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Habermas and Gauchet on religion in postsecular society. A critical assessment

Antoon Braeckman

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Abstract This article seeks to demonstrate that in his recent reading of the role of religion in the postsecular public realm, Habermas overlooks a most fundamental dimension of religion: its power to symbolically institute communities. For his part, Gauchet starts from a vision of religion in which this fundamental dimension is central. In his evaluation of the role of religion in postsecular society, he therefore arrives at results which are very different from those of Habermas. However, I believe that Gauchet too underestimates the extent to which religion's power of symbolic community institution has remained intact within modern, postsecular society. In support of this position, I show how relatively heterogeneous phenomena within Western societies, such as the renewed importance of religion in the public realm, the revival of certain forms of nationalism and the associated demand for recognition of group rights and hence for forms of legal pluralism, may prefigure a new transformation of the public realm.

Keywords Habermas · Gauchet · Religion · Public realm · Representation · Symbolic community

1 Introduction

Over the past decade, the modern separation of roles between religion and politics, of which the principle of separation of church and state is still the most eloquent symbol, has come under pressure. Various developments have contributed to this, but above all the increasing influence that (militant) religious movements and convictions—whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim—have gained on public opinion. The essence of this problematization of the secularist division between religion and

A. Braeckman (✉)
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Leuven, Belgium
e-mail: toon.braeckman@kuleuven-kortrijk.be

politics is that it is no longer accepted that religion is a purely private matter, but that religion should assume its rightful place within the public sphere. This issue has also been taken up by political philosophy, to the point where some scholars[1] follow the example of Habermas[2] in referring to a ‘postsecular’ society: a modern society which has abandoned its originally militant secularism, and is prepared to accept that religion should be given more of a place within the public sphere. The key question here, of course, is what place should be assigned to religion, and on what basis? On this point, naturally, opinions differ. Characteristic in this connection is the interesting disagreement between Rawls and Habermas. Rawls believes that religion does not belong in the public realm, whereas Habermas takes the view that it can do so under certain restrictive conditions. In the meantime, this debate has sparked off numerous reactions, and I will return to it later on. The point I wish to raise here lies on a different plane, however. In this debate, a particular view of religion tends to be tacitly postulated which is far from self-evident, yet which determines the perspective from which answers are provided. In the following, I primarily seek to problematize this implied vision of religion, as it overlooks a fundamental dimension of religion: its power of symbolic community institution. Especially Habermas can be seen to focus unilaterally on the moral-cognitive and epistemic aspects of religion, disregarding its continuing power of symbolic community-building (1). Drawing on the work of the French philosopher and political essayist Marcel Gauchet, I seek to point out this fundamental aspect of religion, and show that it leads to a very different assessment of the role of religion in postsecular society (2). Yet I believe that Gauchet too underestimates the extent to which the religious power of symbolic community institution has remained intact within our modern, postsecular society. In support of this position, I show how relatively heterogeneous phenomena within our Western societies, such as the renewed importance of religion in the public realm, the revival of certain forms of nationalism and the associated demand for recognition of group rights and hence for forms of legal pluralism, may prefigure new, not wholly unproblematic transformations of the public realm (3).

2 Religion within the boundaries of deliberative reason: Habermas

Habermas’ political philosophy intends to offer a discourse-theoretical foundation of the normative principles of the democratic, constitutional state. More specifically, Habermas seeks to reconstruct the normative presuppositions which form the basis for the discursive opinion and will formation which he regards as the core of the constitutional democratic state.[3] One vital element in this discursive opinion and will formation is the public sphere, as the actual locus of deliberation where decisions are made about the validity of socially binding norms. For in a constitutional democracy, only those norms are valid concerning which all

[1] Cooke (2006, p. 189, 2007), Lafont (2007).

[2] Habermas (2005, p. 116).

[3] Habermas (1996, p. 5).

interested parties have reached agreement in a free and open process of deliberation. In other words, the discursive opinion and will formation within the public sphere, in which all interested parties can in principle make their contribution, constitutes in Habermas' view the ultimate legitimacy basis of constitutional democracy's norms and principles.

Habermas conceives of these deliberative processes of opinion and will formation in a discourse-theoretical sense. This means that they are conceived of according to the model of communicative action: they are oriented towards rational agreement in which, ultimately, the "compelling force of the better argument" is decisive.[4] Precisely because in the deliberative process—assuming an ideal discussion situation—agreement is formed on the basis of rational argumentation, Habermas regards the consensus reached not just as normatively valid and hence legitimate, but as acceptable in a rational sense, i.e. defensible from a strictly rational or cognitive viewpoint.[5] This is because norms are justified from a discourse-theoretical viewpoint by means of a procedure which is analogous to the discourse-theoretical justification of true statements.[6] In both cases, the consensus reached is the outcome of an exchange of rational grounds, i.e. of arguments with an expressly cognitive or epistemic (truth) content; and this implies that in both cases 'acceptance' is reached on epistemic grounds.[7]

When Habermas raises the question in *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion* of religion's place in the public sphere, he does so from within the discourse-theoretical framework outlined above. His question therefore reads as follows: how—and this means both in what way and under what conditions—would religion *from a discourse-theoretical perspective* contribute (or alternatively: be a threat) to the development of constitutional democracy and its underlying normative principles? Put differently, how and under what conditions would religion contribute to the ongoing deliberative processes of opinion and will formation with a view to helping determine the norms and principles of the democratic constitutional state?

Taking account of the postulated discourse-theoretical framework, the answer to the 'how' question is clear. Religion can only contribute to the deliberative process of opinion and will formation provided it makes its own cognitive or epistemic contribution to the ongoing argumentation. More particularly, religion's contribution can only consist of the provision of insights or comparable cognitive content which would not otherwise gain a place within the debate, or at least not in the same way. Habermas believes that it does in fact make such a contribution. He is convinced that religion has its own veracity, that it is an important source and depository of moral intuitions, and that it has typical means of expression and sensibilities for societal pathologies, individual failures, distorted ways of life, etc.

[4] Habermas (1996, p. 103, 1998, p. 37).

[5] Habermas (1998, pp. 43–44).

[6] Habermas (1998, p. 38), Cooke (2000, p. 953).

[7] Habermas (1998, p. 42). For the epistemic content of legal norms as the outcome of public deliberative processes, see Habermas (1996, pp. 121, 147, 151, 2005, p. 126), Cooke (2000, p. 952, 2007, p. 224), Geenens (2007, pp. 363, 365), Lafont (2007, p. 253).

at its disposal,[8] and he is particularly anxious lest these aspects of our cultural tradition disappear.[9] Moreover, he also takes the view that believers should be able to contribute their arguments in religious language, provided that those arguments are based on the specific cognitive content of religion.[10] He contends that they need not translate their own religious grounds into a secular, rational argument; for one cannot expect believers to be able to ground their position *independently* from their religious convictions.[11] On the other hand, such a translation, in his view, is indeed required on the *formal*, institutional level of public will formation. Whether one speaks for a public institution or as a political representative, the arguments for the position taken should be rendered secularly and rationally, i.e. equally accessible to all citizens.[12] In a postsecular society, general binding norms can never be solely or unilaterally grounded in religious convictions, as this would be an infringement on the principle of the philosophical neutrality of political authority.[13]

Now religion, as a separate source of insights that may be relevant to the deliberative process of opinion and will formation, may formulate arguments within the *informal* public sphere in its own religious language, but it can only do so when a number of conditions are satisfied. *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, therefore, primarily discusses these conditions. More specifically, Habermas tries to determine what conditions both religion and secular society would need to meet in order for religion to be able to contribute to the deliberative process of democratic opinion and will formation. First of all, the believer has to accept secular society. This means: (1) that one must accept the philosophical pluralism of modern society and thus endorse that someone's view can, by definition, never be the vision shared by all. (2) Furthermore, the believer should recognize the authority of science as society's monopoly of knowledge. (3) Finally, the believer has to accept the premises of the constitutional state, which are grounded on secular morality. This implies that one has to acknowledge the supremacy of secular morality above one's own religious or moral viewpoints.[14] Elsewhere Habermas[15] even advances the idea that the believer has to see a *positive* connection between his or her own ethos and society's secular morality. One should understand this morality, as it were, as proceeding from one's own religious ethos; one has to understand each as being in line with the other. The secular citizen is, for its part, to accept the impossibility of proving the irrationality of religious worldviews. In other words, one has to endorse the position that religion is *not* unreasonable, and therefore that it cannot be considered as a phenomenon that is bound to disappear.[16] Furthermore, and in Habermas' vision this amounts to the same thing, people should acknowledge that

[8] Habermas (2005, p. 115).

[9] Habermas (2005, pp. 116, 137).

[10] Habermas (2005, pp. 132–133).

[11] Habermas (2005, p. 133).

[12] Habermas (2005, pp. 133–134).

[13] Habermas (2005, p. 140).

[14] Habermas (2001, p. 14).

[15] Habermas (2005, p. 269).

[16] Habermas (2005, pp. 117–118, 145).

religious convictions may contain an important cognitive surplus value, especially concerning moral intuitions.[17]

Habermas' position differs fundamentally from that of Rawls. Rawls argues that (reasonable) comprehensive doctrines, among which he includes religions,[18] do not in themselves have a role to play in the public realm: not within the informal public realm of opinion formation, and still less within the formal institutional realm of public will formation. Religions and similar worldviews which are expressly centred around values belong, in his view, to the private sphere. For this reason the viewpoints of these comprehensive doctrines, if they want to play any role at all in the public forum, need to be translated into a secular language. Rawls believes that such an act of translation is required, because otherwise the possibility of an "overlapping consensus" between the various comprehensive doctrines—which constitutes the core of Rawls' political liberalism—would hardly be feasible.[19]

Without dwelling for too long on this discussion between Habermas and Rawls, which is also covered extensively in the literature, it is clear that both Rawls' position and that of Habermas are open to a number of criticisms. Habermas rightly notes that the translation of religious convictions into secular standpoints is no straightforward matter. After all, believers cannot be expected to provide arguments and grounds for their standpoints independently of their religious convictions.[20] It is precisely for this reason that Habermas admits religious language within the informal public realm. Yet Habermas' own view is not without its problems either. For a start, he appears to jeopardize the important theorem of "mutual understanding" from his theory of communicative action. Because one is no longer required to translate one's own religious viewpoints into a secular language within the informal public sphere, and can thus simply use one's own religious idiom, the meaning of consensus, as the implied goal of public deliberation, becomes unclear. Is communicative action then still directed towards "mutual understanding" (*Verständigung*), or does it merely aspire to comprise formal respect in the sense of a non-substantial mutual recognition of the other as a person? Moreover, others have pointed out that the solution proposed by Habermas of lifting the proviso with regard to religious arguments within the informal public sphere, but imposing it in the formal, institutional public sphere, is as open to criticism as that of Rawls. In effect, Habermas is suggesting that it is possible to translate the same content (i.e. strictly religious arguments) using other epistemic (i.e. secular and generally accessible) tools and that, where such a translation proves impossible, the specifically religious reasons should in any case be excluded, simply *because* they cannot be translated into generally accessible, rational arguments.[21]

Despite the interest of this debate, what is particularly significant is the shared basic assumption behind it. According to this assumption, religion presents itself

[17] Habermas (2005, pp. 137, 145).

[18] Rawls (1993, pp. 58–66).

[19] See *inter al.* Rawls (1993, pp. 217–218, 226).

[20] Habermas (2005, p. 133).

[21] Lafont (2007, p. 245).

primarily as a "worldview" (*Weltbild*)[22]—as "a (reasonable) comprehensive doctrine," in Rawls' phrasing. It is a complex of more or less consistent views, values and norms, and as such a separate source of epistemic and cognitive content that, for this very reason, is important as a set of arguments to be introduced into public debate, so long as certain conditions are met.

As was indicated above, in Habermas this assumption is linked up with his discourse-theoretical outlook. From this perspective, religion primarily manifests itself as a source of cognitive content, as a set of conceptions of particular ethical relevance to the development of individual and collective life, the moral intuitions of which contain epistemic veracity. That is the reason why, in Habermas' view, religion has a legitimate place in the public realm: in the public debate, no arguments that may be epistemically or cognitively relevant must be overlooked, whatever their origin. Similarly, and likewise an effect of Habermas' discourse-theoretical gaze, the public realm is presented primarily as a space of debate, where opposing arguments are exchanged and where the 'compelling force' of the better argument prevails. The counterfactually imagined ideal discussion situation in which all interested parties are able to participate equally, together with the epistemic character of the arguments provided, insure the rationality of the agreement to be reached as the outcome of the debate. This twofold reduction, firstly of the public realm to a discussion space, and secondly of religion to a source of significant moral intuitions whose cognitive and epistemic cores may constitute argumentative contributions within this discussion, reveals clearly the extent to which the paradigm of scientific, cognitively grounded argumentation has remained Habermas' model for thinking about the moral and political deliberative processes in the public sphere.[23] In *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion*, Habermas once again confirms this view. He even suggests that the difference between the political and the scientific debates is merely circumstantial.[24] Eventually, from this viewpoint, even political deliberative processes are oriented towards finding truth—defined as rational consensus—and religion is held to contribute to this in a cognitive sense. If religion, therefore, is to be of any significance within the public realm, it should be as a source of 'cognitive surplus value' for public debate, which accepts the rules of rational argumentation, and—on the institutional level—also even speaks the language of secular reason.

The question is, of course, whether Habermas' view of the public realm, which is so obviously modelled after the 'republic of scholars,' and the concomitant view on religion, are really to be maintained. More specifically, the question is whether his view of the role of religion in the public realm does not make him blind to other possible ways in which religion today may manifest itself within the public realm? I am inclined to answer these questions in the affirmative. In his view of religion Habermas turns out to consistently underestimate or even overlook one of the basic dimensions of religion: its power of symbolic community institution. It is precisely in this capacity that religion today, as a result of globalization and the associated

[22] Habermas (2005, p. 117).

[23] See in this respect *inter al.* Habermas (1996, pp. 16, 18–19).

[24] Habermas (2005, p. 267).

large-scale migration flows, is gaining in power and influence and is unexpectedly presenting a challenge to democracy and its deliberative processes of opinion and will formation.

But what is meant by religion's power of symbolic community institution? To explain this, I turn to the work of the French political philosopher Marcel Gauchet, who has developed this dimension of religion into the central pillar of his political philosophy in general and his view of democracy in particular.[25]

3 Religion and the symbolic institution of society: Gauchet

In Gauchet's view, religion is not primarily a comprehensive doctrine with cognitively relevant moral intuitions which can make a meaningful contribution to the deliberative process of opinion and will formation. Religion in Gauchet's view is above all the original form of symbolic community institution: it is the original way in which human bonds are formed into symbolic communities, i.e. into communities which are structured by a complex and coherent meaning system. Therefore, religion in its original form is the 'negative' prefiguration of the political, and the political should be understood as a comparable but differently structured symbolic institution of society. It is this functional equivalence between religion and politics that accounts for the much closer interrelation between the two in Gauchet's vision than is the case in Rawls or Habermas.[26] To explain this, I will take a brief look at (1) the different ways in which religion and politics symbolically institute communities; (2) the effects of this on the historical relationship between religion and politics; and (3) Gauchet's assessment of the current role of religion in the public realm. In the third and fourth sections of this essay, I then try to critically rework Gauchet's and Habermas' views into a fresh evaluation of the current role of religion in postsecular societies.

Following the late French anthropologist Pierre Clastres, Gauchet conceives of the structure of primitive religion as a "neutralization of the political."[27] On the one hand, there is primitive society, which sees itself as an unbroken unity, due to its dependence on a founding, anterior otherness: the ancestors' founding of society. On the other hand, there is this founding, anterior otherness, which is the irrecoverable origin of society that has imposed upon society its changeless structure and order. In Gauchet's view, this structure indicates that the perspective from which society comprehends itself, is situated *outside* society.[28] Put differently: society cannot constitute itself as society but by conceiving of itself as instituted by something or someone different: by an authority that has the *power* to institute

[25] Gauchet (1997). For analyses of Gauchet's position in contemporary French political thought, see Doyle (2003, 2006), Moyn (2004, 2005), Behrent (2004), Weymans (2005). An account of his own intellectual biography is presented in Gauchet (2003).

[26] A survey of Gauchet's intellectual development regarding the interrelatedness of religion and politics is offered in Gauchet (2005); see also Kalyvas (1999).

[27] Gauchet (2005, pp. 12, 70). In this respect, Gauchet relies on Clastres (1974); see Gauchet (2005, pp. 91–180). For a critical assessment of Gauchet's indebtedness to Clastres, see Moyn (2005).

[28] Gauchet (2005, pp. 64, 66).

society.[29] This is clear in the case of primitive religion. There it is held that the ancestors founded the community and its basic social differentiations. Furthermore, this original religious societal structure indicates that when the constitutive otherness is banished *radically* from society, a distinction *within* society need not then exist between rulers who establish (or change) societal order, and the ruled who are subordinated to those rulers. In this structure of primitive religion all political power (i.e. all power that could be used to shape and change society) is removed from society. That is why Gauchet sees the structure of primitive religion as a "neutralization of the political."[30] It is organized in such a way that it need not divide society into rulers and ruled. Yet at the same time, there is a price to be paid. Such a society must conceive of itself as basically unalterable, i.e. as a-historical. For no one within society has the right to take up the position of the ancestors and to change society.

Gauchet's thesis follows upon this analysis, saying that the entire political history can be read as a process of "leaving religion," i.e. as gradually abandoning this religious structuring of society.[31] The key moment in this process is the coming about of the state, i.e. the installment of a power structure within society. At that moment the external foundation of society (that still lies with the ancestors or the gods) receives *representatives* or agents within society. These representatives can now rule over society, due to their participation in its supernatural origins. The result is twofold. Society loses its original unity and falls apart into the opposition of rulers and ruled. But something is also gained: society obtains the capacity to change itself. Society becomes historical. Therefore, Gauchet regards the coming about of the state as the actual birth of the political.[32] What is originally 'neutralized' by primitive religion is precisely this *manifestation* of the political, i.e. the division within society between rulers and ruled and the concomitant possibility to change society. What is *not* neutralized by primitive religion and never could be, according to Gauchet, is what he calls "the social fact" itself[33]: the fact that society cannot but conceive of itself from a position 'outside' itself, i.e. that society always conceives of its order and meaning as something which it borrows from an 'outside.'[34]

The second decisive moment in the process of leaving religion is the development of modern democracy. At the core of that revolution is the complete restructuring of the political, independent from religion. The origin of society is no longer situated within the externality of a sacred divine will, but is now placed within the will of the sovereign people. As a result, the founding otherness moves

[29] Gauchet (2005, p. 74). This idea in Gauchet resumes Lefort's concept of 'the political': the underlying societal structure that institutes a particular distribution of knowledge, law and power, and which is disclosed most clearly by unravelling the symbolic structure of power (Lefort 1986, pp. 17–30, 251–300). For a discussion of the political in Lefort, see Flynn (2005, pp. 115, 121–122) and Doyle (2003, pp. 77–78).

[30] Gauchet (2005, p. 13).

[31] Gauchet (1985).

[32] Gauchet (2005, p. 18).

[33] Gauchet (2005, pp. 46, 48).

[34] Gauchet (2005, p. 64).

from the outside to the inside: from a transcendent origin to an immanent foundation. The structure of democratic society, therefore dissolves, on the one hand into the state or power structure that wields power in the name of the sovereign people, and on the other into the plurality of citizens who build civil society. In this way democratic society seems to carry its own foundation within itself. This is correct, and yet nonetheless more complex.

Gauchet indicates that even in the structure of democratic societies, the basic political structure of any society—found *by negation* from religious societies[35]—remains perfectly recognizable. First, there is the idea that every society has its ground, its reason, its Law in an 'outside': in a foundational otherness.[36] This is also the case in democratic societies. The sovereign people, in the name of which power is exerted, does not coincide with its *existing* citizens. Further still, the liberty and equality, in the name of which power is exerted, do not coincide with their *actual* freedom and equality. Thus even in the case of democracy the foundation of society is an otherness; even here the place of power is 'outside' society. For it is *in the name of* the 'sovereign people' (or in the name of 'equality', 'liberty', 'civil rights' and so forth) that the state exerts power over its citizens and makes them obey the law. The state thus *represents* the Law that has to be enforced—if necessary by the use of (legitimate) violence. The state, therefore, is in itself an otherness vis-à-vis civil society.[37] Precisely due to their representation by the otherness of the state, citizens, according to Gauchet, constitute themselves into a society: they build a polity that is discernible to itself.[38] Just as in primitive religion society comes about by referring to the shared 'founding otherness'; under modern conditions society comes about because it is *represented* by the otherness of the state. For neither the sovereignty of the people nor even the people themselves *precede* their representation by the state. Of course, the state exerts power over its citizens *in the name* of the sovereign people, but as a matter of fact, both the sovereignty and the people only come into existence—are only *instituted*—by their being represented by the state.[39] And only due to this very representation may citizens envisage themselves as one people and hence constitute themselves into one people.[40] The same holds for the citizens' rights and liberties. Even they cannot come before their representation by the state. Of course, again, the state exerts power over its citizens in the name of their rights and liberties. As a matter of fact though, these rights and liberties only become a reality—again, are only *instituted*—by their being represented by the state. And only due to this very representation can citizens envisage themselves as

[35] Gauchet (2003, p. 330).

[36] Moyn (2005, p. 181).

[37] Gauchet (2005, p. 453).

[38] Gauchet (2003, p. 329).

[39] The structure of representation thus converges with the structure of the 'original supplement' in Derrida: the derivative (here: the state as representation of society) is the condition of possibility, and therefore the origin (!) of the original (here: society). Only through this representation does society as society come into being. In his reading of the American *Declaration of Independence*, Derrida has masterfully expounded this logic of representation (Derrida 1984). See Lindahl (2006, pp. 893ff.) for a similar elaboration of this logic of representation.

[40] Gauchet (2005, p. 145).

free and equal, as bearers of subjective rights. In this manner, it becomes apparent that every society is effected by power.[41] Every society constitutes itself by referring to an 'otherness' as its origin, which is at the same time its place of power: the place of society's Law.

Starting from this conceptual scheme, Gauchet goes on to reconstruct the process in which the religious solution is gradually superseded by the political solution, to the point where the political solution prevails.[42] This point is eventually reached with the establishment of the modern, democratic welfare state, but its process of preparation already starts at the dawn of modernity. Gauchet indicates that the "realm of autonomy," as he calls the accomplished democratic ordering, is established in three successive phases. The first consists in the creation—beginning in the seventeenth century—of the modern, sovereign (nation) state. The state raises itself above religious power, declares itself the one and only sovereign, and no longer legitimizes itself by referring to a superior divine order, but instead to the social contract between citizens. Gauchet refers to Thomas Hobbes as this phase's major theorist. The second phase consists in founding and justifying the modern sovereign state in and by the subjective rights of its citizens. This process takes place during the eighteenth century and culminates in the American Declaration of Independence (1776), in the American Constitution (1787), and, of course, in the French Revolution (1789). In the third phase, which unfolds from the nineteenth century onwards, modern society as a whole projects itself into a shared future: it understands itself as a collective progression towards a better future.[43] The establishment of the democratic nation state around the turn of the nineteenth century constitutes a first successful embodiment of this accomplished realm of autonomy. In the second half of the twentieth century, the development of the democratic nation state towards a greater autonomy for all of its citizens then leads to the establishment of the welfare state.[44]

However, in order to understand Gauchet's view of the *current* role of religion in the public realm, we need to explain the core of this historical process: the transformations in the relationship between church and state. For our purposes, one complex turning point is of major importance: the moment at which the state succeeds in expelling religion from the public sphere, while assigning it to the private one.[45] This is the moment—situated by Gauchet around the turn of the twentieth century—at which the state presides over a pluralistically organized civil society with the church as one of its organizations. By the same token, the state becomes invested with the dignity that thus far had been reserved solely for the church.[46] Symptomatic in this connection is the fact that the state, through its pre-eminent position, acquires such value that the citizen is prepared to make sacrifices

[41] Gauchet (2005, p. 74).

[42] Gauchet (1997).

[43] Gauchet (2002, pp. 335–339).

[44] Gauchet (2002, pp. 339–340).

[45] Gauchet (1998, pp. 59–60).

[46] Gauchet (1998, pp. 61–62).

for it.[47] It is the moment at which the state, like religion before it, develops within society into an "instance of collective transcendence."[48] By these forms of collective transcendence, such as the nation, the state, class, religion, ideology, etc., Gauchet understands all phenomena in which the group transcends the individual and which the individual therefore considers as belonging to a superior, authoritative order, for which it shows due respect.[49] Gauchet now argues that since 1975, all instances of collective transcendence, be they religions, ideologies or the (nation) state, have lost their exalted significance. The reasons for this are multiple.[50] But in Gauchet's view it basically has to do with the end of the conflict between church and state. Until the mid-seventies, the state had been struggling with the church for control over society—a conflict, as was indicated, that extends as far back as the beginnings of the modern era. In the course of history, the state, step by step, has conquered the church's power, and the state's eventual triumph gave it its dignity and authority.[51] But now that this dispute has been settled, i.e. since religion, or its secular version, ideology, is no longer regarded as a plausible alternative, the state has lost, together with its opponent, the dignity it had once achieved for itself due to that conflict. If we were called upon to give one name to these various strands of downgrading the forms of collective transcendence, the notion of 'disenchantment of the political' would be appropriate. For they all come down to the disappearance of the dignity and respect for that dimension within society that transcends the individual and by which our sheer togetherness is transformed into a shared community.

According to Gauchet, this downgrading of the dimension of transcendence in society leads to a profound transformation of the relation between the state and the individual.[52] Today this is symptomatically illustrated by overall concerns for 'individual rights.'[53] These rights do not concern primarily the individual's civil rights, but the rights of which it considers itself to be the legitimate bearer *as* an individual, i.e. as a human being—hence the outspoken concern at present for 'human rights.' Here Gauchet espies a serious shift with respect to the former, classical idea of citizenship. According to that earlier notion, every citizen was supposed to appropriate the commonly held general perspective along with its own particular perspective. Today, every individual seeks to have its own private interests asserted by the state, whose perspective no one is any longer prepared to share.[54] Contrary to its former role, the government is no longer capable of directing matters from interests superior to particular interests toward what it takes to be the interests of society as such. Today one works from the assumption that the *market* of

[47] For a probing analysis of the nation state exhorting self-sacrificing citizens, see Anderson (1991, pp. 143–144).

[48] Gauchet (1997, p. 186).

[49] Gauchet (2002, p. 340).

[50] Gauchet (2002, pp. 344–345).

[51] Gauchet (1998, pp. 62–63).

[52] Gauchet (1998, p. 108).

[53] Gauchet (1998, p. 111).

[54] Gauchet (1998, p. 115).

particular interests contains the answer to the political question of which goals should be set for society.[55]

The fading concern for the public interest, the coming to the fore of the individual and individual rights, and the joined privatization of the political realm, eventually transform the individual's self-understanding and the way in which it presents itself within society. Characteristic of this modified position of the individual is that "convictions tend to be transformed into identities."[56] How we conceive of 'our identity' today, Gauchet argues, is the exact opposite of how we understood it yesterday. To become oneself, to become a person, used to be realized by dissociating from one's own particularity. My real self was what I find once I have swept away the ties that particularize me. Today, on the contrary, the individual wants emphatically to coincide with its 'particular' self: it identifies with its singularity. This identification between the individual and its singularity is at play at different levels. Subjectively, the 'real self' is the result of the subjective appropriation of one's social singularity. I coincide with my faith, with my origins, my being Basque or Muslim, black, gay or Catholic. Politically, such singularity also forms the basis for obtaining a position within the public realm. In this sense, the public realm today coincides with those private singularities having become public. The public realm by the same token no longer has any substantiality of its own that would refer to general goals that transcend the market of singular individuals and their private interests.[57]

All of this fundamentally changes the relationship between the private and the public sphere. The private sphere formulates the values and the goals of society, which, although society as such is no longer capable of enacting, it is still expected to endorse through politics. As a result, today the distinction between the public and private spheres is like the distinction between the looking-glass and what it mirrors. With respect to content, there is no distinction at all. For, as was indicated above, the state or the public sphere no longer has a normative substance of its own. There is only a distinction with regard to the forum. The public sphere mirrors private singularities and thus constitutes the forum upon which these private singularities become publicly acknowledged and visible to themselves. The state today has become purely representative: it is merely a reflection of civil society.[58]

This is the context in which Gauchet observes new ways for religion to play a role within the public realm. For the state's loss of significance as an instance of collective transcendence, its reduction to a purely administrative tool for the benefit of the individual citizen and its private interests, has a twofold effect. To start with, we no longer primarily relate our social identity to our citizenship, but to what singularizes us.[59] And here lies a potential contribution of religion, for it offers a distinctive amalgam of religious convictions, moral norms and social rules of behaviour with which individuals may identify and from which they may derive

[55] Gauchet (1998, p. 117).

[56] Gauchet (1998, p. 121).

[57] Gauchet (1998, p. 124).

[58] Gauchet (1998, pp. 155–156).

[59] Gauchet (1998, pp. 121–124).

their social identity. In this way, 'convictions'—in this case religious convictions—may indeed become 'identities' which then also want to be recognized.[60] The effect of this is that the public realm ceases to be a discussion space, and becomes the place where individuals and their (religious) 'identity communities' claim recognition. But this is not the only role that is assigned to religion today. For the state itself is eager to respond to this request for recognition from these (religious) identity communities. By recognizing these communities, the state at once implicitly endorses their norms and values, while at the same time it compensates for its own lack of normative substance. In this way, religion provides moral substance and legitimacy to a state that has gradually lost its own normative content. Only religion does this explicitly at the request and in the framework of a secular polity; as a result of which, religion (or its contribution) is immediately 'profaned' to a significant extent.[61]

4 Depoliticization or re-establishing symbolic communities?

According to Gauchet, the linked processes of the 'disenchantment of the political' and the one-sided emphasis on the individual and its rights thus offer religion the possibility to play a new role in the public realm. On the one hand, religion offers the individual convictions with which it may manifest itself as a specific identity on the public forum and claim recognition. On the other hand, religion provides a reservoir of moral intuitions from which the state can draw in order to gain moral substance and hence normative legitimacy. In both cases religion is instrumentalized as a substitute for something that has disappeared due to the "disenchantment of the political," i.e. the far-reaching depoliticization, associated with the "society of individuals."[62] The bottom-line of Gauchet's diagnosis is that the disenchantment of the political, the disappearance of the citizen's positive, engaged commitment to the state as its ground and precondition, is responsible for religion's re-entry into the public realm, albeit—and this makes the situation completely new—within the outlines of the democratic state and purely and simply as a function of the latter's profane objectives or those of its citizens.

It is clear from this how much Gauchet's diagnosis differs from Habermas'. Whereas religion's contribution within the public realm is welcomed by Habermas as proof of recognition of both the importance of religion and of secularity in the postsecular society, it is seen by Gauchet as a symptom of a depoliticized "society of individuals." Far from making epistemic or cognitive contributions to the democratic process of opinion and will formation, religious content in Gauchet's analysis serves mainly as a compensation for the deficiencies in social and moral substance that the disenchantment of the political at the level of the individual and of the state has brought about. The only significant point of agreement between the two authors is that both are convinced that whatever role religion plays today in the

[60] Gauchet (1998, pp. 129–133).

[61] Gauchet (1998, pp. 143–151).

[62] Gauchet (2002, p. ix).

public sphere, it must play it within the limits and in line with the objectives of the secular, democratic state and politics.[63]

Yet however differently the two writers assess the role of religion in the public realm today, the question is whether they do not both underestimate the religious power of symbolic community institution. Compared with Habermas, Gauchet has the merit of having identified the symbolic, community-instituting power of primitive religion. But this makes it all the more remarkable that, in his analysis of the role of religion in postsecular society, he scarcely takes any notice of this religious power. Gauchet appears to assume that we, as 'modern people,' may still be religious individually, but that the process of 'leaving religion' is definitively behind us,[64] in other words, that the political struggle with religion about the symbolic institution of society has been won once and for all by the modern, democratic and secular state.[65] The secular state may indeed have won out over religion definitively in our present-day Western nation states, but that does not necessarily mean that the *social* mechanism of religious symbolic community institution has disappeared for good. We may even conjecture that, given the fact that religion originally had such a community-instituting potential, it is still capable of reactivating that power under certain circumstances—even within Western, democratic and secular nation states.

Such a hypothesis would in fact enable us to understand a number of recent, striking and at first sight unrelated political phenomena more satisfactorily. I am thinking of the simultaneous rise over past decades of a militant, right-wing nationalism and of various forms of religious fundamentalism within the Western democracies in Europe and North America. The breeding-ground and precondition for both phenomena undoubtedly are the ongoing processes of globalization and the disenchantment of the political in the democratic nation states, as they are failing to cope in their capacity as welfare states with the challenges of globalized economy and other geopolitical processes. However, this is by no means sufficient as an explanation of why these developments have given rise to militant nationalism or religious fundamentalism. My hypothesis—which I can only formulate in outline here—is that both phenomena very much coincide with a reactivation of religion's power of symbolic community institution. In my view this undeniably applies to the emergence of various forms of religious militancy and fundamentalism, whether of an Islamic character—the predominant form in European countries—or of a Protestant Christian character, as in the United States. But I also believe that it applies to the militant nationalism which has arisen throughout Europe in past decades—from the Atlantic coast to the Urals—and which, in the United States, is often inextricably interwoven with forms of Christian fundamentalism. For I agree with Benedict Anderson that, of all the modern ideologies, nationalism fits in with or is most closely related to religion, precisely because of its power to symbolically

[63] Habermas (2005, pp. 119–154), Gauchet (1998).

[64] Gauchet (1997, pp. 200–207), Ferry and Gauchet (2004).

[65] In this respect Gauchet (1998, p. 11) states clearly: "In one word, we have metaphysically become democrat."

institute communities.[66] Anderson finds convincing proof of this in the fact that nationalism is the only modern ideology for which people are prepared to die.[67] And this is something, as we have by now had ample opportunity to see, that also applies to religion. Both religion and nationalism are clearly capable of creating (or re-enacting) a symbolic 'community of destiny' by pointing at the shared history and common fortunes of a community that mark off its singularity, and whose members, as a result, regard it as the genuine and inalterable basis of their social and individual identity.[68] Membership of such a 'community of destiny' is often so decisive for the identity of the individuals concerned that they are prepared without any protest to sacrifice their own individuality for the benefit of the community. As stated, my hypothesis is that the so-called process of depoliticization, i.e. the conjunction of the disenchantment of the political and the emergence of the individual who is only concerned with its own rights and interests (cf. Gauchet's "society of individuals"), has made the societal bonds so loose or weak that groups which are societally less strong within society are spontaneously falling back on the symbolic community-instituting potential of religion or nationalism in the hope of finding the protection within their 'community of destiny' that the political community is no longer able to offer. This is what we can see happening at the moment as a result of globalization and the associated migration of large groups of people to the affluent West. It is leading to conflict situations of an almost unprecedented nature between the weaker members of the prosperous countries and the newcomer. Both groups feel threatened in this confrontation in different ways. The socially weaker groups within wealthy societies feel threatened by the migrants because they constitute their immediate societal rivals for jobs, social welfare, housing and so on. For their part, the migrants feel threatened because they have fled to Western societies with high expectations, but on arrival they must notice time and time again that they are first and foremost victims of social exclusion. The result is that both groups are liable to fall back on forms of symbolic community institution which give them a sense of protection—a protection which, as has been said, a disenchanted polity in a globalized socio-economic setting is no longer able or willing to offer. As has been pointed out, its most likely candidates are both religion—as is exemplified by some migrant groups of Islamic origin in urban Europe or by socially and culturally disadvantaged Christian groups in rural USA—and nationalism—as is illustrated by the rise of nationalistic right in Europe, which in past decades has succeeded more than any other force in mobilising, a.o., important segments of the traditional working class and of the petty bourgeois in support of its objectives.

If this hypothesis is right, it means that both Habermas and Gauchet underestimate the religious power of symbolic community institution in differing ways. Habermas does not assign a constitutive role to this aspect of religion in his discourse-theoretical and cognitivist approach, even though it is clear that in

[66] Anderson (1991, pp. 5, 10–12).

[67] Anderson (1991, pp. 143–144).

[68] The classical (religious) example of such a 'community of destiny' is of course the Jewish people, but one could easily understand Serbian, Russian or even American nationalism along the same lines.

Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion religious arguments obtain a more significant place than ever before in his view on public deliberation. Gauchet, in turn, believes that this community-instituting potential of religion for the Western democracies has been consigned to the past, even though he recognizes the significance of individual religious beliefs and experiences in modern society.

5 To conclude: towards a new transformation of the public realm?

The renewed mobilization of the religious and/or nationalistic potential for the institution of symbolic communities today appears to be transforming the public realm and making it vulnerable in a new way. Although these communities are generally symbolic or 'identity communities' (Gauchet), which at first sight merely claim recognition from the state and hence seem to recognize regular political authority, they are ultimately rooted in a problematic rejection of the very essence of democratic politics. For in the name of the social integrity or identity of their symbolic community, they reject *the transformational effect* of the process of deliberative opinion and will formation.[69] They do not accept that the democratic, deliberative process within the public realm would affect or modify the structure, composition, shared convictions and practices of their symbolic community in any way. In this sense it concerns a form of depoliticization which does not result from a unilateral fixation on the part of the individual on its own rights, as Gauchet holds, but which is essentially a rejection—which can assume violent forms—of the very principles and rules of democracy, in the name of the integrity of a symbolic community, regardless of whether it is the integrity of the faithful Muslim or Christian community, or that of 'one's own race.' The demand for recognition which proceeds from such symbolic communities is thus somewhat paradoxical, as it also contains a claim to remain outside the impact of modern, democratic politics. The demand for recognition is a demand to belong to modern society, without this having transforming effects on the identity and integrity of one's own religious or national symbolic community.

Obviously, this is not to say that the recognition of such symbolic communities, including the associated 'protection' of their social and cultural integrity, would *ipso facto* be inadmissible or undemocratic. The whole communitarian debate, conducted non-stop over the past decades, expresses in this regard a sensibility that could hardly be described as undemocratic. But at the same time, this debate indicates that it is not obvious whether and how a democratic state may accept within its borders symbolic communities which would withdraw to a certain extent from democratic processes or would be able to immunize themselves against them. Symptomatic in this respect are the present-day voices raised on all sides for legal pluralism. These voices have their origin in socially more or less constituted symbolic communities, which demand to be recognized as such by claiming special rights or distinct legal provisions in view of their preservation—a situation in which these communities would fall under partly different legal regimes Incidentally, such

[69] Young (1997, p. 402).

forms of legal pluralism exist in some places. In some of the West African states, for example, Muslims can choose whether to be judged on the basis of the secular law or of the Sharia—a demand that is also being voiced in some quarters of the Muslim community in the UK. Comparable forms of legal pluralism also exist in numerous multilingual states, such as Belgium and Canada, in order to protect linguistic minorities. But the question, once again, is how much legal pluralism a democracy can tolerate; or again, how much autonomy symbolic communities can acquire within a democratic state without jeopardising the democratic nature of that state. Clearly, a thinker such as Habermas, who underlines the importance of deliberative processes in the public realm and is an advocate of constitutional patriotism, is strongly disinclined to allocate separate rights to individual symbolic communities within the state.[70] But others such as Charles Taylor disagree.[71] They believe that the proliferation of multicultural societies will force us to assign separate rights to separate symbolic communities, in order to preserve the possibility and workability of co-existence.[72] Without wishing to support either position, I am convinced that today we need to be aware of the possibility and the signs of a reactivation of the religious and/or nationalistic power of symbolic community institution within our multicultural societies and must accordingly be prepared to take account of this issue in our vision of democracy.

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[70] Habermas (1998, pp. 205–210, 2005, pp. 277, 305).

[71] Taylor (1995, pp. 255–256).

[72] Taylor (1995, p. 248).

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