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Irreligion in America: *A Justification for a New Normative Framework*

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ABSTRACT: Jürgen Habermas professes, “The constitutional state must not only act neutrally towards worldviews but it must also rest on normative foundations which can be justified neutrally towards worldviews—and that means in postmetaphysical terms.”¹ In other words, we are subsisting in an era when religious and secular persons cohabitate, and ought to realize a unified moral attitude for the sake of maintaining our personal liberty. In accordance with Habermas, I contend that in order to reach an agreement on normativity the appropriate means must first be established to ensure an operative modern state. I propose Western nations, particularly the U. S., will need to amend their normative framework in light of the present post-secular horizon where both religious and profane worldviews coexist. A mechanism for social integration that replaces religion’s function is essential in preventing ideological conflicts that may result in violence, human rights violations, and economic decline. For the purposes of this article, I attempt to discern what a potential framework should embrace by (a) recognizing what secular reason lacks in the context of modernity, and (b) how religious language can contribute to public reason through either a public theology or public philosophy. Ultimately, I attempt to highlight the ways in which religious language may legitimately influence the reconstruction of an integrating normative mechanism for modern society.

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The intention of this essay is to provide an examination of the pervading scholarship in secularization theory while demonstrating that current

¹ Jürgen Habermas, *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-secular Age* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 21.

research suggests that a revised universal normative framework may have the potential to restore meaning in postmodern society. Such a framework would replace religious authority as the primary mechanism for social integration, and thus account for pluralism. I attempt to discern what a practical framework should indicate by a) recognizing what secular reason lacks in the context of modernity, and b) how religious language can contribute to public reason through either a public theology or public philosophy. Ultimately, I attempt to highlight the ways in which religious language may legitimately influence the reconstruction of an integrating normative mechanism for modern society.

My claims are endorsed by the sociological theories that render the normative breakdown of pre-modern society and by historical accounts of modern social transformations that are directly responsible for engendering new theories of meaning.

The Demand for a Normative Theory

The Western necessity for a normative framework can be boiled down to what Jürgen Habermas refers to as the modern dilemma. For instance, although a secular society founded on natural reason can be stable, the solidarity and collective action needed to ensure its preservation may not have a reliable source of motivation.²

In a democratic society, citizens aren't simply to obey the law, but to construct it. They must be compelled to participate in public life in order to promote their interests and that of the common good.³ Ironically, however, as much as the liberal state needs collective action to continue operating, it cannot legally force participation upon its citizens given such action would violate the very liberty the state protects.⁴ Democracy requires the solidarity and commitment of its citizens to perpetuate itself. Yet, if there is no motivation to act on behalf of the collective, opposed to self-interest, state de-stabilization seems inevitable. Habermas expands on this dilemma by stating:

² Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 34.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid 39.

Given due consideration to the religious heritage of its moral foundations, the liberal state should consider the possibility that it may not be able to meet the completely new challenges it faces simply by relying on the formulations it developed earlier to meet those attending its origins. Today, the language of the market penetrates every pore and forces every interpersonal relation into the schema of individual preference. The social bond, however, is based on mutual recognition and cannot be reduced to the concepts of contract, rational choice, and the maximization of utility.⁵

Political motivation is just one example of what the irreligious state lacks simply due to the fact that secular morality is not embedded in communal practice.⁶ In the following sections I provide a brief history of the emergence of secularization in the West and attempt to showcase how its prime features contributed to the dissolution of universal norms.

Modern Theories of Secularization

In order to clarify terminology, I want to establish that “secularization” refers to a process wherein religion loses its power in the social system. For example, it is a decrease in religious authority in the matters of public life, such as marriage, education, vocation, ethics, etc. It is not to be confused with the term “secularism” that promotes an irreligious lifestyle. To quote Bryan Wilson, “secularism promotes irreligion, secularization is the process.”⁷ The focus for the purposes of this paper is secularization, and more specifically secularization theory. Put simply, secularization theory is a hypothesis that suggests there is a direct relationship between modernity and religion. For example, the theory assumes that as societies become more modern, they will in turn become less religious. By modernization I refer to Steve Bruce’s definition, which associates “modern” with the increase in technology and industrialization, rather than a particular time

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” in *The Frankfurt School of Religion: Key Writings by Major Thinkers*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Routledge: 2004), 5.

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2010).

⁷ Bryan Wilson, “Secularization: The Inherited Model,” in *The Sacred in a Secular Age: Toward Revision in the Scientific Study of Religion*, ed. Phillip E. Hammond (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 11.

period.⁸ The theory also postulates that as the world modernizes due to globalization religion will ultimately die out.

Secularization theory gained influence in the 19th century due to the populist writings of Karl Marx and the anthropological account Sigmund Freud provided for religion. Both claimed religion was pure illusion, or the “opium of the people,” albeit for different reasons. Such reasons, however, are not relevant for the purposes of this work. What is significant is the academic milieu that manifested around the opinion that religion obstructs progress. Freud states that “...a turning away from religion is bound to occur with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth, and that we find ourselves at this very juncture in the middle of that phase of development.”⁹ Even Durkheim early in his career supported the secularization hypothesis, claiming religion loses its purpose in modernity due to society’s evolution into differentiated value spheres. Each sphere has its own means of legitimation; therefore, religion lost its hegemony on validation. Durkheim believed religion would ultimately withdraw from society since its core functions were replaced by secular domains.¹⁰

The intent of early sociologists such as Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons was to explain the phenomena of modernity. They came to the conclusion that the dominant mechanism of integration, the church, had been disintegrated irreparably by secular industry. Classic sociological theory shows the problem of modern integration to revolve around themes of function, rationalization, and pluralism.¹¹ These categories, explained below, also include critiques that illuminate the shift in development of secularization theory. The shift leads to the question of whether a restorative framework for societal integration is necessary.

Before elaborating on the components of function, rationalization, and pluralism it is important to note that these arguments have led to a reconstruction and renewed understanding of secularization theory as a whole. For example, developments in social action theory have lead many

⁸ Steve Bruce, *In Defense of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 26.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 63.

¹⁰ Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, trans. W.D. Halls (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

¹¹ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

prominent sociologists to reject the old secularization hypothesis altogether and accept that religion is simply evolving. How is it evolving? Put broadly, the consensus among rejectionists is that religion has not disappeared per se, but receded into the private sphere.¹² This supposition acknowledges that belief, as we have seen with the data, is still strong within many communities. In conjunction with privatization, they claim faith has transformed at the institutional level. Due to the lack of state regulation, religion has diversified and acclimated to the believer's tastes. The transformation has resulted in new religious sects, ideological shifts in traditional denominations, and alternative spiritualities developing outside of the church setting.¹³ This seemingly chaotic outgrowth of religion is coined by Luckmann (1967) as *invisible religion*. "Invisible religion" is a functional approach to religion that assumes that the construction of the objective world, which provides society with meaning, is an act of transcendence over the individual's biological nature. Therefore, any norm that transcends natural function can be viewed as a religious phenomenon. Luckmann's philosophy makes religion integral to the human being and incapable of being separated from the person. He does, however, realize there is a difference between the religious person, on one hand, and organized institutional forms on the other. This distinction allows Luckmann to accept the secularization of society without conceding the secularization of the human being.¹⁴

Returning to the themes listed above, religion as a social organizing mechanism will be analyzed against current scholarship in respect to function, rationalization, and pluralism.

Functionalism

Durkheim established the functional approach to sociology in his seminal work *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893). Durkheim proposed the concept of *structural functionalism*, which suggested societal analysis be

¹² Talcott Parsons, "Religion in Postindustrial America: The Problem of Secularization," *Social Research* 41, no. 2 (1974): 193-225.

¹³ Rodney Stark, "Church and Sect," in *The Sacred in a Secular Age: Toward Revision in the Scientific Study of Religion*, ed. Phillip E. Hammond (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

¹⁴ Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (London: MacMillan, 1967).

drawn by accounting for collective behaviors, rather than solely on the actions of the individual. From this perspective Durkheim formulated a theory to describe modernity that implied the services traditionally performed by the church such as education, policy, social engagements, and so forth became differentiated into separate secularized institutions. Functional differentiation, as it were, was a part of industrialization. It allowed for various sectors within society to perform activities normally handled by the church. For example, as governments and private enterprise grew, the citizen had the option to be educated, married, employed, and provided health care outside of religious authority. Functionalists acknowledge that religion is more than simply beliefs, but practice. The performance aspect of religion manifests in the form of ceremonies, ritual, and ethical duty. These religious practices provided the community a way to signify change and acknowledge an individual's progress. Modernity, according to Durkheim, led to the replacement of religion's function in society by secular, functionally differentiated domains. Recent literature, however, has critiqued this theory, claiming that although the social purpose of the church has diminished it does not suggest that the moral and spiritual beliefs associated with religious organizations have decreased—demand may still exist within society to establish churches, mosques, temples, and other places of worship.¹⁵

In addition, the functionalist perspective assumes a linear progression from a unified religious state to uninhibited and increasing functional fragmentation, as if societies are predetermined to become secular modern states. Recent scholarship, however, has produced a heavy critique of this assumption. Multiple fields within the social sciences including ethnography and comparative politics, have suggested that the world's civilizations undergo religious transformation rather than disintegration. Examples can be found in the Evangelical revival in Latin America, the Pentecostal movement in Asia, and the persistent conflict between Sunni and Shia in the Middle East.¹⁶

¹⁵ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York, NY: Free Press, 1995).

¹⁶ Peter Berger, "How My Views Have Changed," interview by Gregor Thuswaldner, September 12, 2013, accessed January 1, 2017, http://thecresset.org/2014/Lent/Thuswaldner_L14.html.

Of course, in order for functional differentiation to fully manifest, it would need a substantial private sphere. The advent of the industrial revolution provided such an outlet for citizens to extract products and services outside of the church community. The advancement of technology and production power strengthened the capitalist economy and expanded private enterprise so that citizens became reliant on their material reputation rather than on their formal standing within the church-state system.

The functional differentiation that Durkheim describes can be justified through the historical lens. The separation of church and state advocated by the colonists in addition to the growing economy and stable government allowed for civil society to expand outside of the traditional religious network.

Rationalization

The theory of rationalization as a cause for secularization was initially proposed by Max Weber and widely accepted by prominent scholars, particularly by the likes of Durkheim, Parsons, and Berger. Weber suggests that modernity is defined by rationalized knowledge systems. Each system can be imagined as an autonomous sphere of knowledge, self-regulating and goal-oriented. As a result, there is no longer a means for an integrating metanarrative (such as religion) to establish itself, or maintain precedence, in society. Weber elaborates on his theory of modernity by correlating rationalization to multiple modern phenomena such as disenchantment and materialism.

Weber argues that disenchantment is a product of the rationalized world. This is due to the fact that, according to Habermas, rational systems rely on material gains for their preservation. For example, the sphere of science depends on empiricism, the sphere of capitalism depends on profit, and the sphere of government relies on a bureaucratic network of power that depends on the diffusion of political goods.¹⁷ The emphasis granted to empiricism, the scientific method, and the increase of technology in the 19th century led the bourgeoisie to believe they could master the universe.

¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action Volume One: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.

Modern materialism left little room for the enchanted cosmos and belief in irreducible beings. Parsons accepted Weber's account of modernity as the rationalization of society, but not as the cause for secularization.¹⁸

Parsons viewed the Protestant Christian value system in America as intrinsic to modernization rather than as a separate phenomenon. He believed modernity's tolerance toward mixed denominations was the result of Protestant Christianity being realized in the form of cultural norms that did not rely on strict religious obligation. *Civil religion* was for Parsons modern Protestantism actualized. It was the intermediary able to accommodate the religious fragmentation of the private sphere with the public secular sphere. Parsons claims, "In the American case, civil religion was from the beginning part of the constitutive structure of the new nation. It can be considered a direct legitimate descendant of the orientation of the puritan colonists...".¹⁹

Similar to Parsons, Marcel Gauchet advocates rationalization and disenchantment are products of Christianity, yet by way of an alternate theory. In his highly controversial work, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (1999), Gauchet presents a broad and intricately woven account of modernity as the evolutionary result of Christianity. Gauchet claims Christianity caused disenchantment by equipping humanity with three modes of transcendence. First, monotheism emerges from the natural world and the thought of God encapsulates all that is sacred. Second, monotheism takes enchantment out of the world and locates it solely in God. Ultimately, God represents all that is mystical and sacred. And third, monotheism suggests that one God can rule all men inclusively and universally by way of political order. Gauchet suggests that Christianity allowed man to reason for himself by reflecting on God and the divine law. In essence, the more powerful God becomes, the more introspective and "free" humanity is to reason for itself. Christianity strengthened man's autonomy—divine transcendence and human freedom grew proportionally. Gauchet implies that Christianity *is* the process of secularization by nature. The Christian emphasis on conscience weakened faith by opening religious truths to criticism, paving the way for

¹⁸ Talcott Parsons, "Religion in a Modern Pluralistic Society," *Review of Religious Research*, 7, no. 3: 125-146.

¹⁹ Parsons, "Religion in Postindustrial America: The Problem of Secularization," 93-225.

philosophical liberalism. The transcendence of the Christian God forced individuals to take responsibility for their actions in light of an unknowable God, leading to a world of "terrestrial integrity" from which all enchantment fled. Thus, science emerges and humanity becomes autonomous. As Gauchet argues, Christian ideas eventually outgrow their religious superstructure. The ideas generated by contemplating Christianity lead to renewed self-understanding for humanity. Particularly the kind of understanding that promotes democratic, individualist, and material societies. Hence, modernity and Christianity are inseparable and disenchantment simply a phase in the process.²⁰

Bryan Wilson in *The Sacred in the Secular Age* (1985) advocates a similar narrative as Gauchet. Wilson proposes secularization is a product of Christianity. In Wilson's opinion, secularization occurs via the rationalization process that Christianity endorses. He argues rationalization created a new social organization distinct from sacralization and religious communities. For example, Wilson explains:

The shift, which might be most dramatically documented in the area of law, led to the steady modification of those absolute decrees and transcendent social norms in which individual well-being was always sacrificed to community cohesion. The steady accumulation of empirical knowledge, the increasing application of logic, and the rational coordination of human purposes established an alternative vision and interpretation of life.²¹

The shift away from supernatural concerns toward worldly self-determining aims is what many sociologists contend to be the major contributing factor to secularization. As Wilson states there was, "a change in the character of knowledge..."²² It had temporal quality, which lacked a sense of responsibility toward a metaphysical belief system and is presently observed in the secular language of U.S. legislation. Wilson claims that

²⁰ Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999).

²¹ Wilson, "Secularization: The Inherited Model," 13.

²² *Ibid.*, 13.

Weber acknowledges such changes as the process of rationalization that, in effect, resulted in the disenchantment of modern society.²³

Rationalization remains an accepted conviction in modern sociological theory. The difference of opinion lies in the application of the theory.

Pluralism

The early Durkheim and Berger would have suggested that pluralism led not only to secularization on the societal level but on the individual level as well.²⁴ Plurality was thought to destabilize religious authority and confidence in a single dogma. Presently, however, the idea that pluralism erodes religiosity has been countered by the Rational Choice Theory, or namely, the *supply-side* theory of secularization. This approach has its roots in the revolutionary Church-Sect theory of Richard Niebuhr. Church-Sect theory was Niebuhr's answer to the quandary of pluralism. Niebuhr postulated that sects are cyclical entities that may perpetuate to infinity. They are born, transformed, and reborn again. Sects are born out of the oppressed class as "high tension" belief system, strong in otherworldly tenets. As the sect matures it is captured by the middle and upper classes where it is transformed into a "low-tension," or more temporal, belief system that accommodates heterogeneity.

Due to the manipulation of the sect from the upper classes it no longer has the capacity to satisfy the needs of the deprived. Rodney Stark adds to Niebuhr's theory and claims that given Niebuhr's theory we can assume that 1) Pluralism will exist, and 2) The most predominant religions will be of a worldly character since sects move from high to low tension. Stark concludes that with Church-Sect theory we are witnessing secularization occur on the societal level. Sect to church status is in essence achieved by societal secularization that implies a continuous cycle of high religiosity on one end and loss of faith on the other. Stark mentions that in a society with multiple sects cycling from high to low at different points in history it is possible to experience periods of overlap in the cycles. This is

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 2.

why there are widespread peaks of extreme societal religiosity as well as valleys of secularity.²⁵

With Church-Sect theory in mind Stark proposes the idea of the “religious economy.” The religious economy is similar to a commercial economy in regards to the pluralism that occurs when the markets are left unregulated. Stark claims that religious firms cater to the dynamic needs of society. Religious demand exists on a sliding scale between high tension and low tension. Due to the nature of religion being incapable of maintaining both worldly and otherworldly principles, Stark argues a total monopoly could never dominate the market. He proposes that secularization is normal and universal—that it is constantly occurring at varying speeds throughout history. Secularization is the cause of revivalism, innovation, and disenchantment. However, Stark points out that sects do not establish new faiths, but amend the old. They work amongst each other, sliding along the scale of secularization. Stark ultimately concludes that secularization will not lead to a post-religious society. To the contrary, it will continue to supply society with religious rebirth.²⁶

In opposition to Stark’s supply-side theory, which rejects the secularization hypothesis, Steve Bruce counters that in fact, “In the Western world, the generally more homogenous Catholic and Orthodox societies (Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Ireland) are more religious than diverse Protestant ones (such as Britain).”²⁷ Bruce claims the predominant supply-side theory purported by Stark and Finke that affirms a positive correlation between diversity and religiosity is actually based on poor data analysis. Bruce claims their studies are non-duplicable. That instead, the most diverse cities have the lowest rates of church attendance. In conjunction, when they cite church membership among Catholics they neglect to account for frequency of service attendance. Citing the problem that many Catholics who claim to be members of a church may never actually attend services. Instead, they base membership on where they received baptism.²⁸

²⁵ Stark, “Church and Sect,” 139-147.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Steve Bruce, *In Defense of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 146.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

Bruce's rebuttal to Stark and Finke's popular theory has brought into question how we define religion. For example, it may be the case that those who indicate in Pew Studies that they are not religious do in fact have a strong belief in a higher power. Even non-religious persons, such as Nones (i.e. those who do not claim any affiliation), may partake in various community service projects, educate, or be philanthropic in order to act out their spiritual beliefs. In sum, church attendance may not be the best measure of a believer.

Pluralism as a pillar of religious vitality appears to be inconclusive. However, we may first need an adequate definition of what it means to be religious. As shown with the conflict between Stark and Bruce, being "religious" can mean anything from the performative aspect to a simple cultural association. Perhaps a different question altogether could help discern the broader problem of understanding what motivates people to coordinate their actions by non-instrumental means.

The arguments surrounding function, rationalization, and pluralism provide insight into the reasons for normative disintegration. Aside from the problem of religious fragmentation, the critiques reveal religion or belief persists in the private sphere. There exists a dichotomy between private and public reasons for action. A conflict emerges between the instrumental systems of industry and value-centered religious norms.

In other words, it is the incredible power of marketized systems, which serve self-interests and material ends, that crowd out collective action. The modern phenomenon of systems dominating society, or what Habermas calls the "Lifeworld," is the rationalization of society. It is possible, however, as Habermas proposes, for values (including religious) to penetrate the markets through the discourse that occurs in the public sphere. Ideally, according to his theory (which he calls *The Theory of Communicative Action*), it is through public dialogue that values may enter and influence society. By engaging in discourse centered on values Habermas submits a balance can be achieved between systems and the Lifeworld.

In accordance with Habermas, I propose in the next section that discourse can act as a resource for rebuilding normative consensus. As part of a larger project beyond the focus of this work, however, I would like to

at least illuminate that if both sides of the coin exist, between value-driven and instrumental ends, we must ask ourselves how they are to be reconciled. I propose an adequate solution would include: 1) A normative framework that can accommodate all value systems, and 2) A normative framework that harmonizes value and goal-oriented systems.

Here, however, I solely attempt to offer two possible paths for approaching such a framework.

The Conditions for a Universal Framework

Which norms can restore the balance between system and Lifeworld? What values can a fragmented nation agree on in order to reconstruct its identity? Perhaps to answer such questions society could reflect on itself and welcome its religious heritage as a resource for meaning-making. It is possible that religion holds semantic potential that moral philosophies cannot match. For instance, reason unattended may not have the resources to ground justice, encourage solidarity, understand suffering, or discern the “good life.” Primarily, I recommend a critique of reason precedes the remaking of a Western normative framework and, second, I argue that the inspiration for conditions may lie in either a strain of civil religion or public philosophy.

Regarding the first point, such a critique of reason could be constructed by an assessment of religious language in contrast to the reductive language of reason. For example, Habermas proposes that unlike reason, religious language is transcendent. It surpasses a functional role. It is more than arbitrary claims to norms, stating:

I do not believe that we, as Europeans, can seriously understand concepts like morality and ethical life, persons and individuality, or freedom and emancipation, without appropriating the substance of the Judeo-Christian understanding of history in terms of salvation. And these concepts are, perhaps, nearer to our hearts than the conceptual resources of Platonic thought, centering on order and revolving around the cathartic intuition of ideas. [...] But without the transmission through socialization and the transformation through philosophy of any one of the great

world religions, this semantic potential could one day become inaccessible.²⁹

From this passage from *Metaphysical Thinking* Habermas argues that religion is significant to reflect upon in order to understand the evolution of ideas that, in many cases, evolved out of religious convictions, and that religion has indispensable semantic content that differs from philosophy, which has the potential to order modern societies.³⁰

Salvaging this content may be key to mobilizing modern reason against the defeatism that lies inside of it. The realization is that practical reason, unlike religion, does not have a foundation strong enough to compel acts of solidarity and collective intention that are necessary to protect individual liberty. Habermas claims:

Practical reason provides justifications for the universalistic and egalitarian concepts of morality and law which shape the freedom of the individual and interpersonal relations in a normatively possible way. However, the decision to engage in action based on solidarity when faced with threats which can be averted only by collective efforts calls for more than insight into good reasons. [...] Practical reason fails to fulfill its own vocation when it no longer has sufficient strength to awaken, and keep awake, in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven.³¹

Religious convictions may potentially fill the void of practical reason (for certain individuals) due to the fact that comprehensive religious doctrines hold narratives that reflect a moral whole in the Kingdom of God. Religion functioning as a motivating force for solidarity and collective action is reasonable when founded in theological understanding, and is powerful enough to mobilize a collective intention. A moral whole is just one instance where reason falls short of providing the goods religion still

²⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press 1994), 15.

³⁰ Habermas, *Awareness*, 18.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

has the power to deliver. For normative spaces that are concerned with pre-conscious life, death, and suffering reason still has yet to provide sustenance. As Max Horkheimer once remarked, “to seek to salvage an unconditional meaning without God is a futile undertaking.”³²

A Potential Normative Framework

Second, I propose that a universal normative framework has the potential to manifest as either a species of civil religion or public philosophy. In order to further clarify my point, I employ Robert Bellah’s concept of civil religion and later John Courtney Murray’s understanding of a modern public philosophy to illuminate possible paths to integration.

Extending the analysis of what secular reason lacks, sociologist Robert Bellah adds to the conversation by identifying what Habermas refers to as “rational thought” as the element of *utilitarian individualism* in America. Bellah’s critique of the American nation-state contains similarities to Habermas’ critique of modern consciousness. The rationalized, instrumental reason that Habermas claims as a key defining characteristic of modernity is, on a societal level, comparable to what Bellah describes as a form of individualism that is grounded in the idea that human nature is egocentric. Generally, the individual is constantly striving to maximize their self-interest relative to their pre-determined ends. In addition, utilitarian individualism views society as arising from a contract that individuals enter into only in order to advance their personal interest, and it has an affinity for an economic understanding of existence.

The main contention in America, as Bellah explains, lies in the fact that our nation was founded on both republican and liberal ideals—ideals that are antithetical to one another. The truth is that our nation is struggling to reconcile its republican and liberal values, both of which are represented in the language of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence.³³ The liberal values that espouse the pursuit of happiness and free enterprise are grounded in individual freedom. This freedom is manifested in materialism, particularly property, and is operationalized by

³² Jurgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons 2002), 108.

³³ Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in the Time of Trial*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Chicago Press, 1992), 172.

capitalism. Liberalism is secular in nature and thus does not contain reasons for collective action toward the greater good. Liberalism puts into the citizenry a utilitarian attitude toward the Lifeworld.

On the other hand, juxtaposed to liberalism, is the republican element of the state. According to Bellah, republicanism is the inner character of the republic, the concern for the greater good that rests on mores, focuses on custom, educates virtues, has a spiritual role and perpetuates itself.³⁴ It is specifically the republican element that Bellah believes is eroding due to utilitarian individualism ultimately driven by capitalism: "It is the ethical purpose of our republic and the republican virtue of our citizens, or rather the loss of them, that has haunted our recent political life."³⁵ We can see examples of this loss in the erosion of our national community, representative character, and in the culture wars. Bellah agrees with Habermas, stating, "Without solidarity and positive freedom, there is a danger of what Habermas has referred to as 'the transformation of the citizens of affluent and peaceful democratic societies into solitary, self-interestedly acting monads who merely turn their subjective rights like weapons against one another.'"³⁶

What is Bellah's solution to unchecked liberalism? He alludes to either a public theology or civil religion. A public theology can be understood as a kind of public religion where the church reflexively examines and critiques existing social practices and cultural understandings against its deepest religious insights into justice and the good society.³⁷ A public theology that extends past self-interested citizens is what Bellah believes can salvage republican virtue. Such an idea is nothing new and comes from a tradition deeply ingrained in American thought that regards the New World as the promised land, and the new society as responsible for fulfilling God's will on earth. This tradition is historically associated with the Protestant faith and, as a result, allows the criterion for norms to be governed by a higher power.³⁸

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 183.

³⁶ Robert Bellah, "Religious Reasons and Secular Revelations," *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, 2008, accessed December 1, 2017, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2008/02/26/religious-reasons-secular-revelations/>.

³⁷ "Martin Marty's Definition of Public Theology," Center for Public Theology, September 23, 2001, accessed December 5, 2017, <http://www.pubtheo.com/page.asp?pid=1004>.

³⁸ Robert Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-traditional World*

A public theology based on Protestant ideals for a fragmented nation is not unreasonable for Bellah because he contends that disparate belief systems—including Jewish, Catholic, Muslim, etc.—have been penetrated by Protestant ethics and, in a way, have been “Protestantized”. Bellah claims we can already see the remnants of this Protestant public theology in what he calls *civil religion*, which he defines as religious symbolism fused with national public ritual. “The public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion. The inauguration of a President is an important ceremonial event in this religion. It reaffirms, among other things, the religious legitimation of the highest political authority.”³⁹ This religious dimension of the public does not present itself as a particular religion, nor does it have any legal standing. It is a formal and marginal set of acts. Bellah claims it was public theology that harnessed support and civic participation to accomplish monumental endeavors such as abolition, the early socialist party, the civil rights movement, etc. Bellah states, “The public theology provided a sense of value and purpose without which the national community and ultimately even the liberal state could not have survived, but it was never entirely clear what the value and purpose was [...]. Every movement to make America more fully realize its values has grown out of some form of public theology.”⁴⁰ In addition, Bellah claims civil religion is just as powerful a mobilizing force:

Precisely from the point of view of republicanism civil religion is indispensable. A republic as an active political community of participating citizens must have a purpose and a set of values. Freedom in the republican tradition is a positive value that asserts the worth and dignity of political equality and popular government. A republic must attempt to be ethical in a positive sense and to elicit the ethical commitment of its citizens. For this reason it inevitably pushes toward the symbolization of an ultimate order of existence in which republican values and virtues make sense. Such symbolization

(Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1970), 171.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 178-179.

may be nothing more than the worship of the republic itself as the highest good.⁴¹

The ethical commitment that civil religion elicits from society speaks to Habermas' concern regarding the motivation the liberal state needs to perpetuate itself. Perhaps Bellah's civil religion can produce such motivation even if the public religion is not fully articulated verbally but codified in symbols that speak to the ideals of which the republic strives.

Karel Dobbelaere, however, insists we must be careful when we discuss the term *civil religion* since what we are referring to is not a religion at all but rather "a political ideology that borrows religious concepts and symbols from the religious traditions of America."⁴² Civil religion may in fact be a universal legal system that has the ability to provide meaning in society by facilitating integration.

In addition, Wilson criticizes Bellah claiming that religion cannot provide cultural integration in society and it cannot be used as a unifier.⁴³ Wilson asserts that in modern society the major facilitating agency is not the community but the broader societal system. For example, traditional, moral, and religious culture is no longer the basis for legitimate control. Modernity is impersonal, technical, legal, and bureaucratic. Religion cannot provide cultural integration in society and it cannot be used as a unifier. Wilson is referring to the fact that modern society does not function, necessarily, at the community level, but on a larger systematized scale. In other words, more interactions are institutionalized rather than personalized. Legitimacy lies in the institution or organization (such as government), rather than in communal practice and religious tradition. It is a kind of technicized legitimacy.⁴⁴

On the other hand, a public philosophy, opposed to Bellah's theology, may be more suitable for the breadth of the societal system. In response, I suggest a rumination of John Courtney Murray's public philosophy as a potential path for normative unification. Murray advocates

⁴¹ Ibid., 176.

⁴² Karel Dobbelaere, *Secularization, An Analysis at Three Levels* (Brussels, Belgium: Peter Lang, 2004) 61.

⁴³ Rudi Laermas, Bryan Wilson, and Jaak Billiet, eds., *Secularization and Social Integration: Papers in Honor of Karel Dobbelaere* (Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1998), 52.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

a public philosophy that encourages dialogue in the public sphere. Murray's inspiration was a response to the challenge American pluralism and the liberal state presented to Catholic doctrine. In an effort to reconcile the two ideologies, Murray comes to the conclusion that the limited government of the United States provides citizens the power to exercise their faith freely and to be individually accountable to their traditions. Given such freedom, however, it is crucial that a society with deep pluralism and lack of overarching social structure (such as the church of pre-modern times) generate a public consensus to preserve its stability. In his seminal work, *We Hold These Truths* (1960), Murray attempts to discern America's public philosophy, or the civic consensus, whereby the people acquire their identity and sense of purpose. A public consensus is Murray's solution to the potential instability of what he refers to as the American Proposition—a nation founded on both civil unity and pluralism.⁴⁵

Bellah's *republicanism* is similar to Murray's civil unity. It is the republican element of our society that holds the virtues that lend to the preservation of the state: "It is essential if a republic is to survive that it concern itself actively with the nurturing of its citizens, that it root out corruption and encourage virtue. The republican state therefore has an ethical, educational, even spiritual role, and it will survive only as long as it reproduces republican customs and republican citizens."⁴⁶ Murray adds to the notion of republicanism by including reason as a virtue of civility. He uses St. Thomas Aquinas to make his point: "Since a rational soul is the proper form of man, there is in every man a natural inclination to act according to reason; and this is to act according to virtue."⁴⁷ It is reason that is at the heart of his public philosophy. He believes reason is what will ultimately lead to consensus. This claim is strikingly similar to Habermas' proposal in his Theory of Communicative Action where he explains that through a discourse ethic (i.e., an argument with a particular set of rules) that requires sound reasons for propositions a public consensus can be achieved. Murray adds, however, that his theory is more than strictly procedural.

⁴⁵ John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 87-101.

⁴⁶ Bellah, "The Broken Covenant," 170.

⁴⁷ Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 113.

When confronted with the criticism that our liberal democracy does not have a public philosophy because democratic institutions such as ours are strictly procedural and void of content to establish any notion of a substantial ideology, Murray adamantly attests that in fact:

We hold in common a concept of the nature of law and its relationships to reason and will, to social fact and to political purpose. We understand the complex relationship between law and freedom. We have an idea of the relation between the order of law and the order of morals. We also have an idea of the uses of force to support that law. We have a criterion for good law, norms of jurisprudence that judge the necessity of law and determine the limits of its usefulness. We have an idea of justice, which is at once the basis of law and its goal. We have an idea of social equality and of social unity and of the value of law and for the achievement of both. We believe in the principle of consent, in terms of which the order of coercive law makes contact with freedom of the public conscience. We distinguish between state and society, between the relatively narrow order of law as such and the wider order of the total public good. We understand the relation between law and social progress; we grasp the notion of law as a force for orderly change as well as for social stability. We understand the value of law as a means of educating the public conscience to high viewpoints on matters of public morality. All of these ideas [...] form the essential contents of the consensus.⁴⁸

This powerful proclamation identifies the resources Americans possess to establish a dialogue. Simply by understanding the distinction between good and evil in conjunction with terms such as justice, progress, consent, public, etc., we have a framework for conversation.

At the time of America's conception Murray claims the founding fathers established a public philosophy, evident in the text of The Declaration of Independence. The document begins by stating, "We hold these truths... ." Given the nature of the declaration Murray concludes that the founders had three objectives: 1) to determine the broad purpose of

⁴⁸ Ibid., 88.

our nation as a political unity organized for action in history; 2) to furnish (a) the standards according to which judgement is to be passed on the means that the nation adopts to further its purposes, and (b) the basis of communication between government and the people and among the people themselves—a common universe of discourse in which public issues can be intelligibly stated and intelligently argued; and 3) to indicate the content of the public philosophy.⁴⁹ Murray claims, however, that overtime the public philosophy deteriorated not necessarily due to pluralism and rational thinking, but because the American Proposition was assumed as realized. According to Murray, it should not have been understood as a completed act of government. Instead, the American Proposition is a project that requires constant care by the efforts of civil society to remain stable.

We must salvage our public philosophy in order to establish a common language that encompasses the needs of a modern fragmented society. In addition, Murray submits that if Catholics were to arrive at new truths about God, they would have to do so in conversation, or “on a footing of equality,”⁵⁰ with non-Catholics and atheists. In order to achieve agreement Murray proposes that public consensus be grounded in reason: “The public philosophy has to be founded on reason. In a renewed understanding of natural law. The doctrine of natural law offers a more profound metaphysic, a more integral humanism, a fuller rationality, a more complete philosophy of man in his nature and history.”⁵¹ Murray’s idea of natural law is for the public and is the basis for his normative consensus. Murray makes explicit that his understanding of natural law is grounded in three assumptions: 1) Man is intelligent; 2) Reality is intelligible; and 3) Reality, as grasped by intelligence, imposes on the will the obligation that it be obeyed in its demands for action or abstention. Murray claims most citizens contain these qualities and that human beings are capable of being rational and aware enough to make ethical judgements. Murray understands that “history cannot alter the natural law, in so far as the natural law is constituted by the ethical a priori, by the primary principles of the moral reason, and by their immediate derivatives.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, viii.

History has not, for instance, abolished the Ten Commandments."⁵² In essence, the natural law does not close us off from self-evident truths, from pre-political understanding of the self, or from metaphysical reason.

Habermas shares a similar conception to Murray as he believes that establishing universal normative framework through dialogue is the solution to the problem of ideological pluralism. Instead of relying on civil religion in a latent form, Habermas would instead have us generate a consensus on norms through a universal discourse ethic. Language rather than religion would be the basis for constructing a legitimate value system. Habermas supports such a resolution in his 2003 Peace Prize speech:

Giving due consideration to the religious heritage of its moral foundations, the liberal state should consider the possibility that it may not be able to meet the completely new challenges it faces simply by relying on the formulations it developed earlier to meet those attending its origins.⁵³

His statement indicates that our current secularized paradigm may need to use religion as a way of discerning moral issues. Religion and secular reason may contain a reciprocity instead of polarity. Their existence depends on a "constructive coexistence" regarding ethical dilemmas.⁵⁴

This position suggests a reflexive relationship between the religious and secular communities in order to construct a moral consensus. Conflict causes both groups to assess humanity on the most intimate levels, such as our finitude, in order to determine a moral framework. The trending field of eugenics is an example of a sphere that requires a pre-existing definition for "human being" from both theists and the irreligious so that future beings are not violated. Controversial issues concerning what constitutes a life, and what is justice, also demand an examination since the answers to those questions determine how we act towards each other in the local and global communities.

⁵² Ibid., 113- 114.

⁵³ Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge."

⁵⁴ Habermas, *An Awareness of What is Missing*, 1-10.

Conclusion

In this short essay, I attempted to provide insight into what a potential normative framework might entail by first reflecting on what secular reason lacks, and then by providing two paths, through public theology and public philosophy, that illuminate potential approaches for rekindling national solidarity. I argue that religion has the semantic potential to combat rational systems, such as capitalist markets, and to balance the liberal self-interested half of the American spirit. I hoped to illustrate that through language religion is able to communicate republican values, which in turn enter the public sphere and contribute to public reason.

It is a fallacy that public reason has to be void of meaningful content in its own right—it must only meet the requirement of universalizability, which is the ultimate undertaking of post-secular society. It is a condition that is important to keep in mind while discerning secularization literature since it highlights the fact that, for the West at least, there is no alternative integrating mechanism serving the public. Religion thus far, has been the best device to help “solve” the problem of context.

By context I am referring to national identity and the normative institutions that constitute collective intention. It is the function of religion, not a particular religion per se, that has the potential to guide individuals toward a shared end. Contemplating an ultimate concern is an inherently religious notion. According to Paul Tillich, religion is generally, “A state of being grasped by the ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life.”⁵⁵ The context in which humanity views itself is what shapes discourses of normativity—not the other way around.

Fundamentally, human purpose precedes the demand for a moral code of conduct, or government. A polity must have pre-political moral foundations in order to substantiate why a regime that protects human rights is even mandatory. Presently, a warrant is required to justify the secular state due to the erosion of religious singularity. It behooves societies to determine what moral truths exist outside of government in order to apprehend what is at stake for human dignity in the event of

⁵⁵ Paul Tillich, *Christ and the Encounter of World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 4.

government, which is, in effect, the regulation of such dignity. We may have been able to continue using religion as civilization's metanarrative—letting it provide us with norms and purpose for all aspects of life, if only the slow and steady phenomena of secularization had not eclipsed institutional religion altogether. The post-secular horizon calls us to be proactive, and construct a new framework that is inclusive and secures against the systemic pitfalls of modernity.

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