

# Habermas and the Meaning of the Post-Secular Society: Complementary Learning Processes

Michael R. Welton, Department of Educational Studies, Athabasca University, Athabasca, Canada

---

## ABSTRACT

*This essay argues that if social justice is to prevail in our world, we must understand the post-secular nature of our globalized society as a prerequisite for moving beyond “might is right” to national and international relations that heed all voices towards evidence-based interaction. The authors post-secular world and post-metaphysical world-orientation requires of us complementary learning processes. This exploration engages Habermas’ thinking post-secularity as the framework for the pedagogical project that replaces the speechlessness of violence with the building of the conversable world.*

*Keywords:* Complementary Learning Process, Fundamentalism, Modernization, Neo-Liberal, Post-Secularism, Postmetaphysical, Public Sphere

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE SHREDDING OF THE CONVERSABLE WORLD

In his impassioned essay, “Faith and knowledge,” Jurgen Habermas (2005) contrasts the speechlessness of violence with communicative action. “Faced with a globalization imposing itself via deregulated markets, many of us hoped for a return of the political in a different form—not in the original Hobbesian form of the globalized security state, that is, in its dimensions of political activity, secret police, and the military, but as a world-wide civilizing force. What we are left with, for the moment, is little more than the bleak hope for a cunning of

reason—and for some self-reflection. The rift of speechlessness strikes home, too. Only if we realize what secularization means in our post-secular societies can we be far-sighted in our response to the risks involved in a secularization miscarrying in other parts of the world” (p. 328). The “fatally speechless clash of worlds” is already present malevolently in the world. The negation of speech or communicative action shreds the world into little tattered pieces. But mumbled speech or unwillingness to try very hard to be conversable is also part of the problem we face in our world.

Our times are excessively and extraordinarily uneasy. Thoughtful pundits smell World War III in the acrid air: their mood is dark,

DOI: 10.4018/ijavet.2014100104

sarcastic and tinged with nihilism. The Obama regime appears to be willing to face off with Russia, risk war in the European theater through precipitating the Ukrainian crisis (Mearsheimer, 2014), pressing NATO troops to the Russian border and engineering insane forms of sanction on selling goods to Russia. Yet again in the dark summer of 2014, Israel has massacred approximately 2,500 citizens, including many women and children, and smashed up the infrastructure of schools, businesses and hospitals. The Gaza is an open-air prison of no escape. We have watched planes, tanks and warships bomb and mutilate territory occupied by the Israeli state itself, leading us to imagine that this would be similar to the Canadian state bombing First Nations reserves. And in September, 2014, the US appears willing to violate international law, national sovereignty and borders to make war against ISIS in Syria. The US is in quite the predicament: they want to overthrow both the Assad regime in Syria and crush ISIS fighters there and in Iraq. Enormous international suspicion clouds US intentions in the Middle East. During his visit to Korea in August, 2014, Pope Francis said: "Today we are in a world at war everywhere. A man said to me, 'Father, we are in World War III, but spread out in small pockets everywhere. He was right,' Francis said at the time (Russia Today, September 13, 2014). The rift of speechlessness courses through these situations. Who can sleep well at night?

Indeed, the entire Habermasian project of shared citizenship and communicative action as legitimate ground for evolving learning processes appear to be in jeopardy. The ideology of "war on terror" renders us mute before power and money. Terrorism is a communicative pathology that leads us to "become alienated from each other through systematically distorted communication" and "not recognize each other as participating members of a community" (Habermas, as cited, Borradori [2003], p. 35). In this essay I want to argue that this recognition of each other—the precondition for parties to learn something new—requires that we grasp the post-secular nature of our globalized society. This focus on naming our world as post-secular

may help clear the pathway for breaking the rift of speechlessness and beginning the hazardous pedagogical journey of "mutual perspective-taking" (ibid., p. 37). Hazardous, because it takes place in a geo-political world of degrading discrimination, violence, social inequality, pauperization and marginalization. For readers of IJAVET, I must point out that I am not delving into the details and pedagogical procedures of complementary learning processes. I want to establish only that these processes are required of our global civilization once we understand we live in a post-secular world in the first place.

## 2. WHAT IS MEANT BY THE POST-SECULAR WORLD?

Our attention turns to Habermas' seminal essay, "What is meant by a 'post-secular society'?" A discussion on Islam in Europe in Europe: the faltering project (2009). This text is based on a lecture delivered on March 15, 2007 at the Nexus Institute of the University of Tilburg in the Netherlands. Habermas acknowledges that the term "post-secular" is a controversial one. "A 'post-secular' society must at some point have been a 'secular' condition" (p. 59). Strictly speaking, the term is "only applicable to the affluent societies of Europe or to countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, where people's religious ties have steadily loosened, and quite dramatically so since the end of the Second World War. In these regions, the awareness of belonging to a secularized society had become more or less universal" (ibid). Steve Bruce (2006) points out that: "Even in the U.S., routinely held up as the great exception, churchgoing is now about 20 percent, down from about 50 percent in 1950.... Most churches have abandoned their supernatural focus, and the therapeutic benefits of faith (once firmly second place to placating God and ensuring salvation) are now advertised as the main point" (p. 36). For me, the claim of American religious exceptionalism is shadowed by a deepening and troubled sense that American religion is unable to temper the increasingly militarized

and aggressive nature of a society whose foreign actions and abandonment of commitment to the flourishing of all within its society is radically disconnected from the spirit of Jesus. In fact, some powerful US Christian formations encourage violent action against the perceived enemy (be they Palestinian, Russian or Arab). War drums are beating; and too many Canadian and American Christians are either in the parade or have relinquished prophetic functions.

Surveying the global landscape, Habermas admits that the “changes and the conflicts flaring up all around in connection with religious issues inspire doubts as to whether the relevance of religion has actually waned. Ever fewer sociologists support the long unchallenged hypothesis that there is close connection between social modernization and the secularization of the population” (p. 60). Habermas argues that this conventional critical axiom is based on three considerations that remain plausible, but are in need of an important caveat. First, scientific and technological progress “promotes an *anthropocentric understanding* of the ‘disenchanted’ world, explained in causal terms; and a scientifically enlightened mind cannot be easily reconciled with theocentric and metaphysical worldviews” (ibid.). This is a classic—and powerful—affirmation of the enlightenment sensibility. It cannot be set aside. Second, the “functional *differentiation of social subsystems*, the churches and other religious organizations lose their control over law, politics, public welfare, culture, education, and science; they confine themselves to their proper function of administering the means of salvation, they make the exercise of religion into a predominately private matter, and they suffer a general loss in public influence and relevance” (p. 60). In my country Canada this is resolutely and undeniably the case (with the exception of significant right-wing Christian Zionist influence on foreign policy pertaining to Israel [Engler, 2011; Dart, 2012]). Thirdly, Habermas articulates the well-trodden idea that the movement from agrarian to industrial to post-industrial societies both eases existential insecurity and provisions people with higher

levels of welfare. This means that “individuals have less need of a practice that promises to cope with uncontrolled contingencies through faith in a ‘higher’ or cosmic power” (ibid.). There is a correlation, in contrast, between profound economic, political and cultural instability and religious resurgence.

Habermas observes that three overlapping phenomena converge to create the impression of a world-wide resurgence of religion: (a) missionary expansion of world religions; (b) their fundamentalist radicalization; and (c) the political instrumentalization of their inherent potential for violence (p. 61). Our extreme neo-liberal global disorder and widening gaps between the very rich and the rest of us (plus rampant moral corruption and prevarication by political leaders [Lewis, 2014]) has created a nesting ground for extremism and violence within established religious organizations as they try to anchor confession on bedrock in an age of fluidity, chaos and humiliation. This religiously inflected violence includes Hinduism and Buddhism—one takes note of their regional spread in Africa and in the East and South-east Asian countries.

“Decentralized networks” are the chosen pedagogical form for evangelism, and charismatic leaders offer up an ecstatic form of religious experience. Habermas observes tellingly that the “fastest growing religious movements, such as the Pentecostals and the radical Muslims, can be most readily described as ‘fundamentalist.’ They combat the modern world or they withdraw from it. Their forms of worship combine spiritualism and adventism with rigid moral conceptions and literal adherence to holy scripture” (p. 62). But it is the “potential for violence inherent in religion” (ibid.) that particularly troubles Habermas (and, one hopes, many throughout the world). “Often smouldering conflicts with profane origins first become ignited when they are coded in religious terms. This holds for the ‘desecularization’ of the Middle East conflict as much as for the politics of Hindu nationalism and the enduring conflict between India and Pakistan, or for the mobilization of the religious right in the US

before and after the invasion of Iraq” (ibid.). Religious coding is a salient theme in this story. In fact, Uri Avnery (2014), long-time Jewish critic of the state of Israel’s policies and war crimes, observes that present conflicts in the Middle East are far more religiously coded than they were in earlier decades. He is shocked to discover that one of Israel’s leading commanders called for a holy fight to fulfil God’s will.

Habermas asserts strongly that “rash inferences” about de-secularization reflect the imprecision of the usage of the concepts “secularization” and “modernization.” It is rash, indeed, to discard the idea of the “differentiation of functional social systems” because “churches and religious communities” have “increasingly confined themselves to their core functions of pastoral care and had to renounce their wide-ranging competencies in other social domains. At the same time, the practice of faith has also assumed more personal or subjective forms. A correlation exists between the functional specification of the religious system and the individualization of religious practice” (p. 63; cf. Bruce, 2002, 2006; Airhart, 2014). Now for the caveat: Habermas thinks that one can accept Casanova’s (1994, 2010, 2011) modification of the strong secularization thesis—religion is still relevant and influential—while accepting the thesis’ core elements. “The revised reading of the secularization hypothesis relates less,” Habermas imagines, “to its substance and more to the predictions concerning the future role of ‘religion’” (ibid.). Thus, the “new description of modern societies as ‘post-secular’ refers to a *change in consciousness*” (ibid.) which Habermas attributes to three phenomena. First, Habermas thinks that the mass media has made many Europeans aware that their own secular mentality is not universal; it is relative to their own historical experience and trajectory. This unsettling shakes confidence that “religion is *destined to disappear* and inoculates the secular understanding of the world against triumphalism. The awareness of living in a secular society is no longer bound up with the *certainty* that cultural and social modernization can advance only at the cost of the public influ-

ence and personal relevance of religion” (pp. 63-64). Habermas considers this loosening of certainty a good thing; ironically, however, the fundamentalist mindset and sensibility is not at all uncertain. Second, Habermas observes that religious organizations are, in fact, contributing to the public sphere—influencing the formation of public opinion. “Our pluralist societies provide a responsive sounding board for such interventions because they are increasingly split over value dispute over the legalization of abortion or over voluntary euthanasia, over bioethical issues in reproductive medicine or over questions of animal protection and climate change—in these and similar cases the key premises are so opaque that it is by no means settled from the outset which party can draw on the more convincing moral intuitions” (p. 64). Third, Habermas makes the brilliant observation that immigration from Islamic countries into Europe introduces “more strident dissonances between different *religions*” and this combines “with the challenge of a *pluralism of ways of life* which is typical of immigrant societies” (p. 65). This is a primary theme in Habermas’ writings: Europe faces the collective learning challenge of moving to becoming “post-colonial immigrant societies” wherein the “issue of the tolerant coexistence of different religious communities is exacerbated by the difficult problem of integrating immigrant cultures into the host society” coping with the “pressures of globalized labor markets” and “growing social inequality” (ibid.).

### 3. HOW SHOULD WE UNDERSTAND OURSELVES AS INHABITANTS OF POST-SECULAR SOCIETIES?

Once Habermas has made the case that even a driving modernization does not lead inevitably to the disappearance of religion, we can ask the normative question of how we should understand ourselves as inhabitants of post-secular societies. That is, “what *must* we expect from one another if we want to ensure that social relations in firmly entrenched nation-states

remain civil in spite of the growth of cultural and religious pluralism?" (ibid.). Habermas says that all European societies are faced with this question. Sarkozy sends troops into the Parisian banlieues peopled with Algeria Muslim youths. The Archbishop of Canterbury recommends that the British parliament adopt some parts of sharia family law for local Muslims. A fire breaks out in a German tenement block where Turks lived, prompting dismay by the Turkish government. The former separatist leader of the government of Quebec, Pauline Marois, attempts to put a "Charter of Values" into law, which would forbid the wearing of religious symbols in public places. Rightly, Habermas insists that these sorts of debates and flare-ups (selected randomly from lots of examples) "have assumed a sharper tone since the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In the Netherlands, the murder of Theo van Gogh on 2 November 2004 kindled a passionate public discussion, not only concerning the victim but also concerning Mohammed Bouyeri, the assassin, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the actual target of the hatred" (p. 66). Hirsi Ali had dared to critique aspects of Islamic practice, particularly pertaining to women. This event gestures to the fatwa against Rushdie's *The satanic verses* in 1989 that literally exploded into western consciousness.

We are reminded that secularizing state power was the learning outcome of bitter confessional religious wars in the early European modern period of the seventeenth century. The separation of church and state was achieved; it assumed a different form in national legal systems. "To the extent that the government assumed a secular character, the religious minorities, which were at first given the freedom to practice their own religion in private, then the right of religious expression, and finally equal rights to exercise their religion in public" (ibid.). Committed to thorough understanding of themes and issues, Habermas provides a historical sketch of this "protracted process" (p. 67). What are the preconditions for this valuable achievement? Asking this question is crucial for social learning theory. In the post-reformation era, the state faced the learning

challenge of "pacifying a society split along confessional lines-..." (p. 67). This required that the state "disarm the quarrelling parties, invent arrangements to ensure amicable social relations between the hostile confessions, and monitor their precarious coexistence" (ibid.). But the problem then arises that the subcultures easily settle into their own niches—thus remaining "estranged from one another" (ibid.).

Habermas argues strongly that toleration is not just about laws protecting religious minorities: "it must be practiced in everyday life" (p. 69). This means that believers and members of other religions and non-believers "must concede each other's right to observe convictions, practices, and ways of life which they themselves reject. This concession must be supported through a shared basis of mutual recognition which makes it possible to overcome repugnant dissonances" (ibid.). Thus, awareness of belonging to an inclusive community of citizens with equal rights in which is accountable to everybody else for her political utterances and actions" (ibid.) is the basis for recognition and mutual learning processes (rather than some quality or evident achievement). "Without the inclusion of minorities in civil society," Habermas claims, "two complementary processes will not be able to develop hand in hand—namely the opening of the political community to a difference-sensitive inclusion of foreign minority cultures on the one hand, and the liberalization of these subcultures to a point where they encourage their individual members to exercise their equal rights to participate in the political life of the larger community on the other" (p. 70). Habermas rejects the radical reading of multiculturalism that builds a kind of apartheid wall between different worldviews, discourses or conceptual schemes and a relativistic reading that denies the universalist claims of the above principles. However, Habermas warns that "if the universalistic thrust of these principles is not even taken seriously, then there is no vantage point from which the illegitimate entanglement of the interpretation of the constitution with the prejudices of the majority culture can be uncovered" (p. 72).

#### 4. THE CALL FOR COMPLEMENTARY LEARNING PROCESSES

Habermas argues that the cultural preconditions for respectful engagement are very shaky in our present world. Religious and secular mentalities must somehow find a way to engage in complementary learning processes. This is a provocative (and some might say, idealistic) position. Habermas thinks that even if one is not convinced of the appropriateness of describing western European societies as post-secular, “one can be convinced, for philosophical reasons, that religious communities owe their enduring influence exclusively to the obstinate, but sociologically explicable, survival of pre-modern modes of thought. Either way, the substance of faith is scientifically discredited from the standpoint of secularism. The status of religious traditions as unworthy of serious scientific consideration provokes secularism into a polemical attitude towards religious individuals and traditions which still lay claim to a significant public role” (p. 74). Habermas makes the important distinction between “secular”—a neutral term regarding agnosticism towards religious validity claims—and “secularist”, which these days “often appeals to a ‘hard’, that is, scientifically grounded, version of naturalism” (p. 74). The learning challenge for religious citizens and communities, therefore, is to “appropriate the secular legitimation of constitutional principles under the premises of their own faith” (p. 75). If they do so, political theology that would impose a specific religious ideology on everyone has to be tossed out the window. Thinking boldly, Habermas thinks that many Muslims have not undergone the as yet “painful learning process” of embracing liberalism and democracy. “Certainly, the realization is also dawning in the Islamic world that today a historical-hermeneutic approach to the teaching of the Qur’an is necessary” (ibid.). This particular controversial theme lies just beneath the surface of discussions of the troubles of Islam; it is not often articulated too openly

(see, Hirsi Ali, 2007; Mansur, 2009; Azlan, 2010; El Fadl, 2005). Risking the label of Eurocentrism, Habermas nonetheless appeals to the post-Reformation Christian churches as model. They were able to learn beyond catastrophe and shift to a more reflexive form of consciousness; however, this “change of consciousness” cannot be prescribed or manipulated politically. We scan the geo-political and religious landscape and long for the impossible. Whether the great world religions can keep temptation to violence in check and begin deep reflection towards living in a pluralistic world is not clear at this dangerous historic moment. Recent developments in Egypt and the extremist agenda of ISIS are not encouraging.

In the end, Habermas reminds us that it is not only “religious traditionalism that has to undergo a learning process...” (ibid.). A “*complementary* learning process is required on the secular side—assuming that we do not confuse the neutrality of the secular state towards competing religious worldviews with the banishing of all religious contributions from the political public sphere” (p. 76). In this essay, Habermas calls for the “liberal practice” of placing a filter between the two spheres of church and state, which allows only “translated, hence secular, contributions from among the din of voices within the public sphere to find their way onto formal agendas of the institutions of the state” (p. 76). In his now classic mode of reasoning, Habermas states: “On the one hand, those who are neither willing nor able to separate their moral convictions and vocabulary into profane and religious strands must be permitted to participate in political will formation even if they use religious language. On the other, the democratic state should not over-hastily reduce the polyphonic complexity of the range of public voices, for it cannot be sure whether in doing so it would not cut society off from scarce resources for generating meanings and shaping identities. Especially regarding vulnerable domains of social life, religious traditions have the power to provide convincing articulations of moral sensitivities and solidaristic intuitions” (p. 77).

One example: Christian associations against torture draw upon their religious repertoire of identification with Christ as victim. Christian prayer and ritual can appropriate the semantic and spiritual potential to be awakened to suffering in the world (Trigeaud, 2012). If all is to proceed somewhat amicably, each side must accept an interpretation of the relation between faith and knowledge from its own perspective, which enables them to live together in a self-reflective manner. Secularists can be nudged to turn their own eyes to the most vulnerable; they do not have to agree that any *ex-machina* supernatural power exists to assist us in doing it.

## 5. EDUARDO MENDIETA ASKS HABERMAS QUESTIONS ABOUT THE POST-SECULAR SOCIETY

Eduardo Mendieta's interview with Habermas in 2010—"A postsecular world society? On the philosophical significance of postsecular consciousness and the multicultural world society"—provides us with opportunity to understand his response to some of the questions his article (and lectures at the time) evoked. It also provides us with an opportunity to see the workings of Habermas' social-historical learning theory. Mendieta begins this illuminating interview by enticing Habermas to comment on the idea that the "end of religion" accompanies the modernization process. Acknowledging that although all societies within the world are modern, Habermas claims that we can speak of "multiple modernities" because the "great world religions have had a great culture-forming power over the centuries, and they have not yet entirely lost this power" (p. 2). The West cannot be the world's pedagogue any longer (with everything to teach and nothing to learn). "The West is one participant among others, and all participants must be willing to be enlightened by others about their respective blind spots. If it were to learn one lesson from the financial crisis, it is that it is high time for the multicultural world society to develop a political constitu-

tion" (ibid.). Both "multiple modernities" and different kinds of secularity characterize our various nations.

Habermas informs Mendieta that the "secularization of state power is the hard core of the progress of secularization" (ibid.). This great liberal achievement ought not to get lost in current religious and cultural acrimony and disputes. We "cannot *intentionally* go back to a point prior to the results of learning processes. This explains the progress in technology and science, as well as the progress in morality and law—that is, the de-centering of our ego-or group-centred perspectives, when the point is to non-violently end conflicts of action. These social-cognitive kinds of progress already refer to the further dimension of the increase in reflection, that is, the ability to step back behind one. This is what Max Weber meant when he spoke of 'disenchantment'" (p. 3). One reason Habermas accentuates this theme has much to do, I think, with the overly-enthusiastic embrace of the de-secularization thesis evident particularly in some theological writings. Look! Religion is back on the scene! Secular humanism is in retreat! Hurray!

But Habermas wants to dampen this ardor; and trace the steps of self-reflection so hard fought for and won in the seventeenth century with the appearance of rational morality and autonomous art. Rational morality and the internalized religious and artistic forms of expression of pietism and romanticism appear in the eighteenth century. And, finally, in the nineteenth century, a developmentalist approach to historical and natural unfolding takes hold of the western imagination. "These are cognitive pushes that have widespread effects—and which do not permit themselves to be easily forgotten" (ibid.). Thus, when rational reflection interacts with traditional, popular piety, believers are faced with two choices: one is to turn away from the world (the "things of earth grow strangely dim" says the old gospel hymn) or aggressively toward it ("Onward Christian soldiers/Marching as to war" wrote Luther, no pansy when facing the Peasant's uprising); the

other opens on to the terrain of relating to other religions and accepting the fallible insights of science and human rights.

Perhaps the most interesting (and innovative) idea coursing through Habermas' thinking on religion is the linkage between post-metaphysical thinking and stepping into a post-secular world society. Mendieta poses this question to Habermas. "You talk about a 'post-secular world society as a sociological condition, as a socio-cultural fact. In what sense, then, is post-secular reason catalyzed by social developments and in what sense is it the result of the inner dynamics of a post-metaphysical thinking?" (p. 4). That's a good question: Habermas does not want to equate post-metaphysical thought with the post-secular social condition. The latter is a sociological condition; and the former the result of a cognitive learning trajectory. Habermas uses the expression post-secular to "describe modern societies that have to reckon with the continuing relevance of the different religious traditions, even if the societies themselves are largely secularized. Insofar as I describe as 'postsecular', not society itself, but a corresponding change of consciousness in it, the predicate can also be used to refer to an altered self-understanding of the largely secularized societies of Western Europe, Canada, or Australia" (p. 5). Attempting to clarify some misunderstanding, Habermas points out that the sociological predicate, post-secular, describes "from the observer's perspective, whereas we use the genealogical perspective from the perspective of one who shares in the goal of self-understanding" (ibid.).

Habermas observes that secular modernity has emerged out of a "long process of translating essential, religious contents into the language of philosophy": he counsels us to simply consider concepts like "person and individuality, freedom and justice, solidarity and community, emancipation, history, and crisis" (p. 6). This grand and compelling idea of the appropriation of semantic contents of whose core remains scientifically inaccessible (the post-Kantian re-

ality) is manifest in the magnificent works of the young Bloch, Benjamin, Levinas and Derrida. This new openness pushes in two directions: 1) it "turns against a secularist self-understanding of philosophy that aspires to merge with science, or to emerge into one"; and 2) it does not "blur the difference that exists between faith and knowledge in the mode of taking-to-be-true. Even if thinking about the postsecular situation should result in altered attitude toward religion, this revisionism may not change the fact that postmetaphysical thinking that insists on distinguishing faith and knowledge as two essentially different modes of taking-to-be-true" (p. 7). It makes sense that Habermas—given his holding two potentially contradictory themes in one hand (our cognitive "condition of belief" is postmetaphysical; our "sociological condition" is post-secular)—would probe deeply into just what it is that distinguishes religion from other worldviews. He finds the secret in the cultic activities of the congregation. "In modernity," Habermas proposes, "they are the only configuration of spirit (*Gestalt des Geistes*) that still has access to the world of experience of ritual in the strict sense" (p. 8). He doesn't think many philosophers take this archaic element seriously. But they should: ritual as a "source of societal solidarity for which the enlightened morality of equal respect for all does not provide neither a real, motivational equivalent— nor do Aristotelian virtue ethics and the ethics of the good. This of course in no way precludes the possibility that this source, protected in the meantime by religious communities, and often used toward questionable ends, will run dry one day" (ibid.). He may be right, but this willingness of the secular mind to turn the ear towards the other would change "if it learned to understand the contemporary constellation of postmetaphysical thinking, science, and religion as the result of a learning process in which 'faith' and 'knowledge' (at least viewed from the perspective of history in the West) have engaged one another" (p. 9). This is the crucial change in conscious-

ness required by secular citizens if they are to engage in mutual learning processes. For Habermas, “There is a certain self-deception in the secularist self-understanding of a ‘scientific’ philosophy that sees itself exclusively as the heir of Greek philosophy and as a natural adversary of religion. This is wrong in several respects” (ibid.). Here Habermas reminds us the religious character of the Platonic origins of philosophy often go unrecognized, and the secularist understanding “suppresses the conceptual traces, mentioned above, left in philosophical thought by the monotheistic traditions by way of the symbiosis of Greek philosophy with Pauline Christianity” (ibid.).

Habermas resists viewing the US as a post-secular society already in place. He does not “believe that secular citizens [in the US] can learn anything from fundamentalist doctrines that cannot cope with the fact of pluralism, with the public authority of the science, and with the egalitarianism of our constitutional principles. On the other hand, you [Mendieta] are right that the political cultures are already so different between our Western societies that the universal principles for the public role of religion—in general, for what we in the West call the ‘separation of church and state’—would have to be specified and institutionalized differently in each local context” (p. 15). Habermas mentions only in passing in the Mendieta interview that we must overcome the “atavistic condition of the social-Darwinist ‘catch as catch can,’ still dominant today in international relations, to the point at which capitalism, globally unleashed and run wild, can be tamed and channeled in socially acceptable ways” (p. 12). In the end, Habermas is “astonished at the absence of every kind of spontaneous protest against the glaring social injustice of trillion-dollar bailouts favoring banks at the expense of future taxes and increasing unemployment, at the expense of the public and private impoverishment of primarily those classes, and domains of life that need government services the most” (p. 19).

## 6. HABERMAS REPLIES TO HIS CRITICS: HOW VIABLE IS THE COMPLEMENTARY LEARNING PROJECT?

The recently published text, Habermas and religion (2013), represents the culmination of a flurry of publishing activity over the past decade on the themes of secularization and the post-secular. It may be that after we engage critically with some of Habermas’ own critics and examine carefully Habermas’ “Reply to my critics” we will have woven a tapestry rich and textured enough to speak confidently about the pedagogics that must follow from our deepened understanding of the Habermasian Project of complementary learning processes. In this section, though, we will focus only on Maria Herrera Lima’s article, “The anxiety of contingency: religion in a secular age” (pp. 49-71). It is of particular interest for us because it presses Habermas to reflect on the viability of the complementary learning process project. Lima (2013) states unequivocally that Habermas is offering us a “revisionist understanding of the present situation as ‘postsecular’ attempts to overcome received antagonisms and sets a new political program for democratic societies” (p. 50). But she has her own anxieties about this demanding project in our torn-apart world.

The notion of complementary learning processes and translation are major theoretical accomplishments of Habermas. But one can easily recognize that these twin concepts would come under fire from critics. Adorno once declared that: “Nothing of theological content will persist without being transformed; every content will have to put itself to the rest of migrating into the realm of the secular, the profane” (as cited, p. 352). Although Adorno is right in this provocative assessment, the continued migration of “semantic substance” from religious traditions towards the “social integration of democratic societies as such” (ibid.) depends on the vitality of the archaic communal sources of worship and the motiva-

tion of secular and religious persons to speak and learn with each other. For one thing, Lima (2013) thinks that Habermas' normative framing of the idea of the post-secular demands "more than the usual tolerance of religion from secular citizens and the acceptance of liberal pluralism from religious believers" and is "unlikely to gain a generalized acceptance from either side of the controversy it intended to remedy in the first place" (p. 50).

Lima also asserts that we cannot assume an "undamaged subjectivity" still existing within religious communities. There certainly is bad and good religion! In fact, in *The philosophical discourse of modernity: twelve lectures* (1990), Habermas raises a similar sort of concern in his reply to Ritter who states that subjectivity has the task of "preserving and keeping vitally present the knowledge of God (in the religious sphere)": "How are traditions for which truly convincing grounds have gone by the boards with the collapse of religious and metaphysical world views, supposed to live on as subjective powers of belief, if only science still has the authority to ground our holding something" (p. 72). The authority of science eats away at the edges and into subjectivity's entrails. Lima (2013) assumes that "it cannot be simply assumed that religions have not suffered profound transformations in their beliefs and actual practices" (p. 62). Indeed, she cites sociological studies that indicate that "there is little observable difference between attitudes and forms of public behavior among the majority of citizens in developed societies, whether declaring a religious affiliation or none at all" (*ibid.*, cf. Airhart, 2014). This critique does have bite: she observes that religious believers have assimilated their everyday experience to the "general *ethos* of the times, dictated by economic imperatives rather than by either religion or philosophy (or 'higher culture')..." (p. 63). This is simply taken-for-granted by many religious communities and ecclesiastic authorities. Here's Lima's punch-line: "As a consequence, religion in general—with no further specification on which groups, or what public issues or policies, and so on—could not be assumed to provide an unmistakable ethical or

moral orientation" (p. 63). Lima is raising hard questions, particularly if thoughtful secularists look to religious communities as sources of critique, solidarity or social integration in our world where the sacred has been stripped from everyday life and religious communities have no consistent or coherent ethical standpoints to offer the secular world.

For Lima, internal secularization travels down the road marked "self-centered ethos." In my estimation and experience, Habermas does think that is possible that a religion could lose "the capacity to organize the encounter with the sacred in ritual forms" and thus survive "only in the fleeting shape of religiosity that would be indistinguishable from other ethical forms of life" (p. 354). A quick trip to Banyen Books on Vancouver's west side, the home of every conceivable New Age form of religiosity, reveals in mind-boggling fashion that the idea (and practice) of the notion of a coherent, Christian (or Buddhist or Islamic) ethical form of life has vanished from our time and imagination. Lima also wonders why secular citizens who have already absorbed semantic potential would take any interest in the religious heritage. Unwilling to give in to a pessimistic reading of religious subjectivity, Habermas observes that the "systemic problems of the emerging multicultural world society, with its intra-national upheavals and international conflicts, have not yet been mastered. For the time being, they outstrip the integration and steering capacities of the nation-states and specially the established forms of cooperation in democratic countries, and thus suggest that an old topic has acquired new substance" (p. 354). In many different places Habermas has argued that in modern societies, only social movements bring the "relevance of new challenges to the attention of broader public" (*ibid.*). He then raises the pertinent question of where the motivation for social movements came from—the "*unacknowledged* motivating role played by a religious socialization that was still taken for granted at the time" (*ibid.*). Lima does not explore this important observation about the

way faith-communities fuel social movements of justice past and present.

Habermas does not address Lima's query that religious citizens do not behave much differently than non-religious. Rather, the question that interests him has to do with the potential of the "normative understanding of modernity" to offer suitable motivation "under conditions of rapidly increasing social complexity to motivate the kind of collective action, of action *in social solidarity*, which is required in times of crisis for the formation of social movements?" (p. 355). Basically, Habermas has some doubts. So he sets out to clarify two forms of deficiency—motivations and political. First, the power to motivate moral action cannot be laid at Kant's feet. "The role of philosophy," Habermas avers, "is to explain what it means to examine something from the moral point of view. But it cannot take responsibility for the cultural traditions and processes of socialization, or for the institutions, that must *anchor* the moral point of view in the hearts of acting subjects" (ibid.). We could, therefore, also speak of pedagogical deficiencies. His second point addresses Lima's separation of generic cognitive species learning processes from the moral action of the individual person. Habermas asserts that: "The *political deficiency* I have in mind is rather a consequence of the individualistic orientation of all modern ethics" (p. 356). This problem arises particularly in acute crises—that must give rise to joint action and communicative power if the crisis is to be resolved. Assuring Lima that from the post-metaphysical point of view a "translation" can by no means be purchased at the cost of returning to the unity of a 'substantive' concept of reason that is embodied in history or nature," Habermas regards it as an open question as to whether the "political deficiency of rational morality in fact *can* be counterbalanced by a continuation of the philosophical appropriation of unexhausted religious contents" (ibid.).

The idea of a "genealogy" of post-metaphysical thinking is central to Habermas' larger argument on the nature of our post-secular times and post-metaphysical intellectual ethos. Persistently, Habermas has argued that modern

self-understanding has often forgotten that it has arrived at its secularized understanding not be leaping from tradition to modernity in one magnificent and happy bound. Put differently, Habermas desires that the rift (or perhaps chasm) between the religious and secular origins of modernity be healed. For instance, Habermas accuses Hans Blumenberg (author of the great text, *The legitimacy of the modern age* [1983]) of not showing that "human rights owes its egalitarian universalism to secular translation of Jewish/Christian ideas of the 'equal worth of every person in the eyes of God'; rational natural law could not have developed without the anthropocentric reversal of the world-transcending viewpoint of the Last Judgment into the moral point of view which transcends all partial standpoints *from within* the world. On the other hand, without this transformation it would not have been possible to overcome the limits placed on the mutual toleration of religious communities wherever the believer's perspective centered on the absolute truth of the teachings of his own community" (p. 361). The legitimacy of the modern age must include the "moral justification of the principles of the constitutional state" (ibid).

## 7. CONCLUSION

The foundation of Habermas' post-secular project (for it is that) lies with his accentuating the complementary relationship between a reformed religious consciousness and post-metaphysical thinking. His genealogical analysis provides knowledge of common origins; the skills demanded of us have to do with willingness to enter into dialogue and cohabit with others (cf. Butler, 2012). Once we do acknowledge common origins, Habermas (2013) claims that this knowledge-form "fosters the willingness to de-center this background and to engage in mutual perspective-taking, a disposition that every party must bring to such a discourse" (p. 363). Both parties face their own forms of resistance: loosening the tight, barnacle-like grip of absolutist thinking is a

shared problem. At the moment, liberal forms of religion are most disposed to let go of any notion of universally binding positions. We cannot forget where we have come from; the religious translations that pervade our Western cultural imagination; religious-faith communities co-exist with other faith-communities and secular citizens; we are in a grave predicament in our world, and need all the knowledge-forms and moral sources of living well at our disposal to confront the burning problems of our time. The post-secular condition, then, demands particular mutual learning processes and newly imagined pedagogical forms.

## REFERENCES

- Airhart, P. (2014). *A church with the soul of a nation: making and remaking the United Church of Canada*. Montreal, Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Avnery, U. (2014). ISIS and Israel. Retrieved from [www.counterpunch.org/2014/09/05/isis-and-israel](http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/09/05/isis-and-israel)
- Azlan, R. (2010). *Beyond fundamentalism: Confronting religious extremism in the age of globalization*. New York, NY: Random House Trade Paperbacks.
- Blumenberg, H. (1983). *The legitimacy of the modern age*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Borradori, G. (2003). *Philosophy in a time of terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bruce, S. (2002). *God is dead: Secularization in the West*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.
- Bruce, S. (2006). Secularization and the impotence of individualized religion. *The Hedgehog Review*, Spring/Summer, 35-45.
- Butler, J. (2012). *Parting ways: Jewishness and the critique of Zionism*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Casanova, J. (1994). *Public religions in the modern world*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Casanova, J. (2010). A secular age: dawn or twilight? In M. Warner, J. VanAntwerpen, & C. Calhoun (Eds.), *Varieties of secularism in a secular age* (pp. 265–281). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Casanova, J. (2011). The secular, secularizations, secularisms. In C. Calhoun, M. Juergensmeyer, & J. VanAntwerpen (Eds.), *Rethinking secularism* (pp. 54–74). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Dart, R. (2012). The Bible Belt in British Columbia, Canadian Zionism and the Israel Lobby: Letter from Abbotsford. *Holy Land Studies*, 11(1), 87–91. doi:10.3366/hls.2012.0032
- El Fadl, K. A. (2005). *The great theft: Wrestling Islam from the extremists*. San Francisco, CA: Harper.
- Engler, Y. (September 23, 2011). What explains Harper's slavish support for Israel? Retrieved from [yvesengler.com/2011/09/23](http://yvesengler.com/2011/09/23).
- Habermas, J. (1990). *The philosophical discourse of modernity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (2005). Faith and knowledge. In E. Mendieta (Ed.), *The Frankfurt School on religion: Key writings by the major thinkers* (pp. 327–337). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Habermas, J. (2009). What is meant by a 'post-secular society'? A discussion on Islam in Europe. In J. Habermas (Ed.), *Europe: The faltering project* (pp. 59–77). London, UK: Polity Press.
- Habermas, J. (2013). Reply to my critics. In C. Calhoun, E. Mendieta, & J. VanAntwerpen (Eds.), *Habermas and religion* (pp. 347–390). London, UK: Polity.
- Hirsi Ali, A. (2007). *Infernal*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Lewis, C. (2014). *935 lies: The future of truth and the decline of America's moral dignity*. New York, NY: Public Affairs.
- Lima, M. H. (2013). The anxiety of contingency: Religion in a secular age. In C. Calhoun, E. Mendieta, & J. VanAntwerpen (Eds.), *Habermas and religion* (pp. 49–71). London, UK: Polity Press.
- Mansur, S. (2009). *Islam's predicament: Perspectives of a dissident Muslim*. Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press.

Mearsheimer, J. (2014). Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault. *Foreign Affairs*, 93(5), 1-5. Retrieved from [web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/ehost/detail](http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/ehost/detail)

Mendieta, E. (2010). Interview with Habermas. A postsecular world society? On the philosophical significance of postsecular consciousness and the multicultural society (pp. 1-20). Retrieved from [mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/Habermas210310p.html](http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/Habermas210310p.html)

Russia Today. (September 13, 2014). 'War is madness': Pope Francis says WWIII is happening already. Retrieved from [RT.com/news/187576-pope-francis-war-italy](http://RT.com/news/187576-pope-francis-war-italy).

Trigeaud, S.-H. (2012). Christian prayer for human rights and peace: A spiritual or civic commitment? In G. Giordan & E. Pace (Eds.), *Mapping religion and spirituality in a postsecular world* (pp. 99-116). Boston, MA: Brill Publishers. doi:10.1163/9789004230231\_008