

# Jürgen Habermas

Peace Prize of the German Book Trade 2001  
Acceptance Speech

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Liao 2012  
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Heuss 1959  
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Wilder 1957  
Schneider 1956  
Hesse 1955  
Burckhardt 1954  
Buber 1953  
Guardini 1952  
Schweitzer 1951  
Tau 1950

# Jürgen Habermas

## Faith and Knowledge

### Acceptance speech

When current events become so overwhelming that they rip the choice of topic out of our own hands, so to speak, the John Waynes among us intellectuals are of course greatly tempted to compete instead as to who can be the quickest to shoot from the hip.

Only a short time ago the spirits moved us to discuss the question of whether and how far we should subject ourselves to genetic technology for self-instrumentation or even for pursuing the goal of self-optimization. Our first steps along this path were beset by controversy between the advocates of those two great rival faiths: organized science and organized religion. One side feared obscurantism and the revival of atavistic suspicion against science. The other accused the scientific belief in progress of a crude naturalism that undermines morality.

But after 11 September, the tension between secular society and religion exploded in an entirely different way. As we know from Atta's testament, these suicidal murderers, who turned civilian means of transport into living missiles against the capitalist citadels of Western civilization, were motivated by religious convictions. For them, those symbols of globalizing modernism were the embodiment of the Great Satan.

But we too, the universal eyewitnesses to these "apocalyptic" events, were moved to Biblical imagery by what we saw on the TV screen. The language of retribution used at first (and I repeat, at first) by the US President in reaction to the events resounded with Old Testament overtones. Synagogues, churches and mosques filled up everywhere, as if the blind attacks had struck a religious chord deep within the innermost core of secular society. This subterranean symmetry did not, however, go so far as to lead the religious memorial gathering at the New York Stadium three weeks ago to a symmetric display of hate.

Despite its religious language, fundamentalism is, as we know, an exclusively modern phenomenon. What struck us immediately about the Islamic perpetrators was the imbalance between their ends and their means. This reflects an imbalance that has emerged in the perpetrators' home coun-

tries between culture and society in the wake of an accelerated and radical modernization.

What under more fortunate conditions might have been considered a process of creative destruction offers these countries no prospect that can adequately compensate for the suffering caused by the collapse of traditional ways. The prospect of improved material living conditions is merely one of these. What is decisive is that the prospect of spiritual freedom, which finds its political expression in the separation of church and state, has been impeded there by feelings of humiliation.

Even in Europe, where centuries have been spent trying to work out a sensible accommodation with the Janus head of modernity, "secularization" is still accompanied by highly ambivalent feelings, as evident in the controversy over biotechnology. There are obdurate orthodoxies in the West as well as in the Middle and Far(ther) East, and among Christians and Jews as well as Muslims. Those who wish to avoid a "clash of civilizations" must therefore keep in mind the still-unresolved dialectic inherent in our own Western process of secularization.

The "war against terrorism" is no war, and in terrorism is expressed also – and I emphasize the word "also" – the ominously silent collision of worlds that must find a common language beyond the mute violence of terrorism against military might. Instead of a globalization that consists of a market without boundaries, many of us hope for a return of the political in another form. Not in the original form of a global security state, tied to the spheres of the police, intelligence services and now even the military, but instead as a worldwide, civilizing power of formation.

At the moment we don't have much more to work with than a pallid faith in rationality and a little self-awareness, because this lack of language has also divided our own house against itself. The risks of disruptive secularization elsewhere may be addressed only when we are clear on what secularization means in our own post-secular society. So with this aim in view, I return today to an old topic, Faith and Knowledge. But don't expect a polarizing Sunday sermon that causes some to leap out of their pews while others remain seated.

First of all, the word "secularization" has a juridical meaning that refers to the forcible appropriation of church property by the secular state. This meaning has since been extended to the emergence of cultural and societal modernism in general. Since then, the word "secularization" has been associated with both of these opposed judgments, whether it is the successful taming of ecclesiastical authority by worldly power that is being emphasized or rather the act of unlawful appropriation.

According to the first interpretation, religious ways of thinking and living have been replaced by reason-based and consequently superior equivalents. According to the second, modern modes of thinking and living are to be regarded as the illegitimate spoils of conquest. The "replacement" model lends a progressive-optimistic meaning to the act of deconsecration, whereas the "expropriation" model connotes theoretically-conceived corruption of a rootless modernity.

But I think both interpretations make the same mistake. They both consider secularization as a kind of zero-sum game between, on one hand, the productive powers of science and technology harnessed by capitalism and, on the other, the tenacious powers of religion and the church. This image no longer fits a post-secular society that posits the continued existence of religious communities within a continually secularizing society. And most of all, this too-narrow view overlooks the civilizing role of democratically enlightened common sense, which proceeds along its own track as an equal third partner amid the murmurs of cultural conflict between science and religion.

From the standpoint of the liberal state, of course, religious communities are entitled to be called "reasonable" only if they renounce the use of violence as a means of propagating the truths of their faith. This understanding stems from a threefold reflection on the role of the faithful within a pluralistic society. First of all, the religious conscience must handle the encounter with other confessions and other religions cognitively. Second, it must accede to the authority of science, which holds a social monopoly on knowledge. Finally, it must participate in the premises of a constitutional state, which is based on a non-sacred concept of morality. Without this reflective "thrust," monotheisms within ruthlessly modernizing societies develop a destructive potential. The phrase "reflective thrust," of course, can give the false impression of being something that is one-sided and close-ended. The reality, however, is that this work of reflection in the face of any newly emerging

conflict is a process that runs its course through the public spaces of democracy.

As soon as an existentially relevant question, such as biotechnology, becomes part of the political agenda, the citizens, both believers and non-believers, will press upon each other their ideologically impregnated world-views and so will stumble upon the harsh reality of ideological pluralism. If they learn to deal with this reality without violence and with an acceptance of their own fallibility, they will come to understand what the secular principles of decision-making written into the Constitution mean in a post-secular society. In other words, the ideologically neutral state does not prejudice its political decisions in any way toward either side of the conflict between the rival claims of science and religious faith. The political reason of the citizenry follows a dynamic of secularization only insofar as it maintains in the end product an equal distance from vital traditions and ideological content. But such a state retains a capacity to learn only to the extent that it remains osmotically open, without relinquishing its independence, to both science and religion.

Of course, common sense itself is also full of illusions about the world and must let itself be enlightened without reservation by the sciences. But the scientific theories that impinge on the world of life leave the framework of our everyday knowledge essentially untouched. If we learn something new about the world and about ourselves as beings in the world, the content of our self-understanding changes. Copernicus and Darwin revolutionized the geocentric and anthropocentric worldviews. But the destruction of the astronomical illusion that the stars revolve around the earth had less effect on our lives than did the biological disillusionment over the place of mankind in the natural order. It appears that the closer scientific knowledge gets to our body, the more it disturbs our self-understanding. Research on the brain is teaching us about the physiology of our consciousness. But does this change that intuitive sense of responsibility and accountability that accompanies all of our actions?

If we join Max Weber and turn our attention to the beginnings of the "disenchantment of the world," we see what is at stake. Nature is depersonalized to the extent that it is made accessible to objective contemplation and causal explanation. Such a world of scientifically-researched nature is far removed from a social framework of persons who ascribe motive and intent to each other. But what would become of such persons, we may ask today, if they subject themselves and each other to simi-

larly scientific processes of description? Will common sense in the end allow itself not only to be instructed by the counterintuitive discoveries of science, but altogether consumed by them?

The philosopher Wilfred Sellars answered this question in 1960 (in a famous lecture on "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man") with the scenario of a society in which the old-fashioned language games of everyday life are overthrown in favor of the objectifying description of conscious processes. The point of departure for this naturalization of the spirit is a scientific image of man that also thoroughly desocializes our self-conception. Of course, this can succeed only if the intentionality of human consciousness and the normativity of our behavior in such a self-description disappears without a trace. Such a theory must explain, for example, how people can obey or disobey rules – whether grammatical, conceptual or moral.

Sellars's students misunderstood their teacher's aporetic thought-experiment as a research program, and they are pursuing it to this day. The application of a scientific modernization of our everyday psychology has even led to attempts at a semantics that postulates a biological explanation for the very content of our thoughts. But even these most advanced theses still appear unable to explain that difference between Is and Ought that comes into play whenever we disobey rules.

When one describes how a person has done something that he didn't mean to do and also shouldn't have done, then that person is not being described as natural science would describe one of its objects. This is because in the description of persons there is a silent moment of pre-scientific self-conception of what it is to be a subject capable of language and behavior. When we describe a phenomenon such as a person's behavior, we know for example that we're describing something not as a natural process, but as something that can be justified if necessary. Behind this is an image of personhood, persons who can hold each other accountable, who at home and away are involved in normatively regulated interactions and who encounter a universe of public fundamentals.

This perspective that accompanies everyday life explains the difference between the language games of justification and pure description. In this dualism, non-reductionistic strategies of explanation also encounter a limit. The concept of individual accountability is the core of a self-conception that develops only the perspective of a participant and not that of an observer. The scientific faith in a science that will one day not only fulfill, but

eliminate, personal self-conception through objectifying self-description is not science, but bad philosophy. Moreover, no science will take away from scientifically enlightened common sense the ability to judge how we are to deal with its effects on human life, as we do, for instance, the descriptions of molecular biology that make possible genetic intervention.

Common sense is thus concerned with the consciousness of persons who are able to take initiative, make mistakes and correct those mistakes. It asserts against the sciences a stubborn perspectival structure. With this consciousness of autonomy which cannot, I think, be grasped naturalistically, common sense on the other hand asserts also the perspective of a religious tradition whose normative rules to which we equally assent.

Certainly, the democratic common sense of the citizenry has, when so desired, taken its place among the reason-based constructions of the democratic constitutional state. The idea of egalitarian law based on reason also has religious roots. But this reason-based legitimation of law and politics drinks from long-profaned springs. Religion therefore contests democratically enlightened common sense for reasons that are acceptable not only to those who are members of a religious community. This naturally also awakens suspicion among the faithful that Western secularization may be a one-way street that leaves religion standing on the curb.

The reverse side of religious freedom is actually a pacification of ideological pluralism that has unequally distributed consequences. After all, the liberal state has so far imposed only upon the believers among its citizens the requirement that they split their identity into public and private versions. That is, they must translate their religious convictions into a secular language before their arguments have the prospect of being accepted by a majority. Today's Catholics and Protestants do this when they argue for the legal rights of fertilized ova outside the mother's body, thus attempting (perhaps prematurely) to translate the "in the image of God" character of the human creature into the secular language of constitutional law.

But the search for reasons that aspire to general acceptance need not lead to an unfair exclusion of religion from public life, and secular society, for its part, need not cut itself off from the important resources of spiritual explanations, if only the secular side were to retain a feeling for the articulative power of religious discourse. The boundaries

between secular and religious reasons are, after all, tenuous. Therefore, fixing of this controversial boundary should be understood as a cooperative venture, carried on by both sides, and with each side trying to see the issue from the other's perspective. Democratically enlightened common sense is not a singularity, but is instead the mental constitution of a public with many different voices. Secular majorities must not reach a conclusion without first having given a hearing to the objections of opponents who believe their religious convictions to have been injured; they must also make an effort to learn something from them.

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

For this reason, Kant did not intend his categorical imperative to be sucked into oblivion by the undertow of enlightened self-interest. He extended the concept of freedom to autonomy and thus provided the first great example of a completely secularizing, yet at the same time redeeming, deconstruction of the truths of faith. In Kant we find the authority of divine command reestablished in the unconditional validity of moral duty. In this we hear an unmistakable resonance. With his conception of autonomy, Kant certainly destroyed the traditional conception of being "a child of God." But in doing so, he also avoided the banal consequences of a simply vacuous deflation through his critical transformation of the religious stance.

Secular languages that simply eliminate what was once there leave behind only irritation. Something was lost when sin became guilt. The desire for forgiveness is, after all, still closely connected with the unsentimental wish to undo other injuries as well. We are rightfully disturbed by the irreversibility of past suffering, the injustice that has been committed against the innocently mishandled, debased and murdered, injustices that exceed every human power of redemption. The lost hope of resurrection has left behind a palpable emptiness. Horkheimer's justified skepticism of what I consider to be Benjamin's indomitable faith in the redemptive power of human thought – "The killed really were killed," said Horkheimer – does

not of course deny that impotent impulse to undo what has already been done. (This correspondence between Benjamin and Horkheimer dates from early 1937.)

Both factors, validity of this impulse and its impotence, continued after the Holocaust in the equally necessary and futile practice of a "redemption of the past" (Adorno). Disguised, as I perhaps should say from now on, this same impulse is expressed in the ever-growing lament over the inadequacy of this practice. The unbelieving sons and daughters of the modern age appear in such moments to believe themselves more obliged to each other, and to be in greater need, as if the religious tradition were accessible to them in translation, and thus as if its semantic potential were not yet exhausted.

However, this ambivalence can also lead to the reasonable position of keeping one's distance from religion without at the same time excluding its perspective. This position could well lead the self-enlightenment of a civil society, ridden with cultural conflict, in the right direction. Moral sentiments, which until now could be expressed only in a rather exclusionary way through religious language, might find general resonance as soon as they find a redemptive formulation for what has been almost forgotten, but is still implicitly missed.

This approach very seldom succeeds, but sometimes it does. A secularization that does not annihilate is brought about as a kind of translation. That is what the West, as the great secularizing force in the world today, can learn from its own history. Otherwise the West will either appear simply as another crusader on the behalf of a competing religious faith, like the Arab world, or as the travelling salesman of an instrumental reason that subjects all meaning to itself.

Allow me to close by illustrating the concept of non-annihilating secularization with an example. In the controversy over the use of human embryos, many voices still allude to Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him." It is not necessary to believe that God, who is Love, created Adam and Eve as free beings like Himself in order to understand what "in His own image" means. Love cannot exist without knowledge of another, nor can freedom exist without mutual recognition.

Consequently, the "opposite stance" inherent in the nature of humanity must remain free to repay this gift of God. Despite his nature as a creature "in the image of God," this "otherness" can itself

be considered a creation of God. The created nature of "in His own image" expresses an intuition that has something to say even to those who have no ear for religion, among whom I count myself. God remains a "God of free men" only as long as we do not erase the absolute difference between the Creator and the created. In other words, only as long as the gift of a divine form to man is taken to mean that no hindrance be placed on man's right of self-determination.

This Creator, because he is both Creator and Redeemer in one, need not operate as a technician according to the laws of nature, nor as a computer scientist according to the rules of code. The voice of God, which calls to life, operates from the outset within a morally tangible universe. God can thus in a sense "govern" man, in that He at once both releases and compels man to freedom.

Now, it is not necessary to believe in these theological premises in order to understand their consequences. A completely different, causally reimagined subjection would come into play if the difference inherent in the concept of creation were to disappear and a peer were to take the place of God – if, for instance, somebody were to impose his own preferences on the coincidence of parental chromosomes without being obligated at least counterfactually to assume a consensus with the others affected. This way of stating the issue brings us close to a question that I have considered elsewhere. Did not the first person who subdued another person according to his own purposes destroy exactly that freedom which exists among peers in order to guarantee their difference?

## Winners of the Peace Prize and their laudatory speakers

|      |  |      |  |
|------|--|------|--|
| 1950 | Max Tau - Adolf Grimme                       | 1980 | Ernesto Cardenal - Johann Baptist Metz         |
| 1951 | Albert Schweitzer - Theodor Heuss            | 1981 | Lew Kopelew - Marion Gräfin Dönhoff            |
| 1952 | Romano Guardini - Ernst Reuter               | 1982 | George Kennan - Carl F. von Weizsäcker         |
| 1953 | Martin Buber - Albrecht Goes                 | 1883 | Manès Sperber - Siegfried Lenz                 |
| 1954 | Carl J. Burckhardt - Theodor Heuss           | 1984 | Octavio Paz - Richard von Weizsäcker           |
| 1955 | Hermann Hesse - Richard Benz                 | 1985 | Teddy Kollek - Manfred Rommel                  |
| 1956 | Reinhold Schneider - Werner Bergengruen      | 1986 | Władysław Bartoszewski - Hans Maier            |
| 1957 | Thornton Wilder - Carl J. Burckhardt         | 1987 | Hans Jonas - Robert Spaemann                   |
| 1958 | Karl Jaspers - Hannah Arendt                 | 1988 | Siegfried Lenz - Yohanan Meroz                 |
| 1959 | Theodor Heuss - Benno Reifenberg             | 1989 | Václav Havel - André Glucksmann                |
| 1960 | Victor Gollancz - Heinrich Lübke             | 1990 | Karl Dedecius - Heinrich Olschowsky            |
| 1961 | Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan - Ernst Benz        | 1991 | György Konrád - Jorge Semprún                  |
| 1962 | Paul Tillich - Otto Dibelius                 | 1992 | Amos Oz - Siegfried Lenz                       |
| 1963 | Carl F. von Weizsäcker - Georg Picht         | 1993 | Friedrich Schorlemmer - Richard von Weizsäcker |
| 1964 | Gabriel Marcel - Carlo Schmid                | 1994 | Jorge Semprún - Wolf Lepenies                  |
| 1965 | Nelly Sachs - Werner Weber                   | 1995 | Annemarie Schimmel - Roman Herzog              |
| 1966 | Kardinal Bea/Visser 't Hooft - Paul Mikat    | 1996 | Mario Vargas Llosa - Jorge Semprún             |
| 1967 | Ernst Bloch - Werner Maihofer                | 1997 | Yaşar Kemal - Günter Grass                     |
| 1968 | Léopold Sédar Senghor - François Bondy       | 1998 | Martin Walser - Frank Schirrmacher             |
| 1969 | Alexander Mitscherlich - Heinz Kohut         | 1999 | Fritz Stern - Bronislaw Geremek                |
| 1970 | Alva und Gunnar Myrdal - Karl Kaiser         | 2000 | Assia Djebar - Barbara Frischmuth              |
| 1971 | Marion Gräfin Dönhoff - Alfred Grosser       | 2001 | Jürgen Habermas - Jan Philipp Reemtsma         |
| 1972 | Janusz Korczak - Hartmut von Hentig          | 2002 | Chinua Achebe - Theodor Berchem                |
| 1973 | The Club of Rome - Nello Celio               | 2003 | Susan Sontag - Ivan Nagel                      |
| 1974 | Frère Roger - (keine Laudatio)               | 2004 | Péter Esterházy - Michael Naumann              |
| 1975 | Alfred Grosser - Paul Frank                  | 2005 | Orhan Pamuk - Joachim Sartorius                |
| 1976 | Max Frisch - Hartmut von Hentig              | 2006 | Wolf Lepenies - Andrei Pleşu                   |
| 1977 | Leszek Kołakowski - Gesine Schwan            | 2007 | Saul Friedländer - Wolfgang Frühwald           |
| 1978 | Astrid Lindgren - H.-C. Kirsch, G. U. Becker | 2008 | Anselm Kiefer - Werner Spies                   |
| 1979 | Yehudi Menuhin - Pierre Bertaux              | 2009 | Claudio Magris - Karl Schlögel                 |
|      |  | 2010 | David Grossman - Joachim Gauck                 |
|      |  | 2011 | Boualem Sansal - Peter von Matt                |
|      |  | 2012 | Liao Yiwu - Felicitas von Lovenberg            |
|      |  | 2013 | Swetlana Alexijewitsch - Karl Schlögel         |

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