EXTENDING HABERMAS AND RATZINGER'S *DIALECTICS OF SECULARIZATION*: EASTERN DISCURSIVE INFLUENCES ON FAITH AND REASON IN A POSTSECULAR AGE

JONATHAN BOWMAN

Saint Charles College, Saint Peters, USA

Abstract. In the unlikely confluence of two colossal intellectual heritages, neo-Kantian Jurgen Habermas and Catholic prelate Joseph Ratzinger agree that we have entered a postsecular age. For both, the inauguration of such an age entails skepticism towards absolutist science and a growing recognition of the contributions of spiritual worldviews to social solidarity. Following their call for a multi-faceted purification in the West whereby secular and religious commitments are subjected to mutual critique, I explore potential Eastern contributions to this process by providing a micro-analysis of the interaction of discursive subjects in three traditions: for Confucianism, the rectification of names; Taoism, truth disclosure; and Buddhism, right speech.

I. Introduction

At the unprecedented crossroads of two German intellectuals exploring the changing role of religion in an increasingly international and pluralistic public sphere, Jurgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger agree that we have entered a postsecular age (2006).[1] The more intriguing side of the agreement

---

[1] Habermas entitles his essay „Pre-Political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State" while Ratzinger titles his portion „That Which Holds the World Together: The Pre-Political Moral Foundations of a Free State." The original public dialogue took place on January 19, 2004 at the Bavarian Catholic Academy in Munich. Nemoianu provides a summary definition for the term *postsecular*: „the common denominator in its different usages is a denial of the ideologized claims of purely rationalistic science and a refusal to keep science on some kind of pedestal, as a supreme and unshakeable expression of truth against any other type of discourse" (Nemoianu 2006, p. 33).

that religion ought to play a greater role in public affairs would indubitably stem from Habermas—the champion of Frankfurt School critical theory— rather than from the man later to be installed as Pope Benedict XVI. Perhaps even more surprisingly, at key points in the dialogue the tables seem to have been completely turned. Habermas sounds like Ratzinger's famed Polish predecessor Karol Wojtyla in pointing to religion as an indispensable source of social solidarity. In turn, Ratzinger seems to play historical materialist in proclaiming that religion unchecked by sustained rational critique can become ideological to the point of inducing wide-scale social pathology.

However, these seemingly topsy-turvy pronouncements can begin to be understood by noting the complex confluence of a number of overlapping trends mentioned by both. These include an increasing skepticism towards the absolutist claims of science, a mutual acknowledgement that even in light of a growing pluralism of worldviews philosophy must continue to seek to salvage truth or succumb to a postmodern collapse into relativism, and the shared pragmatic recognition of the vital epistemic and discursive contributions that spiritual worldviews can positively contribute to the organization of civil society in light of a deflated and overly rationalistic conception of human nature.[2]

Given these various trends, they both agree that the contemporary state requires religion as a resource for regenerating forms of solidarity lost to the growing influence of globalized markets and expanding bureaucracies. Since secularism has found its most mature development in the West and since Western globalization and a pluralism of world views have most deeply stirred on the trend of postsecularization, they both spend a considerable amount of their efforts discussing how secularization has historically proceeded in this more familiar context. However, beyond making some brief speculative remarks, neither offers much reflection concerning how non-Western cultures—as the lesser known flip-side of the global dialectic of interdependence—might contribute to a better understanding of our postsecular age. Given this deficit, I plan to add yet another iteration to the dialectics of secularization since it would be apt to project how this wider,

---

[2] Charles Taylor also offers a succinct formulation of the postsecular in Europe „[N]ot as designating an age in which the declines in belief and practice of the last century would have been reversed, because this does not seem likely, at least for the moment; I rather mean a time in which the hegemony of the mainstream narrative of secularization will be more and more challenged. This, I think is now happening. But because, as I believe, this hegemony has help to effect the decline, its overcoming would open new possibilities" (Taylor 2007, pp. 534-535).

more global dialectic might reflexively influence both Western and Eastern discourse.

Before we make the excursion into Eastern thought, the general story of secularization in the West should be familiar enough. Habermas and Ratzinger both trace this development as a long narrative of mutual influence between two predominate forces: Enlightenment reason and the Christian church. The peak of Enlightenment reason in Europe witnessed the restraint of spiritual influences over the public sphere so that modern citizenship need not presuppose any type of religious commitment. However, both find that such a victory came at the cost of a decrease in citizen solidarity—construed as the affective bond leading citizens to act on behalf of one another. Despite the Enlightenment victory of the secular impulse (that some find embodied most emphatically in the international institutions of the European Union and United Nations), both Christianity and Enlightenment reason have sought at different stages to imperialize one another via their competing impulses towards universal sway over the public sphere (Wiegel 2005; Taylor 2007, pp. 522-528, 831; Bilger 2005). Given this history of an ongoing back and forth struggle, the dialectic between them might seem doomed to an intractable stalemate. However, both Habermas and Ratzinger find that with the mutual acknowledgement that neither will hold universal sway over the political and moral commitments of modern subjects, the self-limitation of both can be made into an epistemic virtue that reflexively insulates each of them from the pathology of ideological near-sightedness.

Perhaps initially as an unintended consequence, the mutually self-imposed purification against pathology has come to take on a nuanced character in the dialectic whereby the increasing pluralism of worldviews provides a welcome exit-option in moving beyond the impasse of the opposition between Enlightenment secularism and Christianity. Non-Western modes of thought are thus to be regarded by both Enlightenment reason (Habermas) and Christianity (Ratzinger) as full participants in the dialectic, internally rendered as porous in their capacities for ongoing critical self-transformation and externally viewed as authoritative sources of potential redaction of Enlightenment and Christian ideologies, leading to what Ratzinger calls a polyphonic relatedness:

> It is important that both great components of the Western culture learn to *listen* and to accept a genuine relatedness to these other cultures, too. It is important to include the other cultures in the attempt at a polyphonic relatedness in which they themselves are receptive to the essential complementarity of reason and faith, so that a universal process of purifications (in the plural!) can proceed (2006, p. 79).

Following this call for a multi-faceted purification from ideology, I will explore potential Eastern contributions to this purification process taking Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism in turn. My own critical theorist mode of analysis will provide a micro-analysis of the discursive interaction of subjects in the philosophy of language of each tradition, showing how each overcomes various cultural manifestations of ideological near-sightedness. For Confucianism, I will consider its notion of the rectification of names, for Taoism, the idea of truth disclosure, and finally, for Buddhism, the practice of right speech. Before going into these Eastern traditions, I will offer a brief introduction to the philosophy of language typical of Frankfurt-style critical theory. Only after presenting Western and Eastern modes of linguistic analysis will we briefly conclude by projecting insights Christian philosophers might gather from the dialectical interpenetration of East and West.

II. Habermas and Ratzinger on Philosophy of Language:
Two Views on the Need for Mutual Understanding
in a Postsecular Age

Given that we have entered a postsecular age—which has to date received confirmation in both East and West and from secularists and theists alike (Nemoianu 2006, p. 33) – Habermas and Ratzinger both open their comments on the current state of the postsecular turn by addressing the following question: does the Western polity require a pre-political ethical substance as the core behind citizens' shared discursive commitment to act on behalf of one another? The verdict in responding to this question for each differs: Habermas answers in the negative insofar as he believes a political culture can reproduce itself by instilling thin civic virtues in its citizens through democratic proceduralism. Ratzinger answers affirmatively by tracing the origin of human rights to the adaptation of Christian theories of natural law to the secular order.

As for Habermas, despite his rejection of a pre-political ethical core as the ground for shared social solidarity, he argues that there is a great need for the translation of spiritual insights into secular language—specifically given the havoc wrought by market forces and growing bureaucracy over the public sphere.[3] In the general corpus of Habermas's work, he argues

---

[3] In reaching his conclusions, Habermas adapts the goals and aims of traditional critical theory to the postsecular context. In brief overview, the major goal of critical theory seeks

that the logic of the market and state bureaucracy both follow what he terms strategic forms of communication. The former relentlessly seeks the increase of capital whereas the latter seeks the unrestrained wielding of power. Only in the public sphere do we find language that conforms to what he calls the performative attitude: that which is oriented to achieving common understanding with a second person.

> [T]he balance achieved in the modern period between the three great media of social integration is now at risk, because the markets and the power of the bureaucracy are expelling social solidarity (that is, a coordination of action based on values, norms, and a vocabulary intended to promote mutual understanding) from more and more spheres of life. Thus it is in the interest of the constitutional state to deal carefully with all the cultural sources that nourish its citizens' consciousness of norms and their solidarity. This awareness, which has become conservative, is reflected in the phrase: „postsecular society" (2006, pp. 45-46).

Spiritual insights thus yield an untapped reservoir of vocabulary that can bring shared meaning and values into the increasingly strategic colonization of the lifeworld by both the market and institutional bureaucracy. In addition to the functional contributions that religious fellowships bring to society in terms of the currency of motivations and attitudes normally deemed socially desirable, Habermas also finds that these fellowships carry a current of reflexivity whereby both believing and non-believing citizens undergo a complementary learning process in taking up a performative attitude with respect to one another's reasons as offered with respect to controversial public issues (2006, pp. 46-47).

Scattered throughout various writings, Habermas offers three prime examples of the translation of the spiritual into the secular. The first and most common reference is to the familiar Judeo-Christian notion of man created in the image of God translated in the secular sphere into the notion of inalienable human dignity that serves as the moral basis of many modern defenses of human rights. With this first instance of a translation that still salvages the substance of the original term, he provides a pragmatic test to assess the degree of success in executing such translations: „this goes beyond the borders of one particular religious fellowship and makes the

---

human emancipation from any form of social and political domination. In reaching such an aim, critical theory takes comfort in utilizing and mixing both normative and empirical modes of analysis using the most recent social science research and also holds to a commitment that rationality can occur in a plurality of sometimes seemingly incommensurable voices. Critical theory also carries a pragmatic component agreeing with Marx that the task of philosophy is not merely to critique social ideology but to change society.

substance of biblical concepts accessible to a deliberating public that also includes those who have other faiths and those who have none" (2006, p. 45). Habermas's second and more recent example has been brought about by the onset of new genetic technologies. He argues that in a secular public most non-believers would seem to be compelled by moral reasons to reject the idea of 'man playing God' via new genetic technologies, for instance, as found in the secular law of the German constitution and Article 3 of the EU Fundamental Charter of Rights through their respective bans on human cloning and the non-instrumentalization of the person (2003, pp. 21-23; 2002b, pp. 15-16).

The third instance, although it is a very brief reference in light of his grand corpus of writing, is one which Habermas claims nonetheless plays a formative role in the initial development of his theory of communicative action. As part of the early philosophical views worked out in his first doctoral dissertation, he draws upon Swabian mysticism to regard the self-limitation of God as the grounds for the post-Fall social freedom of the human subject. He regards such non-coerced self-legislation on the part of Adam as a necessary pragmatic presupposition for the legitimate functioning of the discursively directed agreement characteristic of modern democracies (2002a, pp. 159-161). In other words, God's initial treatment of Adam as free receives confirmation in a discursive sense whereby Adam must have the real ability to take a 'yes' or 'no' discursive position on God's commands. While this may seem to limit God's power, it is nonetheless essential to their mutual status as communicatively free agents and also stands as a discursive precondition for the possibility of non-coercive solidarity.

As for Ratzinger's position on the pre-political foundation of the state, he points to the natural law as the moral basis of the modern state—which can not be understated as a significant philosophical departure from the rational discursive proceduralism of Habermas. However, surprisingly, there is much in Ratzinger's own position on secularization in the context of global interdependence that can find some degree of overlap with the micro-level linguistic analysis of critical theorists. While Ratzinger is careful not to sound so pluralistic as to grant the discursive truth claims of all religions equal epistemic weight, he does make a virtue out of the situation posed by globalization and mass media that can utilize other traditions as a critical check on *both* Enlightenment and church dogma in their mutual claims to universality—with the eventual hope that such a purification might lead to a new cross-culturally informed version of universally held values and norms.

Ultimately, the essential values and norms that are in some way known or sensed by all men will take on a new brightness in such a process, so that that which holds the world together can once again become an effective force in mankind (2006, pp. 79-80).

At the spiritual end, he refers to the pathologies of religion, which include the evils of renouncing rational persuasion to cede to the brute force of colonial conquest and interdenominational warfare. At the scientific end, he notes the more recent growing predominance of the lesser-acknowledged pathologies of reason, such as the ultimatum of force wielded via the atomic bomb and the emergent notion of man as product rather than autonomous subject via the onset of genetic technologies (2006, p. 78). Compare these pronouncements of potential ideologies to similar remarks made by Habermas that seem to move Habermas's more typically pragmatic appeals to social solidarity a lot closer to the objectively shared existential human condition defended by Ratzinger:

> [S]omething can remain intact in the communal life of the religious fellow-ships—provided of course they avoid dogmatism and the coercion of people's consciences—something that has been lost elsewhere and cannot be restored by the professional knowledge of experts alone. I am referring to adequately differentiated possibilities of expression and to sensitivities with regard to lives that have gone astray, with regard to societal pathologies, with regard to the failure of individuals' plans for their lives, and with regard to the deformation and disfigurement of lives that people share with one another (Habermas 2006, pp. 43-44).

Therefore, both pose the intriguing insight that increasing the range of possible expressions of spiritual influence over the public sphere could at least negatively uncover truths about the nature of man that lead persons away from damaged forms of social solidarity.

At this point, given the early stages of increasing global interdependence, the future implications of non-Western discourse on this dialectical process of purification from a damaged social life remains uncertain. To my knowledge, although comparative philosophy of religion has recently grown as a discipline, there have been no attempts to formulate something akin to a comparative theory of intra-religious discourse. Perhaps even anything close to such a project would invariably assume some Western philosophy of language as the implied constraints on what would make a tenable non-Western position. However, while I concede that I will primarily be following the general spirit of Habermas's critical theorist analysis of discursive subjects, I will attempt to elucidate how a transnational public sphere could

benefit from examples drawn from the philosophies of language *internal* to three Eastern traditions. The goal of these analyses will be to raise and begin to address the following question that also must profess its own undeniable parochialism: What lessons can both Christianity and Enlightenment rationality (with their mutual but competing claims to universality) learn from the micro-analysis of the philosophy of language of three Eastern traditions and their historical efforts of infusing the public domain with their spiritual contributions?

III. Name Rectification, Truth Disclosure, and Right Speech: Revelatory Checks on Societal Pathologies from Three Eastern Religions

The linguistic turn in Western philosophy has led to two major influences on the critical theory tradition that contribute to its overall goal of human emancipation. The first (already mentioned) offers a macro-analysis of the complex institutional networks that affect modern subjects, such as the state, market, bureaucracy, and popular media. The second—the analysis of the micro-level communicative interaction among discursive subjects—will have a greater influence over the motivations and goals of this next section. Looking at each of these Eastern traditions we will experiment with offering a Habermasian critical theory of discursive subjects oriented to mutual understanding while also utilizing Ratzinger's language of dispelling the pathologies of reason and religion present in each.

A. Confucianism and the Rectification of Names: A Normative Semantics

For Confucius, given the 500-year Period of Warring States both preceding his birth and following his death, the ultimate goal of his philosophy was practical: reclaim the social stability of the Golden Age of China enjoyed under the Chou Dynasty. In Confucian linguistic analysis one finds both strongly discursive and pragmatic currents, as social stability proved most likely when general names are used properly. This leads to a normative semantics whereby the correct use of a name coincides with the proper fulfilment of a given social role. In other words, the false use of a noun would be tantamount to forging false credentials in the exercise of a given social role (Li 1999, p. 73).

In turn, the propriety (*li*) of the correct use of a term and the proper exercise of a social role can be measured and assessed in terms of the degree to which it embodies compassion (*jen*—literally: human-to-humanness). Rectification, although intimately related to tradition, has both a forward and backward-looking component, comprising what Confucians call deliberate tradition. For instance, in the more conservative guise of a backward-looking appeal to the stability of the past (and as a pathology of reason in the most Hobbesian of strategic guises), a ruler is a ruler not insofar as they wield the most power, but rather in terms of whether they express compassion (*jen*) towards their subjects while also commanding their respect and veneration. Confucius and Mencius thus found *te*, the proper wielding of power via leading by moral example, including teaching socially-enhancing normative practices of general naming, to be one of the key traits of the former Chou Dynasty that was able to unite all of China. However, for all the stigmas attached to Confucianism as rigidly hierarchical and tradition-bound, it also evinces one of the earliest expressions of a more forward-looking and reflexive right to revolution on the part of the people insofar as a given ruler does not practically live up to the normative ideals attached to this social designation.

In its more contemporary context, the secularism of Western and Eastern academia has led to an overtly humanistic rendering of Confucianism leading many to argue that for the Confucian the sacred *is* the secular (Li 1999, p. 145; Clark 2005).[4] However, recent revisionists have proposed a more progressively dialectical approach to name rectification, for instance, as in this case associated with the normative semantics of the name ancestor. Even given his extreme veneration of both the family and of social order, that by Western standards bordered on worship, Confucius also seemed at least open to the notion of a sacred realm transcending the profane with the famous *Analects* 3 adage „without due respect to the Gods, to whom would we pray? Nonetheless, in simultaneously overcoming a pathology of reason, by means of a critique similar to the critiques of enchanted other-worldliness made by contemporary Marxists, Weberians, and neo-Freudians, Confucius sought to refocus public emphasis on the this-worldly realm as an indication of one's worthiness for sainthood, particularly on one's perfect expression of *jen* in the *living* family as the most important of units in the social order. In contrast, the folk religion that Confucius inherited as the prevailing

---

[4] In comprehensive critique of the common notion that Confucius was a humanist, pragmatist, and atheist, Clark argues that 'the theistic tradition is the dominant intellectual tradition in the early Zhou period [1122-221 BCE] and finds clear and remarkable expression for nearly a millennium thereafter' (2005, p. 132).

social context put pride of place on the worship of *departed* ancestors as the means for gaining the favor of the gods. In this dialectical instance of name rectification, Confucius did not want to do away with worship of ancestors—but insofar as the maintenance of social order reigned supreme via *Tian* as the heavenly mandate ultimately conferring naming powers upon the sage king—Confucius reoriented the focus away from worship of the departed and modified it to emphasize righteous governance over this realm as directed by a personal God (Clark 2005, p. 126). Hence came about the modern secularized and disenchanted practice of Confucian filial and civic piety that extends even to this day, granting greater veneration to persons in a degree proportionate to their age, checked by *jen* as the supreme virtue since an elder does not merit the respect worthy of their name if they are abusive in their exercise of authority.

B. Taoism and The Disclosive Linguistic Power of the Tao

For Lao Tzu, the author of Taoism's *Tao Te Ching*, (literally, *The Way and Its Power*) the unique disclosing power of Taoist language gives this religion an undeniably enigmatic character. Repeated references to the nameless, the ineffable, and unspeakable are meant to convey the inability of human language to reach the perfect *dao*. However, for contemporary Taoists

> this is not to deny completely a relationship between language and *dao*: to the contrary, this kind of expression precisely aims at using return or losing small language in order to attain the great language of the *dao* (Xianglong 2004, p. 207).

In other words, (in statements that some Western philosophers have aligned with the views on language expressed by Wittgenstein and Heidegger), one finds within language „something that mutually harmonizes, suits, and satisfies with *dao*, a preconceptual dimension of language, and through this, or in its very midst, *dao* tells (*dao*) us that which it says (*dao*)" (Xianglong 2004, p. 207). This leads to a deconstructive notion of religious language as pure immanence that concedes the difficulty involved in the expression of any sort of theological concept that could either positively affirm the divine transcendence of a strong theism or completely circumscribe the shared totality of the collective religious experience of a given provincial community.

The radical immanence of the *Tao Te Ching* thus adapts a distinctive attitude that presupposes a holistic design governing human and cosmic events. It thus vacillates between paradoxical meditations that border on private

mysticism coupled with calls for very practical political reform entailing the return to a propriety-less society that seeks to disenchant the theistic heavenly mandates of Confucian ritual. As a specific remedy to a potential pathology of religion, with Confucianism as the usual target of its own dialectical development, a Taoist moral culture of humility and silent reserve is called upon to replace Confucian rituals, formalized linguistic proprieties, and the directly personal theism of *Tian*. For instance, the consistent use of water as the exemplification of humility expresses the Taoist notion of passively conforming to one's holistically constituted environment rather than retroactively dominating it, to overcome the reductionist character of language and the tendency to force the descriptions of persons, social interaction, and even grand cosmic design into totalizing classification schemes. Consider as an illustration the Taoist sage portrayed in Verse 2 of *Tao Te Ching* who paradoxically leads best by 'teaching no speaking' since even simple language over-generalizes the particular in its attempts at offering grand-narratives of changing human behaviors and attitudes:

> [T]he sage goes about doing nothing, teaching no-talking.
> The ten thousand things rise and fall without cease.
> Creating, yet not.
> Working, yet not taking credit.

The obscure statement „To teach no talking" thus breaks through or discloses the linguistic and conceptual limits of the false classifications that hinder its stated ultimate goal: non-friction with the cosmic Tao. Such a Tao flows through the hermetic Sage but ultimately from an unknown albeit immanent source, without ritual propriety and complex linguistic and social mores that arrive too late, comprising a moral and social order where the humble choice of limited speech and non-action reign supreme.

With respect to the contemporary atheistic humanism that is often portrayed as the only rational response to the successes of scientific materialism (as in a related sense has become the preferred rational way Western academics choose to recast Confucius as a secular humanist and Lao Tzu as among the earliest advocates of deep ecology), such an immanently materialist frame for how one views the world may seem as though it were the only available option in a pluralist world. However, as far as the application of Taoist philosophy of language to the pathologies of reason goes, since the holistic character of the *Tao* or the Way of the cosmos inheres in all being and effortlessly orders the cosmos, the Taoist view on language therefore includes a pointing towards a more primal affective, pre-linguistic, and instinctual foreground, with the important insight that linguistic expression

cannot positively express the very background conditions of its own possibility. While Enlightenment confidence in the deliverance of science is often viewed as leading to moral maturity, the Taoist notion of epistemic humility would also entail that what we are really presented with are two options, or spins—one atheistic and one not—on what Charles Taylor calls the same Jamesian open space (2007, p. 551). In agreement with both Habermas and Ratzinger, to privilege one over the other in the name of avoiding childish immaturity is merely to fall prey to the false ideology of the self-deliverance of scientific materialism (Taylor 2007, pp. 561-566).

C. Buddhism and the Soteriology of Right Speech

For the teachings of Buddhism, right speech is the third step leading along the eightfold path to Enlightenment. Successful completion of the rigors of these eight stages culminates in a liberation from suffering and pain that carries a twofold sense. On the one hand, the negative side of liberation refers to freedom from attachments to objects in a world comprised materially of various impermanent entities. In short, according to the doctrine of impermanence as an indelible mark of all material existence for the Buddhist, prolonged attachment to that which is transitory can only lead to suffering and loss. On the other hand, at the positive end of the spectrum, liberation from attachment serves as the epistemic precondition for enjoying a certain sort of rational clarity. Such epistemic openness (somewhat misleadingly termed emptiness) allows not only for the fullest realization of one's rational capacities but also carries an interpersonal or affective element in establishing *dharma*, as a shared common good or socio-moral balance in the world, since the alleviation of one's personal suffering leads to the desire to alleviate the pain of all humanity in the most collective possible sense.

Right speech can be interpreted literally as true words or valid speech. Each speech act that one makes carries significance for one's progress (or lack thereof) along the path to the ultimate goal: the cessation of human suffering (again, crucial for a discursively rendered account: simultaneously singular *and* aggregate). The contribution of right speech to the pathologies of reason would be to point out instances of the incorrect use of language if it has become separated from the ultimate experiential/soteriological aim of alleviating suffering. For example, contemporary Buddhist philosophers of language provide a comprehensive four-step pragmatic test for the veridical status of all speech acts, divided in terms of content, purpose, ultimate purpose, and connectedness:

Content comprises the different aspects of the doctrine being taught;

Purpose entails the listener's understanding of the content;

Ultimate purpose/goal brings about the complete enlightenment that is the result of accustoming oneself to the realization born from the understanding of the content;

Connectedness delimits the relationship of content, purpose, and ultimate purpose so that in dependence on the content, the purpose is fulfilled and in dependence on the purpose the goal is fulfilled (Cabezon 1994, pp. 43-44).

In brief summation, one can test whether the given speech act/teaching succeeds or fails in achieving mutual understanding insofar as it contributes to the alleviation or increase of overall human suffering. Therefore, given the fulfillment of the four conditions, (and as a possible ideological check on the dangers of unrestrained Enlightenment rationality), even in the scientific realm, valid truth claims must conform with just moral and political ends that contribute to the aggregate alleviation of *dukkha*.

The world-historical context of Buddha's radically discursive rendering of *dukkha* also carries application to the pathologies of religion, specifically with Hinduism as the original target of critique with its growing precedent of Sanskrit as the official language of the Brahmin elite practicing Hindu theological hermeneutics. As a counter-reaction to the exclusivity of tying Hindu salvation to knowledge of Sanskrit, Buddha wanted his teaching spread in the common vernacular in order to bring about the egalitarian transmission of content, purpose, and goal of alleviating *dukkha* independent of social caste and educational level. For Buddhism, the prospect of mutual discursive understanding must always remain a real human potency in order for individuals to take ultimate responsibility for their own personal enlightenment.

IV. Concluding Lessons for a Postsecular West – Lost in a Plurality of Voices or a New Age for Enlightened Proselytizing?

Now that we have extended Ratzinger and Habermas's dialectic one step further to the pathologies of reason and religion historically faced by the Eastern philosophical account of discourse, what are Western philosophers and theologians to make of these trends? For starters, if a dialectical openness to Eastern contributions entails an openness to all spiritual contributions to the public sphere, Western societies might come to view Christophobia,

Islamophobia, and Anti-Semitism as their own distinctive pathologies of reason by making the initial step (particularly in Europe) beyond the notion that religion is irrational whereas science will always reign as the harbinger of reason (Taylor 2007, pp. 556-566; Nemoianu 2006, p. 38). Moreover, insofar as the three Eastern traditions typically moved into some prevailing spiritual context and rarely ever interacted with subjects having no spiritual commitments, the secularism commonly associated with Enlightenment reason, with its highest expression in contemporary Europe, can gain a critical perspective on itself as the historical exception to the rule rather than the only viable mode of social organization.[5]

In addition, each of the Eastern traditions has much to contribute in terms of debunking the unchallenged purported objectivity of the scientific materialism distinctive of the Western secular tradition. For starters, Confucianism questions the certitude of strategic mean-ends calculations characteristic of instrumental reason by reminding us that any viable normative semantics will always regard the objectivity of judgments as a socially conferred propriety. The Taoist offers a deconstruction of the objectivity of scientific framing by presenting the helpful insight that science cannot provide the background conditions for its own justification—this is something it must presuppose as a matter that should not be hastily regarded as a foregone conclusion. And finally, Buddhist notions of right speech reminded us that scientific truths carry with them an essential tie to existential and moral well-being, or more minimally, the desired alleviation of *dukkha*.

Given that Western secularism and its concomitant scientific materialism seems to have run into problems it alone cannot solve, Christian philosophers in particular might also seize this as a moment for some creative culling of their own spiritual traditions. Consider the recommendations of the 1998 papal encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, as perhaps the most mature contemporary Western intellectual position on this topic:

> Christian philosophers can develop a reflection which will be both comprehensible and appealing to those who do not yet grasp the full truth which divine revelation declares. Such a ground for understanding and dialogue is all the more vital nowadays, since the most pressing issues facing humanity—ecology, peace and the coexistence of different races and cultures, for instance, may possibly find a solution if there is clear and honest collaboration between Christians

---

[5] Habermas notes „In Teheran, a colleague once said to me that the comparative study of cultures and religious sociology surely suggested that *European Secularization* was the odd one out among the various developments—and that it ought to be corrected" (2006, pp. 37-38). Ratzinger likewise refers to this as an intriguing thesis (2006, pp. 75-76)

and the followers of other religions and all those who, while not sharing a belief, have at heart the renewal of humanity (1998, pp.125-136).

While the critical theory tradition with its self-proclaimed goal of human emancipation clearly has the renewal of humanity within its aspirations, the Eastern views also faired comparatively well with regard to this humanistic norm. Confucianism seeks social order, Taoism harmony with the Tao via humble reserve, and Buddhism the alleviation of aggregate human suffering. Ratzinger seems to move in a similarly humanistic direction with his call for a new polyphonic and cross-culturally discursive portrayal of the natural law, as he states

> [T]his dialogue would necessarily be intercultural today, both in its structure and its interpretation. For Christians, the dialogue would speak of the creation and the Creator. In the Indian world, this would correspond to the concept of 'dharma,' the inner law that regulates all being; in the Chinese tradition, it would correspond to the structures ordained by heaven (2006, p. 72).[6]

Therefore, in a plural and truly transnational public sphere, beyond just a dialectical interplay between secular and non-secular Western views, we might expect something closer to a gradual dialectical assimilation of *religions* (emphasis on the plural) rather than an outright religious upheaval in each or an overwhelming reformation into one.[7]

However, one vital practical concern in the West of such a measured assimilation would be addressing to what degree traditionally 'Christian' concepts might be translated into a philosophical language familiar to its respective Eastern audience without sacrificing the essentials of the basic commitments of all sides of the dialectical interplay. For instance, this might proceed along the following very loose lines: perhaps by presenting the Western (both secular and religious) understanding of Christ's precarious politico-moral teachings to Confucians in terms of the name rectification

---

[6] More recently, Habermas has similarly suggested „the democratic state must not pre-emptively reduce the polyphonic complexity of the diverse public voices, because it cannot know whether it is not otherwise cutting society off from scarce resources for the generation of meanings and the shaping of identities. Particularly with regard to vulnerable social relations, religious traditions possess the power to convincingly articulate moral sensitivities and solidaristic intuitions" (2008).

[7] Taylor calls this the nova effect in Western Christendom and admits that extending such an analysis beyond one national culture would be something more akin to a supernova effect (2007, p. 300). Li notes that Chinese cultures often use the term breadth as a virtue in place of the Western notion of tolerance. Breadth connotes genuine understanding that seeks common ground while preserving differences whereas tolerance more minimally just requires one to put up with the differences (1999, p. 159).

of the 'Messiah' prophesized in the Hebrew scriptures, explaining Christ (again in both his Western secular and religious biographical sketches) to Taoists in their own language of the politically humble *chun tzu* that discloses the 'Way' to a heavenly kingdom with its loose parallels to the radical utopia sought in the *Tao Te Ching*, or presenting to Buddhists the secular and religious roots to the Reformed interpretation of Christ's proclamation of a soteriology closest to Pure Land Buddhism that teaches liberation through supernatural grace instead of rigorous self-effort. While missiologists have already devoted much attention to these types of issues, in a postsecular age where even critical theorists seem ready to listen, Christian philosophers of religion in particular should take up their own intellectual mission of engaging with their Eastern counterparts in discussing the fact that they already hold substantial spiritual commitments. In the end, perhaps much to the chagrin of devout critical theorists, even Habermas now suggests that the transnational longing for a renewed sense of human solidarity would more likely come through a public openness to the expressively transformative potentials of religious discourse than via the naïve ideological assumption of an impending secular cosmopolitanism.

References

Bilger, P., 2005, „Religion in the West," *The National Interest*, pp. 112-119.

Cabezon, J., 1994, *Buddhism and Language*, Albany: SUNY Press.

Clark, K.J., 2005, „The Gods of Abraham, Isaiah, and Confucius," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 5(1), pp. 109-136.

Habermas, J. and Ratzinger, J., 2006, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Habermas, J., 2002a, „Conversations About God and the World," *Reason and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, Cambridge: MIT Press.

Habermas, J., 2003, *The Future of Human Nature*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Habermas, J., 2002b, „Glauben und Wissen," *Forum Philosophicum*, VII, pp. 7-16.

Habermas, J., 2008, „Notes On a Post-Secular Society," *SignandSight*, June 18.

Li, C., 1999, *The Tao Encounters the West: Explorations in Comparative Philosophy*, Albany: SUNY Press.

Nemoianu, V., 2006, ,,The Church and the Secular Establishment: A Philosophical Dialogue between Joseph Ratzinger and Jurgen Habermas," *Logos* 9(2), pp. 17-42.

Taylor, C., 2007, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Belknap Press.

Weigel, G., 2005, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God*, New York: Basic Books.

Wojtyla, K., 1998, *Fides et Ratio: On the Relationship Between Faith and Reason*, Encyclical Letter as Pope John Paul II, Boston: Pauline Books and Media.

Xianglong, Z., 2004, ,,Heidegger's View of Language and the Lao-Zhuang View of *Dao*-Language," in R. Wang (ed.), *Chinese Philosophy in an Era of Globalization*, Albany: SUNY Press, pp. 195-213.