DIALOGUE

Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor

CRAIG CALHOUN: Thank you both, Jürgen and Chuck, for really interesting, challenging discussions. They are similar and connected enough that I think we are discussing a common terrain, and there are enough differences that it ought to be possible to continue discussing it in fruitful ways.

I want to give Jürgen a chance to respond first, having just heard Charles. Let me pose a particular question, to start this.

Part of the burden of Charles's talk was to suggest that religion should not be considered a special case, either with regard to political discourse or with regard to reason and argumentation in general, but, rather, that religion is simply one instance of the more general challenge of diversity, including diversity in comprehensive views of the good, in Rawls's language. Therefore, analogous to the difference between utilitarians and Kantians, we may have the possibly declining difference between Episcopalians and Catholics these days.

Does this make sense to you? Would you buy this argument? If not, does it give you a chance to elaborate your position a little, to clarify why?

JÜRGEN HABERMAS: I think I understand the motivation, but I do not accept the reason that Chuck is here proposing to level a distinction which still seems to me very relevant in our context.

As to the motivation, I would immediately agree that it makes no sense to oppose one sort of reason, secular, against religious reasons on the assumption that religious reasons are coming out of a worldview which is inherently irrational. Reason is working in religious traditions, as well as in any other cultural enterprise, including science. So there is no difference on that broad cultural level of reasoning. At a general cognitive level, there is only one and the same human reason.

However, if it comes to lumping together Kantianism and utilitarianism, Hegelianism and so on with religious doctrines, then I would say there are differences in kind between reasons. One way to put it is that "secular" reasons can be expressed in a "public," or generally shared, language. This is the conventional sense that Chuck is trying to circumvent by introducing the term *official* language.

Anyhow, secular reasons in this sense belong to a context of assumptions—in this case to a philosophical approach, which is distinguished from any kind of religious tradition by the fact that it doesn't require membership in a community of believers. By using any kind of religious reasons, you are implicitly appealing to membership in a corresponding religious community. Only if one is a member and can speak in the first person from within a particular religious tradition does one share a specific kind of experience on which religious convictions and reasons depend.

To put it bluntly, the most important experience—and I'm not ranking it above or below anything else, please—arises from participation in cultic practices, in the actual performance of worshipping in which no Kantian or utilitarian has to participate in order to make a good Kantian or utilitarian argument. So it's a kind of experience that is blocked, so to say, or not taken into account, is abstracted from, once you move in the secular space of giving and taking reasons.

Secular reasons lack links to socialization in a community of one of the four or five great world religions which can be traced back to the historic person of a founder or, more generally, to historical origins. These are traditions that have been continued through the persistent interpretation of a specific doctrine. It depends on such a socialization whether one understands, for example, what it means to appeal to revealed truths. It is difficult to explain what "revelation" means without such a background. If you compare a discussion between Kantians and utilitarians with interreligious debates you face another important difference. Philosophical doctrines are not internally connected with a specific path to salvation. To follow a path to salvation means to follow, in the course of your life, an exemplary figure who draws his authority from ancient sources or testimonies.

A path to salvation is different from any kind of profane ethical life project that an individual person can attribute to herself.

Thus the evidence for religious reasons does not only depend on cognitive beliefs and their semantic nexus with other beliefs, but on existential beliefs that are rooted in the social dimension of membership, socialization, and prescribed practices.

CHARLES TAYLOR: A lot of very interesting points made there. I don't agree with all of them—I don't agree, particularly, about the distinction between ethics and religion. Thomas Aquinas talks about the three theological virtues, which give a different idea of what the good life is.

But anyway, let's leave that aside, because I think the really, really key issue is, what has all that got to do with discourse? If I say something like, "I'm for the rights of human beings because humans were made in the image of God"—that's something that comes out of Genesis—it's not entirely clear right off whether I'm a practicing Jew, a Catholic, a Protestant, or just somebody who thinks that this is a very meaningful thought that came out of Genesis.

I don't see how you can track this in different kinds of discourse—unless we are talking about other kinds of dialogue,

where I'm saying to you, "Well, I had this great experience, a vision of the Virgin or St. Therese" and so on. Of course, at that point, that discourse is directly related to this kind of experience. Certain kinds of discourse, if I were trying to describe to you a religious experience, would be directly related to that experience.

But the kind of discourse we're sharing—Martin Luther King had a certain discourse about the U.S. Constitution and its entailments which weren't being followed through. Then he had a very powerful Christian discourse, referring to Exodus, referring to liberation. Nobody had any trouble understanding this. They didn't have to imagine or be able to understand or conceive the deeper experiences that he might have had—the experience in the kitchen, for example, when he decided he had to go on.

How can you discriminate discourses on the basis of the deep psychological background?

I could make another story about the psychological background that Kantians have, and so on, and why they get excited by certain things which don't excite me. But what has that got to do with the discourse out there? Can people not understand it? Why discriminate on those grounds?

HABERMAS: The difference is that religious influences belong to a kind of family of discourse in which you do not just move within a worldview, or within a cognitive interpretation of a domain of human life, but you are speaking out, as I said, from an experience that is tied up with your membership in a community. Talk about being created in God's image is, in our tradition, easily translatable into secular propositions that others derive from the Kantian concept of autonomy or from a certain interpretation of being equipped with human rights.

But translating from one language into the other one does not mean to level the difference between types of reasons. Let me ask you whether I'm right in assuming that behind your strategy of

deflating that difference there is a defensive reaction. Do you suspect in the claim to subordinate religious reasons to public reasons in the political decision-making process the attitude of people who find that religious discourse is just not up-to-date, that it's something of the past?

This is not my attitude. What we are doing here, the two of us this afternoon, is that we both are moving in the same space of philosophical and historical or sociological reasoning. Our discourse needs no translation. However, religious speech in the political public sphere needs translation if its content should enter and affect the justification and formulation of binding political decisions that are enforceable by law. In parliaments, courts, or administrative bodies any reference to Genesis 1 should be explained, I think, in secular terms.

TAYLOR: The difference is that I'm saying you can't have translations for those kinds of references because they are the references that really touch on certain people's spiritual lives and not others'. But the same thing goes for the reference to Marx and the reference to Kant. So we are trying to look at not why we have to exclude those references for the purposes of fairness and universality but why these references had to be treated specially—and I still don't understand about the special treatment—because they belong to some kind of different domain.

I certainly agree that there are big, big differences between the reasoning of a deeply religious person about ethics and the reasoning of one who is not. There are certain conceptions of possible human transformation which are believed in by one and not by the other. That's for sure the case.

But there are analogues to this. I can have enough sympathy for the Kantian position, for instance, that I can understand the rhetoric of Kant about "the starry sky above and the moral law within" and *"Achtung für das Gesetz,"* and so on. I can understand that. There's a certain experience behind that. I could imag-

ine somebody saying, "I don't understand what you're talking about. Awe and respect for the law? Are you crazy?" Some people just don't get it.

HABERMAS: I do want to save also the authentic character of religious speech in the public sphere, because I'm convinced that there might well be buried moral intuitions on the part of a secular public that can be uncovered by a moving religious speech. Listening to Martin Luther King, it does make no difference whether you are secular or not. You understand what he means.

This is not a matter on which we differ. Our difference is that, mentioned at least in the essay, there is a call for a "deeper grounding" of constitutional essentials, deeper than that in the secular terms of popular sovereignty and human rights or in "reason alone." This is our difference. There, I think, I cannot follow you because the neutral character of the "official language" you demand for formal political procedures, too, is based on a previous background consensus among citizens, however abstract and vague it may be. Without the presumption of such a consensus on constitutional essentials, citizens of a pluralist society couldn't go to the courts and appeal to specific rights or make arguments by reference to constitutional clauses in the expectation of getting a fair decision.

How can we settle this background consensus in the first place, if not within a space of neutral reasons—and "neutral" now in a peculiar sense. The reasons must be "secular" in a non-Christian sense of "secularization." Let me explain the adjective *non-Christian* in this context. In your book *A Secular Age* you have convincingly described what "secularization" once has meant from within the church. Secularization has had the meaning of tearing down the walls of the monasteries and spreading the radical commands of the Lord across the world without compromise.

But the term *secular* took on a different meaning at the very moment when subjects had to reach a political background

consensus across the boundaries of the Christian community—a background consensus in terms of which you can today appeal to a French or German court in order to solve headscarf cases. Those cases must be decided according to procedures and principles that are acceptable for Muslims and their Christian, Jewish, or secular fellow citizens alike. Since the religious legitimation of Christian kings has been substituted with a liberal one, the constitution now provides the source for reasons that are supposed to be shared not only by different religious communities but also by believers and nonbelievers alike. The constitution can provide this common platform only if it in turn can be justified in the light of such reasons that are "secular" in the modern sense. The term *secularization* no longer applies to the universalization of radical beliefs and practices across the Christian world, reaching out from the monastic centers to the profane spheres of everyday social life. Secular reasons do not expand the perspective of one's own community, but push for mutual perspective taking so that different communities can develop a more inclusive perspective by transcending their own universe of discourse. I would like to stick to this usage of the term.

CALHOUN: Let me push back one last time. Then we're going to be almost out of time here on this.

To accent the commonalities here, one of them seems to be that this is all about the capacity for sharing, in some sense, and, from each of you, in a setting where no one has recourse to extradiscursive power. So this is ruling out that set of issues which would involve one set of issues about religion.

It also sounds like, in fact, when Jürgen speaks of religious utterances in the public sphere, that it's not all religious utterances that are at stake and it's not religious motivations, but it's specifically those justifications which are not amenable to being shared because they are based on either cultic experiences, from which many are excluded, or they are based on references to inherently nondiscursive authority, to something outside.

Am I so far fairly characterizing it? So it's not all religious speech. In fact, religious sources for ethics and many other things come in.

But there are certain specific things, and they are problematic precisely if they produce an incapacity to share justifications.

I turn to Charles and ask, conversely, do you think that there is a similar incapacity to share and to discursively resolve the other kinds of differences that you would say are part of the same set with religious differences—cultural differences, ethnic differences, philosophical differences? The claim is going to be that there is the same sort of incapacity, in general, to find fully discursive resolutions or justifications.

TAYLOR: Yes. Think of the history of liberalism. There were attempts by very hard-bitten utilitarians to grab the language in the 1830s. This was what it was going to be all about. Also the people who weren't necessarily religious thought, "This is a takeover. We don't think in those ways."

If you want an emphasis on negotiation, where we put together our charter of rights from different people, it can't be in Benthamite language, it can't be simply in Kantian language, it can't be in Christian language.

What Jürgen calls "secular" I'll call "neutral." That's how I see it. I see it as absolutely indispensable.

CALHOUN: But that doesn't seem to be the heart of the difference. It seems to me that the stronger difference is that, in effect, you are saying that it is impossible to abstract from or prescind from the differences among deep commitments, comprehensive worldviews, etcetera, whether they are grounded religiously or otherwise. So the fundamental discursive issue is that you can't abstract—enough to carry on the discourse and settle things discursively—from any of these kinds of deep constitutive commitments. So religion is not a special case.

I think, to confirm, Jürgen is saying that there are certain specific features that he sees in religious discourse which are more

completely excluded from discursive resolution, from sharing in the discursive arena. So, while there might be difficulties getting Kantians and Heideggerians to talk to each other or there might be difficulties getting people of different nationalities to talk to each other, in principle there could be a discursive resolution to the variety of problems that emerge there, but distinctively not for religious problems.

Is that right, Jürgen, or is that going too far?

HABERMAS: I'm, in the first place, maintaining that there are differences in kind between religious and secular reasons. Second, I'm maintaining that religion makes, in view of the historical transition to liberal constitutions, a difference because of the former fusion of religion with politics that had to be in view of the dissolved challenge of religious pluralism. This is the trivial part.

If it comes to a constitution-making discourse or to controversies about the interpretation of special clauses within the frame of an established constitution, I do not think that there are insurmountable obstacles. Religious members of a liberal community would know in advance that certain arguments do not count for those other believing or nonbelieving fellow citizens with whom they are trying to reach an agreement. So they have to be taken from the agenda. This is how I think about developing justice questions and differentiating them from existential, ethical, and religious ones.

CALHOUN: On that level, you're not going to be in strong disagreement, right?

TAYLOR: No, no.

CALHOUN: The disagreement is at another level.

TAYLOR: I just want to tell you one more thing. When we say "religion," we mustn't think of just Christianity. There are Buddhists, there are Hindus. A lot of the things you said don't apply to the other cases at all. That really should give us pause before we make general remarks about—

CALHOUN: Right. This is being argued from within the Western experience. There would need to be a bunch of different discussions within other historical trajectories.

TAYLOR: And they're all here now.

CALHOUN: Indeed they are. And they are us.