

DEMOCRACY, CULTURE AND CATHOLICISM  
INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH PROJECT

**Proposal: Democratic Legitimation in a Multicultural Context**  
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On January 19, 2004 world renowned German political theorist Jürgen Habermas met with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) to discuss the pre-political foundations of the democratic state. Central to their discussion was the impact of cultural secularization on values such as tolerance, orientation toward the common good, and respect for the inherent dignity of the individual that are thought to be essential to flourishing democracy. Two points of convergence emerged in this discussion. First, both discussants agreed that reason alone cannot sustain respect for the inherent dignity of the individual and the common good without more substantive faith commitments. Even if the moral point of view can be understood in rational terms – and, more precisely, in terms that find a direct purchase in the way in which individuals in modern, secular societies hold one another rationally accountable as free and equal participants in a cooperative community integrated by dialog – rational insight alone is insufficient to motivate persons to will the common good. Second, they agreed that the relationship between core democratic values is at once complementary and contradictory. Tolerance and respect for the inherent dignity of the individual as an autonomous agent encourage pluralism in lifestyles and comprehensive belief systems; but multicultural differences pose a challenge to generating popular consensus on policies that all agree advance the common good. Although one might despair at the seemingly insuperable conflict between these so-called liberal and communitarian (civic republican) aspects of modern democracy, the fact remains that they are essentially complementary. The “inalienable”

rights of the individual are (as Jeremy Bentham famously put it) “nonsense on stilts” until they are constitutionally and statutorily defined; and they are illegitimate unless ratified by the people and their chosen representatives. Conversely, modern democracy arises on the basis of moral, religious, and legal transformations that encourage individualism and generate social conflict. As an institutionalized decision procedure for peaceably resolving conflicts between individual rights claims, its own *modus operandi* – as a procedure for deliberation and fair bargaining – presupposes the existence, as well, of civil and political rights.

In concurrence with Habermas and Pope Benedict (not to mention other important liberals, such as John Rawls), I take it as axiomatic that a vibrant democracy incorporating “reasonable pluralism” must find support in a background political culture composing different (even opposed) comprehensive belief systems. Among the belief systems that pose the greatest hope and risk for democracy are religions, precisely because they anchor value commitments in the absolute truth of a righteous God. My interest in the relationship between religion and democracy concerns precisely the ambivalence we feel toward this relationship. Extreme secularists such as Richard Audi not only defend a strict separation of church and state (one is here reminded of the principle of *laïcité* inscribed in the French constitution that effectively bars the wearing of veils and other religious symbols in public places) but they also insist, as a matter of civility, that citizens of democracies bracket their religious commitments when asking themselves what their motives and reasons are in supporting legislation that touches on basic rights (which, as Habermas reminds us, potentially means any legislation). To do otherwise risks tyrannically imposing non-shareable faith commitments on dissenters in a

way that risks impugning the legitimacy of the system. Catholics and evangelicals by and large resist this line of thinking since it imposes, in reverse order, a special burden on believers to suppress what, for many of them, is the most important part of their identities. Moderates, such as Rawls and Habermas, seek a middle ground between these positions. Conceding that the modern world will likely remain a world of faith (or, as Habermas puts it, a world that is post-secular), they recommend rules of limited religious engagement, such as allowing robust religious rhetoric in civil society while insisting on its eventual translation into secular argumentation at the level of government.

My question is whether these moderate proposals adequately address the different challenges faced by democracies throughout the world. Within an overwhelmingly Christian democracy such as the United States, they might well succeed, despite the otherwise significant diversity in faith attachments. In democracies with very different histories from that of the United States (the examples of France, Switzerland, and the Netherlands immediately come to mind) the presence (or looming presence, given migratory patterns) of a militant, anti-assimilationist body of non-Christians (in this case Muslims) poses special challenges. Finally, and more pertinent to the DCCIRP, former authoritarian regimes that are in the process of transitioning toward democracy provide a unique experimental basis for evaluating whether a more liberal (and tolerant) political life can encourage - rather than erode - liberal, tolerant, religiously identified politics. How does a former territory of the Soviet Union integrate religion and politics in the wake of communism? How does a country with one of the largest Muslim populations in the world promote the equal inclusion of non-Muslim faiths within its political life? How does a former confessional state whose population is overwhelmingly Catholic draw

upon the religious identity of its citizens in forging secular policies aimed at healing several decades of bloody civil war?

My objective is to compare the demographic data and political culture of the United States to that of selected countries within the scope of the DCCIRP (Indonesia, Lithuania, and Peru) in investigating whether a single philosophical perspective on the separation of church and state is feasible. This objective is complicated by the fact that the question goes beyond the rules of political civility in democratic engagement to include, as well, special provisions for the protection and accommodation of particular religious groups (be they minorities or majorities). Ultimately, it touches on the right of democratic majorities to regulate the religious composition of their own membership through restrictive immigration policies. I suspect that the answer to my question, in light of these additional complications, is that there is no single, all-encompassing philosophical perspective on the separation of church and state issues (but that, of course, remains to be seen).

My research method consists in gathering the relevant demographic, socio-cultural, and political data that bears on my question and then using it as an empirical (descriptive) basis for testing a range of philosophical opinion concerning the church/state separation issue. The method of “testing” proposed here is frankly circular in the sense that social reality and philosophical ideal will be brought to bear assessing each other’s viability. Furthermore, the ideal – or ideals – in question will not be adduced through free-standing philosophical reflection but will themselves be the result of a circular, interpretative reconstruction of popularly (and firmly) held normative convictions (following John Rawls’s method of reaching “reflective equilibrium”

between firmly held, rationally considered judgments and artificial thought experiments). In investigating the empirical and philosophical dimensions of the project I will forgo archival and field work in favor of conducting a thorough review of the relevant studies that have already been undertaken. Incidentally, my past research, which has focused on human rights, group rights for minorities, immigration, methods of democratic representation, and models of deliberative democracy, has provided me with an excellent preparation for this project.

As for anticipated results and academic contribution: As mentioned above, I anticipate that my research will lead me to conclude that no single philosophical perspective on the separation of church and state issues suffices to capture all the normative angles revealed by the data. This result, while negative, will make a significant contribution to current philosophical debates that normally take one cultural context as paradigmatic in defending a single perspective. Possible venues for publishing my research include leading Anglo-American journals in social and political philosophy, political science, and political theory.

In conclusion, let me reiterate my intense desire to participate in this project. In discussing the Democracy, Culture, and Catholicism project with Dr. Michael Schuck, I expressed my willingness to alter my proposal to meet the needs of the project. Although I have chosen the separation of church and state as my focus, I have deliberately expanded that focus to include other concerns of mine revolving around the compatibility of religion in the political life of aspiring democracies whose historical background has included officially mandated (strong), anti-religious secularism (Lithuania) or weak, ambivalent secularism (Peru and Indonesia). To recall the opening theme of my proposal,

this focus will be guided by simple question: Can a political culture infused with religion function to promote the transition toward secular democracy; and conversely, can such a democracy promote the flourishing of religious political culture without losing its liberal identity?