the higher levels of secularization of East Germany, compared with those of West Germany, to the fact that East Germany is a more modern society, unless of course one is willing to argue that secularity itself is evidence of modernity.

Indeed, in order to understand the significant internal variations in patterns of secularization throughout Europe, not only between East and West Germany, but also among other European societies which are similar in many other respects, for instance, between Poland and the Czech Republic (two similar Slavic East European Soviet-type Catholic societies), or between France and Italy (two similarly modern Latin Catholic societies), or between the Netherlands and Switzerland (two highly modern bi-confessional Calvinist-Catholic societies), it should be obvious that one should look less at levels of modernization or at persistent monopolies, which explain very little, and more at historical patterns of relations between Church, state, nation, and civil society. Only a comparative historical analysis can help us overcome the impasse.

The drastic decline in church attendance across Europe since the 1950s constitutes the strongest evidence for the defenders of the traditional theory of secularization. Less than 20 percent of the population in the majority of European countries attends church regularly, while in East Germany, Russia, and the Scandinavian countries the proportion of regular churchgoers decreases to the single digits. When compared with the very different evidence of continuing vitality in congregational, associational religion in the United States across all denominations - Protestant and Catholic, Jewish and Muslim, and now Hindu and Buddhist - it is obvious that this is the fundamental difference between American and European religiosity. Secularization in Europe takes primarily the form of "unchurching" (Entkirchlichung), which should be understood as a form of liberation from the type of territorialized confessional religiosity which was the legacy of the Westphalian system.

European Christianity, for all kinds of reasons, never made the full historical transition from territorial national churches based on the territorial parish or Pfarrgemeinde, to competing denominations of civil society based on voluntary religious associations, a modern form of religious community.

The analytical distinction between "church" and "denomination" is the key to any comparative analysis of religious developments and patterns of secularization in Europe and the United States. Following Max Weber's definition, sociologically, a "church" is an ecclesiastical institution which claims the monopoly of the means of salvation over a territory. The territorialization of religion and the corresponding confessionalization of state, nation, and peoples are the fundamental facts and formative principles of the Westphalian system of sovereign territorial states, which emerged in early modern Europe out of the so-called wars of religion. The principle cuius regio eius religio is the general formative principle of such a system, a principle moreover which was already well established before the wars of religion and even before the Protestant Reformation, as shown by the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain by the Catholic monarchs in order to establish a territorial Catholic state ruling over a homogeneously religious Catholic society. What the Peace of Westphalia represented was the generalization of this dual model of confessionalization of states, nations, and peoples and territorialization of ecclesiastical religion among the emerging European territorial states. Every early modern European state (with the exception of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), was defined confessionally as...
Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Calvinist, or Orthodox. In this respect, religious homogenization and in many instances ethno-religious cleansing stand at the very origin of the modern European state.

This is the fundamental factor of early modern European history that will determine the various patterns of European secularization. Comparatively speaking, European secularization can be best understood as a process of successive de-confessionalizations of state, nation, and peoples, which was phenomenologically experienced as a process of liberation from confessional identities. This is what determines the historically unique character of European secularization, which is now increasingly being recognized as a form of “European exceptionalism” rather than as a general model of modernization that is likely to be replicated elsewhere. In fact, the European pattern of secularization can hardly be replicated in other contexts in which there was no previous historical pattern of confessionalization of states, nations, and peoples requiring their secularization, that is, their de-confessionalization.

If my assumption is correct, it would imply that the various different patterns of European secularization and the various patterns of civil society formation across Europe are very much related to the various patterns of de-confessionalization of state, nation, and peoples. Those patterns are historically complex and although generally path-dependent, they also traverse recognizable breakthroughs at historical turning points which offer structural opportunities to change course or revise the particular path of secularization.

It is this common phenomenological experience of having passed through stages of de-confessionalization that permeates the typically European stadal consciousness that understands the process of secularization as a process of progressive emancipation from religion.

In fact, without taking into account the longue durée European pattern of confessionalization of states, peoples, and territories, it is not possible to understand the difficulties which every continental European state has, irrespective of whether they have maintained formal establishments or are constitutionally secular, and the difficulties which every European society has, the most secular as well as the most religious ones, in accommodating religious diversity, and particularly in incorporating immigrant religions. This is one of the fundamental differences between Europe and the United States, which never underwent a process of confessionalization and developed a radically different model of religious denominationalism.

Paraphrasing Karl Marx’s “On the Jewish Question,” one could say that if America can be characterized simultaneously as the model of “perfect disestablishment” and the “land of religiosity par excellence,” European societies offer by contrast the inverse combination of different forms of “imperfect disestablishment” and “lands of secularity par excellence.”

The United States never had to undergo a formal process of separation of Church and state, since it never had either a confessional state or an established state Church, from which the state had to separate itself. Unlike most Europeans, Americans also did not need to undergo a process of de-confessionalization from any national ecclesiastical institution, since even the established colonial churches, Congregational, Presbyterian, and Anglican, remained minoritarian institutions and the majority of the population remained unchurched. The American state was born as a modern secular state, without having to undergo any process of de-confessionalization, and the dual constitutional formula of an establishment of religion at the state level and free exercise of religion in society guaranteed the development of denominationalism as a system of free and open religious pluralism in society.

American denominationalism is a system of mutual recognition of de-territorialized voluntary religious institutions and associations within civil society without any state regulation or interference other than through the courts, when there are legal conflicts within or among religious organizations. The American state not only has no office of regulation or registration of religious associations, but does not even have the right to register or survey the religious denomination of its individual citizens.

Tocqueville’s remains the classic and still unsurpassed analytical sociological account we have of the modern system of American religious pluralism and its affinities with the model of a pluralist and democratic civil society. Like so many other European visitors, Tocqueville was immediately struck by the vitality of religion in America and by the “innumerable multitude of sects” he found there. But unlike so many later European visitors and professional observers who tended to minimize or explain away the relevance of this phenomenon by referring to “American exceptionalism,” as if the vitality of religion in America was simply the exception that confirmed the general rule of European secularization, Tocqueville saw it clearly as a “novel” situation, that is, as the product of modern developments and not simply as a traditional residue that was eventually bound to disappear with progressive modernization, and therefore as a challenge to the premise of European secularization.

Indeed, by tying his explanation of the striking pluralism and vitality of religion in America to a historical theory of modern individualism, to a historical theory of modern civil society, and to a historical theory of modern civil religion, Tocqueville offers a more persuasive institutional theory of the unique vitality of the very particular American system of religious denominationalism than contemporary supply-side theories of the American religious markets. These supply-side theories are based
(a) on dubious anthropological presuppositions of a single and universal type of rational human action based on the utilitarian calculation of costs and benefits; (b) on an ahistorical theory of religious market, according to which the demand for religious commodities is universally constant, while what changes is the supply along with changes in the level of regulation and free competition in the religious market; and (c) on an ahistorical theory of a self-differentiated and self-regulated religious market that appears disembodied from the American state, from the legal-constitutional system, from the American nation, and from American culture, and is therefore a model which presumably can be exported to any society in the world or can naturally flourish once the regulation of religious markets disappears.

It should be obvious that the different models of religious denominationism within a pluralistic civil society alongside confessional national churches with limited pluralism have important consequences for the constitution of civil society on both sides of the Atlantic, but also for the development of inclusionary, more egalitarian and solidaristic welfare states in Europe, and the weak development of a welfare state in the USA. As the polemical debates around the attempts of the Obama administration to reform the American health system clearly indicate, the very discursive legitimation of what is a taken-for-granted principle in most European nation-states, namely, the principle of a public national health system which guarantees a minimum egalitarian access of health care for all its citizens, is immediately suspect as an etatist, socialist un-American project and susceptible to the most irrational debates. What is surprising is not that conservative Republicans may oppose the Democratic project of reforming the national health system, but that their arguments still find such a resonance within American public opinion.

One can certainly find close elective affinities between the anti-citizen model of state-civil-society relations and the model of free exercise of religion protected from any kind of state regulation or control. But secularist interpretations of the relation between the absence of a welfare state in America and the persistence of religion invert, in my view, the nature of the relationship. It is not, as Norris and Inglehart tend to argue, that Americans are still so religious because of their existential insecurity due to the absence of a welfare state, but rather that Americans have defeated so far every attempt to institutionalize the welfare state because of its model of a self-organized and privately regulated civil society, which is so intrinsically related with their model of religious denominationism.

Norris and Inglehart have added new dimensions to the dispute between the two competing paradigms of secularization by introducing new global comparative evidence from the World Values Survey, which would seem to support the classic paradigm of secularization by apparently finding a close correlation between levels of socio-economic development and levels of secularization.16 I find the evidence, however, somewhat unpersuasive.

Empirically, all the evidence for the positive correlation between modernization and secularization comes from Western Christian (that is, post-Christian) societies, primarily Western European countries with the addition of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (that is, European settler colonial societies). Japan is the only non-Western society that would seem to corroborate Inglehart’s thesis. But in the case of Japan, as in the case of China, one could offer a more convincing socio-cultural explanation for what appears to be already inordinate evidence of secularity well before the precipitation of processes of modernization.

For that reason, I find Habermas’s reliance on the evidence provided by Norris and Inglehart, in order to somehow still maintain the thesis of a supposedly intrinsic correlation between levels of modernization and levels of secularization, highly problematic. It may indicate a lingering secularist misunderstanding which is not only dissonant with Habermas’s new postsecular reflexivity, but even more so with Habermas’s own attention to “The Sacred Roots of the Axial Age Traditions”17 and to his “Awareness of What is Missing” (AWM). Such an awareness or even any attention to any kind of dynamics of religious rationalization are absolutely missing from Inglehart’s reductionist and ahistorical account of religion, though one must admit that the account is elegant in its utter positivist and materialist simplicity.

Inglehart’s theory of religion regresses to nineteenth-century positivist genealogies of “primitive” religion, without bothering to consider Durkheim’s or Weber’s more developed sociological theories. As a socio-psychological phenomenon, “religion” for Inglehart is simply a response to conditions of existential material insecurity. Given the increasing existential security that accompanies economic development, religion is likely to lose its functional relevance and its raison d’être. Thus, the teleological prediction of increasing secularization is likely to accompany increasing modernization and this appears to be confirmed by the World Values Survey. In post-industrial societies, religion that is associated with economics of scarcity and with material existential insecurity is apparently replaced by higher forms of post-materialist spiritual values.

One wonders whether Inglehart would be willing to admit the paradigmatic post-materialist character of the spiritual search of the Buddha or of all the other paths of individual salvation and redemption “beyond human flourishing” associated with the Axial Age. Certainly, individual polytheistic and polyformic religious search has always been an important option, at least for elites and religious virtuosi, within the Hindu,
Buddhist, and Taoist traditions. What Inglehart calls the expansion of post-materialist spiritual values can be understood in this respect as the generalization and democratization of options until now only available to elites and religious virtuosos in most religious traditions. As the privileged material conditions available to elites for millennia are generalized to entire populations, so are the spiritual and religious options that were usually reserved for them. It may not be appropriate, however, to characterize such a process of generalized religious individuation as religious decline, or as secularization.

China and the United States are the two great outliers in Inglehart's global chart of societies along the vertical "traditional/secular-rational" axis and the horizontal "survival/self-expression" axis, which puts into question the entire theory albeit in opposite directions. Given the basic assumption that "people who experience ego-tropic risks during their formative years (posing direct threats to themselves and their families) or socio-tropic risks (threatening their community) tend to be far more religious than those who grow up under safer, comfortable, and more predictable conditions," and given the catastrophic experience of material existential insecurity suffered by broad sectors of the Chinese population throughout the twentieth century, one should expect high levels of religiosity among the Chinese population, particularly among older generations. Yet the evidence tends to point in the opposite direction. China, along with Japan, perhaps for similar reasons, appears to be one of the most secular societies on earth, at least as measured by the Western Christian categories of religiosity used by the World Values Survey.

Both the evidence of a society like China, which may have been both "secular" and economically undeveloped, and the evidence of a society like the United States, which seems to have become progressively more rather than less religious as it became more economically developed, seem to put into question the intrinsic correlation between modernization and secularization. American religion is not a survival from a premodern traditional society, but is a product of American modernity. Thus, the expectation that religiosity will also eventually decline as the material conditions of the American population become more secure, is highly problematic. None of the three explanations of American exceptionalism offered by Norris and Inglehart seem very convincing.

To attribute American high religiosity to the economic insecurity associated with high levels of economic inequality does not sound convincing, when all sectors of the American population, from the most privileged to the most disprivileged, evince inordinately high levels of religiosity, at least in comparison with most Western European societies.

As I have already indicated, Norris and Inglehart's argument that Americans are still so religious because they do not yet have a welfare state inverts, in my view, the more plausible direction of the correlation between the system of American denominationalism and the weakness of the welfare state in America.

As to the argument that Americans may be inordinately religious due to the constant flow of poor immigrants from undeveloped countries, it is empirically equally problematic for several reasons. There is no evidence of any decline of American religiosity from the late 1920s to 1965, when the gates of immigration to America for all practical purposes were closed, a period which also coincides with a limited institutionalization of the welfare state. There is no evidence of an increase in American religiosity after 1965, when the gates of immigration became wide open again. Moreover, the assumption that immigrants may be more religious because they come from undeveloped countries is also problematic, since half of all post-1965 new immigrants tend to have higher levels of education and income than the average American. Moreover, there is compelling historical evidence that immigrants to America in all waves of successive immigration, throughout the nineteenth century as well as in the late twentieth century, become increasingly more religious, not less, as they settle in the new country. In fact, most immigrant groups, Protestants and Catholics, Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, today as in the past, claim to be more consciously and reflexively religious in the United States than they were in their old countries before immigration.

I would like to add, in this context, that Habermas's reference to the rapid secularization of post-Franco Spain as evidence of the correlation between modernization and secularization seems to me equally problematic. In my view, the rapid and drastic secularization of Spanish society within one single generation, following the forced confessionalization of the Spanish population under the Franco regime, offers more plausible evidence for correlating processes of European secularization with dynamics of de-confessionalization. In my view, phenomenologically, the Spanish case can be interpreted as evidence of a massive nach-Holende conversion to secularity of a population that wants to be definitively "modern" and "European" after a long experience of isolated backwardness. Indeed, Spain is one of the few Western European countries (along with Ireland) in which questions of "the postsecular" have not emerged at all.

III Are We "Still" Secular or Are We Witnessing the Emergence of a "Postsecular World Society"?

Insofar as answering this question requires projecting one's gaze and one's interpretation of what appear to be contemporary trends into the
future, one can offer at best some cautiously speculative answers, well aware that the social sciences have a dismal record of historical forecasting, that history remains contingent and therefore unpredictable, and that the future remains therefore fundamentally open.

Concerning the first meaning of the word “secular,” that of living phenomenologically within the immanent frame of a secular world, not only are we in the West still secular and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, but even most non-Western societies are also becoming increasingly secular, in the sense that the cosmic order is increasingly defined by modern science and technology, the social order is increasingly defined by the interlocking of citizenship “democratic” states, market economies and mediatized public spheres, and the moral order is increasingly defined by the calculations of rights-bearing individual agents, claiming human dignity, liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness. Indeed, globally one must admit that the whole world is becoming simultaneously both more “religious” and more “secular” alongside the increasing globalization of the Western Christian binary system of classification of religious-secular reality. Indeed, the categories of “religious” and “secular” recently became globalized for the first time in all non-Western cultures.

Concerning the second meaning of “secular,” there is little evidence of any significant religious revival among the population of Western European societies, except among immigrant groups. At best, one could say that the rate of religious decline has slowed down or has been halted. Actually, the rate of secularization in many European societies may have reached a point of no return. Religion as “a chain of memory,” using the formulation of the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger, appears broken almost without repair and large generations of young Europeans are growing up without any personal relationship with or even knowledge of the Christian religious tradition. Not only the Christian churches, but most importantly families have lost their role in the process of religious socialization. Barring any unforeseeable religious revival, it is unlikely that the process of European secularization, that is, the unchurching of the European population, may be reversed. In this respect, it is premature to speak of European societies as postsecular.

And yet something fundamental is happening to the European secular zeitgeist. Neither the naïve, unreflexive secularity which accepted being without religion as the quasi-natural, modern condition, nor the secularist self-understanding which turned the particular process of European Christian secularization into a universal normative development for all of humanity are simply tenable, that is, can be simply taken for granted without questioning or reflexive elaboration any more.

We are not “religious” again, yet. But we have certainly become obsessed with religion as a question, particularly as a public issue. The fact that we are asking the question of whether we may be entering a postsecular world society is itself evidence that we have crossed a threshold, that we cannot be simply unreflective secularists any more. As on so many other occasions throughout his exemplary lifework, Habermas is once again reading the “signs of the times” and interpreting the zeitgeist with a prescient accuracy. One could, of course, reassert one’s secularism even more aggressively and militantly. But this in itself is a response to the increasing globalization of the world, and defensively against the repressed, what is viewed as an unwelcome and dangerous return of the repressed, of something we thought we had overcome and left behind. Unlike his defense of modernity against postmodern currents, Habermas is on this occasion ready to reflect upon his own secularism and adopt a postsecular attitude.

There are many reasons for this new reflexive and inquisitive attitude. I will only mention three, which are in line with the same phenomena also analyzed by Habermas:

(A) Globalization

The first and most obvious reason can be subsumed under the code word “globalization.” In our global age, it has become increasingly evident that European secular developments are not a universal norm for the rest of the world; that, as the rest of the world modernizes, people are not becoming more secular like us, but are becoming more religious — or, actually, they are becoming simultaneously both more secular and more religious, which of course only confuses our binary categories. But once it becomes obvious that the secularization of Europe is, comparatively speaking, rather exceptional, the old theory that explained Europe’s secularity in terms of its modernity is no longer plausible.

It is no longer only the United States which appears to be an exception to the European rule of secularization, but the rest of the world appears to be equally exceptional, so that we have now reached a point where we are talking of the “European exception.” Global media continuously impress upon global subjects not only “the ceaseless role of religion in fostering both conflict and reconciliation,” but the unexpected vitality of the world religions under global conditions. It is time to cease viewing these revivals as a survival or persistence of something traditional and to begin asking ourselves the extent to which the very formation of a world society, the very process of globalization, calls for religious responses to which the old world religions are responding in manifold ways. Globalization presents not only new challenges for the old world religions but also new great opportunities.

Moreover, we should be cautious with the new fashionable discourse
of European exceptionalism, for two main reasons. First, because when it comes to “religion” and its antonym, “the secular,” there is no global rule. We must humbly recognize that many of our received categories derived from our Christian-secular European developments, fail us when we try to understand developments in the rest of the world, in that rather than facilitating understanding these categories actually lead to a fundamental misunderstanding. None of the categories prove very helpful in trying to understand contemporary religious developments around the world — not the category of religious fundamentalism, as if we were witnessing a single global anti-modern reaction to secular modernity; nor the term proposed by Peter Berger, “the secularization of the world,” as if we were witnessing simply a reversal of a previous process of secularization; and not even such expressions as the “return of religion” or “religious revival,” as if we were simply witnessing the return of the old traditional religions. We need first a de-secularization of our consciousness and of our secularist and modernist categories before we can develop better concepts to understand the novelty and the modernity of these developments.

But, second, the discourse of European exceptionalism is also problematic because even within Europe there is no single European rule of secularization.

It is the secularist self-understanding of European modernization in a global colonial encounter with the other that has constructed such a rule of European secularization. The historical reality is that of multiple and complex patterns of secularization and religious revivals across Europe, many of them also intrinsically implicated with global colonial developments beyond Europe. This brings us to the second main reason for our renewed reflexive and polemical interest in religion.

(B) European integration

The process of European integration, the expansion to the East, and the possible entry of Turkey have made evident that there is no European rule. None of the national models, the French or the German, the Dutch or the Italian, the Danish or the British can serve as a general European model. The acrimonious debates concerning the problem to the European Constitution make obvious the confusion about the so-called fundamental European values, the problematic notion that one must choose between Christian and secular values, or between Christianity and the Enlightenment as the source of the supposedly universal European values.

One must add the puzzling prospect of Turkey joining the European Union, of a Muslim democratic Turkey which may well meet all the formal criteria and tests to join the European club and yet cannot be fully European because it is neither Christian nor secular.

(C) Immigration and increasing religious pluralism

Finally, there is the novel reality that European societies, due to interrelated processes of religious individuation and more importantly increasing immigration, are becoming either for the first time or again after many centuries religiously pluralistic. The model of the homogeneous nation-state inherited from the Westphalian system is being put into question. The Westphalian principle eius regio eius religio was not significantly altered either by the critical transition from royal to national or popular sovereignty after the French Revolution, or by the expansion and consolidation of democracy in Western European societies after World War II.

The manifest difficulty which all European societies show in the integration of Muslim immigrants can be viewed as an indication of the problems that the model of the European nation-state has, whether it is formally secular or not, in regulating deep religious pluralism. One must question the problematic notion that the European secular state is de facto a religiously neutral state and therefore already contains within itself the proper solution to the management of religious pluralism in society. Today, in Europe, Islam is indeed the elephant in the room in any discussion of religion and secular modernity.

We need to be more reflexively aware of the complex historical process of Western Christian secularization and its relation to allegedly general processes of modernization. We must avoid the false dichotomies built into our binary categories, either religious or secular, either traditional or modern. Above all, we must be more critically reflexive of the stadal consciousness built into our “ secular self-interpretation of modernity.” Becoming postsecular does not mean necessarily becoming religious again, but questioning our stadal consciousness, de-stabilizing if not our secular immanent frame, at least the possibilities of transcendence within the immanent frame, and being open, receptive, at least curious, to all the manifold forms of being religiously human.

Habermas wants to resist the relegation of philosophy by positivism and naturalism to an intermediate stage between a religious-theological and a positive-scientific stage of the human mind. His insistent defense of a postmetaphysical form of philosophical thinking that is not superseeded or made irrelevant by positivist science is laudable, and particularly necessary at the contemporary moment of global expansion of scientism and technocratic impulses. But when it comes to religion, one cannot avoid the impression that Habermas still holds on to problematic
secularist stadial assumptions that relegate religion to a stage of development superseded by postmetaphysical philosophical or scientific thinking. How one is to interpret the insistence that religious discourse to be taken seriously in the public sphere must first be translated to supposedly universal secular rational discourse, as if secular discourses by definition were rational and universal. Habermas seems to want to maintain, at least implicitly, the association of the secular with the rational and the religious with the pre-rational.

Here Bellah's warning that in human cultural evolution no stage is ever forgotten, much less superseded by the next stage, should indeed inform our deliberations. We humans cannot live without rituals and we cannot live without myths. Only then can Arnason's reflection on Patocka, a reflection that Habermas seems to want to make his own in his most recent work, be taken seriously, namely, that "the idea of a self-limiting secularization, reinstated as a regulative principle of modernity, would reopen and perpetuate the mutual interrogation of philosophy, science and religion." 25

REASON must find its own natural being. This motif is not alien to the great religions but it needs "secularization" today not to contribute, isolated and on a higher plane, to the same impoverishment of the world it seeks to exercise.

T. Adorno, Stichworte, Kritische Modelle, 21

Introduction

Among the many subjects Jürgen Habermas has studied in his long intellectual career, he has turned to religion in his recent work. He had written previously on the relations of philosophy and theology and maintained conversations with other thinkers interested in these matters, but what he is proposing today, in the light of a perceived resurgence of religion worldwide, is a more ambitious project of a conceptual reconstruction of the history of philosophy that challenges its received interpretation. He has called the new visibility of religion in public affairs "a challenge for a secular self-interpretaion of modernity." Departing from his earlier pronouncements on these questions, Habermas now seems convinced that at this later stage of global modernization religions may provide some resources to counter the lack of solidarity and other deficiencies of a consumer and success-oriented society.

This reading of the present situation questions not only the idea of a diachronic causal link between modernization and secularization, but also introduces the idea of different paths to modernity, or of a world-wide synchronic (or "culturalist") characterization of modernization that