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Habermas and the Problems of Translating Religious Speech

Introduction and Thesis

Contrary to the predictions of secular philosophers for the past several centuries, religion remains alive and well. In fact, in the past several decades, especially in the United States, the role of religion in politics has grown immensely. For the political philosopher Jürgen Habermas this poses a problem. How can a state remain neutral to competing worldviews, religions included, whilst respecting the equal rights of religious citizens to view themselves as authors of the laws that bind them? Habermas believes that religion is an important and useful force in postsecular democracy and as such must be given a chance to be expressed in public. However, in maintaining the state's neutrality, the use of religious reasons is not permitted in the official law-making institutions of the state. There, only generally accessible, secular reasons may truly ensure that everyone is the author of the laws which govern over them.

I will argue in this project that Habermas' imposition of a firewall against religious reasons in political institutions is an unfair and arbitrary burden placed on religious citizens. Habermas' translation requirement creates a moral dilemma for religious citizens which may alienate them and therefore may undermine his entire conception of deliberative democracy. This requirement also makes an unneeded and harmful distinction between religious and secular reasons when such a distinction is more arbitrary than Habermas realizes. The translation "proviso" also assumes, without justification, that secular reasons, and not religious ones, are the only reasons which are generally accessible.

Habermas and the Role of Religion in Political Discourse

In determining the success or failure of Habermas' ideas on religious participation in political discourse, it is obviously necessary to lay out my interpretation of what it is that Habermas himself has to say on the subject. In doing so, much of the framework and background of Habermas will be left out in the interest of time as he is extremely prolific on a number of topics that are only tangentially related to religious participation in the public sphere.

To begin, it may be instructive to include some comments on Habermas' stance towards religion in general. Habermas' view on religion has undertaken a rather radical shift in the past twenty-five years. As Habermas himself admits, he was much too quick in assuming that modernization and secularization would consume religion and leave very little of it remaining in the world (2002, 79). His more recent writings on religion indicate an increased respect and acknowledgement of the positive role that religion can and does play in postsecular, liberal democracy. In fact, Habermas' notion of postsecularity is the idea that secularity itself does not adequately respect religion and does not see the potential religion has to inform secular rationality (Habermas 2004, 329). He now has come to see that religion may have usefulness to deliberative democracy.

For example, Habermas believes that "universalistic egalitarianism" which gives rise to the notions of freedom, "the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation", as well as personal morality come directly from the Judeo-Christian tradition and that "there is no alternative" to the Judeo-Christian tradition in illuminating these values (2002, 149). To Habermas there are certain ideas which philosophy, which he takes to mean a postmetaphysical, postsecular philosophy, cannot explain as well as religion is able to. Habermas repeats the notion that there

are certain values which are expressed in religious language much better than they are in secular language. In his 2008 work, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, Habermas writes that religions “have a special power to articulate moral intuitions” presumably in comparison to the power secular reason has (131). Religion also has is an immensely important influence on religious citizens. Habermas thinks that religion is not just a metaphysical doctrine for adherents but instead something that informs every decision they make and provides a sort of motivation to their acts in private and public life(2008, 127). Without a doubt, Habermas recognizes the importance religion has not only to the believer, but also public discourse in general.

With all this said about the positives of religion, Habermas maintains a strong belief in the separation between church and state. He believes that the state must remain neutral towards competing worldviews (Habermas 2008, 130). This means that the state will show no favoritism towards any particular religion or conception of “the good”. This separation of church and state derives from Habermas’ idea, much like that of Rawls (1993, 137, 212), that in order for the state to be legitimate in its exercise of coercive power, it must remain neutral and in doing so must “formulate” and “justify” laws “in a language that is equally intelligible to all citizens” (2008, 134). This need to legitimize the state is somewhat problematic in the modern world. States used to be legitimized by religion. With the advent of secularity, something needed to “fill the gap” left by the loss of religious legitimacy. To that end, the modern, postsecular state is legitimized when it first allows for “the equal participation of all citizens” in political discourse so that each person can feel as though they are the author of the coercive laws that exist over them, and second, when political debate takes place in generally accessible terms (Habermas 2008, 121). In Habermas’ mind, a state is legitimate when anyone with something to contribute

is allowed to do so in public discourse so long as the justification for their prescription is done in a language which is readily accessible to all citizens.

Essentially “generally accessible reasons” are akin to secular reasons in Habermas’ thinking. The obvious consequence of all this is that religious reasons are not a legitimate justification for the use of coercive power in society. Habermas recognizes that this seems to disadvantage religious citizens and he is sensitive to this problem, something Rawls was not. He reasons that it is unfair for the secular state to force religious citizens to participate in the public sphere of discourse without being able to appeal to their religious convictions (Habermas 2008, 128). Habermas, having acknowledged the good that religion can do for discourse and for the discoursing believer, does not want to require that religion be taken out of all public deliberation on political matters even in light of the fact that political legitimacy can only come through generally accessible, secular reasons.

However, the necessity of political legitimacy does take precedence over the religious utterances of citizens once discourse takes place within official halls of law-making such as a legislative body or courts of law (Habermas 2008, 128). This is what is sometimes known as Habermas’ institutional “firewall”. While religious reasons were perfectly acceptable and welcome in the informal, opinion-forming, public sphere, as soon as one enters an official forum of law-making all reasons must be secular and acceptable to all so as to maintain the neutrality of the state towards particular worldviews. Habermas takes this “firewall” seriously enough that he even stipulates that the leaders of the legislature must have the power “to strike religious positions or justifications from the official transcript” (2008, 131). This seems rather aggressively anti-religious in comparison to the rest of the Habermas’ thinking on religion.

Habermas still does not think that religious citizens are completely out of the picture when discourse takes place within official law-making forums. Religious reasoning may be translated into secular reasoning at this point and used within legislatures or courts. This is where Habermas' interest in what philosophy can siphon from religion comes into play. Habermas thinks that secularization's role in relation to religious utterances is to transform the reasons into generally accessible ones and not to filter out the content and spirit of religion (Habermas 2010, 18). Secular translation transforms religious reasons, which are accessible only to those that subscribe to that particular worldview, into ones which are secular and acceptable to all by gleaning what secularity finds useful and in step with truths which can be understood regardless of an individual's worldview. David Ingram says that Habermas wants reason to use religion in a metaphorical way so that what is theology, such as man made in the image of God, becomes secular. In this case being made in the image of God translates into the sanctity of life as a secular concept (Ingram 2010, 322). Secular reason attempts to connect the otherworldliness of religion to the secular values of this world stressed by the liberal, constitutional state.

The obvious objection to this requirement of translation, and an objection Habermas anticipates, is that requiring religious citizens to translate their beliefs in official forums is unfair to them in comparison to secular citizens who already provide reasons in the proper way. Habermas readily admits that religious citizens are required to "split" their identities in the process of having their religious reasons translated into generally accessible reasons (2004, 332). However, he is quick to point out that the state will never impose upon a religious citizen a duty which would contradict that citizen's sincerely held faith (Habermas 2010, 21). Habermas saw in Rawls a problem in which Rawls often forced religious citizens to betray their own religious

convictions in the name of a duty of civility. Additionally, Habermas believes that the burdens of citizenship in his deliberative democracy are more or less equally distributed between the religious and the nonreligious. He believes this to be the case because of his “complementary learning process”.

For secular citizens, this learning process consists of having to translate the religious reasons of other citizens, being willing to glean what it is that is useful from religion in the process of translation, and taking all religious speech seriously. The learning process entails for religion citizens: having their reasons translated by secular citizens or by themselves in order to be considered in official law-making; the private life and public life split just mentioned; and the acknowledgement that science and secular reason are prioritized by the state over any particular worldview (Habermas 2008, 143). Habermas believes that these tasks balance each other out to the point that neither group is under more requirements as a citizen than another group. He furthers his idea of the complementary learning process by reasoning that both secular and religious citizens must actively cooperate in order to solidify the fluid boundaries between secular and religious reason (Habermas 2004, 332). He continually stresses the idea that only through cooperation and tolerance from both sides can deliberative democracy work at all.

Habermas makes it a point to emphasize the realizations that need to take place for religious citizens to achieve a proper mental state for translation. He wants religious citizens to “consider one’s own religious convictions reflexively from the outside and to connect them with secular views” (2008, 130). Habermas is asking that religious citizens take a step back from their own perspective and try to imagine their beliefs in the abstract. Through this he hopes they realize that their version of the truth, no matter how strong their devotion to it may be, is one among many versions of the truth. They must also learn to accept and respect the fact that others

will disagree and the state will remain indifferent towards their particular truth. If religion is not to become “self- reflexive”, then the entire discourse-based system of pluralism that Habermas is trying to create is not a realistic possibility (Habermas, 2008, 144-145). Habermas hammers home the point that this whole system is contingent upon the cooperation of both religious citizens in the cognitive processes he imposes on them, and secular citizens respecting and assisting religion in the process of translation. Without effort from both religious and secular citizens, the whole idea of deliberative democracy is unworkable.

Criticism of Habermas on Religion in Political Discourse

We can now turn to criticism regarding Habermas’ ideas about the role of religion in the public sphere as well as how these ideas work given real-world examples. While it is clear Habermas makes an effort to appreciate the role of religion in public life, he falls short of real fairness towards religious citizens in a number of ways. The object of most criticism here is his translation requirement. As stated above, this translation requirement allows religious reasons in public discourse up until the discourse enters the official halls of law-making. After that point, any utterance which is not “generally accessible” is not allowed as justification for coercive law. This is all in an effort to retain the neutrality of the state towards competing worldviews.

A common thread of criticism, and one I find compelling, is the problematic moral nature of forcing citizens to translate their religious language, or have it translated on their behalf. Religion necessarily implicates moral duties and there is some risk of violating religious moral duties in Habermas’ translation. Simone Chambers explains, “It is not always possible, desirable or ethical for religiously minded citizens to check their beliefs at the door when engaging in either virtual or actual public justification” (2010, 18). Again, it is without question that religion

imposes moral duties upon its adherents and Habermas explicitly rejects tearing believers away from their faith (2010, 21). Therefore, his insistence of translation is unworkable. Translation is a burden which tends to force believers to act apart from their faith. To drop faith in official forums, as Chambers said, is potentially unethical for the religious person to do. Habermas here puts an unequal weight on those of religious faith and contradicts his own thoughts concerning burdens on religious citizens.

That action of being forced to act without faith results in religious citizens having to choose between remaining steadfast in religion and not participating in political discourse, or participating in discourse with religion playing only a very limited role. Melissa Yates takes this up in addressing Habermas' "split identity" problem, which he inherits from Rawls. The "split" tears people away from what they truly would like to say and what they truly mean by their words. It also leaves them in a situation where either they will fail the moral standards of their religion by suppressing their faith, or they fail to live up to the standards of cooperative learning in Habermas' theory (Yates 2007, 883-884). One way Habermas thinks he has solved this by making the process of deliberation a learning experience between people of all beliefs. This hardly solves the problem. Habermas is still stuck with citizens who are being pulled in one direction by their religious beliefs but who are simultaneously being asked to accept the fallibility of those beliefs and to accept that secular reason takes priority over them. This is clearly a situation where one would be asked to act contrary to religious faith. By comparison, secular citizens have no burden of splitting their identities so Habermas' insistence that the burdens of citizenship are equal is false. By the time one gets to the halls of law-making, Habermas' split of identity is little better than that of Rawls.

Another problem I see with this split identity problem is that it also robs the speakers of their conviction in argument. Habermas, in a passage paraphrased in the first half of the paper, calls religion “not merely a doctrine, something believed, but is also a source of energy that the person of faith taps into performatively to nurture her whole life” (Habermas 2008, 127). This quote is in direct conflict with his overall theory of religious participation in political discourse given his idea of the institutional firewall. One of the things any liberal theorist desires is sincere, passionate appeals from citizens in discourse. Without passion and deeply held belief in debate, the debate itself becomes moot and democracy loses its defining populism. Habermas not allowing religious reasons inside the halls of the legislature basically makes religious appeals meaningless in their original form. But even if they are translated, the original religious appeal is lost and this burden of translating creates a discouraged and alienated base of religious citizens who will become, at the very least, apathetic to government as it will no longer reflect their beliefs.

To see these burdensome problems in action, let us turn our attention to an example of religious speech in an official forum. This speech is in the midst of a discussion in the United States House of Representatives about the lack of religious liberty in parts of the world and the inhumane persecution of Christians around the world. Representative Ted Poe of Texas took the floor to speak of the human rights issues faced by Christians in the Middle East. For the most part, Mr. Poe sticks to a rather secular line of reasoning regarding the inalienable nature of religious liberty. However, he highlights the need for the United States to act by reminding his audience of a Bible story. He says: “It is written in the Good Book that a man was traveling on the Jericho road and fell among robbers. The man was beaten, his property was stolen, and he was left for dead. Other people traveled down the same road, saw him in the ditch, but passed on

by him on the other side of the road. They went their own way. They did nothing” (Congressional Record 2015, H5983). This is an appeal to a religious story which helps to illuminate his point that the United States cannot stand idly by and let the human rights of Christians abroad be violated.

Without question Habermas would have Poe’s use of religious text stricken from the legislative record until it could be spoken in a way which is accessible without believing in the truth of the Bible. The effect Habermas’ translation requirement would have here is to lessen the passion and the appeal of the speech. It would adversely affect the overall convincingness of the argument without really accomplishing anything. Regardless of the faith of the audience, the Bible story has some authority and furthers Mr. Poe’s point. He may not even make the point at all if his example of a Bible story was omitted. This is especially troubling because it is a worthwhile point to make. In this example of Poe, we see the moral and practical dilemma’s in Habermas’ theory in action. Morally, Representative Poe would be forced to choose between not making any argument at all and failing the duty embodied in the Bible story, or making the argument but without reference to its inspiration. Practically, we see that the firewall will harm the argument, and place substantial burdens on the speaker, without any clear benefit for having done so.

As a result of the immense burden Habermas places on the religious with his translation requirement, it seems entirely possible to me that religious citizens will not recognize themselves as the authors of the coercive laws exercised over them if their religious beliefs are shunned. Even if religious citizens are able to recognize reasons outside their faith as being legitimate, it does not seem farfetched to imagine that the religious will become disillusioned with the fact that they live in state which will not even admit their most sincere beliefs into the decision-making

centers of democracy. Furthermore, Kaul writes, without this support of the religious in recognizing where their beliefs line up with secular ideals of tolerance and without their recognition that their beliefs are limited and fallible, “liberal democracies lack a normative foundation which is essential to their very conception” (Kaul 2010, 509). Habermas’ translation risks disheartening religious citizens to the point that the foundation of his liberal state is at risk.

I do not believe it is reasonable to expect the religious segment of the population to accept the fact that their most basic beliefs are never going to make it into the laws which exist to govern over them. This is, at least in the United States, a rather sizable portion of the country which will see that the faith which they consider so fundamental to who they are is not able to affect policy. The fact that Habermas is allowing religious speech in nonofficial forums is surely a step above Rawls’ formulation, but it does not mean much if their contributions cannot also directly influence law, as that is the ultimate goal of debate.

The importance of discourse in Habermas’ philosophy is at odds with the translation proviso. Translation robs discourse of valuable insights which secular reasoning would never come to on its own. True, spirited debate cannot exclude such a substantial group within the population. Furthermore, the homogeneity of opinions which would result from the exclusion of religion in discourse is obviously harmful to the debate as it could at least act as a counterpoint to secular dogma. Maeve Cooke writes in a similar vein. Cooke thinks that the translation requirement undermines the power of discourse. Habermas wants a transformative deliberation in order to achieve the ultimate end of discourse, which is a single right answer in policy. This “transformation of perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations through encountering objections” in discourse seems to Cooke, and I agree, much more likely to happen when a diversity of opinions are represented in debate (2007, 230). Obviously this comes into conflict with the

translation requirement offering only generally accessible reasons. Much of the possible dissent to the policy under discussion will be filtered out in the process of translation. Habermas' preference for a transformative debate and his insistence on secular translation are mutually exclusive concepts.

The other distinction that Habermas makes which he believes mediates the ethical dilemma of forced translation is the demarcation between the informal public sphere and the official, law-making public sphere. Unlike Rawls, Habermas is allowing religious reasons to be used as much as possible up until they reach an official forum. He believes that this increased allowance of participation should be enough for religious citizens to have their right to equal access satisfied. Chambers points out that such a line drawn between the two public spheres is "arbitrary" (2010, 17). We have seen how meaningless that distinction is based on the inability to affect actual policy in the informal sphere.

If religion is to be allowed in the entire process of formation of opinions, which is done in the informal public sphere, then religion is going to be a major contributor to the ideas that eventually make their way into the decision-making sphere. Clearly, secular policy will be colored at least somewhat by the presence of religion in the formation of political opinions. So then why does it make sense to take away one of the primary sources of inspiration for certain agenda items? As Darren Walhof writes, political and religious beliefs are never formed without some context and very often they are formed through interaction between the two. Therefore, there is no easy way, as Habermas would assume there is, to separate religious and secular reasons (Walhof 2013, 229-230). I think this is an important claim against Habermas because he works under the constant assumption that religious and secular reasons are two opposing camps which are distinguishable at first sight. In reality, we see that secular reasons are formed amidst,

and are influenced by, religion. Additionally, religious beliefs are formed in the company of secular views. For example, Walhof writes about the impact that social and political conditions have had on religious views about same-sex marriage. In the past twenty or so years, religious opinion on same-sex marriage has gone from a relatively minor view, to something that defines the identity of some religious organizations. This development came as the result of a changing social and political climate (Walhof 2013, 231). Religion and politics cannot be insulated from one another, at least not to the extent that Habermas believes. Because of that, to exclude religion *prima facie* from official discourse does not do any good.

Habermas always stipulates that every “ought” implies a “can”. This becomes an issue when we further discuss filtering religious reasons from secular ones. As we have seen in the preceding paragraph, religion and politics are not easily separated. Therefore, it would not be permissible to say that religious citizens ought to leave religion out of their speech if they truly cannot do so. I am of the belief that religion in the western world, especially in the United States, permeates everything to the point that separating religion from all that it informs would strip much of our foundational culture of its meaning. The Judeo-Christian tradition especially is everywhere in our language, idioms, and morality, among many other things, to the point that trying to sift it out is a fool’s errand. Chambers makes the apt comparison that trying to remove religion entirely from the official forums of law-making “would be like trying to expunge Shakespeare from the English language” (2010, 17). Habermas’ translation requirement might simply be impossible if it is strictly adhered to. It is, at the very least, unwise.

In the process of combing through legislative records on religious appeals to human rights, a few general observations stood out to me. Religion is implicit in plenty of official speech without being outright stated. Many times representatives speak with an assumption that

the religious backdrop of their speech is understood by their audience and, for the most part, it is understood. Representatives also spoke as if it was understood that they were Christians and that they supported fellow Christians due to a religious obligation to other like-minded believers. I think this furthers the notion that religious and political speech are not as easily separated as Habermas seems to think. Religious speech is so commonplace in even official forums we often do not even realize its presence. Sessions of Congress begin with prayers, many representatives repeat sentiments such as “God help us” or “God Bless the United States”, for example. Religion is everywhere in American politics even if it does not directly dictate policy and even if the state remains officially neutral to it.

Part of the goal of leaving religious language out of the public record is that religion makes metaphysical appeals which require a particular set of beliefs to access. This argument says it is not likely that religious justification for policy will leave secular citizens thinking they were authors of their own laws. However, Habermas himself admits that religion is also concerned with things of this world which come not from metaphysical truth, but from the experience of social practice (Pedersen 2012, 412). This makes the fact that no religious speech can be allowed in official forum all the more confusing. If a religion illuminates an “innerworldly” truth, and not one that is “otherworldly”, the distinction between religious and secular reasons seems to be meaningless because one of the main reasons for its exclusion is often not a condition present in concerned speech.

To illustrate the problem with assuming religion cannot be accessed because of its metaphysical nature, we can look at an instance in which religion was used in an official forum. Something Habermas anticipates about the importance of religion and its possible contributions to secular reason revolves around equal, human rights. This is something that religion is, at least

currently, superior to secular speech in articulating convincingly. Because of this, religious speech on this subject is a good topic in which to focus an actual example of religious speech.

In November of 2005, Representative Charles Rangel of New York submitted into the Congressional Record a letter written by the group “Rabbis for Human Rights North America” along with some of his own comments on the matter of human rights violations associated with torture. He quotes from the letter: “We understand that the most fundamental ethical principle, which results from our belief in God as Creator of the World and Parent of all humanity, is that every human being is seen as reflecting the Image of God. Torture shatters and defiles God’s Image” (Congressional Record 2005, E2380). These two opening lines may be exactly what Habermas wants to limit in public appeals to religion in that they are arguably dependent on a religious belief to be meaningful. Habermas may object that this sentiment is not accessible without a prerequisite belief but that is entirely different from saying that this speech is not understandable to secular citizens. The understandability is what I would find to be much more important. In fact, it seems unlikely to me that any speech to which we disagree will truly be “accessible”, in the way Habermas uses the word, even if it is understandable. Accessibility, as Habermas sees it, may be an unworkable standard.

When Representative Rangel continues reading from the opening paragraph of the letter, he says: “Torture ‘works’ by attempting to deprive a human being of will, spirit and personal dignity. The humanity of the perpetrators, as well as the victims, is inevitably compromised by the use of torture” (Congressional Record 2005, E2380). This is where I think Habermas has run into an even bigger problem with his insistence that this entire paragraph should be barred from legislative debate. This second quote is a direct continuation of the point about torture defiling the image of God, yet this second portion is entirely accessible and understandable to religious

citizens and secular ones alike. It also highlights an extremely important point. Religion here is a jumping off point in order to start a discussion about the inhumane nature of torture. It does not end all discussion in a theological truth, it ends the discussion with a point that is illuminated by religion but not truly dependent on it. It does not seem obvious to me that there is a clear way to distinguish the religious arguments from those which are generally accessible in the way Habermas seeks to do so. Surely removing this entire paragraph of Rangel's speech removes an important point from the record of the United States Congress.

Rangel's argument seems to make more sense when we understand where he is basing his thought. In this case, the thought happens to be originated in religion. But the fact that the inhumanity of torture came to Rangel through a religious argument tells us nothing about the quality or permissibility of the overall point he is making. Representative Rangel did not use his time on the floor of the House of Representatives to present an argument about Old Testament doctrine; instead, he interwove a religious belief from Judaism into a contemporary human rights issue that the United States is in the midst of struggling with. This is why disallowing religious speech *prima facie* is problematic; it does not allow for us to truly make judgments as to what religious speech actually can contribute to political discourse. In this way, the translation requirement is somewhat meaningless, or at least haphazard.

It is not the case at all that religious arguments end in an appeal to God as the ultimate end with no regard for reason. We saw that in Representative Rangel's appeal to stop torture and Representative Poe's appeal to step up humanitarian efforts to assist persecuted Christians. To take that a step further, Chambers believes that religious views can still be criticized and rationally questioned just like secular reason and in fact they may pass rational scrutiny while it is not obvious that all secular appeals would do the same (Chambers 2010, 18). I think this is a

worthwhile point to make. The underlying assumption throughout the process seems to be that all religious speech can be classified in one way, and therefore can be subject to the firewall, and all secular speech can be classified another way, and therefore can be used without restriction. I do not believe it is clear that there are no secular reasons which, when subjected to rational scrutiny, would wilt and be shown to be unreasonable. Additionally, religious reasons can, at times, be reasonable, understandable, and arguably accessible. Yet secular reasons of any kind are at least allowed in the door of decision-making forums while religious reasons, which may possess some real worth, are shunned from the start.

We can now return to a previous example of a religious appeal for stopping Christian persecution to illustrate the preceding point. To reiterate, religious appeals do not stop deliberation dead in its tracks and can have real value. Instead, religion is often an initial motivation for a point in meaningful discourse even in a worldview-neutral state. The requirement to translate the Bible story Mr. Poe told into secular speech, or to exclude it altogether, does not make it clearer to the citizens of the United States that the state is neutral when it comes to religion. It accomplishes something which is self-defeating for Habermas' theory. Habermas wants to extract from religion what is useful to secular society. Bible stories which warn of the dangers of not providing humanitarian relief are the exact kinds of things that Habermas would find useful in religion. Yet since there is no real translation possible for this, or any other, Bible story, it is left out and with it the possible secular benefits it could have rendered were also left out.

Religious reasons being so ubiquitous in western, and especially American, political culture indicates that nearly everyone has a reasonable understanding of the content of religious appeals. Furthermore, it seems to me that accessibility as the standard of what is acceptable in

official debate is arbitrary. The fact that everyone could be reasonably expected to understand where a religious, or secular, appeal comes from and understand the content it expresses, at least in a general way, is enough for the speech to contribute to political discourse. In my opinion, religious reasons are just as inaccessible to a secular citizen as other secular reasons to which he/she does not believe. Therefore, the only noteworthy difference between religious reasons and secular ones which a particular citizen disagrees with, is that the religious appeal will not be heard in official forums of deliberative democracy. I think framing things in this way shows the true problem in Habermas' dichotomous conception of religious and secular speech.

Again, it is not obvious that secular reasons are the only ones which are generally accessible. It is not even clear that all secular reasons are accessible. This idea clearly shows the arbitrariness of the asymmetrical burdens on the religious. Biggar, writing on the issue of euthanasia, explains that certain ideas, in this case the sanctity of life, are best expressed in untranslated religious arguments and that these religious arguments are rarely, if ever, inaccessible to someone not subscribing to the particular faith that the expression comes from (2006, 16). Most anyone with a cultural upbringing in the United States would be able to grasp an argument about the sanctity life, based in religion, even if they do not adhere to the source religion. They may even reject it because of the religious source but that is not the same as Habermas' insistence that secular citizens will not understand, or be able to access, religious appeals. Habermas never really gives a convincing explanation as to why religious reasons are excluded from the possibility of being considered generally accessible.

Citizens may find that they think of themselves as authors of laws that govern them even when those laws are justified in a creed that they do not necessarily adhere to. Walhof furthers this point in his case study of the Maine state legislative debate on same-sex marriage when he

writes: “the back-and-forth of deliberation suggests that no one has trouble understanding, responding to, or even sharing the [religious] arguments given” (2013, 234). The idea, as mentioned previously, that religion is such a presence in the background of western culture, even to the most ardent secular citizen, highlights the fact that religious reasons are just as accessible, and often times more substantive and meaningful, than secular ones.

Finally, I take objection to what Habermas assumes the role of translation to be. In translation, in opposition to his openness to religion elsewhere, Habermas seems to want religion to be used as a means to an end. This undermines the deep importance he ascribes to religion elsewhere. Habermas’ translation is a “matter of salvaging the valuable contents of religious traditions and translating them into reasons that are public in the sense of generally accessible” (Cooke 2007, 225). I very much agree with the choice of the word “salvaging” in this context as it accurately depicts Habermas as believing that religion is, on its own, not an extremely important or useful thing. Therefore, it is the purpose of translation to extract from religion what secularity can use to its benefit while discarding much of the rest. Again, this shows a certain lack of understanding of the importance religion has to those who of faith.

Habermas is quick to point out the many virtues religion has for the individual believer and for discourse in general, but in the course of translation he seems to zone into religion solely on the basis that it may give something to secular reason and to postsecular society. In fact, the implication, which Walhof states extremely well, is that Habermas’ goal in translation “appears to be less about ensuring that religious citizens have full religious liberty and can recognize themselves as authors of the laws under which they live, and more about the mining of theological resources for public benefit” (Walhof 2013, 235). This need to strip from religion what is of benefit to secular reason would make more sense if Habermas’ assumption that secular

reason is the lone source of useful political speech was correct. In light of the reality of the situation however, this “salvaging” makes little sense because religion is already useful on its own without translation of its essential elements.

Habermas wants to glean what he can from religion in order to strengthen secular reason within his liberal state. But his translation requirement actually strips away what is useful from religion. It has been shown in this project that religious appeals are not inaccessible. Therefore, in order to get the best religion has to offer in order to advance the goals of the liberal state, it seems wise to allow religious speech to continue to exist as is in an untranslated way. Certainly there must be some restrictions on religious speech in public as the fear of a religious majority exerting their coercive will is a legitimate one, but that does not mean that the state itself, in its official sphere, must pretend as if religion is a relic of a bygone world.

Concluding Thoughts on Habermas and Religious Political Participation

Habermas provides a much more inviting and promising environment for religion than did Rawls. He is open to the benefits that can be achieved through an inclusion of religion into the informal public sphere. However, Habermas’ insistence that only generally accessible reasons may exist within decision-making institutions of the state is a haphazard and prejudicial restriction levied against those of religious faith. This gives the religious an unequal burden as a citizen of the liberal state. Additionally, it is not clear that secular reasons are the only ones which are generally accessible, or whether or not accessibility is even a worthwhile benchmark to base judgments. While Habermas may open the door to religion where Rawls shut it out, he does not go far enough and fails to totally comprehend the transformative and positively impactful nature of religion in political discourse.

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