Many thinkers of the Enlightenment considered religion superfluous. Human life was meant to be fully shaped by the power of reason. Modern individuals had to be freed from dogma and other religious restrictions. Such views can also be found in Jürgen Habermas, one of the most persistent and influential exponents of the tradition of Enlightenment. In recent years, however, Habermas’s position toward religion has changed. He now believes that religions are not going to disappear and that they will continue to play an important role in future societies. Highly symptomatic of this new attitude of the German philosopher was his discussion with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) at the Catholic Academy in Munich in January 2004, as well as a dialogue with four philosophers from the Jesuit School of Philosophy in February 2007. The latter has been published in an English translation under the title An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-secular Age.

Habermas claims that although modern thought “treats revelation and religion as something alien and extraneous,” religion is still present in today’s world. The memorable events of 9/11 confirmed that modernist secular society is not the end of history, and that the theme of religions and civilizations, and of potential conflicts between them, is still alive. There are new global, often violent religious organizations whose mind-set “clashes with fundamental convictions of modernity.” There is a growing conflict between fundamentalist religion and the secular state.

In the essay “An Awareness of What Is Missing,” as in his earlier work Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, Habermas defends a modern worldview and is critical
of postmodernism. He expresses a desire “to mobilize modern reason against the defeatism lurking within it”—this defeatism “which we encounter today...in the postmodern radicalization of the ‘dialectic of the Enlightenment’.”7 However, his later writing no longer shares the optimism of the Discourse concerning a successful completion of this enterprise. It begins with a strange scene: secular intellectuals in a church bid farewell to a deceased friend, “an agnostic who rejected any profession of faith,” taking part in his funeral ceremony, at which there is no priest, no blessing, and no word “amen.” The scene may perhaps rightly depict the spiritual emptiness of secularized Western humanity and its desire to return to at least the external manifestations of religion, but Habermas does not interpret it this way. He states that the funeral ceremony may tell us something about “secular reason, namely that it is unsettled by the opaqueness of its merely apparently clarified relation to religion.”8 This relation is not a compromise between what Habermas believes are two “irreconcilable elements”: an anthropocentric orientation and theocentric thinking. It is rather that the two engage in a dialogue, that they “speak with each other,” rather than “merely about one another.”9

To be partners in a dialogue, it is indispensable for Habermas that “the religious side must accept the authority of ‘natural reason,’ while “secular reason may not set itself up as the judge concerning truths of faith.”10 Nevertheless, purely formal acceptance of this demand by religious citizens is not enough to establish a liberal democracy, whose legitimacy is founded on convictions. It must be based on “normative foundations which can be justified neutrally towards worldviews.”11 It means that it must actually be postreligious and postmetaphysical.

The consequences of 9/11 have thus only partially reached the consciousness of the German thinker. He believes that religious citizens of a liberal democracy should accept internally—and therefore not under external compulsion but rather for reasons of its own—the neutrality of the state toward worldviews. This practically implies not only the actual consent of citizens to recognize the equality of all religions and to separate scientific claims from articles of faith but also the cleansing of the public space of religious symbols and values. Religious utterances are to have the right to a place in the public domain only if they are translated into “morally motivated rational belief.”12 They need to be expressed in the language understood by a secular public, for whom their assessment is not based on faith in God but knowledge based on facts.

It should be first noted that the demand that the “religious side accepts the authority of ‘natural reason’” can be approved only by religious traditions in which reason has been regarded as autonomous in relation to faith, and this primarily means Christianity. In spite of frequent interventions of religious authorities, the trend toward the affirmation of the independence of reason from faith increasingly predominated in European history. This allowed culture and politics in Europe to become independent from religion, and on the other hand to draw from it moral and spiritual inspiration. The result of this complex relationship was an unparalleled dynamism in the development of Western civilization.

Such an independence of reason from faith is, however, not present in the civilizations of the East, and particularly in Islamic civilization. In Islam the whole of life is subordinated to the sacred law of sharia, and to break free from this law and be guided by natural reason is equivalent, in
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the opinion of Muslim scholars, to ignorance of divine guidance, jahiliyya—intellectual and moral corruption. Habermas’s demand that the “religious side accepts the authority of ‘natural reason’ ” can then be accepted by Christians, but it will not find acceptance by Muslims. The practical implementation of this demand could thus lead to an asymmetry between religions. In Western society it would result in the weakening of religion: its removal from public spaces and a consequent secularization, which the Eastern religious communities would strongly refuse.

While exploring the meaning of modernity, Habermas points out that while it creates a new culture of freedom, it also results in the breakdown of traditional society into individuals and groups who often have conflicting interests. This breakdown in solidarity “increases all the more inexorably the deeper the imperatives of the market…[which] penetrate ever more spheres of life and force individuals to adopt an objectivizing standpoint in their dealing with each other.” Secular rational morality developed by modern thinkers is aimed at individuals rather than at communities and does not foster any impulse toward solidarity. Traditional religious consciousness, by contrast, preserves the spirit of community from which impulses toward action in solidarity can be derived.

The translation of certain religious utterances or claims into a secular language of “morally motivated rational belief” is thus important from the point of view of Habermas’s project. While taking on the role of the leading defender of modern rationality, he seems at the same time to be anxious about it. His anxiety is reflected in the very title of his work: “An Awareness of What Is Missing” (Ein Bewußtsein von dem, was fehlt). Despite so many contributions to the field of technology and social organization, with which it can be associated, modern reason has failed “to awaken, and to 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.”

Habermas regrets what he believes is missing in the modern age, namely, human solidarity. Nevertheless, to bring it back he does not turn to world religions. Rather, by following Kant he tries to assimilate religion to secular reason. He believes that there are certain religious images of the moral whole—like the Kingdom of God on earth—that are collectively binding ideas. Recognizing their utility for human unity, he wants to deprive them of religious content and translate them into a publicly accessible language of secular discourse. For the same reason, he develops his theory of communicative action. As a result of an exchange of views, he claims, participants in a discourse “overcome their at first subjective views in favor of rationally motivated agreement.” Rational consensus, intersubjective understanding, and reciprocal recognition are all related to Habermas’s hope to restore “authentic [human] self-realization, and self-determination in solidarity.”

However, as can be easily observed by looking into many cases of religious sectarian violence, religion not only unites but also divides, and in today’s postsecular world, religious sectarianism is one of the principal sources of conflict. Therefore, religion can be regarded as a unifying factor but only within a given religious sect or denomination. Religions cleared of their original religious content and translated into a secular language are in turn nothing other than the modern ideologies that, without God, try to build the “Kingdom of God” on earth. The current global crisis, including the lack of solidarity.
among people and the intellectual crisis that Europe is experiencing today, is the result of such ideologies.

Therefore, Habermas’s postsecular project can be described as an ambitious attempt to square the circle; seemingly effective and generating acclaim on both sides of the ocean but based on wrong assumptions and doomed to failure. Taking into account that he does not make a proper distinction between Christianity and religions outside the circle of Western civilization, his ideas are not only impractical and unable to regain a lost human solidarity but also disastrous for Europe: by undermining its Christian roots, they further weaken its already fragile identity.

While taking issue with Habermas about what is missing, I would like first to note that the theory of communicative action is nothing new. One can find it in the dialogues of Plato. Engaged in a conversation, their participants try to reach an agreement. What distinguishes the profound and at the same time often witty Platonic dialogues from Habermas’s obscure and sometimes confusing theory, however, is that the former’s goal is to achieve not only a rational consensus but also, and more important, to arrive at “truth, goodness, and beauty.” In this sense the Platonic dialogues are “metaphysical.”

Habermas rejects the view of Plato, Aristotle, and the subsequent classical tradition of Western philosophy that one can find truth through knowledge of the essence of things and that this truth is timeless and universal. As is the case for Hobbes and other modern thinkers, the character of truth is for Habermas merely conventional and arbitrary, a result of an agreement. The aim of Habermas’s communicative action is not a universal truth but rational consensus. His communicative reason is “disburdened of all religious and metaphysical mortgages.” It is based on modern secularization and de-Hellenization of thought.

According to Habermas, religion and metaphysics derive from a common source, which is the worldview revolution of the “axial age.” Leaving aside the oddity of the concept—after all, religions are older than philosophy and accompany human beings from the beginning of their existence, whereas Islam was born well after the “axial age”—the combination of religion and metaphysics can be associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition. In Christianity, in fact, as clearly expressed by Benedict XVI in his Regensburg lecture, there was a “profound encounter of faith and reason.” There was a “rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry.”

At the dawn of the modern era, with the rise of the Reformation, there was, in turn, a call for the de-Hellenization of Christianity, to offset the side of reason and to make place for faith alone. At the same time there was a modern self-restraint on the part of reason, which is reflected in the first Critique of Immanuel Kant, subsequently radicalized by the reduction of scientific knowledge to the knowledge of facts and by the insistence that questions about religious and ethical values go beyond the limits of scientific inquiry. Hence, the modern mind moved away not only from (particularly Christian) religion but also from metaphysics. In this way it became postreligious and postmetaphysical.

Habermas describes the liberal constitutional state as resting on “normative foundations which can be justified neutrally towards worldviews—and that means in postmetaphysical terms.” Contrary to what Habermas and many other thinkers of modernity believe, one cannot, however, escape from metaphysics into a “postmetaphysical” thinking. The basic metaphysical
question is one of the essence of the human being. At the heart of modern rationality lies an assumption about human nature: man is the Cartesian subject around which the world revolves.

This modern subjectivity is expressed at a practical level in individualism, namely, in thought and action aimed at one’s own particularity, that is, motivated by self-interest. Thus by recognizing human beings as creatures of interests, driven by desires, Hobbes has rightly led Descartes’s thought to its logical, practical consequences. Modern reason, which Habermas describes in his Discourse as “instrumental,” is for Hobbes merely an instrument, a calculus of utilities; with rationality being no more than a reckoning “of the consequences of things imagined in the mind,”25 of desires, aversions, hopes, and fears, or of possible gains or losses.

This modern concept of instrumental or purposive rationality thus replaces the classical concept of reflective or deliberative rationality. According to Aristotle and other representatives of the classical tradition—a tradition born in Greece and continued by St. Thomas Aquinas and other Christian thinkers, and that can be described as the tradition of virtue—the capacity for rational reflection on what is beneficial and what is harmful, just and unjust, is what distinguishes humans from other creatures. In this sense a person endowed with reflective reason, even if subjected to desires, is not merely a creature of interests but above all an intelligent and moral being capable of self-reflection and self-control. People whose character has been shaped by the practice of virtue—and to become truly virtuous, as Christian philosophy suggests, they need not only a good character but also faith in God—can control their desires and sacrifice their personal benefits for the good of others.

The explosion of human desires is a result of modernity—surely this escapes the attention of Habermas. It seems he does not fully appreciate the impact exerted on the formation of modern thought by Hobbes, Locke, and other English thinkers, for in his Philosophical Discourse of Modernity he does not pay much attention to them. Yet, in the assumption that all humans are fundamentally the same—self-interested, pleasure-seeking individuals whose behavior is modified neither by virtue nor by natural law nor by religious belief, with the same cause having the same effect on everyone—the ideas of Hobbes come to the fore. They grow out of the radical rejection of the classical tradition. Similarly, Hobbes’s opponent Locke, who is often described as a father of liberalism, is not a classical thinker, but modern. His “modernity” is revealed not only in his modern methodology, an attempt to derive all knowledge from experience, but especially in his concept of man. Like Hobbes he considers human beings as individuals who are moved by desires and who, instead of cultivating virtue, pursue happiness by seeking pleasure and avoiding pain.

The same Hobbesian concept of human nature can be found in the utilitarianism of Bentham and his followers and in today’s positivist or behavioral social sciences. In such systems of thought an attempt is made to reduce the complexity of the classical view of politics. The constitutional character of political institutions is preserved, but politics is no longer about morality or religion: it becomes a power game or a play of interests. Moreover, this view of human beings as self-interested, passion-driven individuals is not confined to the realm of theory. With a model of education in place that is no longer based on classical ideas but increasingly dependent on positivist assumptions and methodology, such a picture is
internalized during many years of schooling. It therefore influences both thinking and, ultimately, actual human behavior. Subject to social engineering and convinced that “desires, and other passions of man, are in themselves no sin,” individuals make their goal the maximization of utility: they just want to get what they want without paying attention to moral restraints.

Whether it be desire, self-interest, will to power, or class struggle—thinkers of modernity make an attempt to reduce the complex picture of human affairs to a simple principle. Once they discover this principle, they try to implement and enforce it. The boundary between classicism and modernity is set by voluntarism. Political and social reality is voluntarily interpreted as an entity whose creation and existence is based solely on the power of free choice of the human will. The search for truth is replaced by the will to act—the shaping of human beings and the constructing of state and society. The main purpose of thinking is no longer to understand but rather to transform reality. We can find this idea not only in Marxism, in which philosophy is subordinated to the task of a revolutionary transformation of society into one that is classless and free from exploitation, but also in liberalism, which transforms people into the same self-interested individuals and society into a platform for the purpose of obtaining private goals.

There is also such thinking in Habermas, for whom the modern state is a secular state that “functions as an intellectual formation.” Thus, as we can suppose, the state forms the intellects of its citizens, freeing them from the burden of religion and metaphysics. And when, in light of the events of 9/11 and their consequences, a “postreligious” world turns out to be impossible to obtain, he wants at least that world religions accept the authority of “natural reason,” approve the neutrality of the state toward worldviews, respect freedom of religion and conscience, and serve the project of rebuilding the lost human solidarity.

The end of the Cold War, the self-predicted triumph of liberal democracy, and the accelerated processes of globalization have stimulated human desires to an extent previously unknown. Modern secularized individuals—individuals without God, without virtue, and without manners—are creatures of interests who today populate large parts of the world. How then can they arrive at intersubjective agreement and mutual recognition? This may be possible but only through the community of interests, not on a moral plane. However, given that human interests and points of view are often divergent, there is no great hope in obtaining consent.

The world today, as daily news confirms, is the reality of constant uncertainty and endless conflict: when one ends, a new one begins. Therefore, Habermas’s theory of communicative action cleansed of all religious and metaphysical elements seems a great misunderstanding. Directed toward their particular interests, egoistical individuals are not able to achieve a sustainable rational consensus. The human being is the best animal when perfected by virtue, but when separated from law and justice, he may be the worst, as Aristotle declared; and without God, even the best virtues turn into vices, as St. Augustine added.

In liberal society, whose theory was initially presented by Locke—in an environment where the individual is freed from state control, as well as the influence of religion and traditional ties—people have unlimited possibilities to pursue their own goals, getting rich and satisfying their individual desires, shaping their environment
and transforming themselves. Their desires are not only multiplied but, due to peer and public pressure, encouraged and so ordered as to lead to economic success. While Hobbes, in his unrelenting drive to impose order, suppresses human desires through the power of absolute government, Locke, in his liberalism, releases them from all restraint and directs them toward whatever riches the world has to offer.

Modernity is today challenged by postmodernity. Certainly thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and others, mentioned by Habermas in his *Discourse*, contributed to the development of postmodern thought. Linking postmodernism with the criticism of modern rationality and an attempt to transcend its limitations, however, is not enough to characterize this ideological formation.

It is obvious that once life in modernity, especially politics and economics, is separated from religion and morality, it invites critique. The common people, involved in daily toil, unlike many of their leaders and professors, never forget to ask questions about what is just and unjust. Postmodernity thus can partially be regarded as an attempt to reintroduce an ethical discourse into modernity, but since the critical discourse on the one hand takes the form of religious fundamentalism, and on the other hand is expressed in the language of the dialectic of oppression, it is far from classical ethics or traditional religion. Traditional society, based on the idea of naturally differentiated human beings, is challenged by modernity, which replaced it with an artificial construct: a group of homogeneous individuals melted by social contract into a unity, into “one people, one body politic, under one supreme government.” Postmodernity in turn deconstructs the modern concept of unity through its notion of division.

The term *diversity* is often used in reference to this division. Nevertheless, diversity in the postmodern sense refers to ethnic, cultural, and sexual forms of diversity and by no means refers to qualitatively dissimilar persons, divided into traditional social groups or classes. The existence of any such persons, especially of the aristocracy, is excluded from the modern project and certainly from its postmodern radicalization. Postmodernity stands at the same time for globalization, posttraditionalism, postnationalism, and post-Eurocentrism. It eradicates the rest of the local and national traditions. Unique local and national cultures are replaced by global multiculturalism and the celebration of new differences.

Postmodernity, we should also add, though critical of modernity, is in fact a continuation of the unfinished modern project. Like modernity, it is characterized by voluntarism. In both modernity and postmodernity, social reality has created a decisive force of will, embodied in the Hobbesian absolute sovereign, who can be equally represented by either the single-person tyrant or the power-hungry people. With reference to the latter, the result of the democratization of sovereignty is ubiquitous “disciplinary power.” Therefore, instead of Habermas’s idealized impartial “rational consensus,” we would instead find “political correctness” and the conformity pertinent to it. Instead of communication or dialogue aimed at mutual recognition and consensus, groups impose on majorities their skillfully fabricated and often highly controversial discourses. This is done by lobbies and other organizations representing particular social, political, and economic interests.

De-Hellenization in philosophy is the work of Hobbes and his followers, who decidedly opposed the classical tradition; secularization in turn is the process to
which several modern thinkers have contributed, each in his own way: Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Marx. Secularization and de-Hellenization lead to a world without God and without virtue, one in which human beings are ruled by their desires. Already St. Augustine noted that in the fallen man who remains under the sway of his desires, there is an erosion of rationality. For Locke, who, despite his liberalism, denied tolerance to atheists, the lack of the supreme desire, the desire for eternal life, leads people to moral degradation. Consequently, the “disenchanted” modern world without God is not the world of true rationality, but of the defective instrumental rationality that serves desires and does not provide a comprehensive vision of reality. This modern rationality expresses itself, on the one hand, in undisputed scientific and technological achievements, and the ongoing modernization of life; and on the other hand, in violent conflicts, a life full of anxiety, and the inner emptiness of modern humanity. Its effect is not the end of history, as predicted by Hegel, Marx, and more recently Fukuyama, but its ever faster and more unexpected change.

In just one generation the inhabitants of the West—who made their own deconstruction by becoming a people without God, without virtue, without manners, and often without families and without children—are at risk of losing their current leading economic, political, and cultural role in the world. They have created a void that is now to be filled by other, non-Western civilizations.

The greatest loss of modern humanity, however, in both the West and the East, is the loss of the human soul. By forsaking God and virtue, and the awareness of the proper order of things, human beings lose themselves in superficial desires. They are not even aware of what has been lost. The solution is obviously not the politicized and often violent religiosity of fundamentalism. That only contributes further to human degradation. To save themselves, modern individuals must learn to know themselves again. By deep philosophical reflection and authentic religion, they must fill up the void that created postreligious and postmetaphysical thought. They must in the end rediscover their deeper selves.

One cannot live by power or desire alone. Human beings are not one-dimensional, as Hobbes and his followers tried to make us believe, but in fact have many dimensions and many needs. The classical tradition reveals some of those. It speaks to us of community and friendship, virtue and corruption, self-interest and self-control, justice and order, freedom and law, happiness and sorrow, the purposes of life and the dangers of war. It is only through action that can be defined as a return to origins, namely, by creatively repeating and recalling the sources of Western civilization—the ideas contained in the classical tradition—that the declining civilization can be rebuilt.

1. In his work *A Secular Age*, Taylor associates this view with secular, self-sufficient humanists who subscribe to Enlightenment values and deny all other life goals beyond human flourishing. He contrasts them with religious humanists (believers in transcendence) and postmodern antihumanists (neo-Nietzscheans). He thus refers to the struggle between the secular and the spiritual as a three-cornered battle. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Boston: Belknap Press, 2007), 636. In my interpretation, these three corners are represented by broader perspectives of modernity, postmodernity, and the classical tradition. Their conflict constitutes our present experience of living within Western civilization.


5. Ibid., 20.
8. Ibid., 15–16.
9. Ibid., 16.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 21.
12. Ibid., 75.
15. Ibid., 19.
16. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 318.
21. Karl Jaspers, who introduced the term “axial age” (German *Achsenzeit*), believed that in the period between 800 and 200 BC there were revolutionary changes in the thinking of human beings in the East and the West. Born during this period were prominent thinkers: Confucius, Lao-Tzu, Zoroaster, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and others.
23. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 77.