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Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere

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The tacit understanding of citizenship in the modern West has been secular. This is so despite the existence of state churches, presidents who pray, and a profound role for religious motivations in major public movements. The specifics of political secularism vary from case to case – separation of church and state in America, fairness in allocation of public support to different religious groups in India, *laïcité* and the exclusion of religious expression from even nonpolitical public life in France and at least at one time in Turkey.

In general, political secularism hinges on a distinction of public from private and the relegation of religion to the private side of that dichotomy. But of course political secularism is also influenced by secularism more generally, which has a myriad of meanings from belief that scientific materialism exhausts the explanation of existence to the view that values inhere only in human orientations to the world and not in the world itself to the notion that there is no world of transcendent meaning or eternal time that should orient people in relation to actions in the everyday world. Not least, the notion of secularization as an inevitable long-term cumulative decline in religion has also influenced thinking about religion and citizenship.

The main issue was once religious diversity. Faith was assumed, but conflicts of faith undermined political cohesion. Some governments sought national cohesion through religious conformity, others by accepting diversity but limiting the public role of religion. Today the issue is often faith itself. This arises not only with regard to public funding of religion but with the question of whether religious arguments have a legitimate place in

public debates. Participation in the political public sphere is a central dimension of citizenship, so restrictions on public debate are significant. Many liberals think restrictions on religious argumentation unproblematic, however, not only because of long habit but because they approach the public sphere with an ideal of rationality which seems to exclude religious arguments as irrational. The issue here is not simply whether any specific beliefs are true or false, but whether they are subject to correction and improvement through rational arguments appealing to logic and evidence in principle sharable by all participants. Arguments based on faith or divine inspiration don't qualify.

Regardless of one's opinion about the truth of religious convictions, this is a big issue for democratic citizenship. It bears directly on the extent to which one of the most fundamental of all citizenship rights is open to all citizens. It shapes the astonishment of Europeans at American politics with its public professions of faith and demonstrations of piety. Though American liberals are not astonished, many are embarrassed or anxious, indeed alienated from large parts of American public life (and skewed in their understanding because they seldom participate in discussions where religion is taken seriously). In other words, secularists propose a limit on religion in the public sphere, which they take to be a basis for equal inclusion, but at the same time insulate themselves from understanding religious discourse, practicing an ironic exclusion.

At the same time, restrictive conceptions of legitimate participation in the public sphere also shape European difficulties incorporating Muslim citizens. It is disturbing to many not simply that their religion is unfamiliar – though this is certainly a factor, or that it is associated at least in public understanding with terrorism, but that many are so actively religious. Europeans also have been surprised by the enduring prominence of

Catholicism, and startled by Polish proposals to include recognition of God and Christianity in the European basic law and by the fact that these were not without resonance elsewhere. Sometimes the anxieties about religious expression in public and anxieties about specific religions become mutually reinforcing, as in opposition to allowing the creation of an Islamic Cultural Center near the former World Trade Center site (the so-called “ground zero”) in New York.

Unreflective secularism distorts much liberal understanding of the world – encouraging, for example, thinking about global civil society that greatly underestimates the role of religious organizations, or imagining cosmopolitanism as a sort of escape from culture into a realm of reason where religion is of little influence. To get a handle on this, we need to look a bit further at how secularism has been understood – including how it has been tacitly incorporated into political theory, often as though it were simply the absence of religion rather than the presence of a particular way of looking at the world – or indeed, ideology. To move forward it is helpful to look at the recent and controversial effort of Jürgen Habermas to theorize a place for religion in the public sphere – after leaving it almost completely out of his famous study of the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. We will see not only a courageous effort but also some limits and problems that suggest work still to be done. Seeing religion as a fully legitimate part of public life is a specific version of seeing culture and deep moral commitments as legitimate – and indeed necessary – features of even the most rational and critical public discourse. Too often liberals understand these issues through a contrast between the local and the cosmopolitan in which culture is associated with the former and the latter is understood as an escape from it. But of course culture is not only that which separates

and locates but that which integrates and connects human beings. Public life at even the most cosmopolitan of scales is not an escape from ethnic, national, religious or other culture but a form of culture-making in which these can be brought into new relationships.

Religion in the Public Sphere

Religion appears in liberal theory first and foremost as an occasion for tolerance and neutrality. This orientation is reinforced by (a) the classification of religion as essentially a private matter, (b) an “epistemic” approach to religion shaped by the attempt to assess true and false knowledge; (c) the notion that a clear and unbiased distinction is available between the religious and the secular; and (d) the view that religion is in some sense a “survival” from an earlier era - not a field of vital growth within modernity. Each of these reinforcements is problematic. So while the virtues of tolerance are real, the notion that matters of religion can otherwise be excluded from the liberal public sphere is not sustainable.

The secularization story derives partly from an Enlightenment-rationalist view of religion as mere superstition and tradition inherited from the past without a proper ground in modernity. So even while religion had not disappeared as rapidly as many expected, a declining role in the public sphere made sense to many thinkers, because they regarded religion as a personal belief that could not properly be made subject to public discourse. It might be a reason for people’s political positions, but it was not the sort of reason that could be subjected to rational political debate. Therefore, liberal theorists have commonly suggested that religion should remain private or that religious arguments have a

legitimate place in the public sphere only to the extent that they can be rendered in (ideally rational) terms that are not specifically religious. In short, much liberal theory conceptualizes citizenship as essentially secular, even where citizens happen to be religious. It is as though theorists reworked the famous medieval notion of the king's two bodies – imagining citizens to exist distinctly in private and public realms.¹

This use of the public/private distinction to enforce a kind of secularism is embarrassingly reminiscent of the use of the same distinction to minimize not only women's political participation but also opportunities to put certain issues associated with the gendered private sphere on the ostensibly gender-neutral public agenda. Not surprisingly, whether there is an adequate place for religious argumentation and views in public life has increasingly been presented as an issue of inclusive citizenship. Given the prominence of religious people and voices in American politics, it is easy for secular academics to scoff at the notion that they are excluded and in most material senses they are not. But it is nonetheless striking how hard a time liberal political theory has had finding a place for religion – other than as simply the object of toleration.

Perhaps chafing at critiques from the right, some liberal theorists have been moved to recognize religious identities and practices as more legitimate in public life. After initially espousing a more straightforwardly secularist exclusion of religion from politics as an essentially private matter of taste, for example, John Rawls in his later work suggested that religiously motivated arguments should be accepted as publicly valid, but only insofar as they were translatable into secular claims not requiring any specifically

¹ See Ernest H. Kantorowitz, *The King's Two Bodies - A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

religious understanding.² In recent work that has surprised some of his followers, Jürgen Habermas recognizes that this discriminates. He suggests, moreover, that religion is valuable as a source and resource for democratic politics.³ They offer semantic potential, the potential for new meaning, not least to a political left that may have exhausted some other resources.

Habermas labels the present era, in which religion must be taken seriously, as “postsecular”. The term is potentially confusing. When, we might ask, was the secular age that we are now “post”? In his book, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor traces a set of transformations that gather speed from about 1500 and which by the mid-19th century issue in (a) an era when many people find conscious unbelief (not merely low levels of participation in institutional religion) to be normal, (b) an era when believers are challenged in compelling ways by both a plurality of beliefs and powerful achievements based on science and institutions not based on traditional religion, and (c) an era when states and other institutions recurrently demand a distinction between religion and “the

² John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

³ Page numbers in the following remarks refer to one of several overlapping texts Habermas published on “Religion in the Public Sphere,” *The Holberg Prize Symposium for 2005: Jürgen Habermas, Religion, and the Public Sphere* (Bergen: The Holberg Prize). Habermas’s thought has (as usual) continued to develop. See *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity 2008), and his contributions to Mendieta and VanAntwerpen, eds., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press 2011) and Calhoun, Mendieta, and VanAntwerpen, eds.: *Habermas and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity forthcoming). The continued development hasn’t stopped and a new book is on the way.

secular” (even though each may be hard to define). Taylor does not believe we have entered a post-secular age. On the contrary, he thinks that believers and non-believers alike must live within a secular age. He does not seek a return to some imaginary pre-secular orientation, but rather a recognition that everyone works with some evaluative commitments that are especially strong or deep and which put their other values into perspective, and that some of these legitimately transcend limits of scientific materialism.⁴ None of us actually escapes cultural and other motivations and resources for our intellectual perspectives; none of us is perfectly articulate about all our moral sources (though we may struggle to gain clarity). The import of this is that the line between secular and religious is not as sharp as many philosophical and other accounts suggest.⁵ On the one hand, religious people cannot escape the prominence and power of the secular in the modern world and on the other hand while the norms of secular argumentation may obscure deep evaluative commitments they do not eliminate them.

So the term “postsecularism” may be a bit of a red herring. I think we should not imagine that Habermas means simply a return of the dominance of religious ideas nor an end to the importance of secular reason. Rather, I think he is better read as suggesting the

⁴ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). Taylor sees frameworks of “strong evaluation” or orientations towards a “fullness” as basic not only for religious people but for everyone, including materialists and others who insist they act only on interests not values.

⁵ Taylor and Habermas explicitly disagree on this point (with some encouragement from me to clarify this) in their dialog in Mendieta and Vanantwerpen, eds., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, op cit., pp. 60-67. Taylor holds that many of the issues Habermas ascribes specifically to religious difference apply to deep cultural differences in general.

emergence of deep difficulties in holding to (a) the assumption that progress (and freedom, emancipation, and liberation) could be conceptualized adequately in purely secular terms and (b) the notion that a clear differentiation could be maintained between discourses of faith and those of public reason. Loss of confidence on these dimensions is challenging for liberalism. And it leads Habermas to wonder whether exclusion of religious argumentation from the public sphere may be impoverishing.

The notion of religion as somehow private has informed the modern era in a host of ways, mostly misleading but also constitutive of social practices and understandings. Religion simply was never in every sense private – any more than it was always conservative. On the contrary, the United States has seen successive waves of Great Awakenings, and arguably is seeing another now. The Social Gospel informed major dimensions of public discourse and action in the early 20th century. The Civil Rights Movement is inconceivable without black churches. Contrast with Europe is not new, having informed both Tocqueville and Weber after their travels in the US. But the Protestant Reformation was not the last time religion mattered in Europe. We should remember the anti-slavery movement and the influence of especially low-church Protestant religion on a range of other late 18th century and early 19th century social movements. We should note that many large-scale popular devotions, like pilgrimages to Lourdes, have relatively modern origins. We should not neglect the mid-19th century renewal of spiritualism, even if much of it was outside religious orthodoxy, and we should not lose sight of its fluid relationships with Romanticism, utopian socialism, and humanitarianism. We should see religious internationalism both under the problematic

structure of colonial and postcolonial missionary work and in the engagements shaped by Vatican II, the peace movement, and liberation theology.

Faith has thus figured frequently in modern public life, well before the current waves of Evangelicalism and Islam. Rather than a distinction of personal piety from more outward forms of religious practice, the ‘privacy’ of religion has been bound up with (a) the notion that religious convictions were to be treated as matters of implicitly personal faith rather than publicly authoritative reason, and (b) the idea of a separation from the state (which was as much a demand for states not to interfere as for particular religious views not to dominate states). In the former sense religious freedom could be recognized as a right, but it was implicitly always a right to be wrong or to have a peculiar taste, and thus not to have matters of faith arbitrated by the court of public opinion. In the latter sense, religion was private in something of the same sense that property was private: it could be socially organized on a large scale, but was still seen as a matter of individual right and in principle separate from affairs of state.

The Peace of Westphalia, for example, established a framework for seeing sovereignty as secular and religion as private (or essentially domestic) with regard to the relations among sovereigns. Bringing a series of partially religious wars to an end, it helped in 1648 to usher in an era of nationalism and building of modern states, as well as the very idea of international relations. The academic discipline of international relations, not least as it recast itself after World War II, incorporated this secularist assumption about states and their interests into its dominant intellectual paradigms. It requires a considerable effort today for international relations specialists to think of secularism as a substantive position on states rather than virtually a defining feature of states, as a

“something” rather than an “absence”. This reflects a wider tendency to see religion as a presence, and secularism as its absence. But of course secularisms are themselves intellectual and ideological constructs.

What issued from the 1648 Peace of Westphalia was not a Europe without religion, but a Europe of mostly confessional states, mandating an official religion with varying degrees of tolerance for others. The principle that reigned was still *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose region it is, his religion it is). Religion has never been essentially private.⁶ Rather, the Westphalian frame of discourse constructed a particular misrecognition of the way religion figured (or didn't) in public life. And if the Westphalian frame did this for international affairs, others did it domestically. Habermas's own account of the public sphere and its transformations, for example, pays almost no attention to religion. In this it extends a European Enlightenment tradition of imagining religion to be properly outside the frame of the public sphere.⁷ The

⁶ See, perhaps most notably on this, José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁷ This is a tradition associated with the Enlightenment, which certainly had powerful secularizing dimensions, but it is not altogether true to the historical Enlightenment which included a variety of religious reformers alongside the committedly anti-religious. One has only to ask if Swedenborg and followers such as William Blake really shared nothing with Enlightenment, or to consider the extent to which the Scottish Enlightenment included not just Hume's famous atheism but the effort of a number of churchgoers both to increase the role of reason and reflection and to minimize the purchase of “enthusiasm”. This tradition of reading the Enlightenment as always already radically secular leads also to a misleading

Enlightenment theorists did not so much not report on social reality, as seek to construct a new reality in which religion would be outside the frame of the public sphere. Kant's effort to reconstruct religion "within the limits of reason alone" was of course a challenge to the lived orientations of many religious people. If it respected a certain core of faith – "the *Eigensinn* of religion" – it did so only by excluding it from the realms of reason and the public sphere. Faith became available only on the basis of leaps beyond reason – as Kierkegaard recognized.

grasp of earlier history, as for example the vibrant public sphere of 17th century England doesn't figure in Habermas's account of the genesis of the late 18th century golden age of the public sphere. See David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) and "Religion, Science, and Printing" pp. 259-288 in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. C. Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992). It is worth noting that the petitions and sermons Zaret favors as examples reveal the extent to which it is not just religious ideas, matters of content, that figure in the genealogy of public reason but also religious practices and experiences. Reformation-era debates were part of the genesis of a rational-critical form of public reason, and throughout the time since, it has often in religious contexts that people learned to speak in public, and even to participate in reciprocal reason-giving (even if the reasons in question – like Bible quotations -- are not ones that secular rationalists find persuasive). Since the English translation of *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* appeared in 1989, identifying earlier and earlier public spheres or proto-public spheres has become a veritable cottage industry among English historians.

Religious Roots to Public Reason

As Habermas rightly notes, the very ideas of freedom, emancipation, and liberation developed in largely religious discourses in Europe and this continues to inform their meaning. This genealogy is not simply a matter of dead ancestry; the living meaning of words and concepts draws both semantic content and inspiration from religious sources. The word “inspiration” is a good example, and reminds us that what is at stake is broader than the narrowest meanings of politics and ethics and necessarily includes conceptions of the person that make meaningful different discourses of freedom, action, and possibility – and that shape motivation as well as meaning. What is at stake is also broader than measures of participation in formally organized religion, since a variety of ‘spiritual’ engagements inform self-understanding and both ethical and moral reasoning.

Religion is part of the genealogy of public reason itself. To attempt to disengage the idea of public reason (or the reality of the public sphere) from religion is to disconnect it from a tradition that continues to give it life and content. Habermas stresses the importance of not depriving public reason of the resources of a tradition that has not exhausted the semantic contributions it can make. Equally, the attempt to make an overly sharp division between religion and public reason provides important impetus to the development of counter or alternative or publics as well as less public and less reasoned forms of resistance to a political order that seeks to hold religion at arm’s length. Moreover, to exclude religion is arguably to privilege a secular middle class in many countries, a secular “native” majority in Europe, and a relatively secular white elite in the US in relation to more religious Blacks, Latinos, and immigrant populations.

Not only is there valuable content for public reason to gain if it integrates religious contributions, it is a requirement of political justice that public discourse recognize and tolerate but also fully integrate religious citizens. Official tolerance for diverse forms of religious practice and a constitutional separation of church and state are good, Habermas suggests, but not by themselves sufficient guarantees for religious freedom. “It is not enough to rely on the condescending benevolence of a secularized authority that comes to tolerate minorities hitherto discriminated against. The parties themselves must reach agreement on the always contested delimitations between a positive liberty to practice a religion of one’s own and the negative liberty to remain spared of the religious practices of others”.⁸ This agreement cannot be achieved in private. Religion, thus, must enter the public sphere. There deliberative, ideally democratic processes of collective will formation can help parties both to understand each other and to reach mutual accommodation if not always agreement.

Giving Reasons

Rawls’ account of the public use of reason allows for religiously motivated arguments, but not for the appeal to “comprehensive” religious doctrines for justification. Justification must rely solely on “proper political reasons” (which means mainly reasons that are available to everyone regardless of the specific commitments they may have to religion or substantive conceptions of the good or their embeddedness in cultural traditions). This is, as Habermas indicates, an importantly restrictive account of the

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the public sphere,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006), 5.

legitimate public use of reason – one which will strike many as not truly admitting religion into public discourse. It is in the nature of religion that serious belief is understood as informing – and rightly informing – all of a believer’s life. This makes sorting out the “properly political” from other reasons both practically impossible in many cases and an illegitimate demand for secularists to impose. Attempting to enforce it would amount to discriminating against those for whom religion is not “something other than their social and political existence”.⁹

While opening the rules of ordinary citizenship, Habermas seeks to maintain a strictly secular conception of the state. Legislators, thus, must restrict themselves to “properly political” justifications, independent of religion. Standing rules of parliamentary procedure “must empower the house leader to have religious statements or justifications expunged from the minutes”.¹⁰ Still, Habermas goes so far as to suggest that the liberal state and its advocates are not merely enjoined to religious tolerance but – at least potentially – cognizant of a functional interest in public expressions of religion. These may be key resources for the creation of meaning and identity; secular citizens can learn from religious contributions to public discourse (not least when these help clarify intuitions the secular have not made explicit).

In this “polyphonic complexity of public voices” the giving of reasons is still crucial. Public reason cannot proceed simply by expressive communication or demands

⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., 12. Habermas has partially but not completely relaxed this notion in subsequent discussions, speaking of explaining religious references in secular terms rather than expunging them. See Mendieta and Vanantwerpen, eds., *Power of Religion*, p. 64.

for recognition, though the public sphere cannot be adequately inclusive if it tries to exclude these. The public sphere will necessarily include processes of culture-making that are not reducible to advances in reason, and which nonetheless may be crucial to capacities for mutual understanding. But if collective will formation is to be based on reason, not merely participation in common culture, then public processes of clarifying arguments and giving reasons for positions must be central. Religious people like all others are reasonably to be called on to give a full account of their reasons for public claims. But articulating reasons clearly is not the same as offering only reasons that can be stated in terms fully “accessible” to the nonreligious.¹¹ Conversely, though the secular (or differently religious) may be called on to participate in the effort to understand the reasons given by adherents to any one religion, such understanding may include recognition and clarification of points where orientations to knowledge are such that understanding cannot be fully mutual. And the same goes in reverse. Since secular reasons are also embedded in culture and belief and not simply matters of fact or reason alone, those who speak from non-religious orientations are reasonably called on to clarify to what extent their arguments demand such non-religious orientations or may be reasonably accessible to those who do not share them.

In one sense, indeed, one could argue that a sharp division between secular and religious beliefs is available only to the nonreligious. While the religious person may

¹¹ See Schmidt’s discussion of the role of philosophy of religion (in “Reasonable Pluralism – Justified Beliefs: Religious Faith in a Pluralist Society,” unpublished ms) – though note that expectations for philosophy of religion must be different from expectations for the everyday discourse of civil society, even the public sphere of civil society at its most articulate.

accept many beliefs that others regard as adequately grounded in secular reasons alone – about the physical or biological world, for example – she may see these as inherently bound up with a belief in divine creation. This need not involve an alternative scientific view – like creationists’ claims that the world is much newer than most scientists think. It may rather involve embedding widely accepted scientific claims in a different interpretative frame, as revealing the way God works rather than absence of the Divine. She may also regard certain beliefs as inherently outside religion, but even if she uses the word “secular” to describe these, the meaning is at least in part “irreligious” (a reference to a different, non-religious way of seeing things and not simply to things ostensibly “self-sufficient” outside religion or divine influence).

Indeed, many struggles over the secular take place inside religions. Think for example of Opus Dei, the “secular institution” formed in the Catholic Church not as part of but alongside its normal hierarchy, sometimes with strong papal patronage. Opus Dei has a strong engagement with business elites and thus a larger affirmative relation to contemporary capitalism. This is a secular position, and one that puts Opus Dei at odds in many settings with more “progressive” priests. In Peru, for example, where Opus Dei has achieved an unusually strong position at the top of the ecclesiastical hierarchy – a majority of bishops – this occasions a struggle with parish priests, more of whom are informed by liberation theology and many of whom are engaged in practical social projects in tension with aspects of capitalism or ministering to (and perhaps bolstering the movements of) the poor who suffer in contemporary – secular – circumstances. Likewise, Evangelical Christians in the United States may debate whether to exploit or conserve what they regard as God’s Creation – a question about religious engagement with both

secular social activity (business, environmental movements) and material conditions in secular time (nature).

Translation and Transformation

For purposes of public discourse in a plural society, Habermas demands that the religious person consider her own faith reflexively, see it from the point of view of others, and relate it to secular views. Though this requires a cognitive capacity that not all religious people have, it is not one intrinsically contrary to religion and equivalent demands are placed on all citizens by the ethics of public discourse.¹² Interestingly, Habermas does not think the same demand will be equally challenging for the non-religious. This seems to be because he does not believe that they have deep, orienting value commitments not readily articulated as moral reasons. That is, Habermas seems to believe that in addition to their judgments of the issues at hand, and perhaps on a different level, religious people make a prior and less rational prejudgment but that the nonreligious are at least potentially free of such prejudgments, making only a variety of judgments.¹³ This seems a mistake. Both religious orientations to the world and secular,

¹² Which is not to say that religious people will always like being called to such reflexivity.

One might argue that the demands Habermas urges are similar to those Socrates posed in his questioning of Athenian youth – which did lead to charges of teaching impiety.

¹³ In *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), Charles Taylor described such strong moral commitments as involving “hypergoods” which set horizons that give perspective to other moral evaluations. While some people may regard themselves as viewing all potential goods equally – say as merely so many costs or benefits, pleasures of

“Enlightened” orientations depend on strong epistemic and moral commitments made at least partly prerationally.

In any case, the liberal state must avoid transforming “the requisite *institutional* separation of religion and politics into an undue *mental* and *psychological* burden for those of its citizens who follow a faith”.¹⁴ And with this in mind, Habermas also suggests that the non-religious bear a symmetrical burden to participate in the translation of religious contributions to the political public sphere into “properly political” secular terms – that is, they must seek to understand what is being said on in religious terms and determine to what extent they can understand it (and potentially agree with it) on their own non-religious terms. In this way, they will help to make ideas, norms, and insights deriving from religious sources accessible to all, and to the more rigorously secular internal discursive processes of the state itself.

This line of argument pushes against a distinction Habermas has long wanted to maintain between morality and ethics, between procedural commitments to justice and engagements with more particular conceptions of the good life.

We make a *moral* use of practical reason when we ask what is equally good for everyone; we make an *ethical* use when we ask what is respectively good for me or for us. Questions of justice permit under the moral viewpoint what all could will: answers that in principle are universally valid. Ethical questions, on the other

pains in a hedonistic calculus – in fact their reason typically does involve more or less unarticulated appeals to hypergoods – like, in this case, the primacy and autonomy of the experiencing individual. See also Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1974; orig. 1960) and Taylor’s dialog with Habermas in Mendieta and VanAntwerpen, eds., *Power of Religion*, 60-67.

¹⁴ Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 10.

hand, can be rationally clarified only in the context of a specific life-history or a particular form of life. For these questions are perspectively focused on the individual or on a specific collective who want to know who they are and, at the same time, who they want to be.¹⁵

Habermas does not abandon the pursuit of a context-independent approach to the norms of justice. But he does now recognize that demanding decontextualization – separation from substantive conceptions of the good life - as a condition for participation in the processes of public reason may itself be unjust.

Habermas wants to find a way to incorporate insights historically bound up with faith (and religious traditions) into the genealogy of public reason. He clearly sees faith as a source of hope, both in the sense of Kant's practical postulate that God must exist and in the sense that it can help to overcome the narrowness of a scientific rationalism always at risk of bias in favor of instrumental over communicative reason. He is prepared also to recognize that reason is not entirely self-founding, especially in the sense that it does not supply the contents of conceptions of the good on its own, but also in the sense that the historical shaping of its capacity includes religious influences that cannot be accounted for "within the bounds of reason alone".

This line of thought also raises questions about whether the idea of an autonomous epistemic individual is really viable. Are knowers so discrete? Is knowledge a property of knowers in this classical Cartesian sense? Or do human beings participate in processes of (perhaps always partial) knowledge creation or epistemic gain which are

¹⁵ Jürgen Habermas, "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World," in *Rationality and Religion: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002). The distinction is developed in many works and examined in detail in *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

necessarily larger than individuals? Habermas has already criticized the “philosophy of the subject” and argued for an intersubjective view.¹⁶ It is worth re-emphasizing this in relation to secularism, though, since individualist epistemology undergirds many secularist arguments. Two further questions are also opened which may prove challenging for efforts to preserve a strong understanding of (and wide scope for) context-independence and universality in moral reasoning. First, is a genealogical or language-theoretical reconstruction of reason adequate without an existential connection between social and cultural history on the one hand and individual biography on the other? Second, is “translation” an adequate conceptualization of what is involved in making religious insights accessible to nonreligious participants in public discourse (and vice-versa)?

The two questions are closely related, for the issue is how communication is achieved across lines of deep difference. Helpful as translation may be, it is not the whole story. Rawls uses the notion of translation to describe the ways in which the rational arguments of religious people are rendered accessible to secular interlocutors. This would appear to involve a kind of expurgation as well, the removal of ostensibly untranslatable (because irrational) elements of faith. But translation is also a common metaphor for describing communication across lines of cultural difference; indeed many anthropologists speak of their work as the “translation of culture”. Translation implies that differences between languages can be overcome without interference from deeper differences between cultures, or indeed from incommensurabilities of languages

¹⁶ Among a range of texts, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

themselves. It implies a highly cognitive model of understanding, independent of inarticulate connections among meanings or the production of meaning in action rather than passive contemplation.

But the idea of translating religious arguments into terms accessible to secular fellow-citizens is more complicated. To be sure, restricting attention to argumentative speech reduces the extent of problems because arguments are already understood to be a restricted set of speech acts and are more likely to be commensurable than some others. But the meaning of arguments may be more or less embedded in broader cultural understandings, personal experiences and practices of argumentation that themselves have somewhat different standing in different domains.

Bridging the kinds of hermeneutic distance suggested by the notion of having deeply religious and nonreligious arguments commingle in the public sphere cannot be accomplished by translation alone. Perhaps translation is not meant literally, but only as a metaphor for the activity of becoming able to understand the arguments of another – but that is already an important distinction. We are indeed more able to understand the arguments of others when we understand more of their intellectual and personal commitments and cultural frames (“where they are coming from” in popular parlance). In this regard Habermas sometimes signals a “mutual interrogation” or “complementary learning process” that is more than simply translation.¹⁷ This is important and true to his earlier emphasis on intersubjectivity. But this is still a very cognitive conception, and one

¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas, "Dialektik der Säkularisierung," *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 4'08 (2008): 33-46. See also Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization* (Fort Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 2007).

that implies parties to a discussion – perhaps a Platonic symposium - who arrive at new understandings without themselves being changed.¹⁸

Where really basic issues are at stake, it is often the case that mutual understanding cannot be achieved without change in one or both of the parties. By participating in relationships with each other, including by pursuing rational mutual understanding, we open ourselves to becoming somewhat different people. The same goes at collective levels: mutual engagement across national or cultural or religious frontiers changes the pre-existing nations, cultures, and religions, and future improvements in mutual understanding stem from this change as well as from “translation”. Sectarian differences among Protestants or between Protestants and Catholics are thus not merely resolved in rational argumentation. Sometimes they fade without resolution because they simply don’t seem as important to either side.¹⁹ A shifting context and changed projects of active engagement in understanding and forming intellectual and normative commitments changes the significance of such arguments (as for example when committed Christians feel themselves more engaged in arguments with nonChristians and the irreligious—including arguments with those who believe secular understandings are altogether sufficient—than they are in arguments with each other).

¹⁸ This is couple to a tendency to treat religion mainly as a matter of propositional contents rather than a mode of engagement with the world – prophetic, musical, poetic, prayerful - that exceeds any summarization in a set of truth claims. See my “Afterword” to Mendieta and VanAntwerpen, eds., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*.

¹⁹ See Thomas McCarthy, “Legitimacy and Diversity,” in Andrew Arato, eds., *Habermas on Law and Democracy* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998)

But a process of transformation in culture, belief, and self is also often involved. We become people able to understand each other.²⁰ This may improve our capacity to reason together, but the process of transformation is not entirely rational. It involves particular histories that forge particular cultural connections and commonalities.

Cultures of Integration

National traditions are examples. The Peace of Westphalia did not issue in a world of nation-states and of course the hyphen in ‘nation-state’ masked a variety of failures to achieve effective fit between felt peoplehood and political power, legitimacy and sovereignty. Rather national integration was achieved in processes of cultural integration – sometimes oppressive and sometimes creative – over the next two hundred years. The Westphalian settlement informed a process of continuing history in which national projects wove together particular cultural commonalities and collective processes of mutual understanding. This was not entirely a matter of reason and it is by no means entirely a happy history (for the era marked by the Peace of Westphalia led by way of both empire and nationalism to world wars). But at least many of the national projects that flourished after 1648, especially in Western Europe, produced histories and cultures that both integrated citizens across lines of religious difference and provided for “secular” discourse about the common good (where secular means not merely the

²⁰ See discussion in Craig Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory: Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), ch. 2. Such processes of historical transformation are not necessarily advances in reason; they are not necessarily symmetrical; and they are specific histories among multiple possible histories.

absence of religion but the capacity for effective discourse across lines of religious difference). National integration was a product of popular demands as well as elite domination. It is thus an interesting juxtaposition that Habermas's writings on a postsecular era should come on the heels of his considerations of a "postnational constellation".²¹ One might suggest that he is calling attention to the contemporary inadequacy of older national identities, traditions, and discursive frameworks to incorporating new religious discourses—and the need to forge new cultures of integration.²²

Such cultures of integration are historically produced bases for the solidarity of citizens. Whether they can be construed in evolutionary terms as "advances" in truth or only along some other dimension is uncertain. As Mendieta suggests, questions of religion crystallize the tension "between reason as a universal standard and the inescapable fact that reason is embodied only historically and in contingent social practices."²³ This bears on the nature of collective commitments to processes of public reason and the decisions they produce. The Rawlsian liberal model itself depends on a

²¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2000).

²² See Craig Calhoun, *Nations Matter* (London: Routledge, 2007) on the issue of cultures of integration, the reasons why older national solidarities continue to matter even while the production of new, potentially transcending patterns of integration is underway, and the reasons why transcending the older national solidarities is a matter of new but still historically specific solidarities not simply cosmopolitan universalism.

²³ Eduardo Mendieta, "Introduction" in *Religion and Rationality*, Jürgen Habermas (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 1.

“reasonable background consensus” that can establish the terms and conditions of the properly political discourse. Wolterstorff doubts whether this exists.²⁴ Habermas is more hopeful – and reason for hope seems strongest if what is required is only what Rawls called an “overlapping consensus” not a more universal agreement. Hope may be still greater if the overlapping consensus may be forged in multiple vernaculars, and out of cultural mixing not simply linguistic neutrality.²⁵ This suggests, however, that what is required is a practical orientation rather than an agreement as to the truth. This is precisely Wolterstorff’s (and Habermas’s) concern: “that majority resolutions in an ideologically divided society can at best yield reluctant adaptations to a kind of *modus vivendi*”.²⁶ A utilitarian compromise – based on the expectation of doing better in the next majority vote – is an inadequate basis for continuing solidarity where there is not merely a disagreement over shares of commonly recognized goods, but over the very idea of the good. “Conflict on existential values between communities of faith cannot be solved by compromise”.²⁷

This is of course a crucial reason why Habermas has held that we must separate substantive questions about the good life from procedural questions about just ways of ordering common life. I believe he retains the conviction that this separation is important

²⁴ Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 160.

²⁵ See Sheldon Pollock, “Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000) and Audi and Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square*, Chapter Four.

²⁶ Audi and Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square*, 13-14.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

and possible.²⁸ It is intrinsic to his support for constitutional patriotism. But it is challenged by recognition that for religious citizens to give reasons in terms “accessible” to secular citizens may be unjustly difficult or even impossible. And it is challenged further if one agrees that religious faith but also specificities of cultural traditions may make it difficult for citizens to render all that is publicly important to them in the form of criticizable validity claims.

Conflicts between world views and religious doctrines that lay claim to explaining man’s position in the world as a whole cannot be laid to rest at the cognitive level. As soon as these cognitive dissonances penetrate as far as the foundations for a normative integration of citizens, the political community disintegrates into irreconcilable segments so that it can only survive on the basis of an unsteady *modus vivendi*. In the absence of the uniting bond of a civic solidarity, which cannot be legally enforced, citizens do not perceive themselves as free and equal participants in the shared practices of democratic opinion and will formation wherein they *owe one another reasons* for their political statements and attitudes. This reciprocity of expectations among citizens is what distinguishes a community integrated by constitutional values from a community segmented along the dividing lines of competing world views.²⁹

The basic question is whether or how much commonalities of belief are crucial to the integration of political communities. How important is it for citizens to believe in the truth of similar propositions “explaining man’s position in the world”? At the very least, there are many other sources for the solidarity of citizens, from webs of social relations to

²⁸ For a relatively recent, nuanced, statement see Jürgen Habermas, “Norms and Values: On Hilary Putnam's Kantian Pragmatism,” in *Truth and Justification* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003 [1999]), 213-235.

²⁹ Ibid.

institutions and shared culture. Moreover, religion figures in these processes in ways that transcend 'beliefs'.³⁰

Conclusion

Rethinking the implicit secularism in conceptions of citizenship is important for a variety of reasons from academic soundness to practical fairness. It is all the more important because continuing to articulate norms of citizen participation that seem biased against religious views will needlessly drive a wedge between religious and nonreligious citizens. This would be most unfortunate at a time when religious engagement in public life is particularly active, and when globalization, migration, economic stresses and insecurity all make strengthening commitments to citizenship and participation in shared public discourse vital.

Rethinking secularism need not mean abandoning norms of fairness or state neutrality among religions. It does mean working through the debates of the public sphere to find common ground for citizenship, rather than trying to mandate the common ground by limiting the kinds of reason citizens can bring to their public discussions with each other.

³⁰ Taylor, somewhat surprisingly and for all his other differences with Habermas, also approaches religion very largely in terms of belief; see *A Secular Age*, op. cit.