

HABERMAS, THE JESUITS AND RELIGION: NOTES ON A DISCUSSION ABOUT THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN SOCIETY

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Abstract

In 2007, a public panel discussion took place between Jürgen Habermas and professors of the Jesuit University in Munich about the place and importance of religion in and for the (post-) secular society. Habermas there explained that the relation between society and religion has its counterpart on a personal level as the relation between reason and faith. Habermas points out that practical reason can only understand itself, if it clarifies its relation to the religious consciousness. This paper attempts to articulate and clarify the form of this twofold relation.

Introduction

For some time in Western civilization, religion has been seen as an aspect of society fading away due to individualization and modernization. Secularization debates within the Academe in the 70s and 80s have diagnosed a withering of the impact of institutionalized religion on societal processes.¹ Whether this dawn of the secular society was real or whether it was always a diagnosis put forward by an elite academic culture remains undecided. What is clear now, however, is that religion reemerged as a crucial topic in society and politics. 9/11 certainly was a powerful sign of this reemergence. Alas, religion reemerges in different areas of social life, in form of religious symbols in film and advertisement, in political staging and a more public dialogue on religion. Religion is not dying out. It looks as though it will keep playing a significant role through the modern and post-modern stages of society.

Throughout his long-lasting prolific academic career, Habermas has attempted to describe society as a whole. In his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981, engl. 1984/1987), religion appears as “historical development phase”² on the way to a modern, democratic society. In recent time, Habermas returned to religion reflecting on it from a different angle. Religion is no longer viewed as a stage in this historical process of society, but rather as a moral resource that secular society dwells upon. Especially in the discourse on biotechnology, Habermas understood religion as an important ally to grapple with the issue.³

This paper will present the most recent pronouncement of Habermas on the topic of religion in its relation to society. Habermas took part in a public panel discussion at the Jesuit University in Munich [*Hochschule für Philosophie S.J., München*] in early 2007. The proceeding of this panel discussion between Habermas and the Jesuit professors was published in German the following year. Although the discussion was concerned with religion in general, the focus lies clearly on the religion present in Europe, especially Christianity. This paper will reflect on Habermas' train of thoughts and the arguments of his Jesuit debaters.

A Historical-Philosophical Analysis of Our Time

As in other recent comments on questions of our time, Habermas starts his reflection on the place of religion in contemporary society with a philosophical-historical analysis of the time we live in. In the *Future of Human Nature* (2001, engl. 2003), Habermas reflects on the withdrawal of philosophy from questions concerning the good life. Philosophy, at the turn of the 21st century, is unable to give advice on how to live a good life. Habermas' train of thoughts in that book, which deals mainly with the dawn of biotechnological interventions, led him to question this complete withdrawal of philosophy. Moral questions – in Habermas' terminology – deal with the just organization of society, and need to be addressed in philosophy. Philosophy does not have the luxury of remaining agnostic about questions that affect our human nature and that might affect the social balance.⁴ In his recent thoughts on the relationship between faith and knowledge, Habermas addresses this topic of the just social interaction from a different angle. In his reflection on religion, Habermas' main focus is on the interplay between society and religion on a social level and reason and faith on the individual level. More particularly he asks about the resources provided by religion for a just organization of society. What is required in order to understand our time is an analysis of the intellectual history.

Starting point of Habermas' reflection is the *Axial Age* [*Achsenzeit*]. This age, dated roughly between 200 and 800 BC, gave birth to the world's main religion and world views from Taoism and Confucianism in China, and Hinduism and Buddhism in India, to the Talmud Judaism and Zoroastrianism in the Orient and to the Ancient Greek philosophy. Karl Jaspers, who coined this term, would see in this age (which is sometimes called the *Age of Transcendence*) the basis of all great civilizations and the categories of thought, which still shape modern consciousness. In other words, world civilization dwells upon spiritual and philosophical

developments that took place about 2500 years ago, which still shapes the way we understand, deal and interact with the world. On this basis, Habermas perceives a unity between religious and metaphysical world view, which shaped the outlook of Western civilizations, with their centers of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Jerusalem and Western philosophy in Athens.⁵ Both world views attempted to provide a comprehensive understanding of nature and history. Ancient metaphysics was able to take a transcendent view on the world as such and to differentiate between phenomenon and essence. This similarity of these two worldviews enabled Christian thinkers from St. Augustine to St. Thomas to forge a harmony between metaphysics and Christianity, between knowledge and faith. However, modern reason has withdrawn from metaphysical belief and is unable and unwilling to provide a comprehensive view of nature and history. In this intellectual historical setting, the question of the relation between religion and society, faith and reason has to be addressed.

Habermas understands faith and reason as two “complementary forms of spirit”⁶. Such a comprehension rejects a naïve notion of enlightenment, which sees in religion only an irrational, outmoded understanding of reality. But it rejects also a Hegelian understanding of religion, in which religion is a form of spirit subordinated to philosophy. Faith necessarily eludes reason’s understanding: “Faith remains somehow opaque for knowledge.” (Habermas 2008: 29) Reason should neither ignore nor simply accept this notion of the opaqueness of faith, rather it had to grapple with it. Habermas’ motive – as he states explicitly – of dealing with religion is his wish “to mobilize modern reason against its inherent defeatism.” (Habermas 2008: 30) Practical reason, as Habermas explains, doubts of its motivating power in view of the derailing modernity, which can hardly be kept in check by the weak force of moral beliefs about justice.⁷

Hence Habermas’ interest is in the political and social function of religion. It is not the very nature of religion, which stimulates Habermas’ concern; rather he hopes to find in religion moral resources for our modernity in crisis. How could these originally religious resources be appropriated by a secular society? Moreover, what are these resources? In other words: What is lacking?

What is Lacking? On Modern Society’s deficiency

Habermas’ account of what is lacking remains itself diffuse. The clearest aspect of the lack of secular society is its failure to provide adequate rituals. Habermas recounts his experience

of the funeral service of the Swiss writer Max Frisch in 1991. The venue of the obsequies was a church in Zürich, but no minister was present, no blessing was given, no amen was said. Frisch, an agnostic like Habermas himself, felt that the enlightened modernity was lacking an adequate ritual of this last rite of passage, and chose the setting of a religious site, a church, for his own funeral service. Secular society, as Frisch must have felt, is unable to provide an adequate venue (Habermas 2008: 26).

But this lack of a set of secular symbols is not the only thing lacking. Pondering about this question, the first thing coming to mind is that human beings in a secular society are lacking a certain sense of transcendence. This assumption seems to be backed as Habermas explicitly refers to Theodor W. Adorno as the main influence for the formulation of the title. Adorno's negative dialectics is conscious of an ontological need of human beings and Adorno directs his metaphysical speculations towards an inarticulable transcendence, not unlike a negative theology.⁸ However, Habermas is interpreting Adorno on the immanent plane of society and reason. Reason, on the subjective level, and society, on the objective level, is lacking its other side, faith or religion. It is thus reason who is lacking something, and it is only faintly aware of it.

Following Hegel, Habermas understands philosophy and religion as "complementary forms of the spirit"⁹. Against Hegel, Habermas does not see a hierarchy between these two forms of the spirit. Friedo Ricken S.J., in his reaction to Habermas, points out that "complementary" indicates that philosophy and religion supplement and depend on each other. Secular reason draws from religious tradition and translates them into secular language. Religion needs to test its beliefs against the demands of reason; reason in turn is aware of its own incompleteness according to this quite strong understanding of an interdependence of religion and philosophy.¹⁰

But *what* then is reason lacking? Norbert Brieskorn S.J., in his answer to Habermas, points out four areas where reason is lacking something: First, as already pointed out, it lacks a ritual to solemnize the last passage at the end of our lives. Modern reason fails to take serious human finitude, and it remains undecided for the time being, whether reason can (re-)integrate this element. Second, the (motivation for) solidarity is lacking. Secular reason fails to infuse solidarity into human communities. The question is whether reason can be transformed in such a way to transgress its individual character and motivate for habits of solidarity. Third, religious communities not only have to adjust to the liberal state, as Habermas points out, but the democratic constitutional state also needs a legitimation out of persuasion. More than a simple,

rational commitment is required. In order for the political community to avoid disintegration, more than reason alone is needed. (Habermas 2008: 32, Brieskorn 44). Lastly, the political public space profits from religious statements.¹¹ Habermas appreciates the recent public statements from organized religion; especially concerning the bioethics debate concerning research on embryonic stem cells and preimplantation genetic diagnosis.

From the four lacking aspects pointed out by Brieskorn, it is mainly the lack of sources of solidarity in secular society that Habermas is concerned with as his replica shows.¹² From an historical perspective, the religious topos of an inverted and lost world has become profane and was transformed into the Marx' notion of alienation. Social movements from the 19th century onward absorbed the religious longing for another world. Marx in that sense was deeply rooted in the basic structures of monotheistic belief systems, which he transferred on the social plane. However, the term "alienation" turned out to be too general for scientific description of reality. Even if alienation is not an adequate tool of description of social reality, the phenomenon that the term sought to describe is still very much alive. Habermas gives this phenomenon a more general turn, referring to the distorted living conditions: "Without the normative description and self-description of distorted living conditions, which are violating elementary interests, there can be no consciousness of 'what is lacking'." (Habermas 2008: 95) The consciousness of what is lacking refers to a privation within this world; a privation that becomes apparent in outrageous injustices. Given this injustice, Habermas turns to religion to provide resources of motivational power to overcome the "unjust distribution of life chances" (Habermas 2008: 95). His argument about the something that is lacking plays on the social as well as on the philosophical level.

On the social level, Habermas is concerned with a desolidarization [*Entsolidarisierung*] of society, which is caused by the expansion of the logic of the market into previously protected areas of life. The more the performance principle and cost-benefit analysis influence our lives the more solidarity is threatened as this economic logic forces humans into objectifying attitudes. The injustices of society are still considered wrong, the sense of right and wrong is still present, however it is overwhelmed by the powerlessness of a single actor. Hence, "understandably the withdrawal into the private and the repression of awkward cognitive dissonances."¹³ This tendency of a desolidarization of society is even more disturbing given a dynamic global situation moving towards a "multicultural global community" (Habermas 2008: 96). Therefore, Habermas hopes for a social movement which would alter the political mentality which is stuck in social

Darwinist power play. Habermas does not explicitly mention religious communities in such a project, however undoubtedly he looks at them in view of resources of solidarity.¹⁴

Shifting to the philosophical level, Habermas points out the “motivational weakness of a ‘rational morality’ [*Vernunftmoral*]” (Habermas 2008: 97). This rational morality sharpens our judgment and can motivate us with “the weak force of good reasons to act morally”¹⁵. However, it is directed towards our individual acting and can indeed stimulate responsible action, but it fails to provide a drive for collective, solidary action. While it can motivate on the individual level, it fails to do so on the collective one: “The secular moral as such is not innately connected with common practices.”¹⁶ The secular moral stands in contrast to the religious moral, which is always linked with the life of the community. Out of the global character of religions such as Christianity and Islam, a universal communitarism can be developed. It is this in principle universal communitarism that can provide a stronger motivation for actions of solidarity than the ‘rational morality’.¹⁷

Habermas refers to Kant, who has already sensed this inability of practical reason. Kant’s remedy against this lack of practical reason was to turn to religious tradition and translate it into philosophical language. In Kant, reason might come up with the same solutions with hindsight that religion already offers. Habermas does not completely subscribe to Kant’s view, as he doubts that reason can provide these resources out of itself. He rather believes that reason needs to acquire these resources elsewhere. Religion is seen as the paramount resource and thus it is important to rethink the relation between philosophy and religion.¹⁸ Habermas leaves no doubt that practical reason fails if it is unable to create a “consciousness of the worldwide injured solidarity, a consciousness of what is lacking, of what shouts to the heavens.”¹⁹

It is this passage of Habermas, that echoes in the statements of his respondents. Josef Schmidt S.J., following Habermas, criticizes reason and challenges a narrow concept of reason: “Secular reason has to ask itself where she has put up her own boundaries of reason prematurely.”²⁰ Reason might have delimited itself hastily and failed to recognize her true nature. Reason has to be thought more inclusively and should not be reduced to a scientific rationalism that rejects any metaphysical or religious speculation. To this point of the discourse, the debating Jesuits and Habermas agreed on the importance of a dialogue as well as some of the basic features of the relation between faith and reason. However, the answers are different when it comes to point out in detail the relation between reason and faith, between religion and secular

society. In the following, I will elaborate on this disagreement and on different views on this crucial relation further.

Diverging Notions of Reason and Religion

While the debaters agree on the importance on readjusting the relation between faith and reason, they disagree on the extension and implications of the two central concepts in question: reason and religion. Habermas understands reason as a social process, where questions of truth are negotiated in an argumentative discourse. Reason is understood as a social construct in an historical perspective, as his account from the ancient, holistic reason to the post-metaphysical, particular reason has shown. Brieskorn disagrees with such a notion of reason determined by social and historical conditions. Understanding reason from a historical perspective reduces it to the consensus of all citizens; such a consensus – as important as it may be – overburdens reason. Reason, as Brieskorn suggests, following Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), is beyond the social and historical dimension; in stark contrast to religion which has to be understood as a social and historical phenomenon.

But how can religion be properly understood? Michael Reder in his article questions two aspects of Habermas' account. His first concern is the danger of an instrumentalization of religion. Religion should not be reduced to a mere provider of moral resources; religion's social importance consists in a variety of different features such as providing ethical world-views, shaping cultural life and reflecting on the relation between transcendence and immanence (Reder 55). Second, Reder doubts the possibility of a strict separation between reason and religion, and maintains the existence of a "plurality of religious-cultural hybrid forms" (Reder 55). Seen from a global perspective, religion cannot be strictly separated from its cultural strata. Habermas' dwells upon Kantian philosophy and its crucial connection between religion and morality; however, globally, the Kantian heritage which shaped modern thinking and modern political institutions based on the core notion of autonomy, is far from being a shared heritage. Although Habermas' notion of reason is embedded in a social and historical situation, his account does not take into consideration different socio-historical circumstances. Reason in the 21st century might not be easily reducible to a monolithic, post-metaphysical rationality.

Put in a more general way: Habermas' argument depends on a Western strict separation between the different spheres of life, which is a result of philosophical as well as economic

developments in the last two centuries. These distinctions between public and private, between religion and society, between faith and reason, are products of Western history and result in a form of life shared only by a minority. But from a global perspective, the prevalence of religious-cultural forms of life, the lack of separations between the different domains of life, put Habermas' argument in a different light. Although understanding reason through the historical lenses, and although differentiating between different forms of rationalities, Habermas sticks to the Kantian heritage and cannot accommodate culturally different impregnated rationalities.

The Status of Religious Moral Resources

Surprisingly at first glance is the willingness of the agnostic Habermas to turn to age-old religion to deal with a fairly recent problem of desolidarization of modern society. Why is Habermas searching for these moral resources in religious communities? In his article, Brieskorn is doubtful about the ability of religion to provide these resources. Religious communities are not protected islands in a sea of modern egoism, but rather the modern tendencies of desolidarization and egoism are penetrating, as Habermas would agree, all forms of life. The agnostic Habermas appears to have a greater confidence in the motivating power of religion than the Jesuit Brieskorn.

Taking a step back, one might question Habermas starting point more fundamentally. Bearing in mind that Habermas understands himself as a Marxist philosopher, one wonders at the lack to search for sources of solidarity in shared living conditions or shared experiences of exploitation. Socialism (how problematic its implementation was) attempted to foster communal action and solidary behavior on that basis. These institutionalized forms of solidarity in the former Socialist countries achieved the social coherence Habermas is looking for. The transition period of the former Socialist countries to Capitalist democracies was painful for large segments of society precisely because of the loss of these forms of institutionalized solidarity. Certainly, revitalizing a failed political system is for no one's benefit, but these mechanisms could serve as a starting point for reflections about the requirements of a solidary society. After all historically, the workers movement was able to create strong ties of solidarity due to its common condition of life in the area of rapid industrialization.

Of course, these moral resources of the workers movement are in decline. However, there have been contemporary attempts to revitalize this notion of solidarity by elaborating on the old

notion of the working class, but modifying it for the 21st century. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concept of the *multitude*, for example, attempts to forge shared solidarity in the midst of globalized capitalist environment. Sources of solidarity might not be merely waiting to be discovered, but will need to be actively created. From that perspective, Habermas' religious turn and his attempt to recover moral resources in the field of established religion looks dated.

Conclusion

At the beginning of his text, Habermas lays down the preconditions for both sides for a dialogue between religion and reason. Not any religion is deemed fit for such a dialogue. As Habermas puts it:

“The religious side has to recognize [*anerkennen*] the authority of ‘natural’ reason in form of the fallible results of the institutionalized sciences and the principles of a universal egalitarianism in law [*Recht*] and morality. Inversely, secularized reason must not appoint itself as a judge about truths of faith.”²¹

This quote highlights different aspects of the debate between Habermas and the Jesuits. It shows on the one hand, Habermas' understanding of religion and his interest to engage in a dialogue with religion. Reason's two demands – acceptance of the authority of science and recognition of a universal egalitarianism – exclude a number of religious communities. Thus, Habermas thoughts have their place genuinely in a modern Western context.

At the same time, this quote illustrates the openness and willingness of Habermas to engage in a discourse with proponents of organized religion and his hope to find there moral resources to deal with the desolidarization of modern societies. In the reflection on the limits of post-metaphysical reason, religion might be able to enlighten reason about its very own nature. The task of an adequate understanding of the relation between society and religion, and between faith and reason, certainly requires further reflections, however, the discussion between Habermas and the Jesuits has shown the importance to conduct this discussion and provides links to future fields of inquiry.

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¹ENDNOTES

This introduction is loosely based on the opening chapter of the discussed book entitled “Habermas und die Religion” [Habermas and Religion] by Michael Reder and Josef Schmidt. Next to the introduction is Habermas’ article entitled „A Consciousness of What is Lacking“ followed by the article of four professors of the Jesuit university in Munich, who reflect and develop on Habermas’ text. The book closes with an answer of Habermas giving the anthology the character of an ongoing discussion. (Michael Reder and Josef Schmidt (ed.): *Ein Bewusstsein von dem, was fehlt. Eine Diskussion mit Jürgen Habermas* [A Consciousness of What is Lacking. A Discussion with Jürgen Habermas], Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008). A translation into English of this anthology is in preparation.

² “In der Perspektive der Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns erscheint Religion letztlich als seiner historischen Entwicklungsphase auf dem Weg zur modernen, demokratisch verfaßten Gesellschaft zugehörig.” (Reder/Schmidt: 13)

³ An overview on Habermas’ philosophy of religion is provided in Sebastian Maly’s article “Die Rolle der Religion in der postsäkularen Gesellschaft. Zur Religionsphilosophie von Jürgen Habermas” [*The Role of Religion in Post-Secular Society. On Jürgen Habermas’ Philosophy of Religion*]

⁴ It is on the issue of a just balance in society that Habermas gains a skeptical view on the advent of biotechnological diagnosis and intervention. Habermas worries about two fundamental aspects of our human nature, which might be brought into an imbalance by a liberal eugenics (ie. biotechnological intervention based on individual choices about their offspring): first, the equality within society which would be threatened by the advent of a new type of relationship between “designer” and “product” (“designer baby”) in the case of genetic engineering, and second, the autonomy of the “product” would be threatened.

⁵ The following paragraph is a summary of the first couple of pages (27-30) of Habermas’ essay “Ein Bewußtsein von dem, was fehlt” (A consciousness of what is lacking).

⁶ „[K]omplementäre Gestalten des Geistes“ (Habermas 2008: 29)

⁷ Habermas’ point in his German text might even be stronger as he speaks of the “despair of practical reason“: “Anders verhält es sich mit einer praktischen Vernunft, die ohne geschichtsphilosophischen Rückhalt an der motivierenden Kraft ihrer guten Gründe verzweifelt, weil die Tendenzen einer entgleisenden Modernisierung den Geboten ihrer Gerechtigkeitsmoral weniger entgegenkommen als entgegenarbeiten“ (Habermas 2008: 30)

⁸ Adorno, Theodor W., *Negative Dialectics*, Translated by E.B. Ashton, London: Routledge, 1973. See especially the last chapter entitled “Metaphysical Meditations”.

⁹ “Indem ich von komplementären Gestalten des Geistes spreche, wende ich mich gegen zwei Positionen – einerseits gegen die bornierte, über sich selbst unaufgeklärte Aufklärung, die der Religion jeden vernünftigen Gehalt abstreitet, aber auch gegen Hegel, für den die Religion sehr wohl eine erinnerungswürdige Gestalt des Geistes darstellt, aber nur in der Art eines der Philosophie untergeordneten vorstellenden Denkens’.” (Habermas 2008: 29)

¹⁰ Ricken p. 69f. Ricken proceeds in his essay by demonstrating Habermas’ translation of the Gen 1:27 into an argument of secular reason. Gen 1:27 runs as follows: “God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him.” Man is an image *and* creation of God. Philosophical thought dwells on this notion by understanding man as free (as image of God) and equal, being all equally creations of God. This notion of freedom and equality implies on the ethical plane that a determination of another human being in its nature [*Sosein*] would cross the boundary between creator and creature. Upon this argument, Habermas puts his critical stance towards biotechnology. (Ricken 70)

¹¹ Brieskorn over-interprets Habermas’ point. Habermas is more careful in formulating the role of religion in public discourse: “Wenn aber religiös begründete Stellungnahmen in der politischen Öffentlichkeit einen legitimen Platz haben, wird von seiten der politischen Gemeinschaft offiziell anerkannt, daß religiöse Äußerungen zur Klärung kontroverser Grundsatzfragen einen sinnvollen

Beitrag leisten können.” (Habermas 2008: 34)

¹² The following paragraph is a recapitulation of Habermas’ concise argument, which can be found on p. 95-98 of his “Replik”.

¹³ “Um so verständlicher der Rückzug ins Private und die Verdrängung peinlicher kognitiver Dissonanzen.” (Habermas 2008: 96)

¹⁴ Barack Obama, in his first book *Dreams from My Father*, describes his time as a community organizer in Chicago and makes it very clear that the religious resources of solidarity are absolutely necessary for bringing together a community. Although sceptical of religion at the onset of his work, he quickly learns that any community organizing effort will need to dwell upon the resources of the different churches.

¹⁵ “Die Vernunftmoral schärft unser Urteilsvermögen für die Verletzung individueller Ansprüche und individueller Pflichten und motiviert mit der schwachen Kraft guter Gründe auch zum moralischen Handeln.” (Habermas 2008: 97)

¹⁶ “Die säkulare Moral ist nicht von Haus aus in gemeinsame Praktiken eingebettet.” (Habermas 2008: 97)

¹⁷ Habermas does not claim that more solidarity results from religious consciousness. Moreover, he even doubts that this resource is still available: “If this is still the case today, that may be as it is.” (“Ob das heute noch der Fall ist, lasse ich dahingestellt.” (Habermas 2008: 98)

¹⁸ This task of rethinking the relation between religion and philosophy should happen in view of the Axial age, which brought about a shift from the myth to the logos. (“Ich halte es deshalb für sinnvoll, das Verhältnis von Philosophie und Religion mit einem Blick auf die Achsenzeit erneut zu prüfen.” Habermas 2008: 98)

¹⁹ In his essay, Habermas expresses this in strong language: “Gleichzeitig verfehlt die praktische Vernunft ihre eigene Bestimmung, wenn sie nicht mehr die Kraft hat, in profanen Gemütern ein Bewußtsein für die weltweit verletzte Solidarität, ein Bewußtsein von dem, was fehlt, von dem, was zum Himmel schreit, zu wecken und wachzuhalten.” (Habermas 2008: 30f.)

²⁰ “Die säkulare Vernunft muß sich fragen lassen, wo sie die eigenen Vernunftsgrenzen voreilig gezogen hat, so daß diese ihrer wirklichen Weite nicht entsprechen.” (Schmidt: 88)

²¹ “Die religiöse Seite muß die Autorität der ‘natürlichen’ Vernunft als die fehlbaren Ergebnisse der institutionalisierten Wissenschaften und die Grundsätze eines universalistischen Egalitarismus in Recht und Moral anerkennen. Umgekehrt darf sich die säkulare Vernunft nicht zum Richter über Glaubenswahrheiten aufwerfen.” (Habermas 2008: 27)