



The Journal of Religion, 88:365–392, July 2008

© 2008 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved.

0022-4189/2008/8803-0004\$10.00

DOI: 10.1086/587148

A Critical Negative Theology of Dialogue: The Coincidence of Reason and Revelation in Communicative Openness'

William Franke

Vanderbilt University

A Critical Negative Theology of Dialogue: The Coincidence of Reason and Revelation in Communicative Openness*

William Franke / Vanderbilt University

COMMUNICATIVE REASON AND APOCALYPTIC REVELATION

I have in previous discussions insisted on the stark contradiction between apocalypse and its representations:¹ representations tend to close apocalyptic revelation up in finite images, whereas the deeper meaning of apocalypse is the breaking open of all finite forms, their shattering and opening up toward the Unrepresentable. I have elicited from apocalyptic representation what is ostensibly the opposite of its overt intention, in order to illustrate the measureless power inherent in and released from the breaking open of closed discourses and their circularly defined, self-validating meanings. Such is the import of "apocalypse," taken as signaling a limit to representation operative in poetic "making." Traditionally such creative making or inspired invention is an interface where the human is invaded by the divine appearing in the guise of the Muse(s). This limit of apocalypse, present at the edge of human discourse, is also an enabling condition of what I take to be genuine dialogue.

My approach through dialogue is not the most natural way of thinking about apocalypse, nor does it provide philologically the most centered and comprehensive interpretation of the apocalyptic tradition

* This essay is adapted from William Franke, *Poetry and Apocalypse: Theological Disclosures of Poetic Language* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), forthcoming, by permission of the publisher. A German version of this essay, "Eine kritische Negative Theologie des Dialogs: Die Koinzidenz der Vernunft und der Offenbarung in kommunikativen Offenheit," appears in *Salzburger Theologischer Zeitschrift* 11 (2007): 217–49.

¹ See esp. my "Apocalypse and the Breaking-Open of Dialogue: A Negatively Theological Perspective," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 47 (2000): 65–86.

© 2008 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved.

0022-4189/2008/8803-0004\$10.00

Critical Negative Theology

ways toward the world, others, and the future. Beyond the historically specific terms of each revelation, there are also more general principles of love, humility, and surrender that are communicable to others who are not of the same religious persuasion or even culture. At this level of meaning, appreciation of the sense of apocalypse can contribute to a general enlightenment of the whole human race. This is, in fact, the express goal of theological revelation, culminating in apocalypse, in each of its specific manifestations, notably the Jewish, the Christian, and the Islamic. If revelation of this order can be understood as fundamentally communicative in nature, it can become the vital bond uniting people in their search to respond appropriately to the exceeding power and the claim of life and being. Failing such understanding, belief in apocalypse tends rather to become a fractious ideology by means of which one group strives to dominate or eliminate or, at any rate, menace and condemn others.

Not resoluteness in resisting the infidel but suppleness in engaging in dialogue beyond all cultural and confessional boundaries has become necessary for survival in our globalized world order. A certain hermeneutic of communication, potentially across cultures, is purportedly fostered by Habermas's theory of communicative action oriented toward mutual understanding.³ Since this theory, self-described as a recovery of the outlook of the European Enlightenment, is *prima facie* directly opposed to any such possibility as theological revelation, I wish to examine some essential points in it and to engage in a search for common ground, specifically in understanding the nature and stakes of dialogue. My vision of dialogue as in its deepest intrinsic nature needing to be open to theological revelation and apocalypse, with special attention to their mediation by poetic language, could hardly find a more challenging foil than in this preeminent theory of dialogue by a resolutely rationalist, secularist, Marxist philosopher.

It is particularly Habermas's concept of reason as communicative action that matches up surprisingly well, in certain regards, with my notion of apocalyptic revelation. Against subjectivist, nonsocial concepts of rationality, Habermas develops his conception of communicative reason, which requires relinquishing one's own subjective understanding and submitting to the process of communicative exchange,

³ The most systematic development of Habermas's theory is found in Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2: *Lifeworld and System; A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), originally published as *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981), 2 vols. See esp. pt. 5, chap. 2, "The Authority of the Sacred and the Normative Background of Communicative Action," and chap. 3, "The Rational Structure of the Linguistification of the Sacred."

The Journal of Religion

and its texts from Daniel and the Book of Revelation to *The Divine Comedy* and beyond. Nevertheless, it means to be a philosophically illuminating interpretation of apocalypse as we can and, I submit, must understand it today. Without openness to the radical alterity of apocalypse, we cannot be open to dialogue in an unrestricted sense. My proposal is that revelation, and particularly texts purporting to deliver apocalyptic revelations, must be understood essentially as forms of communication. Apocalypse is not just the positive content of ideas and images that express apocalyptic revelation, but the very opening of the space in which such representations can be communicated between radical alterities.

It takes a certain openness to apocalypse—to this shattering or breaking open of one's own world—in order to communicate across different and even incompatible worldviews and cultures. Communication that is universal in the sense of being without any definable, built-in limits is in and of itself already apocalyptic in import, for all human understanding presupposes limits. Communication that remains in principle infinitely open is itself an embodiment of transcendence of the whole finite order. Such communication brings together in a revelatory event—an apocalypse—what remains otherwise incommunicable, since it opens upon a region that is normally or humanly unknowable and is unchartable in terms that any one system or party or logic can command.

I am proposing a concept of communicative revelation that is analogous, in certain ways, to Jürgen Habermas's concept of communicative reason. I believe that such a reconceptualization is key to enabling revelation—including apocalypse as its limit case—and the different religious traditions in which it is embedded to become a positive cultural resource fostering truer, freer understanding and exchange of ideas among people. Alternatively, concepts such as apocalypse, which are laden with culturally specific meanings, tend rather to become a divisive force for promoting rigid identity politics that lead inevitably to opposition and conflict.²

In order to be viable, the apocalypses and revelations of religious traditions, which are embraced by millions, have to prove themselves to be true to life by orienting individuals in productive, sustainable

² Nicholas Adams, *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), has similarly engaged Habermas with a view to reversing his prejudices against religious thinking. Adams's approach pivots on the communicative practice of "scriptural reasoning" common to the three Abrahamic religions, whereas my approach rethinks fundamental concepts of reason and revelation apophatically in order to bring out the potential resources, as well as what Adams calls the "theological blind spots," of Habermas's thinking as it engages religion.

The Journal of Religion

in which consensus is sought *intersubjectively*. This process of rational communicative action can, of course, be manipulated in all sorts of ways, but it is in principle open to an "unconditioned moment" of freedom and truth uncoerced by power. This is what I would recognize as the moment of a negative theological revelation, in which all determinate representations are relinquished for the sake of unconditional openness itself. One would have to leave all determinate representations and their inevitable ideological inflections behind in order to enter this space of absolutely undistorted communication (or at least communicative potential). This moment of unconditional communicative openness is in my terms theological, or, to be precise, negatively theological: it is open to the infinite and indeterminate. Habermas, however, wishes to see theology as having been superseded in the course of history that leads toward an enlightened society constituted by free and undistorted communication.⁴

In part 1 of his *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas follows the thought of Max Weber, and in part 2 that of Émile Durkheim and George Herbert Mead, in order to trace the development of society from religious bases through progressive rationalization to a dispensing with religion, which dissolves eventually into "discourse ethics" as the force binding the members of society together into one.⁵ The rationalization of religion and revelation through science and technology defines the overall direction of development of modern society as understood in the works of Weber, Durkheim, and Mead, taken as foundation stones for Habermas's critical theory. The general thesis is that "the authority of the holy is gradually supplanted by consensus held, at each stage, to be rational or grounded" (*die Autorität des Heiligen sukzessive sich durch die Autorität eines jeweils für begründet gehaltenen Konsenses ersetzt wird*).⁶ I propose rather a theological interpretation of rationality as not possessed of its own ground of immanent teleological evolution through self-reflection but as standing open to an abyss that puts it in a position of being in effect dependent on the infinite, on what religious traditions interpret typically as "God." My contention is that in postmodern times, as at comparable junctures in earlier cycles of history, "rationality" breaks open into something of a

⁴ As Adams notes, "A surprisingly large proportion of Habermas' work is devoted to charting the decline of religious thinking: it is a decline of which he approves; religion's only saving graces are its language of hope and redemption, which, *as yet*, philosophy has not been able to appropriate, and its ability to supply its members with substantive ethical commitments which can then be coordinated via discourse ethics" (*Habermas and Theology*, 136).

⁵ This aspect of his theory is further developed, among other places, in Jürgen Habermas, *Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992).

⁶ Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 118.

Critical Negative Theology

divine mystery and revelation in its own right, reversing the supposedly one-way course of history from revelation to reason, from religion with its myths and rites to the progressive rationalization of society.⁷

Many thinkers have discovered again in late modernity (or postmodernity) that reason is not fully understandable to itself on a purely rational basis but must rather be understood in terms of revelation or of a disclosure of religious mystery of at least a negative sort.⁸ The inadequacy of purely rational accounts of reason and reason alone to achieve genuine freedom and enlightenment had actually been a cardinal insight of critical theory all along, since its inception with the discovery of the *dialectic* of enlightenment.⁹ Every apparent gain for rational enlightenment turned out at the same time to be a step backward into darkness and barbarity, producing eventually the social jungle of the modern metropolis, where humanly produced systems and machinery become at least as menacing as the irrational forces of nature. The consumer society and its culture industry are some of the dubious effects of the instrumentalization of all reality by reason. Theodor Adorno's "negative dialectics" further exposed the ambiguities of all supposedly positive realizations of reason in history.¹⁰

In such a perspective, there is a dialectic of reason and revelation, rather than simply a supplanting of the latter by the former through the progress of history. Characteristic of critical theory is that reason becomes critical *of itself* and exposes itself by rational analysis as a new mythology. By undermining all its own expressions, critique becomes practically a negative theology of reason—or, again, in Adorno's terms, a "negative dialectics"—condemning as idolatrous any achieved form of reason that is exalted to absoluteness and identified with the truth itself. In this manner, reason opens up from within to the infinite—that is, to a limitless self-criticism.¹¹

⁷ I have outlined the cycles of modern and contemporary intellectual history swinging between rationality and its collapse in the face of the inarticulable in my "Franz Rosenzweig and the Emergence of a Post-Secular Philosophy of the Unsayable," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 58, no. 3 (2005): 161–80.

⁸ Abundant witness can be found, for example, in Graham Ward, ed., *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), in particular in Ward's introduction, as well as in Graham Ward, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); and in Paul Heelas, ed., *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). See, further, Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter: Religion in der modernen Kultur* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2004).

⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1944).

¹⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966).

¹¹ I have traced this theme of reason's limitless self-criticism from its Neoplatonist matrices to its postmodern apotheoses in my "Praising the Unsayable: An Apophatic Defense of Meta-

The Journal of Religion

Similarly, a classic formulation of theological reason offered by Anselm of Canterbury in his *Proslogion* in effect takes reason as nothing but infinite openness of mind, openness to thinking "that than which nothing greater can be thought" (*id quo majus cogitare nequit*)—hence, something always greater than any humanly achieved conception. Every *conception* of God is to be critiqued and revised *ad infinitum*. This infinite openness of mind through faith in what reason cannot comprehend, but is forever *seeking* to comprehend (*fides quaerens intellectum*), in effect opens, in Anselm's ontological proof, into an intellectual realizing or enacting of God.¹²

This realizing of God as infinite openness of mind needs to be carried through not only on an intellectual level but also in a variety of pragmatic ways. And this is where Habermas's theory of communicative reason serves as a guide to rethinking revelation as infinite communicative openness—as unrestricted dialogical openness and even as openness to a transcendent Other. Habermas's robust confidence in reason is salutary, but I believe that this endlessly resourceful reason must open itself toward what can best be understood as revelation—first, but not only, in the phenomenological sense of manifestation of what truly is. This, of course, involves reason in an act of self-abnegation. It is not that revelation has any extra content beyond reason that would be a necessary supplement to it. Rather, reason, to fully realize itself, must be kept open to the infinite and indefinable that operates within it and yet is not comprehended by it. Reason must be willing to sacrifice any finite identity or definition of itself. Meister Eckhart expounded just such a notion of reason as unlimited, infinite *intellectus*.¹³ He conceived it as the divine nature itself and as strictly Nothing in terms of finite objects. Reason, self-reflected all the way through to its own limits, must conceive itself in this unlimited way. But it cannot perhaps do this on its own. It needs to be challenged from outside itself—or rather, these boundaries of within and without need to be broken down altogether. Hence the necessity for transcendence not just "from within"—the type of transcendence that Habermas em-

physics based on the Neoplatonic *Parmenides* Commentaries," *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (2006): 143–73.

¹² Anselm, *Proslogion*, chap. 2. See, further, Karl Barth, *Fides quaerens intellectum: Anselms Beweis der Existenz Gottes im Zusammenhang seines theologischen Programms* (1931; repr., Zürich: Theologischer, 1981); and Jean-Luc Marion, "L'argument ontologique relève-t-il de l'ontologie?" in *L'argomento ontologico*, ed. Marco M. Olivetti (Padua: Casa Editrice Dott. Antonio Milani, 1990), 43–70.

¹³ See Meister Eckhart, *Questiones Parisiensis* 1, in *Master Eckhart: Parisian Questions and Prologues*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), together with John Caputo, "The Nothingness of the Intellect in Meister Eckhart's 'Parisian Questions,'" *Thomist* 39 (1975): 85–115.

braces.¹⁴ A transcendence from without—and ultimately one that confounds this very dichotomy—is also necessary.

Habermas understands reason as communicative, as essentially embodied, culturally embedded, and historically situated. He does not see it as necessarily open to a theological dimension, to the other in the form of an Other of humanity. For Habermas, we must place our confidence simply in the human community and its potential for reasonable, fair action tending toward the emancipation of all. Reason is this purely human resource, and it must be defended against the kinds of thinking that undermine it as such. According to Habermas, postmodern thinkers such as Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, and even Adorno all veer into discourses that exempt themselves from rigorous rational grounding of their claims to validity (*Geltungsansprüche*) and are therefore to be refused. By evading this rational accountability, literary discourse, as well as talk of revelation and theological faith, disqualify themselves, in Habermas's judgment, from laying claim to universal validity.¹⁵

For Habermas, rational argument aimed at unforced agreement from others—communicative reason—is the indispensable basis for enabling a just society to come about. Apocalyptic visions and pronouncements do not, apparently, come from this source of human good; they may even interfere with its undistorted operation and growth toward fulfillment. There is, accordingly, no room in this vision for a faith open to apocalypse. Revelation seems to invoke a higher authority that is not bound to justify its claims on rational grounds and thus threatens the whole process of a rational adjudication based on unforced agreement through mutual understanding.

Habermas believes that secular reason is the necessary presupposition for the culture of recognition of others and for a universal dialogue of cultures. The founding principles (*Grundsätze*) for a "culture of recognition" are for him derived from "the secularized world of moral and rational-juridical universalism" (*Kultur der Anerkennung, die ihre Grundsätze der säkularisierten Welt des moralischen und vernunftrechtlichen Universalismus entlehnt*).¹⁶ He does recognize how

¹⁴ Jürgen Habermas, "Transzendenz von innen, Transzendenz ins Diesseits," in *Texte und Kontexte* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 127–56. Translated as "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in This World," in Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 67–94.

¹⁵ Habermas takes Derrida and Adorno to task in chaps. 7 and 5, respectively, and faces off against Foucault in chap. 9 of *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985).

¹⁶ Jürgen Habermas, "Israel oder Athen: Wem gehört die anamnetische Vernunft?" in *Vom sinnlichen Eindruck zum symbolischen Ausdruck: Philosophische Essays* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997),

deeply philosophy is indebted to the Judeo-Christian tradition and its fundamental qualification of Greek philosophical premises, for example, to its sense of the infinite worth of the particular individual as a creation of God. Nevertheless, he maintains that theology itself must borrow the philosophical concepts of the European Enlightenment in order to think through its claims for universal justice and respect for individuals in their practically sacred singularity. And yet these concepts themselves, he admits, in turn derive once again from the covenant community of the Bible. So why privilege a secular culture as the basis for dialogue? This turns out to be more of a personal prejudice than a philosophical necessity. It is a preference that will go over well among modern, Western, secular intellectuals, but not among those who deeply believe in theological worldviews.

Habermas insists that communicative action deals with "criticizable validity claims" (*kritisierbaren Geltungsansprüche*). However, I am suggesting that there are some claims that do not allow themselves simply to be subjected to criticism but also question the claim of criticism itself as a culturally specific discursive form. To see this is to recognize something not reducible to cultural terms, something of the nature of an unlimited openness of mind that can serve as a basis for critique even of criticism itself in whatever historically determinate, culturally specific form criticism may take. Such openness is achieved recursively through unlimited self-criticism and through recognition of one's own insuperable limitations. It takes such self-negation as a basis for positive openness toward what even criticism cannot adjudicate in any authoritative manner. By this exemplary act, such a self-critical openness aims not to coerce but at most to influence others to enter and dwell in a like-minded openness.

Through recognition of the relativity of all our own renderings even of purportedly absolute values or revelations, the parties to dialogue can agree to aim at a truth and justice that involves and binds them all *beyond* any finite, human determinations of such principles. Recognition of an unnegotiable absolute, of a dimension of transcendence, or at least of the legitimate possibility of believing in such a thing, is crucial in order to relativize all positive, finite formulations and conventions that are otherwise bound to be proposed as universal and therefore as coercing agreement. One's own self-critique sets an example and enables others likewise to relinquish their absolutes—or rather their particular interpretations and mediations of what they hold to be absolute. This release can be motivated by a certain faith

110. Translated as "Israel or Athens: Where Does Anamnestic Reason Belong?" in Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, 129–38.

that our absolutes will return to us in terms that are no longer narrowly our own. It is through a mediation with others, whose starting point is different from ours, that we will rediscover our own ground beliefs as they are reflected back to us in a somewhat different guise. In this manner, agreement can be sought in the form of mutual, free acceptance of plausible interpretations of a possibly absolute basis for dialogue that no one party or discourse can definitively comprehend or appropriate.

Habermas recognizes that any attempt to achieve rational consensus may always meet with dissension. The *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) is supposed to solve this problem by providing resources for reaching agreement in the shape of common assumptions that go unquestioned even by opposing forms of conceptualization and argument within a given culture. Habermas appeals to the *Lebenswelt* as the basis of unproblematic, shared assumptions and know-how (as opposed to knowing *that*) of a prepropositional nature, a "forgotten foundation of meaning" (*vergesenen Sinnesfundament*).¹⁷ The *Lebenswelt* is what can seal up the otherwise ever-threatening risk of dissent (*Dissensrisiko*). Still, the fact that only members of a given culture share the same *Lebenswelt* leaves the problem of how to establish rational agreement with members of other cultures whose unconscious assumptions may not be concordant with our own.

Habermas argues that there is a prereflexive form of implicit knowing in natural language.¹⁸ This is a universal rationality. However, it is still a positive content peculiar to a specific shared language and culture. In reality, only the negative theological matrix of indeterminacy—requiring the relinquishing or at least relativization of all verbal forms and images—stretches beyond and between specific cultures and their expressions and thereby forms the condition of sense that can be shared in common without limit.¹⁹ This is a dimension whose awesome mystery and power has likely never been better expressed than by the revelations of world religions. These revelations employ an abundance of metaphorical language, but, understood in negative theological terms, what they reveal—by concealing and revealing it in images—is what cannot be linguistically determined at all.

¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken: Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), 85.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁹ Michael Kühnlein, in a similar spirit, presses Habermas's thinking toward this limit of an "extra-discursive moment" (*diskursexternes Moment*) with "unmistakably religious connotations" (*unverkennbar religiöse Konnotationen*) in "Aufhebung der Religion durch Versprachlichung? Eine religionsphilosophische Untersuchung des Rationalitätskonzeptes von Jürgen Habermas," *Theologie und Philosophie* 71 (1996): 398.

The Journal of Religion

What, really, is revelation? Understood in light of negative theology, revelation tends toward and must finally realize itself as pure potency devoid of all positive content of representations of the object of religious revelation.²⁰ The critical force of negative theology undermines the adequacy of all representations. Negative theology, in fact, belongs especially to periods of critical reflection pursuant to the creative bursts in which religious revelations, generally rich in representations, originate. Jewish Kabbalism, Christian mysticism, and Islamic Sufism, as reinterpretations of the Pentateuch, the New Testament, and the Qur'an, respectively, are fruits of such critical reflection on the insuperable inadequacy of all representations to the divine transcendence. Neoplatonic philosophy of the Hellenistic age is the historical cradle of this type of thinking. Neoplatonic philosophers such as Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, and Damascius follow in the wake of the Greek Enlightenment and reinterpret in its light Greek mystery traditions including the Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries, the *Chaldean Oracles*, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and the Pythagorean *Golden Verses*. This philosophical negative theology, born of apophatic reflection in a critical vein, gives decisive impulses to the negative theologies that evolve in each of the monotheistic traditions.²¹

Negative theology flourishes in highly reflective and critical ages of culture and offers a path for reinterpreting religious revelations that, in the course of time and reflection, typically have been downgraded to myths. It shows these myths to be reminders of a religious revelation that necessarily transcends all representations produced even by this revelation itself. Reflection of this type was vigorous in Habermas's own historical context, for example, in the negative dialectics of Theodor Adorno and in the negative theologies of Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch.²² These powerful precedents manifestly influence his thinking, though not without causing considerable tensions within it. Habermas, nevertheless, pursues his program for a rational ordering of society in continuity with the ideals of the Enlightenment taken as an unfinished, rather than a failed, project.²³

²⁰ An excellent history of concepts of revelation viewed from the standpoint of negative theology is offered by Gregor Maria Hoff, *Offenbarungen Gottes? Eine theologische Problemgeschichte* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2007).

²¹ I have sketched the historical lineaments of this apophatic tradition in the introductory essay to William Franke, ed., *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature and the Arts* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), vol. 1.

²² Anson Rabinbach, "Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism," *New German Critique* 34 (1985): 78–124.

²³ See Habermas's programmatic lecture, "Die Moderne: Ein unvollendetes Projekt," in *Kleine politische Schriften I–IV* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981), 444–64. Translated as "Modernity:

Although part of the agenda of the Enlightenment was to supplant revelation by reason, it must be emphasized that reason and revelation are not finally opposed. From within the heart of the German Enlightenment, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing saw human culture and education as carrying forward the work of theological revelation rather than as abandoning or undermining it. He maintained that "education is revelation for the single individual: and revelation is education that the human race has undergone and still undergoes." The training of natural and rational capabilities achieves essentially the same thing that revelation does, although less quickly: "revelation gives the human race nothing that human reason, left to its own devices, would not come to on its own, but it gave and gives humans the most important things of this kind earlier."²⁴

The convergence and eventual identity of reason and revelation in a "Mythologie der Vernunft" (mythology of reason) was indeed the vision of the original outline of German idealism that was formulated by Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin, the thinking they shared in common already as students at the *Evangelischer Stift* in Tübingen.²⁵ It was envisaged by Johann Georg Hamann throughout his life (1730–88) in a perspective based on language, such as has again become crucial since the linguistic turn of philosophy in the twentieth century.²⁶ Already Hamann began to turn the Enlightenment's faculties of critique against itself in questioning the opposition between faith and reason. He argued that both have a common basis in experience and therewith in language as the basis for all human powers of knowing whatsoever.²⁷ In conceiving reason as language, he was well on the way toward a pragmatic position like Habermas's, as well as toward postmodern language philosophies. Language is the common mother of reason and

An Unfinished Project," in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, ed. Maurizio d'Entrevies and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

²⁴ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts" (1780), in *Lessings Werke* (Salzburg: Bergland-Buch, 1964), 1016: "Erziehung ist Offenbarung, die dem einzelnen Menschen geschieht: und Offenbarung ist Erziehung, die dem Menschengeschlechte geschehen ist und noch geschieht." For a detailed history emphasizing efforts to reconcile reason and revelation in the Enlightenment, see Max Seckler, *Aufklärung und Offenbarung*, *Christlicher Glaube in moderner Gesellschaft* no. 21 (Freiburg: Herder, 1980).

²⁵ The crucial document, "Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus" (1796), can be found in G. W. F. Hegel, *Frühe Schriften*, vol. 1 of *Werke*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), 234–36.

²⁶ See, e.g., Johann Georg Hamann, "Konxompax: Fragmente einer apokryphischen Sibylle über apokalyptische Mysterien" (1779), in *Sämtliche Werke: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Josef Nadler (Vienna: Herder, 1949–57).

²⁷ See esp. Johann Georg Hamann, *Estetica in nuce* (1796) and *Des Ritters von Rosenkreuz letzte Willensmeinung über den göttlichen und menschlichen Ursprung der Sprache* (1772). See, further, Josef Nadler, *Johann Georg Hamann: Der Zeuge des Corpus Mysticum* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1949), particularly "Vernunft und Offenbarung," 320–64.

The Journal of Religion

of theological revelation: "Language, the mother of reason and of revelation, their alpha and omega" (Sprache, die Mutter der Vernunft und der Offenbarung, ihr A und Ω).²⁸ These two offspring of language separate into enemy brothers only through misrecognition of their irrevocable kinship.

Such is the perspective underlying my vision of apocalyptic revelation as operative in poetic language. I differ from Habermas in that I believe that communicative reason cannot understand itself in opposition to theological revelation and poetic discourse but needs to find its most crucial challenges precisely in dialogue with them. Habermas has shown himself to be open to and engaged in dialogue with a wide spectrum of philosophies and even theosophies. But he still wishes to define his Enlightenment ideal in terms of argumentative reason and as secular, as nontheological or "methodologically atheist," albeit no longer "pure" reason in the Kantian sense. I am urging rather that we recognize what reason cannot rationalize as fundamental to what gives it its character, which is achieved only when reason is broken open. This is a reason that can recognize God—at least as its own Other and as exceeding and yet conditioning reason absolutely.

What, after all, is reason? My claim is that if "reason" goes deep enough into its own (self-positing) ground, it discovers "revelation" in the sense of an unlimited openness that can be most profoundly interpreted as theological. In effect, what I am suggesting is that apocalyptic revelation is essentially communicative reason—that is, reason as the power of unrestricted communication. Unconditional communicative openness is the nature of reason and of revelation alike. Whatever their represented content, it is in giving this up in the encounter with others and (perhaps indistinguishably) with the unnameable Other that the ultimate act of communicative rationality *and* of revelation is consummated.

Revelation, taken to the extreme of apocalypse and understood in terms of negative theology, I submit, must likewise be stripped of positive content and become nothing but the openness to revelation. This very openness, moreover, is reason. At this limit, which is "apocalypse," therefore, reason and revelation converge and may even coincide. Of course, this is a revelation without finite bounds of representation, and it is a reason that has been exploded as a self-possessed human faculty. It is now open to transcendence beyond itself—just as in its original

²⁸ This formulaic phrase from Hamann's 1785 letter to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi is quoted by Walter Benjamin in his essay "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen" (1916), in *Briefe, 1919–1924*, vol. 2 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Herman Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 1.

Critical Negative Theology

disclosure among the Greeks, especially in Heraclitus and Parmenides, to whom Logos first revealed itself as universal and (indissociably) divine.

For Heraclitus, Logos was revealed as the divine presence in all things that rendered possible a commonality and indeed universality of thought transcending all particular opinions of individuals. Sextus Empiricus records that Heraclitus discovered the universality of the Logos as a divine principle present in every rational soul: "Reason that he [Heraclitus] makes the criterion of truth is not any reason whatever but the common and divine [τὸν κοινὸν καὶ θεῖον]" (*Adversus mathematicos* VII 127). This is the "common and divine reason by participation in which we become rational" (VII 131).²⁹ It is through negating the personal opinions of the individual and apprehending cosmic order and principles that we make our reason conform to divine reason. Chalcideus states that Heraclitus, concordantly with the Stoics, "connects our reason with the divine reason that governs and orders the things of the world" (rationem nostram con divine ratione conectit) (*In Timaeum* 251). Heraclitus's fragments, moreover, formulate the universal divine principle of Logos in precisely negative theological terms: "The one and only Wise wishes and wishes not to be called by the name of Zeus" (Diels B 32), indicating that even the highest human name for God is not adequate and is used ambivalently. This explains why all characterizations in language of the divine are contradictory: God is day-night, winter-summer, war-peace, satiety-hunger (Diels B 67).

In a similar spirit, Parmenides, in his poem *Peri Physis* (ca. 500 BC), section 1, enframes his philosophemes concerning the uniqueness of Being and its identity with Thought by an initiatic chariot ride to the portals of the goddesses Diké and Themis, representing human and divine justice, respectively. Both of the corresponding faculties, reason and revelation, are driven by their own intrinsic energy and impetus ineluctably to the point where all is disclosed in its final truth. In more figured terms, reason itself, as discovered by the Greeks, is born as a divine revelation. In my theory of dialogue as the medium of this disclosure, then, reason and revelation are alike boundless and open into the discourse of the divine Logos: as such, they aspire toward and converge upon the total disclosure of apocalypse.

I attempt to develop this thesis concretely in dialogue with Jürgen Habermas as the thinker who has been most insightful on the nature of dialogue in the tradition of the Enlightenment, which is apparently

²⁹ Citations in this paragraph are from Hermann Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. Walther Kranz (Zürich: Weidmann, 1951), vol. 1. My translation.

The Journal of Religion

at the antipodes with respect to the apocalyptic tradition from which my own reflections hail. Habermas has developed his theory of dialogue on the basis of insight into reason as communicative in its innermost nature. Reason, for Habermas, has no metaphysical postulates or purely transcendental structures but is communicative through and through, revealed in practical action and communication.³⁰ Rather than possessing an essential truth of a metaphysical nature, reason is essentially open to intersubjective validation. No positive definition in terms of explicit rational criteria can be adequate to what rational discussion and argument reveal to be true (*wahr*) and truthful (*wahrhaftig*) by communication directed toward mutual understanding in a circle of communication that opens itself without limit. This reason, open to an "unlimited communicative society" (*unbegrenzte Kommunikationsgemeinschaft*), constitutes the "unconditionality" (*Unbedingtheit*) that for Habermas supplants any supratemporal, metaphysical type of unconditioned transcendence.³¹

Habermas's theory of communicative reason maintains, furthermore, that there is, beyond linguistic competence, an innate competence for communicating that is universal and therefore also the basis for binding rational principles. This competence need not be innate like Noam Chomsky's grammatical competence. It can develop from experience in society. But it is nonetheless universal and binding for all human beings. It has, therefore, a certain normative content, and Habermas wishes to derive his philosophy as an ethics of discourse from this content. This seems in some sense to be an extension of the Kantian project of defining synthetic a priori principles that would be conditions of possibility of experience and therefore constitute necessary and universal knowledge.

Ultimately, Habermas proposes that reason can refound society through its own powers of self-reflection and critique. But in so doing, he is liable to fall prey to an idolatry of the social. I maintain that this self-sufficiency of reason, even when redefined as communicative reason, is illusory unless reason opens to a ground that transcends it—and not only "from within," but in a way that it cannot control or encompass. Although Habermas tries to found reason as a positive paradigm and reliable basis for dialogue, the most challenging sort of dialogue, I contend, begins with recognition of its "impossibility"—of barriers that are *rationaly* insuperable, which, in other words, no

³⁰ Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, particularly chap. 4: "Handlungen, Sprechakte, sprachlich vermittelte Interaktionen und Lebenswelt."

³¹ Habermas, "Zu Max Horkheimers Satz: Einen unbedingten Sinn zu retten ohne Gott ist eitel," in *Texte und Kontexte*, 124.

humanly defined formula or principle may be adequate to remove. Then the unconditional openness that imposes no determinate rational framework makes truly open dialogue possible for the first time.

Habermas's idea of reason embraces a dialogue among diverse rationalities. But it is only when we fully recognize the *impossibility* of dialogue and glimpse the need for something else beyond ourselves and all our own solutions—in effect, for an apocalypse—that a breaking open of dialogue becomes paradoxically possible. The shattering of every set formula and framework for dialogue first opens the Opening in which genuine dialogue can occur. This moment of shattering of our world or discursive order is what I am calling “apocalypse.” The word *apocalypse* signals that the world order as we understand it collapses around us.³² Such a collapse is precipitated through the attempt to communicate with the incommensurable. When we do not know how to proceed, then a progression beyond our impasses may become possible again. This is the necessary “theological”—or, more precisely, *negative* theological—moment in human dialogue.

Paradoxically the moment of its (rational) impossibility renders (radical) dialogue possible for the first time. Habermas is profoundly right that language is founded on a search for common understanding. This very seeking is itself constitutive of human reason and discourse. What he ignores is that the idea of reason as intrinsically dialogical breaks it open to an Other that cannot be constrained or encompassed and that leaves reason gaping open infinitely.³³ It is at its breaking point that reason can be illuminated and, in fact, become a locus of revelation. When reason breaks open to the Other of reason, when something that reason cannot itself account for becomes compelling, this opens a space for revelation and even apocalypse. The bindingness of such a suprarational instance as these notions envisage is its communicability. Binding in this sense is what other minds and cultures are able and willing to embrace, even without explicit, logical entailments that are necessary by some prior principle or logic that is already in place and recognized as authoritative. For then there must be something driving conviction from beyond the reach of reason. There is,

³² “The apocalyptic element involves a quantum leap from present to future, from exile to freedom. This leap necessarily brings with it the complete destruction and negation of the old order.” Rabinbach, “Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse,” 86.

³³ Habermas does endeavor to recognize an Other of reason, for example, in his discussion of Hartmut Böhme and Cernot Böhme, *Das andere der Vernunft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), who postulate “a *comprehensive* reason” (eine *komprehensive* Vernunft, 352) beyond Kant’s that would embrace Swedenborg as his nocturnal twin brother. See sec. 2 of Habermas’s “Ein anderer Ausweg aus der Subjektphilosophie: kommunikative vs. subjektzentrierte Vernunft,” in *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, chap. 11.

moreover, an unconditional freedom at work in such rationally unaccountable choices and beliefs adopted by human beings even as the ultimate moral or religious frame of reference for their ways of life. This level of freedom, as an inalienable human capacity for interpretation of the whole of existence from its ground up, constitutes a trans-cultural sensitivity for what lies beyond any culture's linguistic formulations and conceptual schemes.

Habermas insists that agreement has to be rationally founded, that grounds or reasons have to be given for the beliefs that are adhered to. This is what makes them binding and universal. But is there a sharp distinction between grounds that are rational and ones that are not? Beliefs about one's world as a whole, its permanence or transience, its moral value and purpose, or else its arbitrariness, may not be rational in any obvious or average sense. And yet such beliefs may be practically binding for individuals living within specific communities of belief. Habermas himself invokes only a pragmatic criterion of bindingness—basically, what it is good for us to believe.³⁴ Of course, rationality must also be adherent to the world. We cannot agree about just anything and call that rational. Rational beliefs have to be testable and in that sense verifiable. Yet, again, such beliefs may not be epistemologically separable from the other sort of beliefs that may not be in practice verifiable, at least not in this world. What all this means is that rationality is part of the *question* and not the answer to the general question of what beliefs can be binding for all people. It is impossible to exclude from the discussion a priori apparent irrationalists like apocalypticists without committing a certain violence that is not rationally justified, except in a limited, reductive, parochial sense of "rational." Unrestricted rationality must remain always open to redefinition through open dialogue and cannot be defined in advance so as to serve as a stable foundation.

FROM CRITICAL THEORY TO NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

To press further the dilemmas of defining rationality, we must ask: How can Habermas presuppose that there is any kind of a standard of argumentative discourse in relation to which discourses can be measured

³⁴ Habermas's pragmatism is modeled on that of Charles Sanders Peirce rather than that of William James. Peirce shows how everyday communication appeals to ideals that claim validity transcending specific contexts. His "archeology of the sign" suggests how time is structured through the presence of a signifier bonding the impression of an object experienced in the past with possible future recognitions. See Habermas, "Transzendenz von innen, Transzendenz ins Diesseits," 146.

as to their rationality? And what gives argumentative discourse its presumed natural advantage? Discursive speech is not an absolute or a given; it is not even one with itself. It consists in a diversity of forms. What holds them all together and makes them recognizable as discursive speech does not as such appear in them at all. This common sense is the undefined basis of sense for all definitions of determinate forms of discourse. It becomes manifest only in agreement, which may not have a basis that can be determined in any prior sense as "rational."

Karl Jaspers describes as "philosophical faith" (*philosophische Glaube*) such an invisible basis for belief that is common and even binding. He describes it in terms very close to those I am proposing of reason as limitless communication coinciding with a revelation of truth. His vision is based, furthermore, on the temporality of human existence as was disclosed especially by Heidegger: "Reason requires limitless communication; it is itself total will to communication. Since in time we cannot have truth as the one eternal truth in our objective possession, and since existence is possible only together with others, it comes to itself only with the existence of others, therefore communication is the shape of the becoming revealed of truth in time. . . . For here both propositions are true: truth is what binds us—and: truth has its origin in communication."³⁵

The unrepresentable potency of absolute truth or apocalypse that is the common goal of reason and revelation alike is manifest simply as the unlimited ability and will of human beings to communicate. It is not essentially a content. It is apprehended more accurately as pure communicativity. Accordingly, the validity of such apocalyptic truth depends purely on its being communicable. This very communicability becomes the binding force that forms community. The openness to what can be conveyed to and shared by others—communicative reason—has normative value, but not by virtue of any definable norms. It can be verified only a posteriori—as if it were the work of an invisible hand of providence. Through history, reason is revealed in ways that cannot quite be rationalized. Moreover, reason is not in control of its own criteria. In a dialogical application, where it is infinitely open, what is capable of producing agreement must come as a revelation—that is, not as the property and deliberate production of any one party,

³⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Der philosophische Glaube* (Munich: Piper, 1974), 40: "Vernunft fordert grenzenlose Kommunikation, sie ist selbst der totale Kommunikationswille. Weil wir in der Zeit die Wahrheit als die eine ewige Wahrheit nicht im objektiven Besitz haben können, und weil das Dasein nur mit anderem Dasein möglich ist, Existenz nur mit anderer Existenz zu sich selbst kommt, so ist Kommunikation die Gestalt des Offenbarwerdens der Wahrheit in der Zeit. . . . Denn hier gelten die beiden Sätze: Wahrheit ist, was uns verbindet—und: in der Kommunikation hat Wahrheit ihren Ursprung."

The Journal of Religion

but in and through the unlimited openness of all parties to each and to every Other and therewith to what is beyond them all.

Radical critical theory tends to undermine reason as a self-sufficient faculty, just as radical negative theology undermines all supposedly adequate conceptualizations of God. The founding figure of the Frankfurt school, Max Horkheimer, was constantly thrown back upon theological convictions that for many seemed to contradict or undermine his secular, Marxist, and rationalist project.³⁶ In a way congenial for Western, secular-minded intellectuals, Habermas blunts this theological edge of reason itself in rejecting Horkheimer's theological impulses and his skepticism regarding reason (*Vernunftskeptizismus*).³⁷ But this comes at the price of an adequate understanding of Horkheimer and, even more importantly, of our being able to comprehend theologically radical cultures and particularly the challenge of Islam. In its most thoroughgoing and consistent form, critical theory shows us how reason opens to its own abyss. It is the aporetic moment in dialogue—when it breaks down and breaks open—that is the enabling condition for dialogue of the more radically necessary sort for which we cannot dictate the premises.

Reason is being challenged today by the need to pursue dialogues aimed at understanding and agreement with others who ostensibly hold some other principle besides what we recognize as reason to be more authoritative than reason itself. They seem to have their reasons for subordinating reason itself to a suprarational, theological revelation. We can question whether this is reasonable, but we cannot appeal to any fixed notion of reason in doing so. The open search itself is the form that reason must take. Communicative openness is the very nature of reason. Being true to this communicative vocation of reason cannot but take us into genuine dialogue with theological discourses and belief—those of other cultures as well as our own. We need to endeavor to understand anew how theological belief can still be compelling, even after the full realization of rational enlightenment—indeed as its most challenging result.

The fact is that, whether *we* understand theological premises to be necessary or even possible as premises for valid beliefs about ourselves and the world, other people do. We have to start with a conception of

³⁶ Max Horkheimer and Hubo Staudinger, *Humanität und Religion: Briefwechsel und Gespräch* (Würzburg: Johann Wilhelm Maumann, 1974).

³⁷ Jürgen Habermas, "Zu Max Horkheimers Satz: Einen unbedingten Sinn zu retten ohne Gott ist eitel." Translated as "To Seek to Salvage an Unconditional Meaning without God Is a Futile Undertaking: Reflections on a Remark of Max Horkheimer," in Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, 110–26.

human reason that admits the presumptive rationality of such an outlook. Whether reason can rely on itself or needs to open to a higher authority than its own cannot be resolved as a matter of fact and prior to dialogue. Whether or not this is true cannot perhaps be settled finally at all. The very openness to the question of a higher authority than we can rationally comprehend is what is dialogically necessary, both in a pragmatic and in an ethical sense.

What is particularly significant about Habermas is his attempt to think reason as communicatively open. Not any abstract essence, but only what is communicable and enables agreement is, in principle, rational. This makes reason a normative principle of a sort that cannot be positively circumscribed and stated. There is something transcendent about it. And it tends toward an infinite openness of mind. However, Habermas conceives all this in purely "procedural" (prozeduralistisch) terms, as if a formally fair procedure could be neutral as to worldviews and cultures.³⁸ He excludes theology and revelation as claiming unreasonable prerogatives, whereas rational procedures, he supposes, are universal. But this is mistaken. Genuine impartiality and openness are not just matters of a neutral procedure but of a deeper critique in which the authority of reason and reasonable procedures can be questioned and must be relinquished in order to let even the premises of rationality emerge from dialogue in a truly unconstrained and unprejudiced way. In my view, negative theology offers a model and opens the deepest kind of insight into this type of self-critique. This is where I differ from Habermas, who thinks that reason must guard itself against turning theological. Still, the difference may in the end be only that between thinking theology as a set of fixed representations and thinking it *negatively* as the critique of all representations—exposing them all as idolatrous.

I agree with Habermas's aspirations toward the universal and normative. It is crucial to not abandon these ideals of Enlightenment thought. However, Habermas's constructive project, like Kant's, is based on too narrow an interpretation of reason. Habermas widens the

³⁸ Others have uncovered this limit to Habermas's thinking from an ethical rather than a theological point of view. Steven Hendley, *From Communicative Action to the Face of the Other: Levinas and Habermas on Language, Obligation and Community* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2000), follows Charles Taylor in bringing out shortcomings of Habermas's merely procedural understanding of communicative reason for a discourse ethics. Habermas attempts to be fair to all parties to dialogue without prejudice regarding any substantive interpretation of the good, such as that supplied by Levinas with his notion of infinite obligation vis-à-vis the Face of the Other. Both Levinas and Habermas discern an inherently moral dimension to language that is binding. But Habermas sees only procedural imperatives enjoining impartiality, not the ethical relation to the "height" of the other and certainly no theological exigencies.

The Journal of Religion

concept of reason such that it is no longer "pure" in the Kantian sense and rather realizes itself in and with its other in the act, or rather interaction, of communication. And this is very promising. But he does not open the very structure and method of reason to being determined through this process of interaction. He still operates with a distinction between the rational and the irrational that precedes the interactive process of dialogue and the choices that must emerge from it without prior justification on rational grounds. A theological theory of communicative reason is more radical in opening reason to its hidden grounds in "revelation." Revelation, too, is not self-evident but rather is open to infinite mediation with manifestations of reason, as well as with what appears as *unreason*.

Habermas cannot fully admit that what communicative reason communicates at the deepest level is nothing but pure communicativity itself. This pure potency without stateable content evades all positive conception in the same way as does the God of negative theology (or, at any rate, "das ganz Andere" of Horkheimer and Adorno). This purely negative conception of what enables human community was linked with the originally universalistic vision of the first generation of thinkers forming the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. It grew out of the secular apocalyptic messianism of Benjamin and Bloch during the First World War. Benjamin, for example, thought on the basis of "the absolutely unlimited and creative infinity of the divine word."³⁹ This is a word of language before it was debased to a mere *means* of communication of some content of thought (the "bourgeois conception of language"). This word is for Benjamin, in its very essence, nothing other than pure communication or "pure language" (*reine Sprach*).

For Habermas, such an understanding is not progressive, but this indicates once again where he is himself at odds with the deeper inspiration of the school of critical theory, out of which his own thinking emerges. Habermas's idea of communicative reason is revolutionary and yet not radical enough, to the extent that he still wants to define it in oppositional terms against revelation and poetry. Habermas adheres to the Enlightenment ideal of argumentative reason, but this itself is a drastic narrowing of the Enlightenment that included, as has already been pointed out, theological thinkers like Hamann. Hamann was an inspiration to Benjamin in his esoteric theory of language as revelation, as immediate presentation of absolute reality—apocalypse—and not indirect, conventional, arbitrary signifying by signs. It is also

³⁹ Benjamin, "Über Sprache überhaupt," 149.

worth comparing Giambattista Vico, another thinker who shows how "enlightenment" is originally inextricable from theological revelation.⁴⁰

This *other* Enlightenment (reacting against the Cartesian and the Kantian versions) demonstrates that reason must open up to its own infinity, as already demonstrated in the works of Eckhart and the pre-Socratics, rather than being conceived in opposition to theological insight and poetic vision, as is the case in modern understandings of reason, which are by and large modeled on science and technology. The first-generation thinkers of critical theory were critical of this latter concept of reason as leading to a mechanistic society in which reason is reduced to its instrumental applications. Habermas is alive to this risk and wishes to restore to reason its normative capacity within a discourse ethics. He is reluctant to write off religion, in the style of more aggressively secular types of Enlightenment thinking, as an outmoded use of reason.⁴¹ But he does not really embrace the inherently theological use of reason as infinitely self-critical and as poetic beyond all narrowing to rationally explicit criteria of judgment.

Habermas has engaged in recurrent, probing discussions with theologians that have gradually induced him to qualify and complicate his views.⁴² Nevertheless, his program remains ideally one of substituting for terms such as *reconciliation* and *solidarity*, with their religious semantics, the secular, rational terms of *communicative action* and *discourse ethics*. He sometimes comes very near to recognizing that such translation is as much a realization as an erasure of theological content; he has been induced to become more and more accepting of this type of insight through his dialogues with theologians.⁴³ Still, however, in the spirit of the Enlightenment and of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, or negation and absorption of religion by philosophy, Habermas believes that a communications theory is destined to offer the final explanation of authority in society, supplanting that offered by theological revelation in previous ages. "God" is ultimately "a name for a communicative structure, one which obliges human beings, on pain of loss of their humanity, to rise above their contingent, empirical nature, inasmuch

⁴⁰ See particularly the sections on "Metafisica Poetica," "Logica Poetica," and "Morale Poetica" in Giambattista Vico, *Principi di scienza nuova* (1744), bk. 2.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen: Friedenspreis des deutschen Buchhandels 2001* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001).

⁴² In addition to his own essays collected in Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, see Edmund Arens, ed., *Habermas und die Theologie: Beiträge zur theologischen Rezeption, Diskussion und Kritik der Theorie kommunikativen Handelns* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1989).

⁴³ See Hermann Düringer, *Universale Vernunft und partikularer Glaube: Eine theologische Auswertung des Werkes von Jürgen Habermas* (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), esp. pt. 1 on religion in Habermas's work and his replies to theologians Johann B. Metz and Helmut Peukert, among others.

The Journal of Religion

as they encounter one another *mediately*, that is, in relation to an objectivity that they themselves are not" (Gott wird zum Namen für eine kommunikative Struktur, welche die Menschen bei Strafe des Verlustes ihrer Humanität zwingt, ihre zufällige empirische Natur zu überschreiten, indem sie einander *mittelbar*, nämlich über ein Objektives, das sie nicht selber sind, begegnen).⁴⁴

This is a subtle formulation, but it still entails reduction of the meaning of "God" to some social structure or phenomenon, rather than opening social reality to the infinity of meaning(s) it has or can take on in open communication among any and all parties to dialogue. This formulation endeavors to distill God into discourse, in accordance with the program of "Versprachlichung"—that is, "linguistification" of the sacred. As such, it is an attempt to supplant revelation by reason. Such was in essence the project of the more militant, anticlerical strains of the eighteenth-century movements of Enlightenment, signally that of the philosophes of the French *Lumières*. It often entailed an ideology that erected reason into a fortress power on high, so as to usurp the absoluteness and authority that had been wielded by the ruling classes in the name of God. Such pseudotheological authority was used to inculcate fear and was abused as an instrument of coercion. This discourse naturally succumbed to the challenge of rational critique. But enlightened critique itself, by usurping absolute authority in the name of another human instrument or function, namely, instrumental reason, was also in need eventually of being deposed.

Critical theory has long been distinguished by the depth of its negative-theological insight into the wholly Other, "das ganz Andere," that transcends all discourses and baffles them.⁴⁵ For Horkheimer, the fact "that we can say nothing of God" (daß wir über Gott eben nichts sagen können) is not only a Jewish article of faith but also "a decisive principle of critical theory" (ein entscheidender Grundsatz der Kritischen Theorie). He explains, "We cannot represent the Absolute; when we speak of the Absolute we cannot say much more than this: the world in which we live is relative" (Wir können das Absolute nicht darstellen, wir können, wenn wir vom Absoluten reden, eigentlich nicht viel mehr

⁴⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), 167. However, cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 101: "God indicates only approximately a structure of communication, which forces participants, on the foundation of the reciprocal acknowledgment of their identity, to transcend the contingency of a merely external existence."

⁴⁵ This phrase was given currency esp. by Max Horkheimer. See Horkheimer, *Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen: Ein Interview mit Kommentar von Hellmut Gumnior* (Hamburg: Furcht-Verlag, 1970).

sagen als dies: Die Welt, in der wir leben, ist eine relative).⁴⁶ We experience the negation of absoluteness in our mortal, compromise-rife, and pain-ridden existence, and precisely this gives us a relation (at least in desire and hope) to something absolute.

The Frankfurt school, whose heritage Habermas assumes and develops but at the same time also delimits and compromises, emerged from the matrix of a negatively theological Jewish messianic utopianism. Eduardo Mendieta characterizes the latter as a "secular, apocalyptic, utopian and pessimistic messianism of the Jewish thinkers of the generation of 1914."⁴⁷ It is a theological apocalypticism that can only be discerned negatively. Adorno, for example, had the keenest sense of a Transcendence that staid and complacent verbal formulations cannot but travesty: "Anyone who would pin down transcendence can rightly be charged—as, for example, by Karl Kraus—with lack of imagination, anti-intellectualism, and so with a betrayal of transcendence" (Wer Transzendenz dingfest macht, dem kann mit Recht, so wie von Karl Kraus, Phantasielosigkeit, Geistfeindschaft und in dieser Verrat an der Transzendenz vorgeworfen werden).⁴⁸ Adorno is acutely aware that any rational formulation of transcendence betrays it, but also that without this dimension of transcendence and, correlatively, of a prospect of redemption of existence, "the human spirit would become an illusion, and the finite, conditioned, merely existing subject would eventually be deified as carrier of the spirit" (schließlich das endliche, bedingte, bloß seiende Subjekt als Träger von Geist vergottet).⁴⁹

Adorno is asking whether revelation, as an alternative to "immanence," might not still be relevant in ways that contemporary culture is scarcely capable of recognizing. Immanentism, the utter denial of a possibility of radical transcendence such as theological revelation affirms, seems to have a stranglehold on the modern world and especially on contemporary consumer culture, reducing it to a fetishism of the object as commodity. This is why the apocalyptic mentality can hardly help but appear untimely today and seem a mere regression. And hence also its supreme importance as contradicting the self-enclosed, disenchanted world of modernity subjected to natural law and utterly without transcendence.

Of course, Adorno takes a position against any return to revealed

⁴⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁷ Mendieta, "Introduction," in Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, 2. See, further, Mendieta's introduction to his *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁴⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 392.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

The Journal of Religion

religion (*Offenbarungsreligion*), but that is because he identifies it completely with its representations and turns away from the fact that the negative theological perspective actually is an integral part of this type of religion all through its history. Such a negative theological perspective relativizes representations as all inadequate to the transcendence of the divine and as in fact idolatrous if taken in and for themselves. Adorno realizes that revealed religion resembles what he himself is seeking to articulate in opposition to the objectification and commodification of reality he saw and abhorred all around him in the modern world. But by taking revealed religion literally and thereby identifying it with its representations, he is bound to dismiss it as offering no viable alternative. Revealed religion consists for him in apocalyptic and otherworldly types of imagery rather than in a search for what is incommensurable and "non-identical" (Adorno's own preferred locution) in terms of the present world and any of the concepts it furnishes.

Adorno concludes his essay on "Reason and Revelation" with the statement, "Therefore I see no possibility besides the greatest asceticism towards every belief in revelation, the strictest faithfulness to the interdiction of images, far beyond that which was once intended in the original place" (*Darum sehe ich keine andere Möglichkeit als äusserste Askese jeglichem Offenbarungsglauben gegenüber, äusserste Treue zum Bilderverbot, weit über das hinaus, was es einmal an Ort und Stelle meinte*).⁵⁰ Curiously, this rejection of revelation is modeled on the revelation of God's unrepresentability in the Bible ("Thou shalt make no graven images" [Exod. 20:4]). Adorno suggests that he is going beyond what this prohibition meant when it was first handed down, that he is being more true to its intent than it perhaps intended. How so? By proscribing belief in God altogether? But this too has been built into the tradition: in terms of negative theology, any determinate, articulable belief must be abjured as mistaken and idolatrous. The third commandment, which is against using God's name in vain (Exod. 20:7) and follows the second commandment against graven images, in effect proscribes all verbal formulations for the "divine" and "infinite." Religious belief at this level can be nothing but the openness to belief. Adorno, in fact, knows this and objects that it reduces faith to nothing at all:

If one would in the worst case disregard every concrete, social-historically mediated determination and literally obey the Kierkegaardian dictum that Christianity is nothing other than a NB, a *nota bene*, that God once became man,

⁵⁰ Theodor Adorno, "Vernunft und Offenbarung," in *Stichworte: Kritische Modelle 2* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969), 28.

Critical Negative Theology

even without that moment as such, as concrete and historical, entering into consciousness, then in the name of paradoxical purity revealed religion would decline into the wholly indeterminate, into a Nothing, that would hardly allow itself be distinguished from its liquidation.⁵¹

But the relation to what we can apprehend only as Nothing is the very basis of faith in its inexhaustibly rich expressions, as understood from the perspective of negative theology. So what Adorno says may be accepted: revealed religion is not about establishing itself but about its own liquidation.⁵² That is what Christ and his self-sacrifice on the cross reveal. I grant that this is not the most obvious way to take apocalypticism, which ostensibly tends to be positively assertive, but it may nonetheless define the deep and abiding import of apocalypse today as the final moment of Christian revelation.

RELIGION AND RATIONALITY WITHOUT LIMITS

My disagreement with Habermas is based on my conviction that in order for reason to establish itself by means of rational self-reflection it must recognize its necessary, internal relations to apocalyptic revelation and even poetry. Habermas has spent considerable energy in attempting to control both of these borders.⁵³ Like Adorno, he naturally fears shipwreck for critical reason if it becomes indistinguishable from poetry and revelation. But his rupturing of this primordial unity of the rational, the poetic, and the revealed also betrays the fundamental inspiration of the Enlightenment registered in the early sketch attributed variously to Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin ("Das älteste Systemprogramm des Deutschen Idealismus" [1796]) and pursued throughout his life most ingeniously by Hamann.⁵⁴ The distinctions

⁵¹ "Würde man aber schlechterdings von all jenen konkreten, gesellschaftlich-historisch vermittelten Bestimmungen absehen und buchstäblich dem Kierkegaardschen Diktum gehorchen, das Christentum sei nichts anderes als ein NB, das Nota Bene, daß einmal Gott Mensch geworden wäre, ohne daß jener Augenblick als solcher, nämlich als auch seinerseits konkrete geschichtlicher, ins Bewußtsein träte, so zerginge im Namen paradoxer Reinheit die Offenbarungsreligion ins ganz Unbestimmte, in ein Nichts, das von ihrer Liquidation kaum sich unterscheiden ließe" (ibid.).

⁵² Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Déclension (Déconstruction du christianisme, I)* (Paris: Galilée, 2005), argues this explicitly and specifically about Christianity. So does Gianni Vattimo, *Dopo la cristianità: Per un cristianesimo non religioso* (Milan: Garzanti, 2002).

⁵³ See in particular Habermas, "Philosophie und Wissenschaft als Literatur?" chap. 9 in *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, and Habermas, "Exkurs zur Einebnung des Gattungsunterschiedes zwischen Philosophie und Literatur," chap. 7 in *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*.

⁵⁴ It is worth noting also that Johan Gottlieb Fichte, *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung* (1792), vol. 5 of *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. J. H. Fichte (Berlin: Veit und Comp., 1845), attempted a deduction a priori of the concept of revelation from principles of pure reason. This argument also opens reason in the direction of revelation, even while tending to reduce revelation to

The Journal of Religion

that must necessarily be made between these different modalities are heuristic and do not determine Truth to be the exclusive province of reason more than of revelation or poetic invention and insight. Reason must remain in communication with precisely these faculties in order to remain true—true to itself, no less than to the Truth. The nature of reason cannot be to arbitrarily and prejudicially exclude its Other. Opening to others is the heart of rationality, the very meaning of *Logos* as sharable, participable word. This is the essence of the vocation to universality that was discovered in the Greek Enlightenment, with the birth of philosophy in the sixth century BC, and it has been rediscovered periodically throughout history as the inspiration for a universally human culture.

It might well seem that such an openness to theological revelation is incompatible with communicative reason directed toward mutual understanding as developed by Habermas. Habermas works in continuity with the tradition of the (modern) Enlightenment. He stresses that the overarching structures that condition the meaning of all possible statements are dialectically intertwined with acts of making sense within the world. This is an important insight and one that helps us to form a more concrete and realistic idea of what revelation entails. Considered in relation to its linguistic medium, revelation involves the making of sense through a kind of *poiesis*. Such has been the light shed by the *other* Enlightenment—that represented, for example, by Hamann and Vico, for whom reason and revelation were not opposed.

I too conceive of communicative action oriented toward mutual understanding as the nature of reason—but also of revelation, or at least of the openness to revelation that is a prerequisite to genuine dialogue. The representations with which apocalyptic texts are rife must be decoded, so as not to be identified with the true revelation conveyed by those texts but rather as necessarily inadequate figures calling to be negated. Then the movement beyond any discourse and representation creates an openness in which revelation, leading up to apocalypse, and reason, in its ideal of completeness, alike are fully realized. They are realized as a relating in unknowing to the unrevealed, yet this very relation is itself a positive gift that founds reason and reveals all as issuing from what transcends us.

Habermas rejects Heidegger, Bataille, Foucault, and Derrida as all accepting irrational aesthetic and religious motives that distort and be-

the measure of reason. German Idealism's early program for unifying philosophical reason with religious revelation led later in the Romantic period to the heterodox and orthodox philosophies of revelation, respectively, of Schelling and Franz von Baader. See Peter Koslowski, *Philosophien der Offenbarung: Antiker Gnostizismus, Franz von Baader, Schelling* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2001).

tray reason,⁵⁵ but really it is the unlimited openness of reason, its deep nature as communicative, that is the strength and virtue of reason, even by his own account. We have taken glimpses into the historical development of this conception of reason as it emerges cyclically in enlightenments ancient, medieval, and modern—at moments when revelation and reason seem quite close, particularly for thinkers married to language (Logos) as the medium of disclosure. Hamann treated reason as revelation in language. In different terms, Vico too shares this view of poetic language as theological revelation and the disclosure of rationality all at once. This is, in effect, the type of vision that I am attempting to restore in mediating revelation with reason through poetic language.

Reason and revelation are ostensibly old antagonists, vying for the soul of Western culture from age to age. The swings of the pendulum can be traced from classical times to the Hellenistic period, from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance, and from modernity to the various postmodern countermovements that it provokes. The insight I have attempted to develop here is that both reason and revelation in their own most intrinsic natures demand unlimited openness, particularly communicative openness to others and to the irreducibly Other. Both are ordered to a total disclosure—whether it is figured as Truth or as Apocalypse—that cannot be comprehended by any finite individual or even by any defined group or single culture. Only in being open to others, and thereby to being modified and enriched, can this unlimited disclosure remain open toward the totality that it blindly envisages. In this openness toward a total, unrestricted disclosure of all, reason and revelation ultimately agree and practically come to coincide. Total openness to an unlimited insight and disclosure is the goal toward which reason and revelation alike aspire.

Reason, just like revelation, reflected on and thought through completely, empties itself of determinate content or theses and becomes pure openness to what it cannot grasp or define. This is the extreme limit at which reason, considered pragmatically, comes to coincide with revelation, and both are bounded by apocalypse. Apocalypse, as final or total disclosure, can be seen as the limit-case, the regulatory ideal or goal, of both revelation and reason—the point where all is revealed to the soul after death or is disclosed to fully enlightened reason.

The earliest testimonies of enlightenment in Greece, from *The Odyssey* on, show reason under the ensign of Apollo to be born in and with theological representations. The same lesson must be gathered

⁵⁵ Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, particularly chaps. 6–9.

The Journal of Religion

from the rebirth of reason in the Middle Ages with Anselm and again in the eighteenth century with Vico and Hamann. Reason in all these incarnations understands itself essentially as theological revelation. It is universal and universally communicable. But it is such by virtue of being open to what is higher than itself, to what illuminates its own darkness. This rationally inconceivable Other breaks into reason's self-enclosure with the lightning of apocalypse.