

### Uses of Religion

Terry Eagleton, **Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate**, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009, 185 pp., \$25.00 (hardcover).

Jürgen Habermas, **Between Naturalism and Religion**, Malden, MA: Polity, 2008, 361 pp., \$26.96 (paperback).

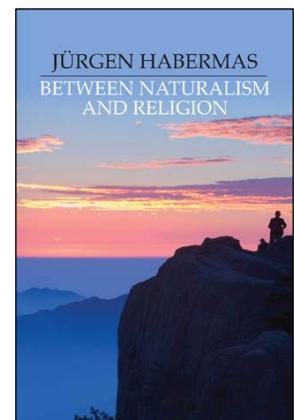
Steven D. Smith, **The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse**, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010, 285 pp., \$26.95 (hardcover).

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The contemporary moment is one of great unrest, ranging from global economic turbulence in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008 to street protests in Israel over affordable housing to political demonstrations (some now with military backing) across the Arab world in what is being called the Arab Spring. In a late-summer column in *The New York Times*, Thomas Friedman (2011) says that the essence of what is going on across this series of expressions of disquietude is distilled in one of the slogans from the Israeli protests: "We are fighting for an accessible future."

That somehow the future is not accessible represents, to some degree, a failure of *modernity* as conceived in enlightenment liberal politics, or at least as those powerful concepts of equality, freedom, and reason are translated and enacted in the current global era. Though modernity, indeed the multiple modernities, are hard to characterize in a few sentences, one of the central goals of the enlightenment project is, from the wake of the Holy Wars to contemporary heterogeneous pluralistic societies, to answer the question, "How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?" (Rawls, 2005, p. xvii).

Three recent books—by literary critic Terry Eagleton, critical theorist Jürgen Habermas, and legal scholar Steven D. Smith—enter into this discussion of the failures of modernity and what the future ought to look like, pointing to what might be a surprising reservoir of ideas, possibility, and guidance: religion. More specifically, all three books hold that a rearticulation of the relationship between reason and religion is necessary in the current era. Though the books are varied in the treatment and enunciation of the proper relationship between reason and religion in political society, all agree that there are important roles for religion to play in the public sphere as citizens deliberate on (and perhaps fight for) their future.



As I'll argue here, these three books can be read as offering specific *uses of religion* in the current era. The specific uses are that of religion: (a) providing a supplemental, not necessarily alternative, epistemology, (b) as a moral foundation for law and politics, and (c) as possibly grounding, if not inspiring, revolution in the name of more just societies. I will give a brief overview of the three works now and then take each of these three uses in turn, concluding with a discussion of faith and transcendence in the global era, including brief reference to the Arab Spring.

### An Overview of the Books

Though it feels like a major new addition to Habermas' corpus, *Between Naturalism and Religion* is not a systematic treatment of the subject matter. That is, it was not written as a philosophical treatise; rather, it is a collection of his relatively recent writings on the theme of reason and publicity in the contemporary era—an era marked by increasingly secularizing trends in reason begun in modernity leading to a scientifically grounded naturalism on the one hand and resurgent religious orthodoxies on the other. These “two countervailing trends mark the intellectual tenor of the age” (p. 1).

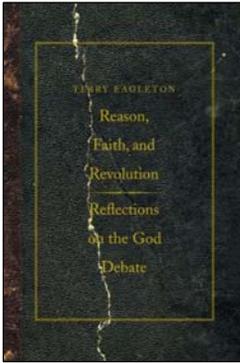
Though relatively discrete essays, there is an overarching goal here: to sketch a reconstruction of reason as a reflexive enterprise able to confront the “opposed, yet complementary, challenges of naturalism and religion”—and this is the kicker—“with the stubborn postmetaphysical insistence on the normative meaning of detranscendentalized reason” (p. 7). The aim here, then, is a sort of accommodation project between the growing insights offered by, for example, biogenetics and cognitive neuroscience, and the normative foundations of major world religions, viewing the latter as vital incorporating chapters, not illusory or mythic digressions, in the history of reason. This is accomplished (or begun) in his outline of postmetaphysical discourse and detranscendentalized reason (both of which are discussed in more detail below) as epistemically demanding *reflexive* enterprises. Reflexive reason—the task of turning reason back on itself—is reconstructive, not deconstructive, in that the aim is to continue to engage in social and public discourse with relatively similar principles of thought and reason in as inclusive of a mode as possible.

Smith's *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* tackles similar territory in that it sees public reason as problematic in the contemporary era due to mistaken assumptions and premises in modernity. But it is largely a critique of what Smith sees as anemic liberal-secular discourse and less a reconstructive effort. The primary goal here seems to be to establish that secular discourse is anemic *because* it is liberal and secular, and that public discourse might be rescued—made more robust, engaging, and authentic—by debating at deeper normative levels. That is, the usage of words like *harm* in legal theory and court decisions are so bereft of meaning in pluralistic, heterogeneous societies that it has become necessary to “smuggle” (p. 33) substantive principles into them.

So the state's (e.g., the U.S.'s) position is that of *neutrality* toward religion, but one of Smith's points is that there is no such thing as neutrality in such moral terms, and it is precisely the veil of neutrality—or even at times not the veil but the spoken refusal to engage in more foundational levels of morality, reason, and normative theory—that precludes more robust



public discourse. This is grasped in looking at a concept like *tolerance* or *reciprocity*, frequently thought to be virtues in the contemporary era. It would be a virtue, Smith thinks, if “religions are relatively similar;” but that itself is a contemporary (or modernist) premise, one that “premodern believers emphatically denied” because, in their picture, “one of the religions leads to salvation, while the others lead to damnation: that is hardly equivalence”(pp. 31□32). This is a problem, Smith thinks, because “what could be more perverse than to insist that reciprocity requires truth to be treated in the same way as falsehood?” (p. 32). More robust public discourse and more careful reasoning might begin, he argues, by “opening up the cage” in which modernity has locked religious discourse (p. 41).



Eagleton’s *Reason, Faith and Revolution* has similar hopes for the interplay of reason and religion (in the Judeo-Christian tradition) providing not just a more comprehensive view of rationality and the necessity of faith in practical reason, but in establishing better societies. The book is based on Eagleton’s Terry Lectures at Yale University and was largely inspired by the crop of books attacking religion from the preceding years, most notably those by atheists Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Eagleton’s response to those writers, whom he collapses together and forms the neologism “Ditchkins,” is that they essentially attack a straw man version of religious belief. It is this “ignorance and prejudice” that ignites Eagleton and not necessarily the disagreement with or rejection of Christianity or other religious traditions.

Recognizing that religion has “wrought untold misery in human affairs,” including “bigotry, superstition, wishful thinking, and oppressive ideology,” the overarching goal here is less apologetic than it is political (p. xi). That is, the “agnostic left cannot afford such intellectual indolence when it comes to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures” both because it “belongs to justice and honesty to confront your opponent at his or her most convincing” and that those Scriptures have much to say to radicals about human emancipation and vital questions of “death, suffering, love, self-dispossession”—questions on which the “left has for the most part maintained an embarrassed silence” (pp. xi□xii). Eagleton proceeds to outline a politics of love informed by the Judeo-Christian tradition that might break this silence and ground radical, emancipatory action.

In summary, Smith primarily shows the failures of secular public reason to provide a moral and political foundation from which discourse in liberal democracies can thrive. Habermas largely agrees with such a view and also offers a reconstruction of public reason along such critical lines, while Eagleton suggests how religion is unfairly caricatured by secular reason and how religion provides a connective tissue for not just liberal democracies but for a potential leftist revolution in the name of establishing more humane and just societies.

Now that I’ve given an overview of each work, the rest of this essay will articulate how the three books can be read as calling for specific uses of religion in early twenty-first century pluralistic societies and beyond.

### **Religion as Providing a Supplemental — Not Necessarily Alternative — Epistemology**

One of the primary controversies that arises in terms of religion is its supposed contrast with science, a conflict addressed by all three of these books. Echoing Smith's comment above, perhaps the most important thing to note about the "religion versus science" clash is the reductivism in the dichotomy, as if there is a unified Religion and Religious View to which people who call themselves religious—Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, etc.—all subscribe and endorse, and, conversely, as if there is a unified Science and Scientific View to which people who call themselves scientists—relativity physicists, sociologists, psychologists, communication scholars—all subscribe and endorse. No such unification of science or religion exists.

Rather, both are remarkably similar in that there are a wide variety of theories, schools of thought, and sects/disciplines at work in the broad categorizing terms of both science and religion. Catholics are different than Protestants, and different versions of Protestantism have different views on, for example, the apocalypse, and yet all are Christians, which, of course, is a different set of beliefs than Muslims, who have Sunnis and Sufism, etc., in the same way that quantum mechanics differs from relativity but both are within the study of physics.

That being said, the supposed contrast between science and religion is that of epistemology: How the scientist knows something is supposedly different than how the religious know something. One is empirical and verifiable; the other is metaphysical and intuitive. One is open for all to see and interrogate; the other is divinely revealed and "known" only through faith. One is self-correcting and systematic; the other is subject to the seeming whims of the Revealer and is otherwise humanly impenetrable.

But it should not be hard (at least for the communication scholar) to see that, in many ways, there is not really a contrast here. Science interrogates what there is through faculties of perception, reasoning, and advances in technology. Do the religious somehow interrogate the world differently? That is, if a Christian and an atheist want to know what rocks are made of, do they really go about this process differently? Probably not. The matter hinges, instead, on the issue of *what is there*; that there is a rock in front of the two women that they wish to analyze is uncontroversial, as is the epistemology, as is the method (ignoring possible methodological differences within the discipline) for analyzing. That is all to say, when it comes to the material, there is no contrast—material facts, typically, are material facts. All three authors hold to such a view.

To assume that there is a contrast, Eagleton says, is to commit the "blunder of believing that religion is a botched attempt to explain the world" (p. 50). Eagleton comically underscores the point, noting that to say as much is like saying that "a novel is a botched piece of sociology" (p. 6), or that "thanks to the electric toaster we can forget about Chekhov" (p. 7). The two have basically nothing to do with one another insofar as the contrast is in purpose and not method or epistemology. More to the point:

The difference between science and theology, as I understand it, is on over whether you see the world as a gift or not; and you cannot resolve this just by inspecting the thing,

any more than you can deduce from examining a porcelain vase that it is a wedding present. (p. 37)

So the point here is that religion offers a different *theory* of what is there and how it came to be, not necessarily an entirely different epistemology.<sup>1</sup> And even if there is a different epistemology at work, in the case of how one comes to believe (or knows) that the world was a gift to humanity given by a Creator, being via, for example, the Bible, this is not (at least not necessarily) a *replacement* epistemology but a *supplemental* one. That is, to say that religion is just *bad science* is a confusion of categories; that's not what religion is *doing*. The question religion is answering is a different question than that asked by science.

But this gets to a deeper philosophical issue and one that is best understood in historical terms: that there is only *one* kind of knowledge, or that there is a type of knowledge to which all other knowledges must defer, and that is scientific knowledge. This is the story of the ascent of modernism, and all three authors are highly critical of this type of modernist, totalizing scientific view of reason giving knowledge—though to varying degrees. Eagleton calls the embodiment of this view Enlightenment Man, who is “born as free, controlling, agent-like, autonomous, invulnerable, dignified, self-responsible, self-possessed, contemplative, dispassionate, and disengaged . . . [He is] celebrated [essentially as] Reason itself” (p. 82).

Reason as an isolated and distinct capacity is a view unique to modernism. “Reason for Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas is indissociable from certain ethical, ontological, metaphysical and even aesthetic commitments which simply fall out of the modernist world picture” (Eagleton, 2009, p. 81).

Smith is keen to highlight this same problem in a chapter entitled “Science, Humanity and Atrocity,” in which he argues that scientific reasoning as divorced from morality is precisely what led to scientific experiments in Manchuria on three-day-old babies and the eugenics of the Nazis. Given that morality is not empirically verifiable in the same way that atoms are, these scientists are just “doing their job,” right? That is, if there really is a stark fact/value split, and it is the scientists’ job to discover or find facts, then there is no *moral issue* at play here.

But if scientific knowledge—empirical, verifiable, replicable—is the type of knowledge to which all knowledge aspires, if it is the premiere epistemology, why is it, Smith wonders, that “most people (scientists included) react with outrage upon learning of the experiments on human beings conducted in occupied Manchuria or Nazi Germany?” (p. 203). More importantly, it makes no sense to reign in their activities based upon some *inferior* epistemology (of religion or ethics or whatever).

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<sup>1</sup>This is largely the point of a section in Paul Boghossian’s *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, where the author wonders, in the cases of Richard Rorty and Cardinal Bellarmine, if it is really true that the two use “a coherent fundamentally different epistemic system,” or “is it just an example of someone using the very same epistemic norms we use to arrive at a surprising *theory* about the world?” (2007, p. 104, emphasis in original).

"Even after Auschwitz," Eagleton says, "there is nothing in their view to be redeemed from. Things are just not . . . desperate enough" (p. 38). For those who find Manchuria or Auschwitz unacceptable, then, what emerges here is a picture of complementary, not competing, epistemologies and theories. There is, in this Toulminian style of reasoning, more than one type of rationality, and there is no *supreme* rationality/rational position from which to judge all other rationalities.

But given that religion, like science, has had regrettable moments of complicity in atrocities like the Holocaust, Habermas seeks to show that either or both sides are not sufficient resources of resistance. Put differently, Habermas pushes even further by trying to show that science and religion, or fact and value, are not even unique, independent systems in the first place. The conviction that:

knowledge based on observation enjoys priority over understanding based on communication . . . underlies the naturalistic assumption that soft hermeneutic knowledge tied to the participant perspective can be *replaced in toto* by "hard" factual knowledge. However, this program is already thwarted by the fact that investigation of the objective world itself rests on an argumentative dispute, which, although it appeals to events accessible from the observer perspective, is nourished by hermeneutic resources. (pp. 206□207)

In other words, specifications of the objective, empirical world are still going to rely on interpretive claims and theories, which, though not solely reducible to normative stakes and values, are necessarily and always informed by them.

Habermas has long been a critic of totalizing scientific/modernist-truncated reason (what he calls "scientism" or "radical naturalism"),<sup>2</sup> offering a highly influential reconstruction of reason called *communicative rationality*, in which the normative dimension of reason is cast along neo-Kantian constructivist lines, combined with principles of intersubjectivity engendering a legitimating model of deliberative democratic procedures en route to collective processes of norm-constitution. But for him, unlike Eagleton and perhaps Smith, this is meant to more carefully and justly complete, not reject, the project of modernity. More recently, he has offered two conceptualizations that further moderate the tension between seeming secular and religious epistemologies: postmetaphysical and detranscendentalized reason.

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<sup>2</sup> Here's a relevant passage from the reviewed work:

Scientism often misleads us into blurring the boundary between natural scientific knowledge which is relevant for understanding ourselves and our place in nature as a whole, on the one hand, and a synthetic naturalistic worldview constructed on this basis, on the other. This form of radical naturalism devalues all types of statements that cannot be traced back to empirical observations, statements of law, or causal explanations, hence moral, legal and evaluative statements no less than religious ones. (p. 141)

The theme of the postmetaphysical in Habermas is encapsulated in a variety of works. It is a confusing concept, for the idea of being *postmetaphysical* seems to imply temporal succession, as if we are somehow beyond metaphysical questions. For Habermas, it is not that we are beyond such questions but rather that we are beyond having these questions answered in advance; postmetaphysical thinking is an approach to inquiry that avoids judging a priori the nature of metaphysical claims. It is part of his discourse theoretic approach to truth, morality, and law that “turns its back on strong ontological conceptions that deduce normativity entirely from the constitution of being or of subjectivity. Instead, it derives a normative content from the practice of argumentation. . . .” ( p. 81) that “seeks rational acceptability of contested statements . . . based on a connection between ‘good reasons’ and those idealizations of the epistemic situation that participants must make when they engage in rational discourse as a form of communication” (p. 82). With discourse theory, the intersubjective process of norm-constitution allows for a moment of transcendent emancipation.

Habermas uses the term *postmetaphysical* then “not only in a methodological sense that concerns procedures and conceptual means but also in a substantial sense, to describe *agnostic* positions that make a sharp distinction between belief and knowledge without assuming the validity of a particular religion” (p. 245, emphasis added). He retains the use of the word *metaphysics*, it seems, to maintain the normative import of the concept, but uses the “post” prefix to deflate the all-encompassing worldview connotation: As he puts it, “Postmetaphysical thinking is ethically modest in the sense that it is resistant to any generally binding concept of the good and exemplary life” (p. 110).

Similarly, detranscendentalized reason is the conceptualization Habermas gives to accommodate the Janus-face of reason; though he ultimately sees reason as building a sort of progressive cosmopolitanism, he recognizes that reason can be both a tool for building and a tool for dismantling, for being “norm-setting” and “obfuscation” at the same time (p. 24). Detranscendentalized reason is a self-reflexive and desublimated approach to reason, being “situated” instead of “pure,” and one that manages the tensions between oppression and emancipation by recognizing its own limits (p. 25). It avoids the “excessive” reasoning (p. 30) of scientific processes without falling into strong skepticism, what he calls “cynical self-destruction” (p. 228).

Given his notion of the postmetaphysical and the detranscendentalized use of reason, Habermas acknowledges that Kantian (and Rawlsian)-type public reason—in which the reasons that count are those that are public, transparent, and (at least quasi-) universal<sup>3</sup>—is unfair to religious minds because it

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<sup>3</sup> Here’s how Kant articulated his conception of public reason: “The *public* use of reason must at all times be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men [sic]; the *private* use of reason, however, may often be very narrowly restricted without the progress of enlightenment being particularly hindered” (1996, pp. 59-60, emphasis in original). What is important here is both the universalizing conception of public reason—reasons that would count for all, under all circumstances (“before the entire public of the reading world,” p. 60)—and the connection of public reason with enlightenment, with being educated, advanced, and ever-improving. This view of public reason has received sustained critique from theologians, feminists, social theorists, communitarians and political and democratic philosophers of a wide-variety of stripes, but it is important to note that this split of public and private reasons was *not*

assumes a division that is artificial; not between public and private per se, but *within the being* of religious persons.<sup>4</sup> The “. . . normative expectation to let secular reasons ultimately decide is to *ignore* . . . an existence guided by faith” and thus, we must release citizens from the burden of having to make a strict separation of the two (pp. 129–130, emphasis mine).

But what about normative religious reasons being mistaken or contrary to the principles of a constitutional democratic society? Isn't this just giving religion a free pass in matters of truth and justification? No, for Habermas thinks this would go too far in the other direction. The problem for religion is usually the nontransparency of its truths. This is a familiar complaint of nonbelievers: Religion is a conversation stopper; justifications that run simply “Because God says so” leave interlocutors no room to respond, no place to take or continue the conversation.

This objection was perhaps popularized by Richard Rorty in “Religion as a Conversation Stopper” (1994).<sup>5</sup> Smith discusses this idea and Rorty in particular on pp. 216–220, where he makes a bold point: It is Rorty's idea of public reason that precludes further argument and debate. His “prescription looks like a recipe for a discourse that is assured in advance of being shallow, empty, and pointless,” and Rorty's thin and truncated reason is ironic given all of his criticisms of Enlightenment Reason (p. 219). Smith continues: “Why would anyone want to waste precious time and energy in that sort of predictably futile and boring conversation? Contrary to Rorty, it appears that it is not religion after all, but rather the imposition of artificial constraints on discourse, that is the ‘conversation-stopper’” (p. 220).

In contrast to both Rorty and Smith, Habermas says that religion must understand itself as limited by the “revealed” nature of some of its truths (pp. 111–112) and must “translate relevant contributions from religious language into a publicly intelligible language” (p. 113). In this way, the religious become actually a *model* for how public argument and cooperation ought to work. “The advances in reflexivity exacted from religious consciousness in pluralistic societies . . . provides a model for the mindset of secular groups in multicultural societies” (p. 270).

But how does this process of translation not place an asymmetrical burden on the religious, in which people hold bifurcated doctrines and commitments? Because Habermas has a similar requirement

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intended as a means by which to eradicate religion from individual or even public life, but rather to conduct the business of politics in as neutral—and therefore inclusive—of a language as possible.

<sup>4</sup> Though this division is seemingly built into certain religious views, for example Christianity in the tradition of Augustine (recall the difference between the city of God and the city of man) and Locke (the division of state and religion is such that the true religion cannot be coercively assented to). The distinction is grasped quickly in the gospels' report of Jesus and the question of paying tribute to the state. Jesus asks for a coin and then says: “Whose image and superscription hath it? They answered and said, Caesar's. And he said unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's, and unto God the things which be God's” (Luke 20:24–25, KJV). Smith tackles this division and differences of purpose in his chapter “Disoriented Discourse: The Secular Subversion of Religious Freedom.”

<sup>5</sup> Rorty modified some of his views on the matter in a later essay (2003).

for secular discourse as well, requiring it to reflect on its own limits.<sup>6</sup> The idea is to learn the limits of each view—secularism and religion—and to understand that both have a normative requirement to be self-reflexive, that is, to understand their limits and potential blind spots, and to have engagement on controversial political issues as a “*complementary learning process*” (p. 111). So it seems Habermas does maintain a difference in epistemology, but there is no clear winner in terms of *The Best Epistemology A Priori*; that title doesn’t exist. Instead, he has reconstructed public reason and communicative rationality so as to adjudicate and encompass epistemological disputes, primarily of the social controversy variety.

By imposing the self-reflexive requirement—to reflect on the limits and blind spots of one’s epistemology—on both, an asymmetrical burden does not exist on the religious to translate their views, and thereby engage in self-reductionism, into secular rationality. The cognitive burden is symmetrical and formulated precisely as having the “appropriate epistemic attitudes” (p. 143). In this sense, Habermas conceives of public reason as “epistemically demanding” and oriented toward, in a constitutional democracy, a truth-sensitive government; the truth element is vital, for he declares that a “post-truth democracy” would “no longer be a democracy” (pp. 143–144).<sup>7</sup>

The overall idea here, in Habermas, Eagleton, and Smith, is a view of reason that acknowledges more to rationality and knowledge than empirical science and systems rationalization gives us. This is not to deny that science provides important insights into the world and perhaps even something like a human condition; it is simply to say that naturalism and empirical science is not the epistemology to which all others must defer—and that, often, neither is religious epistemology. The goal for all of these authors is to restrike a balance between reason and reasonableness, between science and religion, between, in short, fact and value—for, in Eagleton’s words, our “age is equally divided by a technocratic reason which subordinates value to fact, and a fundamentalist reason which replaces fact with value” (p. 137). Habermas further explains the confusion as not one of poles but of confusions of categories: “The ontologization of natural scientific knowledge into a naturalistic world view reduced to ‘hard’ facts is not science but bad metaphysics” (p. 207).

### Religion as Moral Foundation for Law and Politics

Another use of religion is that it provides a moral foundation from which public discourse can thrive. The idea that secularism is an outgrowth of the Judeo-Christian tradition in the West has been established (e.g., Taylor, 2007). All three authors develop this idea, often with reference to Charles Taylor’s work, to show that secular reason is more adequate and substantive in modernity due to the

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<sup>6</sup> This prevents the oscillating poles of what Chaim Perelman & Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca call the skeptic and the fanatic (1969, p. 62). The notion to expel fanaticism was of course a driving impulse behind Kant’s philosophy as well. Citing Slavoj Žižek, Eagleton notes that fanaticism results when one confuses *faith* with *knowledge* (p. 114).

<sup>7</sup> Though one wonders what this conception of truth is apart from a comprehensive doctrine/normative theory and whether or not it ends up defaulting to the very scientific/the world-is-the-sum-total-of-facts view that he set out to question.

shared and presumed backdrop of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In this vein, Habermas notes the intimate connection between religion and practical reason:

Without historical credit advanced by positive religion, with its sort of suggestive and inspired images, practical reason would lack the epistemic stimulus to generate the postulates with which it attempts to recuperate a *need* articulated in religious terms within the horizon of rational reflection. (p. 223)

Smith goes perhaps the furthest in this regard, demonstrating that key liberal moral terms like *harm* are not so much "misguided as empty" (p. 72) without a moral foundation *à la* Judeo-Christianity. This is a key to the overall argument of his book, in which, borrowing from Max Weber's notion of modernity as an "iron cage," secular discourse operates as a cage that keeps out the deeper and necessary normative commitments required to provide a foundation for more ethical public life. This is not to say that there is *no* foundation or meaning to terms like *harm*, but rather that their meanings are malleable and subject to ostensibly endless interpretations. So a liberal-democratic definition of harm is empty. But it doesn't *stay* empty; rather, it is imbued with meaning via a process he calls "smuggling" (pp. 24-37).

For him, this is not a problem *per se*, in that he thinks that, for example, Millian utilitarianism provides the substantive meaning to harm in certain contexts, but that this is precisely what liberalism and secular discourse claims it *doesn't* do, thereby making the justification of legal and ethical terms circular. In his chapter study on harm in Jeremy Bentham, J.S. Mill, and Joel Feinberg, he concludes with a quasi-Nietzschean insight: "It turns out to be a receptive vessel into which advocates can pour any content they like, or that they can persuade others to swallow" (p. 104). The upshot of this is that it allows everyone to accept *the harm principle* and then simply engage in argument for what counts as harm or the articulation of harm in your favored conception of the good life. This is precisely what someone like John Rawls, and to some degree Habermas, might say; the fact that there is no substantive grounding to harm and that such is open to revision and legitimation as long as procedural norms of discourse and law are followed is precisely what makes democracies thrive.

But Smith's concern is not with procedural democracy or intersubjectivity but rather in that such amounts to a continually *limited* and *limiting* discussion of the *substantive* issues here. In other words, public arguments on harm will always keep the informing comprehensive doctrine or normative theories *in the background* and thus *smuggled into the conversation*, and that just won't do. "If our conversations about 'harm' are to be anything more than obfuscating and question-begging, they need to carry us to consider our deeper commitments and their bases in such things as 'metaphysics, ethics, theology'" (p. 105).

The point is less that secular reason, the secularization of a term like "harm," is *bad*, but that it is untenable for it will always be circular, and ultimately that it is too thin a conception to adequately ground a just society. This is perhaps no more evident than in the case of something like human dignity, in which the totalizing scientific worldview, despite powerful microscopes and advanced technology, has yet to

confirm that there is such a thing as *dignity* within humans. In fact, Smith is keen to note that quite the opposite has been true in the contemporary era:

Stephen Hawking . . . observes that the 'human race is just a chemical scum on a moderate-sized planet'. . . Monod [says that a] 'belief in the natural rights of man' [is archaic and] 'disgusting' . . . [John] Gray contends . . . we are 'straw dogs,' . . . [and] Steven Pinker recently published an essay revealing entitled 'The Stupidity of Dignity.'<sup>8</sup> (p. 179)

Now, of course, one simple answer here is to follow through with the noncognitivist view in which it is not reason nor scientific worldviews but sentiment/emotion that undergirds our morality. In this way, the lack of noncircular, rationalistic basis for societal values is no problem at all. In the expressivist tradition, moral language is simply endorsing and prescribing: "I approve of this and so should you!" Part of Smith's point is that this is perhaps an *inevitable* position for human values in the secular age, for the foundation necessary to ground this is either unrecognized as universally reasonable or in the off-limits world of religion or both.

Again, he doesn't seem to have a problem *per se* with the fact that such would be expressivistic or circular but in that they are *necessarily so* and yet we often *act* as if they are not. This is his take on Martha Nussbaum's (2000) touchstone essay, "In Defense of Universal Values." He says that if she is merely expressing her favored views, then his critiques don't hold, because she is simply seeking assent to her preferences. But the irony here is that isn't she, then, simply reporting "truths revealed to her," be they biological or simple whim? He doesn't think that's what she's doing. Rather: "It seems more plausible . . . and more charitable, to interpret Nussbaum as doing—or at least *trying* to do—what she says she is doing" (p. 174), which is philosophically defending universal values.

In other words, secular discourse *precludes* more open and honest exploration of (at least some) citizens' deepest commitments and more robust articulation of arguments. Smith is not certain that a more robust religious, for example, Judeo-Christian, conception of harm will be better, for it

may turn out that in our pluralistic society, the sort of thin, desiccated public discourse we have today . . . is the best we can do. But we will only know if we open up the cage and see what happens. (p. 225)

In a way, Habermas is advocating something similar; his reconstruction of public reason as to be an epistemically demanding affair affords precisely such an opening up, of perhaps more robust debates at the level of normative theories and comprehensive doctrines; in short, public argumentation not on simple key terms but on competing visions of the good life more generally. But while Habermas seeks a balance between naturalism and religion, Smith seeks a balance between naturalism and liberal constructivism. Habermas is keen to point out that religion offers a genuine source of normative commitment, but he is also careful to not concede too much to the religious view at the cost of all the seeming advances of

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<sup>8</sup> This essay is available from *The New Republic*: <http://www.tnr.com/article/the-stupidity-dignity>

modernity and to concede the institutionalization of broadly Western liberal values of, for example, tolerance and human dignity. Smith has no such reservations because, in his view, all of these advances and institutionalizations are compatible with the religious views in the Judeo-Christian tradition and there is *perhaps* a gain in a more reasonable and robust foundation for these (liberal) values.

### **Religion and The Possibility of Revolution and More Just Societies**

Eagleton goes a step further than either Habermas or Smith in that he does not seek so much a reconstruction of reason more inclusive of and informed by religion nor an opening up of the cage of secularism so as to provide a less circular foundation for public life. Instead, he sees religion in the form of Christianity as providing for nothing less than the possibility of a Marxian-style revolution. In this he follows a philosophical tradition described by Habermas: "From Hegel to Marx and Hegelian Marxism, philosophy attempts to assimilate the *collective* emancipatory moment of the Judeo-Christian promise of salvation by drawing on the idea of the 'people of God' inherited from Kant" (p. 232).

Like Habermas, Eagleton recognizes the need to imbue public discourse with more substantive argumentation in terms of comprehensive doctrines and normative theories. This has long been the criticism of leftist politics against the liberal state, that neoliberalism is empty and/or fails to live up to its promises, thereby demanding something more substantive in its place (usually some form of Marxian-infused socialism).<sup>9</sup> Like Smith, but unlike most critics of neoliberalism, Eagleton is convinced that religion, and particularly (Judeo-)Christianity (not explicitly but implied throughout Smith), is precisely the way to engage in more substantive political change.

So, if Smith's project is a largely negative critique showing problems and then offering religion as a useful reservoir for future reparation, and Habermas' work is both a negative and positive critique in a reconstructive effort, Eagleton's is part apologetic defense and part a call for full-scale revolution and revolutionary politics.

While Habermas is not similarly committed to Marxian-socialism, he has long been critical of what he sums as the "totalizing assumption that the mechanisms of the market and of bureaucratic normalization lead to an unlimited expansion of the principle of exchange and to the *hermetic* functionalism of a completely regulated world" (p. 196). In his view, the institutional forms of life combined with capitalistic-market mentalities degrades the very possibility of freedom, cutting off the conditions for such at the knees in the discouragement of, if not outright rejection of, reflective—and reflexive—reasonable thought. Reflexivity is the "ethos of liberal citizenship," an ethos that demands that "both sides should determine the limits of faith and knowledge in a reflexive manner" (p. 6). This reflexive manner is a "cognitive presupposition" of interlocutors that, when in place, should deflect and avoid the current polarizations of religious and secular mentalities (*ibid.*).

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<sup>9</sup> The cleanest articulation of this is probably found in Harvey (2005). The work of critics like Judith Butler, Wendy Brown, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe all present challenges to the liberal state, with perhaps Žižek (e.g., 2009) being the most stringent.

His critical theory of morality and his overarching idea of *emancipation*, then, is tethered to reasons and argumentation in a vibrant political life, itself giving rise to the possibility of *freedom*. "Reasons and the exchange of reasons constitute the logical space in which the free will is formed. Reasons can certainly constrain us—to change our opinion, for example. But good reasons force us to grasp something in a cognitive sense" (p. 191). The point here is that it is *through reason*—reason conceived in his distinct sense—that humans are able to be free.

Eagleton's view of human freedom, of emancipation, though requiring revolution as a means of transforming the world into a more just society, is not anchored in a human practice at all, but in Christianity. For him, the connections between Marxism and Christianity are apparent; during Jesus' time, the gospel appealed largely to the "scum of the earth"—those who do not fit into the hierarchies of ordered society, those who are lost and searching, those who were disaffected and perhaps alienated from mainstream life. This of course sounds much like the workers for whom Marx wrote about revolution, and Eagleton goes even further to connect those highly vested in the capitalistic system with breeding a sense of illusion that manifests "spirituality" as New Ageism—"which is just the sort of caricature of the spiritual one would expect a materialistic civilization to produce" (p. 40).

Eagleton writes about New Agey "spiritualism" with the same stringent criticism as Marx wrote about Christianity.<sup>10</sup> The shared overlap here is that New Ageism surges as late capitalism triumphs precisely because it "offers a refuge from the world, not a mission to transform it" (p. 41). Recall that this was Marx's explanation of religion/Christianity, that it existed as a respite from the intolerable working conditions and truncated, compartmentalized life that modernity provided. But Eagleton handles this objection implicitly by noting that it was the original core of Christianity to transform the world according to an ethics of love, not materiality; it was to resist commodification and eschew worldly standards of success.

But somewhere along the line, the revolution was betrayed. Something happened as Christianity "shifted from the side of the poor and dispossessed to that of the rich and aggressive" (p. 55).<sup>11</sup> In other

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<sup>10</sup> Consider this passage:

Those who are in every other way worldly, cynical and hard-boiled (Hollywood superstars and the like) reveal a truly bottomless gullibility when it comes to spirituality. Nobody is more otherworldly than the worldly, nobody more soft-centered than the hard-nosed. . . . This is why people who are in every other respect urbane and streetwise believe that affairs on earth are being controlled from an alien spaceship parked behind a cloud. They would probably not believe this if they had only \$38 in the bank. Money is a great breeder of unreality." (pp. 40–41)

<sup>11</sup> It is necessary to note that this "shift" is only true in so-called Western countries and not in the so-called Global South (e.g., Latin America, Africa, India and China) where Christianity is frequently said to be expanding, if not exploding. For example, Landau (2010) of the BBC reports that "Christianity is growing in China like never before," and Jenkins (2002) extrapolates upon then-recent figures to the year 2025, and, assuming some sense of stability in conversions,

words, "far from refusing to conform to the powers of this world, Christianity has become the nauseating cant of lying politicians, corrupt bankers, and fanatical neocons, as well as an immensely profitable industry in its own right" (p. 56). The idea here is that the core of Christianity is *so* countercultural and anti-status-quo (things like not exchanging an eye for an eye but turning the other cheek) that it would necessarily cause a revolution against the contemporary liberal state and capitalism, and that any "preaching of the Gospel which fails to constitute a scandal and affront to the political state is in [his] view effectively worthless" (p. 58).

So the institutionalization of the Christian religion then is as much a target for Eagleton as it is for those (like "Ditchkins") who seek to conflate science and reason into a totalizing scientism. The most important use of religion for him is that it provides a foundation for a more just and free society, in that Christian love informs a "political love . . . [as an] . . . ethical basis for socialism" (p. 32). But to him this is not simply a version of the Gospel; an ethics of love leading to more just societies is exactly what Jesus came to do and what his followers are still called to do. But it comes with a high cost, he says, in reference to the martyrdom of nearly all of Jesus' disciples and followers. As he puts it in perhaps the most quotable line in the book: "If you follow Jesus and don't end up dead, it appears you have some explaining to do," continuing: "The stark signifier of the human condition is one who spoke up for love and justice and was done to death for his pains" (p. 27).

This, he thinks, is compatible with a sort of Marxian socialism in that the "New Testament is a brutal destroyer of human illusion" (p. 27), and that Marxism itself began, *inter alia*, "as a response to a Christian movement which had betrayed its origins" (p. 67). He also notes the curiosity that the left objects to Christianity as a potential wellspring while it does "not appear to object overmuch to Jewish theology (Benjamin, Bloch, Adorno and the like), or even to, say, Buddhist pacifism" (p. 67).<sup>12</sup> Even if one doesn't ultimately buy his ideas, Eagleton notes, the overriding point is: "There are lessons which the secular left can learn from religion, for all its atrocities and absurdities, and the left is not so flush with ideas that it can afford to look such a gift horse in the mouth" (p. 168).

### Faith and Openings Toward Transcendence in the Global Era

Overall, there is a sense from these three books that religion is quite useful to (liberal) democracies, as is the necessity of democracies taking religion seriously by providing protections for its practice and inclusion of it in political processes. But whenever one talks about *uses*, as I have done in this

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there would be some 2.6 billion Christians" in total, with "633 million in Africa, 640 million in Latin America, and 460 million in Asia. Europe, with 555 million, would have slipped to third place . . . By 2050, only about one-fifth of the world's three billion Christians will be non-Latino whites.

<sup>12</sup> As should be apparent, he takes pains to separate Christianity from Christian fundamentalism throughout the book. In a similar call-out against the left (though a different left in this case, perhaps):

Many Western liberals are careful to distinguish their criticisms of so-called radical Islam from a criticism of Islam itself; they are rarely so scrupulous when it comes to Christianity. It seems not to be the case that liberalism begins at home. (p. 98)

essay, it is important to note that this often obscures a fundamental question: whether a religion is true or not. But the question of truth does not really arise for these authors, other than as tethered to embedded and reflexive reason.<sup>13</sup>

Eagleton admits that one is free, of course, to reject religion and to fight against it—but cautions interlocutors to be sure that they are rejecting the real thing and not some “worthless caricature” (p. xi). People like Dawkins and Hitchens reduce the arguments for the existence of a God and the practice of religion to a simplistic straw man: “Though the account may not be true, it is not, in my opinion, stupid, vicious, or absurd” (p. 33) and, more revealing, he notes that “. . . those who polemicize most ferociously against religion regularly turn out to be the least qualified to do so,” drawing an analogy to disciplinary practices and anxieties: “Those who polemicize against literary theory do not hate it because they have read it, but rather do not read it because they hate it” (p. 52).

Part of his argument for why it is not stupid or absurd is not just his recasting of reason discussed above, but also the fact that faith plays a deeply important role in the lives of all individuals. That is, the idea that someone is *just* a Man of Science or a Woman of Rationality is a myth. In a descriptive sense: “Justifications must come to an end somewhere; and where they generally come to an end is in some kind of faith”; and, in a more normative claim, “A hunger for absolute justification is a neurosis, not a tenacity to be admired” (p. 124). While some might accuse Eagleton of equivocating here on *faith*, noting that *faith that p* is different than *faith in p*, his point is that *faith in p* is an absolute requirement of what it means to be human; certainty for present and future affairs does not exist and therefore matters come down to trust. And another name for trust is faith. Trust in *p*, faith in *p*, he seems to be saying, is simply making a commitment to something despite not having all the evidence—and by the way, no one ever has all the evidence.

The other option here is skepticism, which is rejected on practical grounds by Eagleton and Smith. Habermas seeks, to some degree, to avoid this conversation entirely by detranscendentalizing reason. In other words, by removing the transcendental possibility, and reconstructing reason as to more robustly account for a wider array of human affairs and conditions, one is more in a position to accurately account for truth and, more importantly for Habermas, to arrive at legitimate laws and social practices via intersubjectivity.<sup>14</sup>

But, as Eagleton notes, transcendence has not gone away. Instead, it has taken the form of art, literature, and the humanities; the idea here is that transcendence—that there is something “beyond science, material welfare, democratic politics, and economic utility”—persists (p. 83). Smith agrees, and he calls this pursuit of (persistent nag of?) transcendence “openings into spirit,” telling of a colleague who claimed to be incapable of religious faith but was “deeply sensitive to art and music” and admitted to

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<sup>13</sup> The “as tethered to embedded and reflexive reason” part captures Habermas and mostly Eagleton; Smith’s view is less clear.

<sup>14</sup> There seems to be a difference in Habermas between *transcendence* and *transcendental*, with approval and regard for the former (that intersubjectivity itself is a form a transcendence) and the aforementioned distaste for the latter, though this isn’t exactly clear to me.

being “troubled by a naturalistic worldview because he could find no real home in it . . . for Mozart . . .” (p. 205). Other “openings” can be things like *language* (“with all its intricacies and subtleties and poetry”), *land* (“fields, mountains, forests”), *law*, *love*, and even *death* (in a sort of existentialism); in short, how to account for *awe* and the *sublime* (p. 205) and how such create openings and ruptures in the secular, totalizing scientific reason view.

Though he does not discuss art or language in this same way, Habermas notes how sensitivity to tragedy and human suffering is necessary for a proper morality and cohesive civic liberalism. “Even today, religious traditions perform the function of articulating an awareness of what is lacking or absent. They keep alive a sensitivity to failure and suffering” (p. 6). The idea here is that religion can give voice to that sense of *missing-ness* discussed by Smith above.

Eagleton agrees, though he is keen to note that all of these things (politics, art, literature) are not themselves transcendent but that they simply *point* to something beyond. It is fitting, he thinks, that works of art are themselves seen as “mysterious, self-dependent and self-moving,” for they are “images of God for an agnostic age,” filling the vacancy of transcendence left by the removal of religion and the secularization of society. But filling this role with anything other than God is simply futile: “Works of art cannot save us. They can simply render us more sensitive to what needs to be repaired” (p. 159).

These openings, combined with a continued insistence on the necessity of morality and ethics for societies, leads Smith to question if anyone *really* believes in the totalizing naturalistic worldview. Of course, it could be that the “reductively naturalistic worldview is true even if hardly any of us can bring ourselves to entirely embrace it” (p. 198), but given that so many of us, scientists included, are not prepared to follow the view to its logical conclusion, that we seem to hold onto *something*, some sort of belief otherwise, suggests the untruth of the view. That is, “. . . separated from the question *what we believe*, the question of *what truth is* can mean nothing to us,” for there is “no escaping the fact that it is *we*—finite, fallible, alternately credulous and skeptical human beings—who are posing the questions, and we are posing them for ourselves and for our purposes” (p. 198).

On this point, Habermas, Eagleton and Smith would ultimately agree: morality, politics, governance, science, and art are all human affairs meant to serve human purposes—and religion has uses in any and all of those domains. Where they differ, it seems (at least between Smith/Eagleton and Habermas) is on whether religion, though itself a human affair, is based on and strives to reflect something that isn’t human.

As I’m writing this, it is hard not to put this admittedly highly Western conversation of religion, reason and modernity into play with the explosion of revolts seemingly in the name of more political freedom (if not democracy) in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and Libya—what Seyla Benhabib (2011) and others are calling a sort of Arab Spring. What will democracy, political freedoms, and/or human rights look like in these non-Western countries after such seemingly populist uprisings, if anything at all? How might they be legitimated, grounded, justified or rejected? What role will Christianity or Judaism or other religions play in these largely Islamic populations? As Benhabib notes, “There is no single

model for combining religion and democracy, nor is there a single model for defining the role of faith in the public square" (para. 13).

This review essay has largely been about how those relationships are renegotiated seemingly constantly in a liberal democracy like the United States. That an embedded reason oriented toward truth in which interlocutors of all political, social, genetic, religious, and moral stripes have a stance of epistemic reflexivity, as argued for (to varying degrees) in the books by Smith, Habermas, and Eagleton, might provide a better cognitive presupposition for political, legal, and social argumentation seems worthwhile to explore within and outside of constitutional liberal democracies. Overall, these three books have powerful critiques of existing societies and institutions, as well as suggestions for future societies.<sup>15</sup> These lines of thought become all the more important as we endeavor to establish more accessible and just futures and as, for better or worse, democracy, liberalism, and capitalism continue to transform the globe.

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<sup>15</sup>Habermas, in particular, discusses the idea of a political constitution for a pluralist world society in accordance with his neo-Kantian cosmopolitanism, pp. 312–352. Most notable here are his concluding sentences to the book, which put "religious" and "freedom" at the heart of the matter of culture, capitalism, and democracy in Western and non-Western countries:

Competing social models of capitalism coexist even within the domain of Western culture, which is the cradle of capitalist modernization and remains the source of its dynamism. Not all Western nations are prepared to accept the social and cultural costs at home and abroad of the unrectified global disparities in wealth that neoliberals would foist upon them for the sake of a more rapid increase in affluence for the time being . . . The many cultural faces of a pluralist global society, or *multiple modernities*, do not fit well with a completely deregulated and politically neutralized world market society. For this would rob the non-Western cultures that are shaped by other world religions of their freedom to assimilate the achievements of modernity with their own resources. (pp. 351–352).

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