

**Religious Particularism and Religious Pluralism
in Herder's *Humanität***

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Many of the most pressing political arguments in the world today—about human rights, about war, about international law—are deeply implicated in persist questions about the role of religion in modern life. The violent threat of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, the political challenge of increasingly radicalized Christian majorities—these and others have for decades elicited a fairly uniform response in the modern West: the secularization of public life. According to this line of reasoning, while a private life or culture thoroughly permeated with religious presumptions is generally compatible with the liberal freedoms which Western nations have developed over the past few centuries, a thoroughly secular and rational politics must keep those presumptions in line.¹ But secularization is a complicated process, and however one defines it, the reactions to it have often been extreme.² Thus have numerous thinkers attempted to develop ways of addressing the persistence of—sometimes extreme—religious reactions to modernity that do not involve rigorously purging the public square on the one hand, or contenting oneself with isolated (but potentially growing) instances of theocracy on the other. One of the most intriguing is an argument which the philosopher Charles Taylor has put forward, in which he claims that the true route to peace amongst rival religious claims and reactions is not to restrict them in light of a secular model which presents modern subjectivity and its attendant freedoms as negative accomplishments, achieved through the subtracting away of traditions, but rather to employ a different definition of secularism, one which would *encourage* the expression of and interactions

¹ This argument is still very common; see for instance the recent publication of Damon Linker's *The Theocrats: Secular America Under Siege* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).

² While the literature on this point has grown enormously, probably the best starting point remains Benjamin Barber's *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).

between religions as routes to a fuller, more moral sense of the modern subject.³ As he put it at the conclusion of one essay, “world convergence will not come through a loss of denial of traditions all around, but rather by creative re-immersions of different groups, each in their own spiritual heritage, traveling different routes to the same goal.”⁴

Many would dismiss this aspiration out of hand as dreadfully naive, and it may well be—but not because of the idea itself. If there is a fundamental problem with Taylor’s argument, it lies not with his aspiration, but rather with his explanation. Taylor’s philosophy of the human self, with its emphasis on moral sources and strong evaluation, does not do enough to get a handle on the basic problem of incommensurability with different religious (and irreligious) claims. What Taylor needs to supplement his account of the self is an account of the world within which selves find moral sources in history and nature, subjectively draw upon them, and through doing discover a larger meaning immanent to their own evaluative activity. In other words, what is needed is an ontology of that “immersion” in religious tradition he speaks of. Sometimes, I will admit, I think Taylor comes close to providing just that.⁵ But as yet, his argument lacks a substantive enough vision. *Humanität* on the other hand, that vision of Johann Gottfried Herder’s which lurks in the background of so much of Taylor’s thought, has substance in spades.

³ See Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” in *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture*, James L. Heft, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 29, 107; “Modes of Secularism,” in *Secularism and Its Critics*, Rajeev Bhargava, ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 37-38, 46-47; “Modernity and the Rise of the Public Sphere,” in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values 14*, Grethe B. Peterson, ed. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993), 207-210.

⁴ Charles Taylor, “Conditions of an Unenforced Consensus on Human Rights,” in *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 144.

⁵ This was the focus of my dissertation; see Fox, “Immanent Community: Herder, Taylor, and the Moral Possibilities of Modernity,” Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 2001.

Herder's vision of human existence within the context of various *Völker* and nations—a vision which begins with his insights into the organic connection between human language and natural and historical forces, moves on to a consideration of the cosmological unity which those connections hint at, and climaxes with a contemplation of the national forms which emerge from and along with the people who realize these revelatory connections—has profound implications for how we think about belonging, identity, citizenship, and so forth, and nowhere are the implications potentially greater than in regards to the interrelated problems of religious pluralism and religious particularism. For Herder, *Humanität*, a term which he derived from Latin, expressed his both his hopes regarding the progress of humankind and his belief regarding the ultimate purpose of the religious impulse. “I wish,” he wrote, “that in the word humanity I could include all that I have said hitherto about humanity’s growth toward reason and freedom, toward finer senses and desires, toward a sensitive and robust health, toward the occupation and dominion of the earth.”⁶ This ideal defined a destined state of self-realization and wholeness, wherein human beings religiously comprehended their authentic place and powers and enjoyed harmony accordingly. It was an ideal which Herder believed was contained in the historical and natural potential of the human race, and all individuals, of all nations, are partners in its achievement: indeed, as a normative purpose it “recalls nations to their human destiny.”⁷ He did

⁶ *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, Band 6, Martin Bollacher, ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989), hereafter “*Ideen zur Philosophie*,” 154 / *On World History: An Anthology*, Hans Adler and Ernest A. Menze, eds., Menze and Michael Palma, trans. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), hereafter “Menze and Palma, 1997,” 141. In this paper, the source for Herder quotations will be followed by a slash (“/”), after which the primary source for the English translation will be given. Where there is no slash, the translation is primarily my own.

⁷ *Ideen zur Philosophie*, 667; see also Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism: The Genesis of German Political Thought, 1790-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 214-215, and Samson B. Kroll, “Herder’s Concept of *Humanität*,” in *Johann Gottfried Herder: Innovator Through the Ages* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1982), 9-11.

not mean by this ideal any common-sense understanding of what human beings can accomplish or desire: he pointedly contrasted *Humanität* to concepts like *Menschenheit* and *Menschlichkeit* which, in his view, described the sympathies of the human race much too casually.⁸ Herder had something grander in mind, something that despite all historical and natural differences *would* define the aspirations of all human beings everywhere: nothing less than the “*character* of human being,” something given by God to guide us between the standards of the angels, which we reach for in vain, and animal brutality, which always threatens and tempts us.⁹ According to Herder, any national *Bildung* which does not tend towards *Humanität*, any national religion which does not look towards “godlike humanity,” mocks the laws which govern human being itself.¹⁰

But this only describes Herder’s explanation of the solution; it does not work through the problem itself. That Herder ascribed a religious significance and validity to the development of human communities and cultures as nations is well understood—but what is the nature of that significance and validity, what is its meaning, in a world where communities and cultures vary so widely? Simply put, are the differences between Herder’s nations and cultures and communities incommensurable? If they are not, then in what sense can all their various members truly insist upon the validity of their own particularity, authenticity, and unique contribution to humanity? But if, on the other hand, they *are* incommensurable, then how can the religious meanings which Herder asserted that nations embody be taken to manifest anything other than a historicist,

⁸ *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*, in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, Band 7, Hans Dietrich Irmscher, ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1991), hereafter “*Briefe zu Beförderung*,” 147 / Menze and Palma, 1997, 105.

⁹ *Briefe zu Beförderung*, 148 / Menze and Palma, 1997, 106.

¹⁰ *Ideen zur Philosophie*, 189.

culture-bound conception of truth? Indeed, how can we speak productively about “truth” at all? If any headway is to be made down the path which Taylor suggested we travel, then it will have to begin with thinking about how Herder’s philosophy charted that path in the first place.

2

The problem of difference in Herder’s philosophy has hardly gone unnoticed. Isaiah Berlin set the pace for most English-language scholarship on Herder when he asserted that the question of pluralism--“the tension of the One and the Many”--was Herder’s obsession.¹¹ Berlin was of course aware that Herder was not the only thinker interested in questions of difference, but he decided that Herder most directly expressed the rebellious, contrarian heart of the romantic movement: “the denial of unity, the denial of harmony, the denial of the compatibility of ideals, whether in the sphere of action or in the sphere of thought.”¹² This negative assertion, Berlin claimed, articulated a vital corrective to the Enlightenment, announcing that “values are not universal” and that “there are many objective ends, [many] ultimate values, some incompatible with others, pursued by different societies at various times.”¹³ Berlin’s association of Herder in this argument was persuasive enough that Herder now appears in the scholarly literature on pluralism with some frequency.¹⁴ But there remains the matter of its historical accuracy. To call Herder’s struggle with plurality his defining insight may lend support to

¹¹ Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” in *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 153-154.

¹² Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, H. Hardy, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 67.

¹³ Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, H. Hardy, ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 37, 80.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 93-98, and *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 161-162; John Gray, *Enlightenment’s Wake* (London: Routledge, 1995), 154-165.

Berlin's view of Western intellectual history as a one long "monistic 'pursuit of the ideal,'"¹⁵ but it ignores the possibility that Herder's preoccupation with historical and natural differences reveals not so much an unresolved concern as a desire not to be misunderstood--a fear that his affirmation of a national process of *immanent* aesthetic revelation, one which was both empirical and religious, individual and holistic, was likely to be reduced to one extreme or another.

This unfortunate fact was not unexpected by those who knew Herder well. The novelist Jean Paul Richter wrote after Herder's death that his friend was fated to "the mortifying spectacle of watching others take possession of the kingdom to which he had pointed the way, and seeing them rule it in a manner that was not his."¹⁶ One of the more common ways of "mis-possessing" Herder's thought, one which characterizes the work of both Berlin and the romantic authors whose ideas he chronicled, is an undue focus a single part of Herder's output; just as "it was the young Herder, the prophet of revolt against Rationalistic concepts of form, who was revered by the early Romanticists," so did Berlin pay especially close attention to *Yet Another Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* [*Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*], which he labeled Herder's "classical statement of historical relativism," and in particular that essay's doctrine of "feeling into" other cultures: *Hineinfühlen*.¹⁷

Herder also made extensive use of this idea in his often over-looked work, *Oldest*

¹⁵ This is how Damon Linker put it in his trenchant comments about Berlin in his article "The Reluctant Pluralism of J.G. Herder," *Review of Politics* 62 (Spring 2000), 268 n.2.

¹⁶ Richter cited in Michael Morton, *Herder and the Poetics of Thought: Unity and Diversity in "On Diligence in Several Learned Languages"* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 3.

¹⁷ Robert T. Clark, *Herder: His Life and Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 418; Berlin, "Herder and the Enlightenment," 208. In "Herder and the Enlightenment" Berlin cites the relatively short *Yet Another Philosophy* as often as (and including glosses and paraphrases, probably more often than) any other single work of Herder's.

Document of the Human Race [Älteste Urkunde des Menschengeschlechts]. Through that examination of Biblical history, Herder wished his readers to understand that every authentic expression, whatever distance through space and time it may have traveled, still retains a sensate core, a revelatory story that human beings can “feel out” and make their own. This is how aesthetic articulation brings being to bear on human life: through a “felt” unity with those enduring forces immanent to all we hear and speak. In *Yet Another History*, however, Herder’s idea of *Einfühlung* is expressed much more harshly, against those who would impose a superficial philosophical unity on a world which he conceived of in spiritual terms. Thus did he argue that there was *no* historical method which could make other cultures or moments in history available to us, for evaluation or comparison; there could only be aesthetic insight.

The whole nature of the soul, which rules through everything, which models all other inclinations and forces of the soul in accordance with itself, and in addition colors even the most indifferent actions—in order to share in feeling this, do not answer on the basis of the word, but go into the age, into the clime, the whole history, feel yourself into everything—only now are you on the way towards understanding the word. But also only now will you lost the though “as though you too are all that taken individually or collectively.” You all taken collectively? Quintessence of all times and peoples? That really shows stupidity!¹⁸

Herder’s strong emphasis on the inability of more rational methods to do justice to the diverse conditions of the world *and* provide some overarching guidance to it had at least one unintended consequence—namely, to lead thinkers like Berlin to conclude that “anyone who reads Herder’s works with the *Einfühlung* for which he asks, and which he so well describes,” will have to accept that “societies and their ideals are not commensurable,” that even “the highest

¹⁸ *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, Band 4, Jürgen Brummack and Martin Bollacher, eds. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994), hereafter “*Auch eine Philosophie*” 33 / *Philosophical Writings*, Michael Forster, ed. and trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), hereafter “Forster,” 292.

ends for which men and rightly striven and sometimes died are strictly incompatible with one another.”¹⁹ Berlin was by no means unaware of the role of *Humanität* in Herder’s thought, and over time he further clarified his interpretation, distinguishing “pluralism” from “relativism,” and placing Herder in the former category. But the real thrust of Herder’s pluralism, in his view, was the challenge it posed to “the possibility, at least in principle, of universal, timeless solutions of problems of value.” He pointed out that Herder’s concept of *Humanität* would have to involve numerous forms, and no one expression of it would be excused from the requirement of “feeling out” all others for the sake of understanding; presumably, the same would hold for Taylor’s proposals about “re-immersion.” Wouldn’t all that feeling and immersing reduce *Humanität*’s universal character to something which existed in name only?²⁰

Berlin, however, makes a flawed assumption. Berlin accepts the romantic argument that depicts the human desire for meaning as best satisfied by religion and culture, by the collective cultivation of roots and beliefs which give structure and direction to human existence. But in his view, becoming “cultured” was primarily a matter of will: of holding forth a vision that would orient the lives of all who embraced it. Cultural and religious devotion might have all sorts of historical complications, but essentially it was, for Berlin, mostly a matter of subjective devotion. Since any person who grounds themselves in a culture would become a believer in their culture exactly through their own (whether conscious or unconscious) decision to do so, supposing that same person could also hold simultaneously themselves “outside” their community and access some higher principle through “feeling” (or “immersion” for that matter) is simply confusing.

¹⁹ Berlin, “Herder and Enlightenment,” 210, 211-212.

²⁰ Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” 211-212.

What is “outside” can only be the humbling, pluralist recognition of what all the other willful people are doing, and thus the constructedness of one’s own views; that, or the recultivation of some higher myth. This makes sense--*if* we accept the idea that culture is basically a human construction. But what if it is not?

3

It might be easy to look at the “laws” which Herder often discussed and see essentially simple anthropological observations: that humans are culture-building beings, that we do this through the expressive power of language, and that as our language is a artifact of nature and history, so are our national feelings. These observations are good ones to make, and Berlin made an important contribution to political theory by using Herder and other romantic thinkers to remind the discipline of the expressive aspects of human existence. But without the assumption that our reflection upon what we naturally and historically receive involves us in a larger organic whole, these observations will remain earth-bound. When one rejects the possibility of organism, the possibility those *Kräfte* which Herder argued are present in our thought and speech is *also* rejected--and with it, a valuable perspective on the very idea of community.

Rousseau provides a useful contrast here. That Herder was influenced by Rousseau’s critique of civilization and his argument for communal rather than individual freedom is undeniable. But there is a crucial difference between them. Rousseau understood the significance of culture to the human sense of belonging. But it was his contention that ever since humankind left the state of nature, neither language nor any other aspect of human existence could be said to culturally convey the elements of authentic, communal being; hence, the culture he proposed was political and artificial, a new “general being” invoked by legislation. Herder’s vision of culture,

on the other hand, is national and organic: he holds that the numerous *Völker* which the immanent structure of expression reveals constitute an ongoing “diversity *amidst* unity.”²¹ For him, cultural connections are themselves organic--they grow, and our understanding of them grow with them. As such, they provide humankind not only with a place but with a purpose, as does any organism, and carry with them a history which reflects the potential, continual fulfillment of that purpose. Rousseau did not consider this possibility, and consequently faced the need for establishing a culture, a wholly embedded community, that drew *nothing* from history or nature--for humankind had left the state of nature, and history had nothing to offer.²²

In contrast, Herder’s vitalist reading of all human thought and experience took seriously the idea that culture is at least as much given as it is created--that there will always be a “living organic force” immanent to us and all our associations.²³ This is a position Herder reiterated endlessly in all sorts of different contexts--aesthetic, historical, analytical. The idea that human acts of appropriation and reflection through language involve the process of our becoming what we are led to be with laws which move all the discrete elements of the universe together like a work of poetry or art introduces radical possibilities into one’s moral and political thinking.²⁴ Insofar as one’s interpretation of Herder’s arguments about nations and religions go, it means that the analogies and metaphors that play a central role in his writing are not simple

²¹ F.M. Barnard, *Self-Direction and Political Legitimacy: Rousseau and Herder* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 307.

²² As one scholar put it, Rousseau was the “prophet of history who despaired of history.” See Leo Gossman, “Time and History in Rousseau,” *Studies in Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 30 (1964), 348.

²³ *Ideen zur Philosophie*, 271 / *J.G. Herder on Social and Political Culture*, F.M. Barnard ed. and trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), hereafter “Barnard,” 291.

²⁴ *Briefe zu Beförderung*, 126; see also Hans Adler, “Johann Gottfried Herder’s Concept of Humanity,” *Studied in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 23 (1994), 68-69 and passim.

epistemological creations; rather, they communicate a truth--one that may only be known culturally and nationally, but a truth nonetheless. Truth and culture have for thinkers like Rousseau (and Berlin) a fairly straightforward dependent relationship: truths exist *for* communities, products of a willed (whether consciously or not) perspective. For Herder, truths exist *in* and *by* communities. Hence focusing on their diverse content and calling that a sign of “pluralism” may in some ways be accurate, but it misses the primary metaphysical emphasis of the analogy entirely.

Of course over the course of history the expressions of different nations will conflict, in the same way that in the natural world rabbits and wolves and trees and beavers do. But that does not make them “incommensurable” any more than it makes them into a “monism,” unless such an idea can be said to refer to any holism marked by sympathy, complementarity, and feeling. Herder’s analogical approach denied the idealist construction of difference as a problem for *Humanität*, and thus for morality and truth; he argued that the appropriate response to difference is to feel out a “synthesis . . . that preserves the element of opposition”: what medieval thinkers called a “coincidence of opposites,” a principle of moral reasoning quite at home in the “German tradition of philosophy-as-literature” exhibited by Herder.²⁵

4

But what then about those national religions of which Herder spoke so much and so highly? Can we make sense of this kind of understanding of pluralism when talking about a *Volk* whose constituting self-understanding involves specific doctrinal claims? It is one thing to interpret the value of somewhat pedestrian cultural norms and practices as part of a linguistic and

²⁵ Morton, *Herder and the Poetics of Thought*, 20-22.

analogical process which immanently brings forth out of nature and history real meaning; at first blush, it seems a very different thing to similarly interpret central religious revelations and events in light of such an immanent process. So having seen Herder's perspective on the issue difference in terms of human development, the questions turns to how human communities take up and talk about that which is supposed to be *more than* human. What happens when beliefs like those are "re-immersed"?

Some have suggested that here we can see a weak ecumenism, and hence a hidden secularism, behind all of Herder's communitarian and culture-celebrating talk. For example, some readers interpret Herder's account of the Mosaic Law and its role in the creation of the Jewish nation as fudging on exactly this point; Herder does not have Moses presenting a law which was *really* from God, they claim, but rather one which allowed the people to believe that a divine revelation had taken place.²⁶ This interpretation, however, too quickly insists on the same either/or which Herder's use of analogy points beyond; insisting on "genuine truth, history and firm dates" in our quest for evidence of God ignores the fact that knowing ourselves and even being able to ask such questions about our history, depends upon prior "instruction by the divine."²⁷ Revelation comes in many forms, and while Herder often dismissed extravagant accounts of miracles as unimportant to faith (the apparent exceptions in his mind being Christ's healings, resurrection and the Pentecost), he never claimed that changing one's understanding of

²⁶ See Damon Linker, "Culture, Community and Counter-Enlightenment in the Thought of J.G. Herder," paper presented at the 1999 American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Atlanta, GA [copy in possession of author], 28-29.

²⁷ *Über die ersten Urkunden des Menschlichen Geschlechts*, in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, Band 5, Rudolf Smend, ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993), hereafter "*Über die ersten Urkunden*," 17 / Menze and Palma, 1997, 86.

the way in which a miraculous event took place meant doubting God's involvement in the first place.²⁸ It may well be that Moses presented "his tables for the handwriting of Jehovah . . .

impressed with the glories of a Divine original." But immediately after writing this, Herder adds:

Such is the answer which I would give to the supposition that Moses's laws were not really, but only professedly, of divine origin. But why need we make this supposition? What greater work has Providence to accomplish among humankind, than to form and promulgate law and order, light and truth, among the nations? . . . And according to the conception of all nations, is there a nobler work of God in the souls of humankind than the divine thoughts, impulses, aims and energies, which he sometimes imparts to one chosen individual for the cultivation of thousands of others? . . . Who will determine when in the soul of such a man, learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, inspired and enlivened by the God of his fathers . . . his finger and the finger of God met together?²⁹

In short, whatever actually happened to Moses on the Mt. Sinai, what resulted was a revelation, and hence a truth which gave expression to the Hebrew nation and religion, a national-religion which revealed and moved a particular people towards divine principles of *Humanität*. It was a cultural expression which the Jews--and all who came after them--could believe in, and hold to. But what were they believing in--the fact of revelation, or its content? Both, though the former came first. Recognizing oneself as part of a specific national religious community gives one a sense of purpose, but such recognition is ongoing. As Vicki Spencer wrote, the purpose or "destiny" which he described in this process was an "open teleology," in that "no definitive blueprint exists for the quest of this [religious] *telos* because it is a condition of its own realization that each individual and *Volk* modify its own powers and goals to suit its

²⁸ See Marcia Bunge, "Introduction," in *Against Pure Reason: Writings on Religion, Language and History*, Bunge, ed. and trans. (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993), 32; Clark, *Herder*, 181-182, 388-389; *Vom Erlöser der Menschen*, in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, Band 9/1, Christopher Bultmann and Thomas Zippert, eds. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994), hereafter "*Vom Erlöser*," 708-711.

²⁹ *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie*, in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, Band 5, 1096-1097 / *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, James Marsh, trans. (Burlington: Edward Smith, 1833) 2:134-136.

own time, environment and internal disposition. . . . Herder's notion of *Humanität* is thus a regulative ideal which provides a minimal moral framework for any human being to live by, but requires specific historical content to become a fully developed morality."³⁰ *Humanität's* natural laws are not necessarily full of normative doctrinal content, but they do reveal a normative *context*, one which grounds the diverse individual and national realizations of such doctrines.

What makes up this framework? Most prominently, the principle of *Billigkeit*, or equal treatment.³¹ By posting God's presence in the powers by which we subjectively work out our own national and religious presence, but by not presuming to limit the articulation of that divine presence to any set of races or eras or cultures or environments, Herder believed we *oblige* ourselves to feel out the meaning of every people and nation; only after doing so, even as one community brings its message to bear, can there be analysis and engagement with love and authenticity. Herder's turn to the Golden Rule in the midst of a discussion of truth, revelation, nation and religion may seem banal, but it has a few key ramifications. It means that colonialism and slavery and war, practices which Herder repeatedly condemned,³² were not just crimes against other individuals and violations of Christian teachings, but also perversions of the very structure of human being itself. The laws of organic expression demand a certain reciprocity and equity between nations and individuals; not a toleration of evil, but a willingness to feel out the other, and as necessary, to treat them as one would treat oneself or one's own community.

³⁰ Vicki Spencer, "Beyond Either/Or: The Pluralist Alternative in Herder's Thought," *Herder Jahrbuch* 1998, Hans Adler, Wulf Köpke and Samson Kroll, eds. (Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 1998), 65-66.

³¹ *Ideen zur Philosophie*, 159 / Menze and Palma, 1997, 144-145; see F.M. Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought: From Enlightenment to Nationalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 97-98.

³² *Auch eine Philosophie*, 74 / Forster, 328; see also *Ideen zur Philosophie*, 462 / Menze and Palma, 1997, 248; *Brief zu Beförderung*, 672-673; Kroll, "Herder's Concept of *Humanität*", 14-15.

Abolitionism, pacifism, and an end to imperialism, are necessary if every national community is going to be able to religiously express itself, and thus aid the realization of humanity which is the destiny of diverse nations in the first place. Such aid could perhaps involve action to support or repair old or oppressed cultural forms, but, as far as Herder was concerned, it ought never go so far as to involve any sort of universal government. Suspicious as always of the power of sovereignty, Herder felt that an additional layer of social and bureaucratic uniformity would only deepen national animosities further.³³ Rather, what is to be hoped for is cooperation (*Zusammenwirken*), a kind of decentralized communion wherein one may say that “love of our own nation should not prevent us from recognizing the good [of other nations] everywhere.”³⁴

Zusammenwirken and *Billigkeit* constituted the ethical framework that the hope for and potential of *Humanität* make incumbent upon on human beings, a framework which we bind ourselves to and build upon whenever we reflect upon and speak about that religion, whatever it may be, which grounds our traditions and orients our aspirations. This is the point which Berlin and other students of Herder’s “pluralism” miss--that what varies is the content and the construction of culture, not the sacred conception of it all. As Herder wrote near the very end of his *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* [*Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*], “the tendency of human nature is to embrace in itself a whole universe . . . an infinite diversity, striving for that unity which lies in all things and which urges all things forward.”³⁵ This is the open teleology at work in the organic whole of God’s creation, culturally recognized though that

³³ *Brief zu Beförderung*, 134.

³⁴ *Brief zu Beförderung*, 574; see also Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 106-107.

³⁵ *Brief zu Beförderung*, 750.

creation may be; through it, nations could understand, articulate and constitute themselves as embodiments of that spiritual, immanent community which Herder was convinced our very way of being and communicating in this world promises us. To a degree, one must wonder if this is a “teleology” at all; one might instead see it as more phenomenological, with the metaphysical *Kräfte* which human beings bring to bear in their communities through the appropriation of that which is given them imbuing their nations with a kind of immanent *intentionality*. For Herder, the force at the revelatory heart of any people’s language and community was one whose form would surely evolve as they developed--but that did not make the revelation itself any less binding on their orientation towards, and sense of, national religious identity.

5

Whether or not one finds any of this believable or useful in terms of either making sense of Taylor’s original claims or simply in regards to rethinking the matter of religious particularism and religious pluralism in general depends largely upon whether or not one accepts Herder’s philosophical account of human identity and its relationship to larger forces in nature and history. However, leaving aside that debate, there remains one important issue that Herder’s *Humanität* must respond to on its own terms. It has become commonly accepted amongst many scholars that civil society often depends upon deeper religious or at least moral presumptions; this is the argument for “civil religion,” and it is made today by numerous communitarians (include Charles Taylor himself) and republican thinkers, echoing observations which go back to Tocqueville, Adams, Hutcheson, Rousseau, Machiavelli, and eventually all the way back to the Greek and Roman tradition. Supposedly, a weakening of that civil religion makes it difficult for civil society to continue to be even understood in the same way. The same could hold for Herder’s definition

of humanity. Herder presented *Zusammenwirken* and *Billigkeit* in light of Christian presumptions, and *Humanität* itself clearly echoes Christian principles. What then will become of it as a tool for understanding and encouraging religious and national convergence, when Christian nations immerse themselves in relationships with other national religions and seek to immanently work out these complementary understandings? If the truth we have really *is* present even in all national religions and languages, might we then we lose it, and thus all perspective, if we attempt to feel into and appreciate other cultures? By focusing on the broader context of religious articulation in such an open way, do we risk losing some prior necessary humane content, or transforming it into something that will undermine its own premises, at the same time we “develop” it? The sorts of immersions Taylor discussed, the national religions which Herder thought were crucial steps along a *Volk*’s path towards *Humanität*—they both seem to assume some stability or background in communities or tradition, out from which all this opening up emerges. Could such openings turn back and harm those sources of stability themselves?

Herder said no, but it is a no which much be qualified and carefully articulated. For example, Herder did not think that acknowledging the revelatory claims of truth in any specific cultural expression would prevent a critical and assessment of such expressions. He believed that his own Protestant Lutheran faith revealed a natural principle both necessary and good for the continued development of humankind, and he thought that Luther’s achievement, his whole national expression of Protestant Christianity, served the roots of the Biblical revelation particularly well. But while Herder strongly defended his faith, he never denied that God’s work with Christianity was still ongoing. “I do not consider the prophecies of the Old Testament to be yet completed or fulfilled,” he wrote; “the ultimate development of this people, of our religion,

and of all peoples on earth, must . . . be granted the ultimate consummation.”³⁶

That said, it is difficult to imagine what Herder’s response would be to wholly diverse religious worldviews, and their accompanying languages, pressing themselves upon Christian lands of Europe. He did feel capable of making distinctions between different varieties of non-Christian belief in the same way he addressed his own belief system, and those distinctions constitute a primary argument against seeing Herder’s pluralism as a reflex which, when pressed, ultimately collapses into relativism. But practically speaking, Herder admittedly was not able to see what communities outside the Judeo-Christian tradition could offer, since so much of what they seemed to express ran counter to how he realized human national religions needed to develop; the most he could say was that, while the nations of Asia were surely partners in humanity’s destiny “to approach . . . a point of perfection which it yet does not know and . . . can never truly touch,” they were not contributing much: “you Chinese and Japanese, you lamas and brahmins, are traveling . . . in a rather quiet corner of the vessel.”³⁷ And when he did engage and assess aspects of non-Western religions so as to identify moral advancements, the results often seemed limited in their *Einführung*--for instance, when he praised aspects of Hindu thought where God is conceived as beyond specific images in contrast to those “lazy” traditions of “idolatry” where God is seen as inhabiting particular persons, places or things.³⁸

³⁶ *Brief, das Studium der Theologie betreffend*, in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, Band 9/1, hereafter “*Brief, das Studium*,” 316.

³⁷ *Ideen zur Philosophie*, 463-464 / Menze and Palma, 1997, 249.

³⁸ Marcia Bunge, “Human Language of the Divine: Herder on Ways of Speaking about God,” in *Herder Today*, Kurt Müller-Vollmer, ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 312, citing Herder’s *Fragment einer Abhandlung über die Mythologie, besonders über die Indische*, in Ulrich Faust, *Mythologien und Religionen des Ostens bei Johann Gottfried Herder* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1977).

Herder's views of Judaism, by contrast, were far more sensitive. While there are comments in Herder's writings which may be thought antisemitic, there are many more which assert his belief in the continued integrity of the Hebraic covenant and the importance of the Jews to God's ultimate purpose, very much in line with the best applications of his own stated convictions about the analogically and culturally articulated religious truth claims which characterize *Humanität*.³⁹ But perhaps this was to be expected, as Herder held the revelatory language of Jews and Christians to be essentially identical: "The foundation of theology is the Bible, and the foundation of the New Testament is the Old . . . [while] Christendom proceeded from Judaism, the genius of the language is in both books the same."⁴⁰ Some have argued that Herder regarded Jewish practice and belief as an "alien presence in Germany," but Ernest Menze has shown this interpretation to be dependent upon a mistranslation; while the connection of the language and faith of Judaism to the land of Israel was surely sufficient to mark Jews as "different and distinct from all the peoples" of Europe, this hardly meant that Herder "despised" them, or thought that anyone should.⁴¹ Nonetheless, the Jewish worldview is not the same as the Christian one, and Herder did regard it as the lesser of the two, because he saw the message of the Bible as one of spiritual renovation--a renovation which takes place only as individuals develop in their own families, communities and nations, and that meant there needs be a

³⁹ *Älteste Urkunde des Menschengeschlechts*, in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, Band 5, 641. See also *Vom Geist*, 892-894 / Marsh, 1:234-237; *Brief, das Studium*, 252-253; and Ernest A. Menze, "Herder and the 'Jewish Nation'--Continuity and Supersession," in *Nationen und Kulturen*, 471-486.

⁴⁰ *Vom Geist*, 669 / Marsh, 1:22.

⁴¹ See Ernest A. Menze, "Herder's 'German Kind of Humanity' and the Jewish Question: Historical Context and Contemporary Criticism," in *Johann Gottfried Herder: Geschichte und Kultur*, Martin Bollacher, ed. (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1994), 221-222 and passim.

spiritual, rather than a worldly, Messiah.⁴² “Who will be right?” he wrote, discussing the differences between Judaism and Christianity. “Let the end result show it. Who is right *at this moment*? It seems to me, the Christians, for their Old Testament does not end without fulfillment.”⁴³ Herder, who was not only a good Protestant but one with much sympathy for pietist conventicles, was convinced that any religious articulation which did not move towards opportunities for greater personal familiarity and collective attachment, towards the unity of fellow-feeling and spiritual devotion, was hampered in its development of those qualities which characterized *Humanität*. Herder’s insistence that “every German . . . must write, even if unwillingly, in an evangelical, Protestant, Lutheran way,” suggests that in his view the Protestant German and Jewish nations as then constituted were wholly distinct communities of language and belief, and thus could never truly merge.⁴⁴ But he never called for separation or assimilation: the spirit of the Hebrew nation was too central to the German identity to warrant such actions.⁴⁵ (Indeed, Herder once described Luther’s work as a “Germanization” of the divine sensibility of the Jews.⁴⁶) He did acknowledge that the further development of Judaism might involve the construction of a Jewish homeland, but also wrote that, since the Jewish people over the centuries had grown beyond the bounds of their original cultural space, they should be helped to

⁴² *Vom Erlöser*, 700.

⁴³ *Brief, das Studium*, 317.

⁴⁴ *Über National-Religionen*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Bernard Suphan, ed. (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967), 24:48 / *Against Pure Reason*, hereafter “Bunge,” 105.

⁴⁵ See Jonathan M. Hess, “Memory, History, and the Jewish Question: Universal Citizenship and the Colonization of Jewish Memory,” in Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, eds., *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), pp. 39-61.

⁴⁶ *Vom Geist des Christentums*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, 20:99.

contribute to the “collective culture of humanity” by making a “Palestine,” a flourishing Jewish nation, in whatever space they inhabit, including Germany.⁴⁷

Kant’s treatment of Judaism is an interesting counterpoint here. Kant, like Herder, rejected the easy secularism of certain Enlightenment figure; he no more avoided the question of religious belonging when talking about differences between peoples than his student did. However, having made his critical turn and rejected the organic and anthropological analogies which Herder in many ways took from his teacher’s own earliest writings, which make possible the sort of immanent religious vision Herder affirmed in the midst of cultural difference, Kant’s hoped-for cosmopolitan world of enlightened, federated nations was instead characterized by an “ethical state of nature” in which a reformed religion would play a “suprapolitical role,” supported by an idealized “Church Triumphant” that he clearly identifies with a rationalized Christianity.⁴⁸ This purely regulative, as opposed to constitutive, religious idea was perfectly tolerant on a personal level; still, it was Kant’s conclusion that the Jews ought to convert to Christianity, going so far as to call for the “euthanasia of Judaism.”⁴⁹ This is not because he thought Judaism a barbaric religion, but simply because it was a distinct religious body, and Kant’s critical philosophy could not accommodate granting any normative status to any affective expression that was not, ultimately, part of a single ethical whole. The constitutive possibilities of Judaism, however valuable, simply were not part of Kant’s calculus. Whereas Herder, despite

⁴⁷ *Bekehrung der Juden*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, 24:74-75; *Ideen zur Philosophie*, 491-492 / Menze and Palma, 1997, 263, 328 n8.

⁴⁸ Mark Lilla, “Kant’s Theological-Political Revolution,” *Review of Metaphysics* 52, pp. 425-431.

⁴⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, Mary J. Gregor, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 53.

his willingness to judge Judaism as wanting, nonetheless insisted that its place in the ongoing realization of *Humanität* was far from clear even to a Lutheran minister such as himself.⁵⁰ Which suggests that Herder's response to difference (and perhaps Taylor's to) is not necessarily in any practical way significantly less liberal than Kant's cosmopolitanism. Indeed, perhaps this vision of subjectivity is even *more* liberal; Herder, after all, is concerned with acknowledging and contributing to the religious and national homes that people realize for themselves, whereas the hospitality afforded by Kant famously never extends beyond that of a minimal "right of resort"—we cannot rightly look to be one another's "guests" under Kant's regulation of difference, since we are all, after all, "strangers," motivated by inward conviction rather than immersively realized connections.⁵¹

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This leaves me with one final point to make: just as Herder did not imagine the practices of *Billigkeit* and *Zusammenwirken* he urged the nations and religious of the work to discover through their engagement with their own and each others' traditions would or should ever be instantiated into a governing order, neither did he feel that the religious context of *Humanität*, with all the liberal and humane possibilities which adhered to its ongoing articulation, would or should ever become a regulative, global ideal. Which, inevitably, means that Herder's response to the problems of religious pluralism and religious particularism is somewhat limited, or at least not assured, especially in a globalized world where the rapid movements of people and ideas

⁵⁰ *Brief, das studium*, 253-262, 316.

⁵¹ Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, H.B. Nisbet, trans., Hans Reiss, ed., 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 105-106.

potentially outstrip and overwhelm the capacities of communities re-articulate their own natural and historical situation, and thus their own national identity. Still, to take Herder's religious vision as a prescription of how to address the (admittedly necessary) task of managing such conflicts as will invariably arise as this open, teleological process slowly continues misunderstands it profoundly. Absent this consideration, Herder's conception of a single German *Volk*, nationally united through the continued expression of a Lutheranism which transcends all other social and state divisions, may sound like a weak attempt to passively elide the complicated political reality that some of those divisions marked significant distinctions in the religious expression of the German people themselves. The scars of the Thirty Years War were still visible in late eighteenth-century Germany; the balance between Protestant and Catholic states was a perennial concern, and Herder was not ignorant of this dynamic. But he anticipated the day when "the Catholic provinces of Germany move closer to the Protestant ones, and all Germans recognize one another as brothers, as parts of one nation and language, and work communally towards a single good!" He did not expect said provinces to ever become "identical," only united, converged, in their own articulations (though, obviously, centered around a more or less Lutheran articulation.)⁵² He approached the problem this way, without much attention paid to hard political expediencies and exceptions, because his organic ontological premises rejected the idea that the expression of nations and religions could solely and permanently serve as a tools for social boundaries or state agendas. Either it would atrophy, or it would find its own way towards greater national fulfillment; and it was that sort of revelatory fulfillment on which Herder focused.

Herder saw his own brand of "genuine Protestant, Lutheran belief" as an enormous step

⁵² *Briefe an Theophron*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, 11:204 / Bunge, 263.

towards the realization of a truly national religious expression: “I continue to believe,” he wrote, “that *anyone* who lays pure sentiments, the power of the mind and heart, on the altar of country continues the work of Luther and contributes to national religion in the surest sense of the word--that is, *conscientiousness and conviction*.”⁵³ Of course, Lutheranism was more than just a simple “conscientiousness and conviction”; Herder’s Lutheran theology was both deep and complex. His point, rather, was only that building upon the immanent *Kraft* which makes itself known through the *Volk* involves first and foremost a level of interaction which the routine, automatic identification of religion with any one specific incarnation would only hamper. The nation, in this sense, was more profound and encompassing than any single state--or any single church for that matter. “Our God,” Herder exclaimed, “is the father of all humankind, not of *one* people, a God of Christians, not of *one* Christian religion!”⁵⁴ Herder’s negative view of Roman Catholicism arose not so much from his appraisal of Catholic doctrine but from its form: one hierarchical church, with a single Latin rite which claimed a kind of “sovereignty” over all national, cultural and linguistic differences. Such an organization, Herder perhaps too quickly assumed, could never involve its members in a communal or familial way. He called it “state Christianity,” and (recalling his distinction between community and society) suggested that any “exclusive church” would invariably be corrupt; ignoring the later Luther’s actual tendency to rely heavily upon local princes to defend the *Landeskirchen*, Herder asserted that what set Luther apart from other

⁵³ *Über National-Religionen*, 24:48 / Bunge, 105.

⁵⁴ *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur: Fragmente (Zweite Sammlung, 1767)*, in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, Band 1, Ulrich Gaijer, ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), hereafter “*Über die neuere*,” 281 / *Selected Early Works, 1764-1767: Addresses, Essays and Drafts*, Ernest A. Menze and Karl Menges, eds., Menze and Michael Palma, trans. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), hereafter “Menze and Palma, 1992,” 178.

reformers was that he did not settle for a “national church,” as Henry VIII did in England, but rather gave “a pure, free Christian religion . . . to the German people.”⁵⁵ (One suspects that Herder would have approved of the “Protestantization” of Judaism and Catholicism which took place in the nineteenth-century.) So while Herder was suspicious of mere “enthusiasm” and insisted that languages co-existed with substantive religious understandings, he never felt such understandings could be captured by the dogmas of sovereign, state-like churches. What was needed was a way of interactively fleshing out a nation’s immanent *Denkart*, of “preaching the poetic community,” as one writer put it, as a sort of Judeo-Christian “gospel of *Bildung*.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *Über National-Religionen*, 24:46, 47-48 / Bunge, 103-104, 105; see also *Briefe an Theophron*, 11:202-203 / Bunge, 262, and Clark, *Herder*, 181-182.

⁵⁶ Josef Chytrý, *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 47, 51-52.