Religion in the Public Sphere: The Limits of Habermas's Proposal and the Discourse of "World Religions"

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Abstract

Since 2001, Jürgen Habermas has turned increasingly toward questions on the role of religion in the public sphere. Modifying his earlier position, Habermas now argues for the equal inclusion of religious voices in the political public sphere and urges for the recognition among secular citizens that we are living in a "post-secular" world that must become adjusted to the continued existence of religious communities. Such a process requires that secular citizens undergo a "cognitive dissonance" when confronting religious claims and attempt a "translation program" to discover the profane truth content contained within. While there is much to commend this position, I argue that Habermas's model is unnecessarily constrained by his narrow understanding of "religion" as a normative category, and that he privileges a Euro-hegemonic conception of "world religions" while circumscribing the parameters for how discourse on religion—both in philosophy and in the public sphere—ought to proceed.

In a recent essay, Jürgen Habermas proposes a more inclusive approach to the role of religion in the public sphere than he was previously willing to permit.[1] Pointing to such phenomena as the fall of the Soviet Union and the attacks of September 11, 2001, he asserts that religion has gained a "hitherto unexpected political

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[1]Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14 (2006), 1.

importance," thus warranting a renewed consideration.[2] Maeve Cooke observes this nuance in Habermas's thinking, noting that since 2001 the tone of his writing on the importance of religion has been less cautious than in the past, calling for the inclusion of religious language in public debate.[3] Habermas's renewed consideration is not without precedent, however, and can be detected in embryo in some of his earlier writings. In his 1992 essay "Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking," for example, Habermas admits a certain indispensable relationship between religion and philosophy, where the former continues to inspire the latter through the force of its semantic content, thus maintaining what he calls a "curious dependence" between the two.[4] It is not until his 2006 essay "Religion in the Public Sphere," however, that he makes the transition from recognizing the existence and value of this dependence to granting religious actors reciprocal rights in the realm of public discourse. While ultimately denying religious voices a place in the legislature, Habermas's move raises some important questions about the limits of communicative rationality and the problem of toleration more generally. On the one hand, it pushes the boundaries of public discourse by challenging secular citizens to grapple with the "profane truth content" of religious statements while, on the other hand, urging non-religious citizens to embrace the realities of a "post-secular" world that must learn to accommodate the continued existence of religion as a force in public life. Habermas's move thus places a shared burden on religious and secular persons alike, and proposes a framework where religious voices can contribute to political decision making without becoming overtly politicized in the process. Furthermore, it suggests a renewed understanding of the nature of the social contract which, by mutual consensus, citizens (ideally) agree to enshrine in a secular constitution. In this way, an egalitarian foundation for political public discourse is more equally distributed and, what is more, a higher standard is set

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2 For an earlier statement on these themes, see Jürgen Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," in *The Future of Human Nature,* trans. Hella Beister and Max Pensky (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

3 Maeve Cooke, "Salvaging and Secularizing the Semantic Contents of Religion: The Semantic Contents of Religion: The Limitations of Habermas's Postmetaphysical Proposal," *International Journal of Philosophy* 60 (2006): 189.

4 Jürgen Habermas, *Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays,* trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 51.

for critical self-reflection, one that requires all participants to undergo a form of "cognitive dissonance" so that they might internalize the position of the "other." In short, Habermas's proposal advocates a pragmatic program for including religious voices in the political public sphere in order to facilitate rational communication.

While the nature and corresponding models of deliberation of the political public sphere are by no means a settled boundary (nor, for that matter, is the question of how cognitive dissonance might be applied in public debate), Habermas does not seem concerned with the logistics of a positive model, but rather with the normative, and thus theoretical, question of how and on what grounds we ought to ideally proceed. [5] In contrast to what he sees as an authoritarian and dogmatic Marxist model, as espoused by Lukács, or the impotent political quietism of Adorno's negative dialectics,[6] Habermas endorses a radical social democratic vision of the public sphere, where members of a self-determining citizenry "present normative dialogue as a conversation of justification taking place under the constraints of an 'ideal speech situation,'" and where the conditions of universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity are taken for granted.[7] Problems with this model notwithstanding, his conception of an idealized public sphere does pose some interesting questions for debates on inclusion, deliberation, and the reduction of antagonistic tendencies in modern liberal states, not least of which are those that arise between religious and secular citizens. For one thing, Habermas's theory of modernity establishes the terms by which subjects in modern societies are able to undergo a "learning process" whereby actions can be coordinated and consensus facilitated under a pragmatic and "post-conventional" conception of the meaning of moral utterances.[8] Habermas's

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5 For a selection of critical essays on Habermas's model of the public sphere, see Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press, 1992).

6 See, for example, Andrew Edgar's chapter on the public sphere in his book *The Philosophy of Habermas* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2008), 27-55.

7 See Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition and Jürgen Habermas," in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 105.

8 For a clear elaboration of Habermas's theory of modernity and discourse ethics, see James Gordon Finlayson, *Habermas: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 62-105.

prescriptions run into problems, however, when we consider his understanding of "religion" as a normative category, and how the limits he sets forth for dialogue serve to privilege a narrow discourse at the expense of other, more critical interpretations. On this point, we may rightly ask whether Habermas's conception of religion and valuation of its role in public discourse could be used in the service of a hegemonic political agenda (i.e., one that is Eurocentric), and whether the boundaries that he sets for secular citizens to engage the religious are unnecessarily constrained. Though I will elaborate further on the logistics of Habermas's theory, it is with these last two points that I am chiefly concerned.

At the outset of his 2003 essay "Intolerance and Discrimination," Habermas grants a certain pride of place to the early struggles for religious toleration—from the *Edict of Nantes* in France (1598), and the *Act Concerning Religion* in Maryland (1649), to the *Toleration Act* of 1689 in England—as templates for all other constitutional rights within a liberal democratic framework and as harbingers of modernity.[9] Just as early debates on tolerance required a "learning process" through deliberation, so too does democratic will formation involve the act of "mutual perspective taking" in order that democratic power becomes generalized and institutionalized within the state. Moreover, this goal of mutual recognition of another's right to believe differently than oneself requires a cognitive adaptation to competing worldviews and a process of recognition and legitimation by all parties of the moral content of a mutually agreed upon democratic and secular constitution. Noting that the U.S. *Bill of Rights* of 1776 "was the political pacemaker en route to establishing a freedom of religion that rested on the reciprocal respect of the religious freedom of others," Habermas demonstrates a strong concern with what he sees as an authoritarian religious "revivalism" in both the Muslim world and in the United States in particular.[10] He argues for a more expansive view of John Rawls's notion of the "public use of reason," urging that a "uniting bond" of civic solidarity be established

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9 Habermas, "Intolerance and Discrimination," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 1, 1 (2003): 22.

10 Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," 3. For a critique of Habermas's notion of a post-secular constellation see Hans Joas, "Post-Secular Religion: On Jürgen Habermas," in *Do We Need Religion: On the Experience of Self-Transcendence* (Boulder, Col: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), 105-111.

through a reciprocal cognitive adaptation among secular citizens—an adaptation, he stresses, that should be "distinguished from the political virtue of mere tolerance."[11] Accordingly, secular citizens need to develop what he calls a "self-reflective transcending of a secularist self-understanding of Modernity," and a recognition that they live in a post-secular society that must become "epistemically adjusted" to the continued existence of religious communities.[12] This turn away from Rawls's notion of the "public use of reason" seeks to reconcile itself to the reality of a post-secular world and to come to terms with the fact that religious claims constitute "a reasonably expected disagreement" in the political public sphere.

In her critique of this argument, Maeve Cooke notes how Habermas distinguishes between a "critical engagement" with the cognitive substance of religious statements from a "critical assessment" of a statement's validity. In this way, he seeks to retain post-metaphysical thinking within the purview of social philosophy, while recognizing the continued dependence between secular and religious identities and the potential for semantic renewal.[13] While ultimately lauding Habermas's ideas, Cooke finds some problems with the narrowness of his approach. For one thing, she notes, Habermas fails to distinguish between beliefs that are epistemologically authoritarian from those that are not. The problem with the former is that they make claims to truth without mediation through language (and thus inclusion and deliberation), and disregard history and context in their argumentation. More importantly, the presumed certainty of religious experience that the authoritarian holds precludes any kind of critical assessment.[14] While she is largely in agreement with Habermas's suggestion that the psychological burden of cognitive dissonance be distributed equally between secular and religious citizens alike, Cooke rightly points out his failure to fully consider how requiring public contributions to the process of legislation through a "post-metaphysical vocabulary" might impair the political participation of religious believers. In this way, non-authoritarian religious voices could be barred from the decision-making process unnecessarily. As

11 Habermas, "Religion," 15.
12 Ibid., 15.
13 Cooke, "Salvaging and Secularizing," 195.
14 Ibid., 199.

she writes:

> Jettisoning the elitist, absolutist, and a-historical elements of traditional modes of metaphysical thinking, we can endeavor to develop non-authoritarian modes; metaphysical thinking of this kind acknowledges that its guiding assumptions are mediated by language, history, and context and understands them not as indisputable claims about the structure of the mind or the world, but as arguments that raise claims to validity that can be subjected to critical interrogation in open-ended, inclusive, and fair processes of public argumentation.[15]

Cooke's positive valuation of "non-authoritarian" metaphysical thinking touches on a potential deficiency in Habermas's argumentation. By failing to distinguish between modes of religious self-understanding (authoritarian from non-authoritarian) he does, in effect, exclude potential voices from the legislative process that may very well meet his standards of practical reason. While I do not wish to defend the legitimacy of Cooke's suggestion to include what she calls "non-authoritarian" metaphysical thinking within the legislative process, nor investigate this problem here, it is worth considering whether Habermas fails to distinguish between different modes of metaphysical thinking, and if so, if this constitutes a significant oversight in his theory.

The real crux of the problem, however, is that Habermas not only fails to distinguish between modes of religious *self-understanding*, but that he also neglects to distinguish between modes of *understanding religion* and thus narrows the boundaries for critique. Consider the following statement from "Religion in the Public Sphere":

> In short, post-metaphysical thought is prepared to learn from religion, but remains agnostic in the process. It insists on the difference between the certainties of faith, on the one hand, and validity claims that can be publicly criticized, on the other; but it refrains from the rationalist presumption that it

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15 Ibid., 205.

can itself decide what part of the religious doctrine is rational and what part irrational.[16]

    In advocating for an "agnostic" approach, Habermas first distinguishes between faith and validity claims, thus separating truth statements that have no direct consequences for public discourse (e.g., I believe that Jesus is the son of God) from those that do (e.g., homosexuality is a sin). He goes on to grant the "certainties of faith" a privileged domain, thereby permitting religious doctrines an exemption from rational critique. To put it differently, post-metaphysical thought refrains from passing judgment on religious claims to faith. Its only demand is that ideas professed in the political public sphere be profane, in light of the fact that a change in epistemic attitudes for the "religious consciousness" requires a difficult learning process that has "ambiguous consequences" from a social and cognitive point of view.[17] Underlying Habermas's concern is the endangerment of political integration when the gap between worldviews splits a society into "fundamentalist" and "secular" camps. In the case of the former, and indeed for all religious groups, it is necessary that they are able to develop a self-reflexive and pluralistic view of modernity, such that the truth claims of "non-believers" are understood as inevitable disagreements to be worked through in rational discourse and not merely rejected out of hand.[18] In the case of the latter, a non-reductionistic and reflexive attitude toward the religious is required, and one that "refrains from passing judgment on religious truths, while insisting, in a non-polemical fashion, on making a strict demarcation between faith and knowledge."[19] While I think that such a notion is essentially correct in its recognition of the difficulties required in moving from a conventional to a post-conventional moral framework, and, moreover, recognizes that a complementary learning process cannot proceed upon the presumption of the *a priori* validity of a secular (scientific) worldview, it does not follow, as Habermas

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16 Habermas, "Religion," 180.

17 Habermas, "Religion," 18.

18 Ibid., 18.

19 Jurgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the 'Public Use of Reason' by Religious and Secular Citizens," in *Between Naturalism and Religion,* trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 140.

argues, that, "only the participants and their religious organizations can resolve the question of whether a 'modernized' faith is still the 'true' faith."[20] While there is value in leaving internal debates as to the "true" faith to believers as a tactical position, as it satisfies a level of reciprocity in public discourse that would restrict secular critiques to "validity claims that can be publicly criticized" (as in the case of homosexuality mentioned above), such a distinction could potentially limit the opportunity to open up discourse on religion to a deeper analysis. What is problematic here is not so much the restriction placed on secular citizens toward leaving faith claims to believers, but rather the implication that this dimension of religiosity is somehow unimportant for the consequences of public debate. Since Habermas's theory is normative and *not* positive or explanatory, a critical theory of religion must attend to the historical and indeed theological claims to faith in order to reveal, among other things, prevailing modes of false consciousness, prejudice, ethno-centric bias, and so forth.

Common to the academic study of religion is the *a priori* rejection of any notion of a "true" religion, be it from an *emic* or an *etic* point of view. In other words, the truth claims of religious traditions are neither validated nor denied, though they are often subject to a materialist critique from the perspective of the social sciences. Accordingly, the following statement by Habermas must be met with suspicion:

> At best, philosophy circles the opaque core of religious experience when reflecting on the intrinsic meaning of faith. This core must remain so abysmally alien to discursive thought as does the core of aesthetic experience, which can likewise only be circled but not penetrated by philosophical reflection.[21]

While this argument may be reasonable within the current purview of positive discourse within the public sphere, a domain that has largely resisted the incorporation of the academic study of religion, it does not hold true for philosophical reflection, especially when such discourse is broadened to include a critical social theory in the study of religion. While it is true that for certain schools of

20 Ibid., 19.
21 Habermas, "Religion," 17.

thought, most notably amongst phenomenological thinkers in the tradition of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolph Otto, and Mircea Eliade, the experiential realm should remain a realm unto itself beyond explanation or critique,[22] for many others such methods grant an unwarranted *sui generis* status to religious claims, thereby making them immune to criticism.[23] Indeed, much recent work on cognitive theories of religion, such as those by Pascal Boyer and Harvey Whitehouse, have been explicit in engaging the experiential realm in the mind of the believer.[24] Here an important question must be raised: How can Habermas expect secular citizens to undergo a cognitive dissonance while not being allowed to critique theological claims to truth from a critical, while respectful, position? Is such a requirement not then placing a similarly undue burden on secular citizens? Here I will suggest that part of problem can be traced back to Habermas's understanding of "religion" itself. Since critical discourses on religion are able to move beyond the simplistic and stereotypical atheist/theist divide, criticized by Habermas when he refers to positivist models of religion as "scientism,"[25] and are able to mount a critique of religion on less cognitively jarring terms, though in ways that are no less challenging (e.g., a recent ad supported by Richard Dawkins, which read, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life!"),[26] Habermas's concern over the need to approach religious consciousness while not challenging "truth claims" amongst adherents, is unnecessarily conservative and pre-mature. Moreover, by adopting a position that exempts certain theological questions from public critique, Habermas ignores the socio-political and historical construction of "world religions" as a

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22 See Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Co., 1991), 220-250.

23 See Donald Wiebe, "Religious Studies," in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion,* ed. John R. Hinnells (New York: Routledge, 2005), 98-121.

24 For an overview of such theories see Luther H. Martin, "Religion and Cognition," in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion,* ed. John R. Hinnells (New York: Routledge, 2005), 473-488.

25 See Habermas, "The Boundary Between Faith and Knowledge: On the Reception and Contemporary Importance of Kant's Philosophy of Religion," in *Between Naturalism and Religion,* trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008).

26 Atheist Campaign.Org: http://www.atheistbus.org.uk/.

Euro-hegemonic discourse in need of critical examination. Here I will suggest that a critical investigation of such problems in the domain of philosophy (and in the social sciences and humanities more generally) would significantly enhance Habermas's normative model for debates involving religion in the public sphere.

While Habermas's prescriptions for public discourse mark a change from his earlier thinking, we can detect a continuity of his position on religious faith in some of his previous work. In his essay "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World," Habermas attempts to ascertain the premises under which philosophers and theologians can communicate, and by which the former can understand the status and truth claims of the latter. Citing his preference for "methodological atheism" he comes to the conclusion that philosophy cannot borrow the discourse of religion as *religious experience*, but must borrow instead from "the universe of argumentative discourse that is uncoupled from the event of revelation." Phrases such as "redemption" and "messianic light" should thus remain out of bounds for post-metaphysical thinking.[27] Concerning his statement that religious experience can "only be circled but not penetrated by philosophical reflection," we must ask whether or not Habermas is privileging religion as a *sui generis* category.[28]

In his recent book *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, Hans Kippenberg takes an historical look at how nineteenth century developments in philosophy, sociology, and anthropology, among other disciplines, helped to shape religion in a particular way. Crucial to Kippenberg's analysis is the question of why religion appears the way it does. Noting how nineteenth century thinkers sought to de-religionize religion into ethics and thereby protect it from sustained scrutiny, his inquiry charts a series of developments that have had a lasting impact on the field. One such development that he explores is the tendency for certain nineteenth century thinkers to move away from the aggressive scientism of the Enlightenment, toward a renewed sense of the importance of religious history. Dissatisfied with the

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27 Jürgen Habermas, "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence from in this World," in *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers,* ed. Eduardo Medieta (New York: Routledge, 2005), 309.
28 Habermas, "Religion," 17.

various ruptures and dislocations of modernity, with its mechanized objectification of the world, Kippenberg notes how leading thinkers made a turn toward asceticism and mysticism, where such categories as "thoughts," "feelings," and "meaning" were given a pride of place. One such thinker was Ernst Troeltsch, who advanced the notion that only religion would be able save culture from a descent into materialism, and that Christianity could actually save humankind by separating humans from the culture that threatened to overwhelm them.[29] What is important to note here is that trends amongst nineteenth century philologists, anthropologists, and sociologists, who made profound and influential contributions to the study of "world religions," tended to frame their discourse along the lines of a rational and universal religiosity, though one that was still steeped in the Christian tradition.[30]

In addition to finding parallels with Habermas's views on theological criticism, we might also observe here traces of his discourse ethics and his notion of post-metaphysical thinking. While these parallels are by no means exact, Habermas's notion of religion can be broadly situated within this theoretical heritage. More importantly, it is here that we find an entry point to critique the deficiencies of his position. If religion, thusly conceived, is a heritage we cannot dispense with, then learning from and accommodating it is certainly a reasonable course of action. It would seem that Habermas's writings on post-metaphysical thinking and, more recently, on religion in the public sphere, are geared in this direction. But if religion is merely conceived of as a remnant of the past where, following Habermas, semantic traces may still reveal "profane truth content" for secular discourse, then what does this mean for how we can conceptualize religion in the public sphere? More importantly, if discourse in the political public sphere is to include religious points of view, must we refrain from analyzing the discourse of religion in a critical fashion? Lastly, if the goal of public discourse is for free and unconstrained communication where, in the interest of containing religious voices to the weak public sphere, we find a need for secular citizens to

29 Hans Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 122.

30 For a discussion on such trends see Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

also undergo a cognitive adaptation to religious perspectives but *not* criticize theological propositions, then we find in Habermas a marked contradiction. By imposing this limitation on the force of secular critique, Habermas risks privileging a certain dimension of theological belief as a *sui generis* category. Moreover, by allowing theologians the sole privilege of solving problems in "their" domain, he ignores the fact that theological assumptions are the product of Euro-hegemonic historical discourse, and thus can and should be contested as "real" and "legitimate" categories of investigation.

In her book *The Invention of World Religions*, Tomoko Masuzawa undertakes a similar project to Kippenberg, though offering a more biting critique of normative assumptions in the contemporary study of religion. Pointing to those "religion friendly scholars," of whom we may include Habermas (though not without condition), she notes the ambiguous line between the reality of religions on the one hand (i.e., in a generalized and tangible sense), and their legitimacy as a normative category on the other. Such confusion thus raises the question of how we are to lend legitimacy to something that may not be "real" at all, since it is largely the product of Western scholarship. While the discourse of world religions in the present day claims to have turned away from nineteenth century notions of the search for "origins" and the "primitive," questions of Eurocentric bias still loom large. As Masuzawa points out:

> In some localities, being religious—to out it more concretely, practicing or engaging in what has been deemed 'religious'— may be related to the question of personal and group identity in a way altogether different from the one usually assumed (i.e., assumed on the basis of the western European denominational history of recent centuries). In some cases, for that matter, religion and identity may not relate at all.[31]

It is important to note here the distinction Masuzawa makes between the *reality* of religions and their *legitimacy*. She does not deny that religions *exist* as a normative category of classification, but rather questions how they have been defined and made legitimate in

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31 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

a particular historical and cultural climate. While limitations of space do not allow for a detailed exploration of Masuzawa's critique, one short example should prove illuminating.

In discussing nineteenth century constructions of Islam, Masuzawa notes how the tradition's classification as an "Arab" and "Semitic" religion was the product of a belief in the universality of Christianity, and as a way to interpret how other religions could be so persistent and, in the case of Islam, so powerful. The Aryan religions, for their part, of which Christianity was seen as the ultimate manifestation, were considered the bearers of the universal principles of the modern world: science, art, democracy, law, individuality, and the normative construction of "world religions."[32] Acknowledging the move toward a discourse of "plurality" and "diversity" of religions in the first half of the twentieth century, Masuzawa's study reveals how contemporary classifications of world religions are still embedded in this Eurocentric discourse, where the East preserves history while the West creates it. A mere glance at some of the titles of Habermas's essays, for example, "Israel or Athens: Where does Anamnestic Reason Belong," or "The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers," reveals a consistent preoccupation with the Western "Judeo-Christian" (religious) and political heritage of Enlightenment philosophy, and is thus largely limited to an occidental lens. [33] Similarly, Habermas's debates on religion have overwhelmingly been with Christian theologians, such as John Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, and Joseph Ratzinger. [34] For Masuzawa, to speak of religion as a category of classification is to tap into a "systemic network of discursive organization" that was shaped in the service of Eurocentric interests. As she argues at the end of her book:

> Instead, criticism calls for something far more laborious, tedious, and difficult: a rigorous historical investigation that

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32 Masuzawa, 206.

33 Both essays can be found in Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity,* ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), 2002.

34 See *Observations of "The Spiritual Situation of the Age,"* ed. Jürgen Habermas, trans. Andrew Buchwalter (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985); and Habermas and Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006).

does not superstitiously yield to the comforting belief in the liberating power of "historical consciousness." . . . This is one of the reasons historiography must always include the historical analysis of our discourse itself.[35]

Moreover, by failing to problematize religion as a constructed category, Habermas also runs the risk of ignoring the socio-political role that religion plays in relation to human culture. Russel T. McCuthcheon takes up this point when he writes the following:

> To limit a priori the scale by which one studies these religious things to emic, devotee's self- core of the datum is to fail to understand individual and social religious life, religious associations, religious experiences, and their academic study as well as inherently the practices and engagements of historical and contextualized human beings.[36]

As a consequence of this limitation, valid, illuminating, and non-confessional methods of analysis (sociological, psychological, political, feminist, etc.) are often excluded *a priori* to the investigation.[37] A corollary of this pitfall, notes McCutcheon, is that it proceeds by studying human beings "as if they were simply believing, disembodied minds," and thus avoids, to quote Masuzawa, "confronting the relations between material, cultural productions (e.g., a myth one studies) and the concrete political and economic conflicts and inequities of the people under study."[38] In short, what McCutcheon's observations reveal for my critique of Habermas is that by assuming the category of religion as different from other kinds of human discourse, and that scientific and theological categories are ultimately separate pursuits, he runs the risk of privileging theological

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35 Masuzawa, 328.

36 Russel T. McCuthcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11.

37 For a critique of Habermas's failure to engage with feminist discourse, see Seyla Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Moral Theory," in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

38 McCutcheon, 13.

claims as a de-contextualized category that is divorced from the complex socio-political and historical interactions that are always already present in the creation of "meaning." In such a way, Habermas may be compromising his larger goals of embracing plurality and so-called "toleration" by avoiding an investigation of the legitimacy of theological discourse itself and, in the process, privileging a small, select group of (largely Christian) theologians at the expense of other religious and secular critical points of view.

In this essay I have argued that Habermas's more inclusive reconsideration of religion in the public sphere is limited by his narrow conception of the discourse of the study of religion. As a normative (critical) discourse theory, his suggestion that both religious and secular citizens undergo a mutual cognitive dissonance in order to share the burden of reciprocal perspective taking, has significant implications for any positive model seeking to apply his ideas. Such a model is compatible with Habermas's notion that we live in a post-secular world, namely, one that is reconciled to the continued existence and influence of religion amidst an ongoing process of secularization. What is more, such a model elevates discourse to the highest ideal by seeking to instantiate not merely a formal or legal mode of toleration, where discourse and boundaries are set by the narrow demands of forbearance of an other's beliefs, but a model of intrinsic toleration, where communicative ethics are put forward as a mode of action to be undertaken in a radically new light. Though it is not at all certain *if* and *how far* such insights can inform and enlarge the scope of discourse on religion in the public sphere, it is important that such critiques be seriously considered in light of the very real discords, both within and between religious and secular formations, that threaten to make the very possibility of communication null and void. If we are to take Habermas seriously, then a critical theory of religion should also consider how discourses like those of Kippenberg, Masuzawa, and McCutcheon, reveal a fundamental flaw in Habermas's understanding of religion as a normative category of investigation. Consideration of the discourse of theology and of "world religions" as the product of a Euro-hegemonic history opens up a whole range of possibilities for critiquing religion in both the academy and in the public sphere. Significant progress on this front may very well offer insights on how far the critique of religious (and secular) consciousness may go, and on what terms it

may proceed. In this sense, cognitive dissonance between secular and religious worldviews need not necessarily avoid certain forms of critique once a critical and more nuanced understanding of religion, in all its complex and theoretical manifestations, is enlarged beyond its current limitations.

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