

# *Laicism and Globalization*

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**ABSTRACT:** One of the most evident, though little elucidated, signs of the disorder pertaining the process of globalization is the multiplication of intercultural conflicts and, on this context, specially the heightening of the conflict between Western culture and other cultures. This process reached its peak, at least symbolically, with the September 11 Attack on the World Trade Center in New York. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas offered at the time a long-range interpretation, which he deliberately decided to name after one of Hegel's early works, "Faith and Knowledge" ("Glauben und Wissen"). The present paper analyzes this interpretation and discusses the reasons why Habermas made one of Hegel's old theses his own. This thesis shows the still latent danger of the scientific or western rationality in pretending to fight and distorting the religious phenomena of one's own culture and of others a fortiori. The aim is to make visible, this way, a hermeneutic framework for understanding the complex relations existing between "faith" (or culture) and "reason" (or science"), as well as the phenomenon of laicism in the age of globalization.

A few weeks after the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on 9/11, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas received the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in the city of Frankfurt. For obvious reasons, his acceptance speech was highly anticipated, since he was presumably compelled to take a stand and offer some interpretation of that symbolic and decisive event. When the day came, Habermas began his speech by making an ironic reference to the curiosity awakened by his upcoming communication: he said he felt as if he were in a duel between intellectuals competing for the role of John Wayne, that is, for who could draw the gun faster<sup>1</sup>. However, far from satisfying the audience, especially the media, his address – the way he drew the gun – sowed confusion and

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<sup>1</sup> See Habermas' "Faith and Knowledge", in: Habermas, Jürgen, *The Future of Human Nature*, London: Polity, 2003.

even brought disappointment. In a deeply hermeneutic philosophical gesture, Habermas interpreted the attack as a symptom of an unsolved tension between the scientific and the religious world-views, a tension which now reveals itself in the conflict between cultures and religious confessions, but which has also been the topic of a long controversy within the Western culture itself for centuries. This is why he entitled his speech, and the text he later published, “*Glauben und Wissen*”, which has been translated into English as “Faith and Knowledge”, even though a more literal translation (“Believing and Knowing”) is still relevant.

Although Habermas did not refer explicitly to the philosophical tradition in his speech, it was evident to all who had hermeneutic ears that he was evoking an old essay by Hegel with the same title<sup>2</sup>. Hegel discusses in this text the previously mentioned tension between reason and religion in the context of a general interpretation about the effects and dangers of the Enlightenment. His analysis is original and it shows an interesting distance from the triumphalism of the rising modern rationality in its relationships with the religious mentality. Habermas’ speech refers to this consideration, though he does not hide the fact that he initially intended to develop another issue: the current disputes of principle regarding genetic research. What’s interesting about this is that these disputes, which in a way also confront rationalists and believers, are not dissociated from the secular previously mentioned controversy; on the contrary, they enlighten us on the continuity, complexity and aporias that are still latent at the heart of enlightened modernity.

In what follows I will refer to this fundamental issue, which will serve as an explanatory framework for the laicism phenomenon. This paper is divided into three parts. 1) In the first part, I will discuss Habermas’ speech and briefly explain the thesis he pursues as he uses, *pro domo* of course, Hegel’s systematic interpretation. 2) Second, I will turn to Hegel’s own text, as well as to other contemporary writings of his, in which a subtle analysis of the paradoxes of the Enlightenment can be perceived. 3) Finally, as a way of concluding, I will bring Habermas’ and Hegel’s arguments together to show the level of complexity at which the problem of laicism ought to be adequately set if we want to avoid the dangers they both refer to in their interpretations.

### Faith, Reason and Secularization

Habermas begins by highlighting a feature of the attack that contributed, without a doubt, to make it more spectacular, that is: the baffling non-simultaneity of its motivations and its means, in other words, the

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<sup>2</sup> Hegel, G. W. F., “Glauben und Wissen”, in: *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. by E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970, volume 2, pp. 287-433.

non-simultaneity of the traditionalist and religious justification that encouraged its authors and the use of the most sophisticated technological resources to carry it out. This feature symbolically reveals a contradiction between religious tradition and scientific rationality, between culture and society, which penetrates every sphere of social life in the international context and which has been strengthened by the process of globalization. The intrusion of modernity has had a devastating effect on every cultural tradition, including the Western culture, and it has not always managed to transform that strength into a fruitful movement of regeneration of the cultural life. A clear symptom of this failure is precisely the emergence of fundamentalism, which appears to be a regressive and desperate reaction against the violent advancement of modernization and cultural imperialism. Habermas writes, “in terrorism is expressed also the ominously silent collision of worlds that must find a common language beyond the mute violence of terrorism and missiles. In the face of a globalization that is taking over unbounded markets many of us hoped for a return of the political in another form – not in the Hobbesian original form of the globalised security State, that is, in the dimensions of the police, secret services and the military, but as a world-wide civilizatory formative power. At present we have little more than the faint hope of a stratagem of reason and a little introspection (*Selbstbesinnung*). Since the rift of speechlessness also divides our own house.”<sup>3</sup>

As we can see, a proposal like this one places us in the heart of the controversy to which we have referred since the beginning. And, what’s very important, it allows us (it allows Habermas) to redirect our gaze from the international conflict to the internal conflict, which characterizes the Western tradition itself, since within it the tension between reason and faith, which now appears on the surface of world politics, has been experienced for centuries and continues to be experienced. The exercise of *introspection* is not only a trait of caution that prevents us from making rush judgments concerning the evolution of other cultures, but also a way to realize that the causes of cultural presumption, which is perceived as imperialism in many parts of the world, might be found in the ignorance of the roots of our history, in the lack of awareness concerning the assumptions on which civilization lies. It’s a matter of reinterpreting the process of secularization that occurred in the Western culture and of searching there for the sources and aporias of its more current ways of manifestation.

The very concept of secularization, Habermas reminds us, carries in itself the traces of a conflict of interpretations, and of assessments, regarding the process it led to in the development of culture. Initially used in a

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<sup>3</sup> Habermas, Jürgen, “Faith and Knowledge”, op. cit.

legal sense, the word “secularization” referred to the forced transfer of ecclesiastical properties to the secular power of the State, and it is only by extension that it was applied to the process of modernization as a whole. Depending on the perspective from which it is understood, the concept involves a contradictory double sense: either it describes the legitimate submission of the ecclesiastical authority to the civil power (in broader terms, the substitution of religious dogmas by rational truths), or it refers to an act of wrongful appropriation (also in broader terms, to the delegitimation of the traditional forms of life). “Both readings,” Habermas remarks, “make the same mistake. They contemplate secularization as a kind of zero-sum game between two opponents: on the one hand, the productive forces of science and technique set off by capitalism and, on the other, the conservative powers of religion and the Church [...] This image does not fit a post-secular society [...]”<sup>4</sup>.

This interpretation about the process of secularization takes distance from the latent authoritarianism of the enlightened reason, which is capable of imposing itself relentlessly, in practice and in theory, on its own traditions and on the other cultures. It is there where the so called “Eurocentrism” most likely finds its roots, both the one criticised by its opponents as well as the one practiced by its believers, which frequently intends to make its own cultural world-view the only human essence or nature. Under this reading, one can also claim that the biggest danger the West could face in the current situation, the most counterproductive reaction that it could adopt, would be to repeat the act of strength that historically constitutes it and disguise it with a universalized ideological veneer, if not, what is even worse, with an apocalyptic religious language. Thus, the old opposition between reason and faith is reproduced once again, without giving signs of having learned lessons from history itself. But in this reading there is also, as it has been suggested, a way to solve the dispute. Nevertheless, whoever expected Habermas to appeal, in this context, to the *ideal discursive community* so that steady and bright as a lighthouse it may indicate the binding path to follow, would be most definitely disappointed. In his recent work, including the speech we are discussing, Habermas seems to come closer to a pragmatist position, according to which the defence of a democratic civilization is, in the first place, an issue rooted in culture itself and, second, an offer to partake of a dialogue in the *conversation of humanity*. This way we learn from Habermas, for example, that there is a “third way” between science and religion (the text says “*eine dritte Partei*”, which literally means: “a third party”; however, I consider that the non-literal translation is more accurate), whose role lies in acting as a mediator between the two previous

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

ones in a post-secular society, that is, in a society that leaves the unproductive opposition implicit in the process of secularization behind. This “way” would be “a democratically enlightened *common sense*”<sup>5</sup>, in which the imperatives of rationality and the requirements of consensus generation are collected and processed, a way we already know from Habermas’ discursive development of the concept of life-world. He explicitly tells us that *common sense* works by means of “translation”<sup>6</sup>: anchored in the life-world of citizens and equally influenced by the advances in scientific knowledge, it *translates* the religious contents into the language of the free exchange of opinions in which everyone has something to say.

Nor faith nor reason in their extreme positions but a third way. A way that does not discredit on principle nor distort the religious or cultural identity and that, hence, makes the defensive reaction of fundamentalism unnecessary. Translation of the religious experience into the codes of consensus of an enlightened democratic society and into the generation of agreements within itself. I will return to this at the end. What’s surprising is how close this analysis is to the Hegelian interpretation of the phenomenon of secularization, to which Habermas refers only implicitly<sup>7</sup>. Let us see, then, in a little more detail, how Hegel deals with the problem. And, to do that, let us go back to the essay that functions as a meta-text in this controversy, *Glauben und Wissen (Believing and Knowing, Faith and Reason)*.

### The Struggle of the Enlightenment with Superstition

The fact that Hegel wrote a long essay entitled *Faith and Knowledge* is, without a doubt, revealing. But the claims he made there are also developed in other writings, particularly in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, thus, it will be useful to consider them as well to specify the scope of his interpretation. The essay *Faith and Knowledge* was actually conceived to analyse the *metaphysical* assumptions of the enlightened project that Hegel tries to articulate systematically under the expression “principle of subjectivity”. This explains the fact that the text is mostly dedicated to the exam of the evolution and the gradual radicalization of the concept of subjectivity in the philosophy of Idealism, particularly in the work of Kant, Jacobi and

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> In a more recent book, *Naturalismus und Religion*, Habermas takes up again the central idea of his speech “Glauben und Wissen” as a backdrop for the debate about the problem of religion and he goes even further in his concessions to the Hegelian interpretation, particularly in two points: 1) he declares to agree with Hegel in the fact that religion should be understood as a particular kind of philosophy, or as a development of reason, and 2) that philosophy (ethics) should own the motivational force of religion (to the extent that the liberal State does not own it).

Fichte. But the atmosphere surrounding the essay, the main assumption that the culture of that time seems to have already consecrated, is the conviction of final victory of the enlightened reason. In this context, on the first page of Hegel's *Faith and Knowledge*, we find a famous passage that I now reproduce: "The question arises, however, whether victorious reason has not suffered the same fate that the barbarous nations in their victorious strength have usually suffered at the hands of civilized nations that weakly succumbed to them. As rulers the barbarians may have held the upper hand outwardly, but they surrendered to the defeated spiritually."<sup>8</sup> The question that Hegel asks himself is very suggestive and it contains something essential of his interpretation of modernity, but it is complex and it is not exempt from misunderstandings, hence, we ought to analyse it in more detail.

In this assessment concerning the dispute between reason and faith, at least three levels can be distinguished. On a first level, we are told that reason has distorted, twisted, the content of faith in so far as it has not understood what was at stake in the religious experience: reason has caricatured its adversary and, by doing so, it has shown itself as unilateral. On a second level, we observe that, even though the outcome of the dispute has been the victory of reason over faith, in this outcome nor faith has kept on being what it was nor has reason preserved its true nature; the result of a combat of distorting strengths has been the existence of two distorted products ("the offspring that rises victoriously over those cadavers," says Hegel, "has in itself as little reason as authentic faith"<sup>9</sup>). And, on a third level, we can infer that the victorious reason unconsciously drags along some traits of its adversary, and that this adversary has not come out of combat unharmed. This would explain how the enlightened reason can conceive itself with the absolute presumption of a religious truth or how both reason and faith can succumb to the temptation of fundamentalism.

In order to be able to observe in detail the different stages of this movement of opposition between modern reason and traditional religious culture, one ought to turn to the chapter "The Struggle of the Enlightenment with Superstition" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*<sup>10</sup>. The title of this chapter itself already outlines the systematic perspective from which the problem is addressed and that coincides with what we have called the first level of the dispute. The Enlightenment ("reason") has begun a battle against religion (against "faith"), but assuming an attitude that discredits

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<sup>8</sup> See Hegel, G. W. F., "Glauben und Wissen", p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Hegel, G. W. F., *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. Terry Pinkard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

on principle the opposing party; this is the reason why it does not even recognize faith's nature and calls it "superstition". Every level of this distorted dispute is accurately analysed by Hegel through a range of portraits of the different unilateral positions. Nevertheless, as we have already stated, none of the opponents comes out of the battle unharmed. If the Enlightenment must become aware of the dangers of authoritarianism or ethnocentrism that its defence of rationality brings along, religion, on the other hand, is compelled to defend the legitimacy of its position in terms that are universally acceptable. It is a new dimension of the controversy that appears here on the scene.

Hegel's main idea on this issue is that the resistance of the religious community, in the face of the distorting interpretations of the enlightened formalism, as justified as it may be, only manages to articulate itself theoretically with the help of the conceptual resources (of the "weapons") that the opposing party (the "Enlightenment") has brought to stage. The struggle itself with the Enlightenment "betrays the fact that the infection has occurred. The struggle is too late, and every remedy adopted only aggravates the disease, for it has laid hold of the marrow of spiritual life, viz. the concept of consciousness or the pure essence itself of consciousness."<sup>11</sup> That is why the religious community is on the horns of a dilemma: either blindly holding on to the evidence of the values system in which it *believes* without reacting to the criticisms of the Enlightenment, or paradoxically adopting the conceptual perspective of the opposite position so as to be able to defend the *legitimacy* of its truths of faith. In the first case, it becomes an encapsulated fundamentalism; in the second case, it loses its primary source of legitimation. This explains, according to Hegel, how the Enlightenment finally *wins* this struggle, at least regarding the respect of the complexity of the problem to be solved.

A non-distorting understanding of religion or, by extension, of non-Western cultural traditions, would be, in Hegel's opinion, one that recognizes the legitimacy of these world-views, especially regarding their peculiar way of articulating an understanding of the world. In this sense, religions and philosophy would share the ambition of offering a global explanation of reality or a coordinate system about nature or the meaning of life. For this reason precisely Hegel considers that religion is one of the three forms of the *absolute spirit*, that is, of the all-comprehensive vision of reality. Not only is it not a distorted interpretation of things but, on the contrary, it is a coherent and motivating system of beliefs for a determined community. The problem, of course, is that this perception of the religious phenomenon is only imaginable and expressible from a wider, more

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

rational instance, which is the last and full form of the *absolute spirit*, that is, from philosophy. Religion's greatness as well as art's greatness (the first form of the *absolute spirit*) are only thinkable as past forms of the articulation of sense. Unavoidable lessons derive from this constellation for the disputing parties. Reason must correct its unilaterality and recognise the internal coherence and the legitimacy of the religious world-views; faith, in turn, must correct its fundamentalism to try to open up to a reasoned dialogue with the pluralism of the interpretations of the world. If neither faith nor reason maintain their original positions, that is, those that produced the two opposing facets of the process of secularization, then this means that there is room for a third way that can gather, under a classic dialectical inspiration, some truth from the disputing parties and be nourished by them. It makes full sense to say as well that this way would be post-secularised because it goes beyond the irreconcilable opposition that was implicit or explicit in the secularisation model. We are near to Habermas' position in the speech we analysed at the beginning. And this allows us to move on to our third and last part: a brief conclusion of what has been said so far.

### Conclusion

Habermas' main thesis is, let us remember, that the attack on the World Trade Center has evidenced a radical confrontation between the Western rationalist culture and the Muslim religious world-view, a confrontation that reproduces and evokes the conflict between reason and faith that occurred in the heart of Western culture itself at the beginning of modernity. The call for an "introspection" ("*Selbstbesinnung*") has, in this context, the purpose of recalling the fruitless act of strength with which the process of secularisation was imposed and that now seemingly reappears in the arrogant attitude of the Western culture against other cultural traditions. For the introspection to be successful, we ought to abandon the trap to which the paradigm of secularisation leads and to choose instead a third way that does not oppose but reconcile, in a post-secularised society, the scientific mentality and the religious world-view, reason and faith. But this will only happen in the heart of a democratic tradition that knows nothing but human, not divine, rules for the generation of consensus. Thus, in this open and plural dialogue of humanity, the religious voices will have to make an effort to translate their moral convictions into the language of universally comprehensible rationality. According to what we have seen, Habermas is right in evoking Hegel's work because we find in it the precedent of a nuanced position, like the one he defended in his assessment of the Enlightenment.

We may have perceived a certain tone of disenchantment or resignation in Habermas' position. This is, without a doubt, in the first place due



to the evolution of the political world situation, specially worsened at the moment of the attack, when George W. Bush directed an international fundamentalist crusade against terrorism, to what one could then add (or even may add now in other terms) the extreme lack of control of the process of economic globalization. “Many of us hoped” – let us remember Habermas’ quote – “for a return of the political in another form – not in the Hobbesian original form of the globalised security State, that is, in the dimensions of the police, secret services and the military, but as a worldwide civilizatory formative power”. We hoped for this but the opposite occurred. There is, however, a second explanation for the disenchantment, and it is that Habermas, like other contemporary political philosophers, bet for a long time on a Neokantian principalistic position, on a deontological critical theory of utopian character, which seemed to uphold itself through universal claims, and today, on the contrary, they realise that such position is illusory or that it is detached from the social processes or the everyday worries of the inhabitants of the planet. With certain resignation, it is recognized that Hegel’s philosophy seems to be better supplied to apprehend the rationality immanent in the social and cultural practices as well as the slow march of the process of rationalisation in history, that “faint hope of a stratagem of reason”. What we appreciate, in general terms, is a pragmatic turn in political philosophy animated by the late and growing awareness of the complexity of the problem of social rationality. It had already happened before with John Rawls, who in his last books – *Political Liberalism* or *The Law of Peoples* – abandons the classic universalist position to propose a more modest, *realist utopia* that aspires to obtain an overlapping consensus amongst the cultural or religious world-views. And Habermas’ most diligent disciple, Axel Honneth, has already openly submitted the Hegelian positions about the ethical normativity immanent in the institutions of modernity<sup>12</sup>. This constitutes a withdrawal to more encompassing ways of rationality that allow a greater pluralism, but without abandoning the field of reasoned exchange of opinions. I believe the problem of the conflict between reason and faith or, in general terms, the issue of laicism should be set within that framework.

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<sup>12</sup> Honneth’s most recent work on this topic is *Das Recht der Freiheit*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2011, where he intends to systematically update Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*.