Jurgen Habermas, who receives the Ulysses Medal from University College Dublin next week, is Germany's foremost philosopher and critical theorist. His lifelong work on language, communicative reason and discourse in the public sphere, along with their central importance for democracy, makes him one of the world's leading public intellectuals. Aged 80, he continues to publish prolifically. Recent work deals with religion and pluralism in modern life, contrasting knowledge and methods in the natural and social sciences, the ethics of media communication and how international law can legitimate a "global domestic politics".

He supports deeper European integration so that democracy is developed regionally beyond - but in harness with - legitimate nation-states. This approach could be a model for a transformed cosmopolitan world order through the United Nations. A social democrat, he is a sharp critic of technocratic regulation and neo-liberal ways of governing. But since the end of the Cold War he says it has "become impossible to break out of the universe of capitalism, which must be civilised and tamed from within".

And since "moral discourse allows all those concerned and affected an equal say and expects each participant to adopt the perspectives of the others when deliberating what is in the equal interest of all", media can be a democratic enabler. He traces these preoccupations with communication back to his childhood surgery for a cleft palate. Despite current setbacks he remains optimistic that his values can be realised with sufficient political will.

Habermas, emeritus professor at the University of Frankfurt, is being honoured by UCD on Wednesday next, Bloomsday. He will hold a seminar in the school of philosophy and deliver a public lecture on "The Political: The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology" at 6pm on Tuesday in the Clinton Auditorium. This written interview between he and I was conducted last month.

Paul Gillespie: You are being presented with a Ulysses medal in University College Dublin and have a long-standing interest in James Joyce's work. What attracts you to it and what do you think it has to tell us about today's world?

Jurgen Habermas: You must not expect any special expertise on my part in this area. I am simply one of the countless admirers of one of the most outstanding works of literature of the twentieth century. For me, Joyce, the itinerant European author, combines things in Ulysses that are otherwise seldom encountered together. He combines the artifice of a highly self-

reflective, aesthetically uncompromising modern novel whose allusions are almost indecipherable with an unmistakable, though by no means uncritical, attachment to the all-pervasive ethos of his Irish native country. The novel is a declaration of love to the streets and pubs of Dublin and to the rich tradition and spirit of the country. It could be that this mixture is gaining a new resonance in times of "glocalisation", that is especially in places where the local is entering into strange combinations with the global.

PG: In your recent writings you argue that western societies are living in a post-secular age because of the revival of religious sentiment. What do you mean by this term?

JH: Ireland and Poland long remained the exception to the rapid advance of secularisation among the European countries. But that seems to be changing, at least if one can believe the most recent statistics. Presumably these two countries will also follow the example of Spain which, in the wake of [the dictator Francisco] Franco's death [in 1975], was immediately gripped by a secularising trend.

PG: I actually used the expression "post-secular" to describe a shift in public consciousness in such predominantly secular countries as Canada, Australia, New Zealand or western Europe. Here the resurgence of religion that we are observing in other global regions has unsettled a dominant but unspoken presumption. In these countries it is no longer a cultural commonplace that religion is outdated, that it is destined to disappear with the advance of modernisation. All are now coming to the realisation that religious communities are destined to remain with us, even as the surrounding environment becomes increasingly secular.

JH: I associate this sociological observation with a diagnosis of a more philosophical kind. Secularly minded people should recognise religion as a contemporary intellectual formation. Over the past two millennia, western philosophy has repeatedly borrowed images, meanings and concepts from the Judaeo-Christian tradition and has translated them into its own secular language. We cannot tell whether this process of appropriation has run its course or whether, on the contrary, other semantic potentials remain untapped. Of course, such a receptive and dialogical relation is only possible towards non-fundamentalist traditions that do not close themselves off from the modern world.

PG: How is your case affected by the current crisis in the Catholic Church - notably in Ireland and Germany - over child sex abuse?

JH: My positive views on the public role of religion have nothing to do with the recent discussion prompted by the child sex abuse scandals in the Catholic Church. These scandals are an indication that the Catholic Church has neglected to draw one long overdue conclusion from the Second Vatican Council. It shows that it has failed to reconcile itself sufficiently with the secularisation of state power when it conducts itself like a state within a state, even within our liberal societies, and when it is more concerned with its own reputation than with the suffering of the victims of abuse. This insensitivity cries out to heaven.

PG: Political communication and a deliberative public sphere are at the centre of your philosophical reasoning. What role does this imply for quality media?

JH: It is easier to detect the mote in the eye of the other than the beam in one's own. This is why the destruction of political communication in the United States in particular - a case in point being the ideological indoctrination of the population during the debates over [President Barack] Obama's health care reform - is more apparent to us Europeans. But the breakdown of public discourse is also progressing quite rapidly in our own countries. The major national newspapers, which played a decisive role in forming political opinion over the past century-and-a-half, have come under economic pressure and have yet to find a business model that would ensure their survival on the internet.

PG: Is there a case for public subsidy schemes to protect them from the effects of market rationalisations?

JH: In contrast to commercial television, the programming of the public broadcasting companies has not yet completely lost sight of the fact that its audience is not only composed of consumers but also of citizens. They are even bound by law to offer their audience not just entertainment but also information, education, and cultural programmes, and thus to provide solid underpinnings for the formation of independent political opinions. On the other hand, this BBC - or, in Germany, ARD and ZDF - model is not easy to apply to newspapers, which have to secure their independence in the private sector. But we should all wake up to the fact that the disappearance of an argumentative press represents an extremely acute danger for democracy. There are isolated experiments that seek to combine public subventions for the leading press with guarantees of their ongoing editorial independence. We should put such experiments on a broader footing before theNew York Timesor Le MondeorEl Paisor the Frankfurter Allgemeineare rationalised out of existence or go bankrupt.

PG: Has the euro-zone crisis over Greece crystallised an historic shift in Germany's relationship with the EU?

JH: Over the past four weeks Angela Merkel has squandered much of the capital of trust accumulated by her predecessors over four decades. Jean-Claude Juncker gave an apt description of the stress test when, with an eye to Angela Merkel's cool interest calculation, he missed a willingness "to take domestic political risks for Europe".

PG: Does this indicate a generational change toward political players who pay lip service to ideas of European solidarity but, in the final analysis, will put German interests first in a way a Kohl or Gentscher would never have done? Or might they be forced to rescue the euro-zone system precisely to protect those interests?

JH: I'm afraid that the former is true but at the same time I hope that the latter is not false. But let me address your questions in turn. After Helmut Kohl, our political elites underwent a sweeping change in mentalities. With the exception of a too-quickly exhausted Joschka Fisher, since Gerhard Schroder took office a normatively unambitious generation has been in power. It seems to enjoy Germany's return of Germany to normality as a nation-state - and just wants be "like the others". Conscious of the diminishing room for political manoeuvre, these people shy away from farsighted goals and constructive political projects, let alone an undertaking like European unification. I detect a certain indifference towards this project. On the other hand, the politicians can no longer deceive themselves concerning the fact that the Federal Republic is the greatest beneficiary of the single currency. Self-interest dictates that they support the preservation of the euro zone.

However, that can only be accomplished if the euro countries build up a common economic government and co-ordinate their fiscal policies. There are extreme economic imbalances among the countries in the euro zone; this is why, at the time the euro was introduced, the medium-term goal was to harmonise the levels of development of those rather heterogeneous national economies. Now it turns out that the stability pact is much too rigid an instrument for achieving this goal. As a result, we now face the alternative of either co-operating more closely or of doing away with the single currency. The pivotal political question from a German perspective is whether the Federal Republic is ready to change its European policy before it is too late, and then whether it is also able to co-operate with France in leading the other EU countries in that direction.

PG: The economic crisis puts public discussion of European integration at the centre of political debate. Can this politicisation of mass public awareness contribute to a deeper political union of the EU?

JH: In every country the tabloid press is eager to exploit any opportunity to foment nationalistic and xenophobic prejudices. In Germany, the Greek crisis provoked the Bildzeitungto such excesses, and the politicians allowed themselves to be carried away by this climate of opinion. Especially in times of crisis, reasonable proposals can gain the upper hand only if the national press keeps a clear head, together with the government and the major political parties. It should not let itself be taken in by populist slogans and it must maintain a halfway deliberative climate in the country. In the final analysis, it is the responsibility of the political parties to ensure that the population does not succumb to its fear reflexes and that it makes decisions only after reflecting on its own long-term interests. But past experiences leave me sceptical. To date there has not been a single European election or referendum in any country that wasn't ultimately about national issues and tickets.

PG: Is it realistic to foresee the emergence of a more unified European foreign policy? What would that mean for transatlantic relations under President Obama?

JH: The symbolic power of a common European foreign policy would certainly tend to promote cross-border awareness of a shared destiny among the member states of the European Union. In any event, if the countries of the euro zone opted for closer co-operation in the fields of fiscal and economic policy, a convergence in other policy fields would have to follow. And as regards transatlantic relations, under such conditions the shared interests - in such matters as abandoning unilateralism, an effective global regulation of the financial markets, climate policy goals, and a peace agreement in the Middle East - would become more effective than ever.

Jurgen Habermas responded in German to the questions. The replies were translated into English by Dr Ciaran Cronin.