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Jürgen Habermas on the (Non-)Translatability of Religious Meaning

Abstract

The relationship between religious faith and public reason has occupied an increasingly central role in Jürgen Habermas's mature work. Yet this recent engagement with questions of religious meaning also illuminates a significant area of development in Habermas's thought. While his earlier writings emphasized a need to subordinate religious beliefs to rational critique and to translate religious truth claims into publicly accessible forms of reasoning, his later writings signal a shift to a more cooperative understanding of religious faith and critical reason that highlights the ongoing potential of religion to advance rational discourse and social criticism in the public sphere. This essay traces this growing recognition of the irreducibility of religious meaning in Habermas's writings, and it attends to the non-translatable dimension of religious faith as a source of its ongoing contemporary significance.

> Nothing of theological content will persist without being transformed; every content will have to put itself to the test of migrating into the realm of the secular, the profane.
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> Adorno, *Reason and Revelation*[1]

> To articulate the past does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.
>
> Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*[2]

The critique of religious meaning, and the relationship between religious faith and public reasoning, has emerged as a central and organizing focus of Jürgen Habermas's recent work. With an output spanning more than five decades, Habermas's writings on positivism, philosophies of consciousness and language, and communicative rationality offer a host of direct and indirect insights into the potential of religious ideas and forms of learning as a source of moral and philosophical insight.[3] Yet in the course of his work, Habermas's position on the relationship of religious faith to critical reason has also undergone notable revision. Where his early work indicated a clear need to subordinate religious truth claims to reasoned public critique, his more recent writings highlight the ongoing potential of religious faith to meaningfully inform contemporary democratic discourse, a potential which he notes has grown particularly acute in the face of contemporary political crises and the threat of nationalistic violence. Moreover, in this later stage of his work, Habermas has also engaged in a number of critical

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1   T. Adorno, *Reason and Revelation*, in: E. Mendieta (ed.), *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*, New York 2005, p. 167.

2   W. Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in: E. Mendieta (ed.), *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, p. 267.

3   See, for example, his early essay *Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism: The Philosophical Historical Consequences of Schelling's Idea about the Contraction of God*, in: J. Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis*, Neuwied 1963; and Habermas's exploration of the interconnections of religion, social solidarity, and moral authority in *The Authority of the Sacred and the Normative Background of Communicative Action*, in: J. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2: *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. T. McCarthy, Boston 1987, p. 43–76.

dialogues with prominent religious figures and scholars of theology and religion, and his writings have indicated both a more cautious approach to overtly religious themes and a renewed willingness to attend to the intellectual and social claims of religious traditions.[4]

This trend in Habermas's writings signals an important shift in emphasis in his treatment of religion. His early work held to the secularization thesis prominent in discussions of social sciences in the 1970s and 1980s, which maintained that the relevance of religion would inevitably wane and pass away, and any rational content worth preserving would increasingly migrate into the sphere of philosophy or the social sciences.[5] His later writings, by contrast, reveal an ongoing reevaluation of religious ideas and practices, and of the potential for religious traditions to speak to pressing social challenges and political deficiencies in the contemporary age. This developing position on religion and public reason, and its apparent departure from the trajectory of his earlier critique, has sparked a renewed interest in Habermas's writings of religion. Some critics point to a "religious turn" in Habermas's later work.[6] Similarly, his seemingly newfound openness to religion has spurred on a variety of studies exploring possible intersections of this new dimension of Habermas's work with contemporary discussions in philosophy of religion and practical theology.[7] Other scholars, however, point

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4   See, for instance, Habermas's high profile exchange with Joseph Ratzinger, later to become pope Benedict xvi, in Habermas, *Ein Bewusstsein von dem, was fehlt*, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 10.02.2007; and J. Habermas, J. Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, San Francisco 2006. For a critical analysis of this exchange, see F. G. Lawrence, *Transcendence from Within: Benedict XVI and Jürgen Habermas on the Dialogue between Secular Reason and Religious Faith*, in: F. G. Lawrence, *The Fragility of Consciousness: Faith, Reason, and the Human Good*, R. S. Rosenberg, K. M. Vander Schel (eds.), Toronto 2017, p. 193–228. For a broader conversation between Habermas and scholars of religion and theology, see C. Calhoun, E. Mendieta, J. VanAntwerpen (eds.), *Habermas and Religion*, Malden 2013.

5   See J. Habermas, *Reply to My Critics*, in: C. Calhoun, E. Mendieta, J. VanAntwerpen (eds.), *Habermas and Religion*, p. 348–349; and J. Habermas, *Notes on a Post-Secular Society*, Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik, April 2008.

6   See M. Dillon, *Jürgen Habermas and the Post-Secular Appropriation of Religion: A Sociological Critique*, in: P. Gorski et al., (eds.), *The Post-Secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society*, New York 2012, p. 250.

7   For a helpful overview of theologians' engagement with Habermas's thought, see N. Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, New York 2006, p. 182–202; see also M. Junker-Kenny's book by the same title, *Habermas and Theology*, New York 2011.

to these recent shifts in Habermas's writings as illustrating a more gradual move from a general and at times one-sided treatment of religion to a more nuanced and open-ended analysis of the place of religion in the public sphere.[8]

This essay attends to this ongoing development of Habermas's critique of religion, particularly with regard to his recurring discussions of the "translatability" of religious meaning into secular or public discourse. While his early works pointed to the supercession of religious belief by public and generally accessible forms of reasoning, his later writings signal a pair of important shifts: first to the possibility of an abstemious co-existence of religious faith and critical reason; and finally to a genuine cooperation of religion and reason in advancing rational discourse and social criticism in the public sphere. These later writings continue to maintain the position that the rational insights and "semantic potential" of religion should be expressed as far as possible in the generally accessible categories of public reason. Yet Habermas also comes to recognize a limit to this capacity of public reason to capture and repurpose the insights of religious faith and locates the ongoing significance of religious traditions in their non-translatable character and their distinction from other philosophical and political forms of reasoning.

This evolving perspective reflects both Habermas's ongoing ties to the provocative social criticism of the early Frankfurt School and his own innovative theory of communicative action. Setting aside the presumption of progressive secularization as unable to adequately account for the complex trajectories and conflicts of modernity, his writings call for new frameworks for critical reflection on religious belief and a significant re-evaluation of the potential of religious faith and practice to inform responsible public discourse. In tracing the lines of Habermas's developing perspective on the role of religion in the public sphere, then, it will be helpful to first attend to the important background of his critique of religion in the early writings of the Frankfurt School.

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8   Eduardo Mendieta, for instance, argues Habermas's treatment of the relationship between religious meaning and philosophical or rational discourse is best examined in its development: "it would be unrealistic and absurd to approach Habermas's work without attending to its transformation over the past five decades." See E. Mendieta, *Appendix: Religion in Habermas's Work*, in: C. Calhoun, E. Mendieta, J. VanAntwerpen (eds.), *Habermas and Religion*, p. 392; on this point, see also M. Junker-Kenny, *Habermas and Theology*.

Habermas and the Frankfurt School on Religion

Behind Habermas's own treatments of religion lies a series of pro-vocative studies emerging from the writings of thinkers such as Ernst Bloch, Leo Löwenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Walter Benjamin. Against the backdrop of economic uncertainty of the interwar period, the dissolution of Weimar Republic, and rise of National Socialism, this eclectic group of thinkers carried out an ambitious and innovative program of interdisciplinary research and social criticism. The work of this "Frankfurt School," as it came to be called in the 1960s, centered in the Institute for Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*) founded in 1923 at the University of Frank-furt am Main.[9] The wide-ranging research trajectories of these early thinkers are difficult to summarize, yet together they engaged in ambi-tious and pioneering studies that would exercise a significant influence on subsequent critical studies in the humanities, spurring on the de-velopment of disciplines and forms of inquiry such as cultural studies, media studies, and philosophy of technology, and providing an impe-tus as well to a number of currents of poststructuralist and postmo-dern philosophy.[10] Scholars at the Institute, under the initial leadership

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[9] For a comprehensive overview of the development of the Frankfurt school and its principal figures, see Rolf Wiggerhaus's important volume, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, Cambridge 1986. Wiggerhaus notes that despite the common usage of the terms "Frankfurt School" and "Critical Theory" to-day, there was persistent disagreement among members of this institute regarding the meaning of both terms (see p. 1–8). In particular, Horkheimer and Adorno, often iden-tified as the central figures of the Frankfurt School, reflected notably different research trajectories.

[10] Michel Foucault comments: "If I had known about the Frankfurt School in time, I would have been saved a great deal of work. I would not have said a certain amount of nonsense and would not have taken so many false trails trying not to get lost, when the Frankfurt School had already cleared the way." Quoted in R. Wig-gerhaus, *The Frankfurt School*, p. 4. The name "Critical Theory," taken from a 1937 essay by Horkheimer on "Traditional and Critical Theory" indicated a diverse set of research strategies converging on social analysis, a critique of post-Enlightenment rationality, and the historical materialism inspired especially by early writings of Marx. Though it was understood somewhat differently by different members of the Institute, this critical attitude towards theory reflects a relentlessly self-reflexive posture of reason criticizing itself.

of Horkheimer and later Adorno, pursued an impressive array of interdisciplinary studies and social research, developing innovative and original studies of the culture industry, political economy, and social psychology. They also articulated an enduring philosophical orientation in "critical theory," which seeks to uncover the abridgements and pathologies of modern reason and to work toward the ongoing liberation from oppressive ideological forces and social structures.[11]

Further, drawing upon a unique blend of Hegelian Marxist philosophy and Jewish messianic thought, thinkers associated with this early Frankfurt School marshaled a trenchant critique of capitalism and the amalgamation of technology, the market, and mass culture that prevails in liberal democratic societies. Most fundamentally, they offered a thoroughgoing criticism of logical positivism and the idolization of scientific and technological progress, which ushers in a commodification of social life and reinforces the instrumentalized rationality of the modern age, "the period of docile masses governed by clocks."[12] Such false forms of consciousness not only prove de-humanizing but also signal a lingering susceptibility to violent and totalizing political regimes, in the "mysterious willingness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the spell of any despotism" and the "self-destructive affinity to nationalistic paranoia."[13] Informed by the social alienation many members experienced as Jews in the interwar period, this critical stance gained particular urgency with the rise of National Socialism in 1933, which drove its major figures into exile.[14]

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11   For a description of the widespread influence of this Critical Theory, see B. H. McLean, *Biblical Interpretation and Philosophical Hermeneutics*, New York 2012, p. 199–208. This critical approach also informs the move from concern with metaphysics to studies focused on future emancipation from unjust and alienating social structures. In the words of Ernst Bloch: "The forward-look has replaced the upward-look." See E. Bloch, *Hunger, "Something in a Dream", "God of Hope", Thing-For-Us*, in: E. Mendieta (ed.), *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, p. 50.

12   M. Horkheimer, *Theism and Atheism*, in: E. Mendieta (ed.), *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, p. 222.

13   M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. G. Schmid Noerr, trans. E. Jephcott, Standford 2002 [1987], xvi.

14   The Institute was first temporarily transferred to Geneva and then to Columbia University in New York. In 1941, Horkheimer moved to the Pacific Palisades, near Los Angeles, where he lived in close proximity to other exiled German intellectuals such as Bertold Brecht and Thomas Mann. Adorno followed shortly thereafter. Walter Benjamin, however, refusing to leave Europe, committed suicide at a border

Within this broad field of inquiry, the critique of religion emerged as a recurrent and animating theme. Though proceeding with a methodological skepticism and maintaining a critical distance toward religious dogmas and institutions,[15] thinkers of the early Frankfurt School opposed the simplistic secular narrative of Enlightenment reason overcoming religion and recognized the enduring potential of religion to motivate resistance and transformative action in the face of oppressive political systems. Religious traditions present promise and yearning, providing common language for addressing hopes and discontents and preserving forms of recollection that are neither exhausted by nor reducible to other aspects of modern culture. Religion thus has the capacity to form a powerful engine of social critique, able to unmask reigning structures of domination, delusion, and oppression. It provides a renewable and inexhaustible "lexicon of transcendence" that gives expression to vital human longing, although this yearning itself continually needs to be rescued from its reification and deformation in doctrines and institutions through ongoing criticism.[16]

In this fashion, the first generation of the Frankfurt School expressed a sharp critique of religion as expressed in belief systems and political institutions, and especially as a product of modern culture, while also maintaining an awareness of the power of religion to fund and animate transformative social action. Such a critique thus seeks not to overcome religious faith as outmoded superstition but to recover it as a vibrant source of social criticism. In the longing for redemption and openness to transcendence, religion proves a resilient and destabilizing force against destructive claims to totality. In this

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crossing between France and Spain. For a detailed description of this period of exile, see R. Wiggerhaus, *Flight*, *The Frankfurt School*, p. 127–148.

15   See T. Adorno, *Reason and Revelation*, in: E. Mendieta (ed.), *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, p. 173: "[…] I see no other possibility than an extreme ascesis toward any type of revealed faith, an extreme loyalty to the prohibition of images, far beyond what this once originally meant."

16   E. Mendieta, *Introduction: Religion as Critique*, in: E. Mendieta (ed.), *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, p. 9. Such ongoing criticism is the object of Adorno's negative, "inverse theology," a distinctive brand of philosophically-informed apophaticism. On this negative dimension of critical reason in Adorno's thought, see C. C. Brittain, *Adorno and Theology*, New York 2010, p. 83–113; and P. E. Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*, Cambridge 2016, p. 120–157.

vein, for instance, Ernst Bloch speaks of "the radical, subversive dream of the Bible" and the continuing significance of discourse about God, which serves to indicate the problem of the radically new and absolutely redemptive, that which is not just hidden but also not yet – still coming to be.[17] In similar fashion, Horkheimer points to "an entirely Other" and "the thought of something other than the world," which can arrest the glorification of scientific and technological progress and through which the injustices and wounds of history might be given their voice. "Without God one will try in vain to preserve absolute meaning."[18] Yet at the same time, as Adorno insists, "…God, the Absolute, eludes finite beings."[19] Such yearned-for religious truth, then, can never be adequately captured in thought or reliably served by social institutions but must be ever subject to negation and ongoing criticism.[20]

In this sense, a productive tension exists between religious faith and secular reason, and the relation between them resists any final resolution. Instead, in the face of the pathological distortions of modern society, religion provides a reservoir of humanity's recollection of injustice and longing for reconciliation. Religious practices and forms of thought retain the crucial awareness that "something is missing."[21]

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17   E. Bloch, *Hunger, "Something in a Dream," "God of Hope," Thing-For-Us*, p. 50; and E. Mendieta, *Introduction: Religion as Critique*, p. 16, n. 24.

18   M. Horkheimer, *Theism and Atheism*, p. 220–223, at 221, 223.

19   T. Adorno, *Sacred Fragment: Schoenberg's Moses and Aron*, in: *Quasi Una Fantasia*, trans. R. Livingston, London 1992, p. 226. Quoted in E. Mendieta, *Introduction: Religion as Critique*, p. 10.

20   The work of Bloch captures this tension. He writes: "Where there is hope there is religion, but where there is religion there is not always hope…" (E. Bloch, *Hunger, "Something in a Dream," "God of Hope," Things-For-Us*, p. 50); and again, "Only an atheist can be a good Christian; only a Christian can be a good atheist" (E. Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*, trans. J. T. Swann, New York 1972, p. 9).

21   The description of religion as an "awareness of what is missing," which Habermas chose as a title for a later 2008 essay, alludes to this treatment of religion in the work of Bloch and Adorno. See M. Reder, J. Schmidt, *Habermas and Religion*, in: J. Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, trans. C. Cronin, Malden 2012, p. 11, n. 5.

Early Habermas on Religion and Reason

Habermas own work carries on many of the features of the early Frankfurt School's critique of religion.[22] In 1956, following the return of Adorno and Horkheimer from their exile in United States, he became Adorno's assistant at the newly reopened Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt. He would later become a professor of philosophy and sociology at Frankfurt in 1964 and director of the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg in 1971. These appointments provided him a platform to develop a modified version of the Institute's interdisciplinary research program, developing a distinctive research trajectory that differed from critical approaches of both Horkheimer and Adorno.[23]

As with the figures of the first-generation Frankfurt School, Habermas's own early writings do not reject religion outright but recognize its enduring importance for meaningful social criticism. Yet these initial studies, which focused on a critique of positivism and the de-historicized philosophy of consciousness,[24] also struck a more confident tone concerning the ability of human reason to engage and salvage the insights of religion. In the sporadic and indirect treatments of religion during the first decades of his work, Habermas maintained that while religious insights are not to be dispensed with by philosophy, they find continuing validity only through their transference into rational and secular discourse. Accordingly, religious traditions, ideas, symbols must be interpreted and justified, their sacred meanings opened up to rational and discursive treatment. Thus, for example, values from the Judeo--Christian tradition such as the dignity of persons, freedom, liberation from oppression, and communal solidarity are transposed into a field of discourse which finds its justification not in standards of faith but

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22   On the question of continuity or discontinuity between Habermas and the early Frankfurt School, see E. Mendieta, *Appendix: Religion in Habermas's Work*, p. 392–395; and F. Dallmayr's review of J. Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity* (MIT Press, 2012), Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews, 5.02.2003, http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23259-religion-and-rationality-essays-on-reason-god-and-modernity/.

23   See M. Junker-Kenny, *Habermas and Theology*, p. 1–2. Habermas's research into social action and language theory helped to define the research objectives of the 'second generation' of scholars at the Institute.

24   See E. Mendieta, *Appendix: Religion in Habermas's Work*, p. 392–395.

in persuasive arguments and publicly accessible claims of reason based on valid factual knowledge. Through such rational analysis and intellectual exchange, these meanings become open and explicit as binding and consensual moral norms. Moreover, Habermas makes clear that this labor of translation applies not only to broader moral attitudes and values but extends even to explicitly religious concepts. His 1973 work *Legitimation Crisis* asserts, "The idea of God is transformed (*aufgehoben*) into a concept of a *Logos* that determines the community of believers and the real life-context of a self-emancipating society."[25] And again, in a 1974 lecture, he claims: "God indicates only approximately a structure of communication," which forces one to look beyond merely contingent existence.[26]

Used in this manner, the term "God" is far removed from any cultic practices and no longer indicates a personal being nor functions as the object of private or communal devotion. It serves instead to name that which gives coherence, unity, and depth of meaning to communal human interaction and to the potential for human progress. Consequently, in Habermas's early works, the very idea of God, as with other religiously elaborated symbols and meanings, admits of some translation into a regulative concept that indicates broader norms for social interaction. This emphasis on the transposition of religious meaning, or the "linguistification of the sacred" (*die Versprachlichung des Sakralen*),[27] would find its clearest expression in Habermas's subsequent treatments of communicative action and discourse theory.

Religion and Communicative Action

Habermas's ground-breaking 1981 work *The Theory of Communicative Action* outlines an innovative analysis of rationality and human agency as grounded in dialogue and social interaction. The study presents

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25   J. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, Boston 1975, p. 121.

26   J. Habermas, *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus*, Frankfurt am Main 1974, p. 101.

27   J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, p. 77. This "linguistification of the sacred," which centers on the logic of secularization, follows Habermas's broader project of the "linguistification of social theory" in the 1970s, which culminated in his *Theory of Communicative Action*. See E. Mendieta, *Appendix: Religion in Habermas's Work*, p. 395–397.

a notable transition away from a focus on philosophical anthropology and hermeneutics towards intersubjectivity, structures of social action, and language theory, and it establishes the theory of communicative rationality for which Habermas is best known.[28] The lines of inquiry established in this seminal work also set the stage for later modifications to his early treatment of religion.

Habermas locates a point of departure for this new approach to rationality in human intersubjectivity and the cooperative relationships of dialogue and exchange that constitute human communities. Developing an adequately critical theory of social action, he argues, demands a paradigm shift from the transcendental framework of the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language.[29] Whereas philosophical explorations of consciousness often begin with the solitary autonomous individual set over against the outside world – and the resultant dualism between subject and object – the turn to language theory recognizes the conscious self as already constituted by shared cultural references and communal interactions, and situated within an ongoing process of social learning. Thus, human rationality is inescapably communicative. It is rooted in dialogue and oriented toward the shared search for understanding. Likewise, meaningful social action is "communicative action." It proceeds through discourse in the public realm, in which persons strive to reach mutual understanding and base their behaviors on binding consensual norms. Such ongoing discourse shapes the "lifeworld" of communities – the common assumptions and "background knowledge" enshrined in cultural meanings, self-understandings, and social values, and it forms the locus for both social progress and social critique.[30] Philosophical reasoning is thus displaced from

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28 For a helpful comparative treatment of Habermas's understanding of communicative rationality, set in contrast with the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, see B. H. McLean, *Biblical Interpretation and Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 210–226.

29 See J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1: *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. T. McCarthy, Boston 1981, especially chapters 1 and 3.

30 J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, p. 13, and p. 335–337; and vol. 2, p. 119–153. The language of "lifeworld" is adopted from Edmund Husserl, who uses it to distinguish the natural and pre-theoretical orientation of ordinary or everyday living from the theoretical and objectifying perspective of the natural sciences. For Habermas, the lifeworld indicates the intersubjectively shared horizon of background knowledge, constituted by common life-relations and spheres of sociality such

the "I" of the transcendental subject to the plural "we" that functions as the subject of an unending conversation.

With regard to method, this shift to language theory offers distinct pragmatic advantages. Where the philosophy of consciousness often tends toward solipsistic introspection, the philosophy of language is oriented to public exchange, rational cooperation, and mutual understanding. Accordingly, this paradigm shift entails a further move from metaphysical to "postmetaphysical" thinking.[31] Rather than holding to timeless principles or invariant structures of thought, reason advances modestly and incrementally as theoretical and practical validity claims – each embedded in a particular historical and linguistic context – are further tested and modified through dialogue and argument. This discursive orientation also provides the basis for Habermas's conception of discourse ethics, developed in his 1983 work *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action,* which anchors moral norms in the practice of dialogue and search for consensus between free and equal participants.[32]

Within these works, Habermas's early position on the translatability of religious meaning is expanded. In his *Theory of Communicative Action*, religion is treated broadly and in functionalist terms. Drawing especially from Emile Durkheim's analysis of sacred symbols and norms established and regenerated in communal ritual practice, Habermas suggests that communicative action effects a disenchantment of the domain of the sacred by releasing the normative and rational potential of religious practices into the publically accessible language.[33] In its relation to such communicative rationality, the significance of religion is effectively provisional, as the lure of the sacred, "the *spellbinding* power

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as household and culture, which are prior to institutions or structures of an action "system" that organizes patterns of strategic or instrumental action.

31   On this turn to postmetaphysical thinking, see J. Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. W. M. Hohengarten, Cambridge, MA 1996, especially chapter 3, *Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking*, p. 28–56.

32   See J. Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Ch. Lenhardt, Cambridge 2001. For an overview of Habermas's discourse ethics, see W. Rehg, *Insight and Solidarity: The Discourse Ethics of Jürgen Habermas*, Los Angeles 1997.

33   See J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, v.3: *The Rational Structure of the Linguistification of the Sacred*, p. 77–112. See also N. Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, p. 66–91.

of the holy, is sublimated into the *binding/bonding* force of criticizable validity claims."[34] Here again, Habermas recognizes religion as a catalyst for social development, as it drives communities toward solidarity and instills universal moral norms. Nonetheless, he argues, the archaic forms of religious solidarity must give way to generally available forms of rationality: "the socially integrative and expressive functions that were at first fulfilled by religious practice pass over to communicative action; the authority of the holy is gradually replaced by the authority of an achieved consensus."[35] Within this theory of communicative action, then, religion occupies a transitional role, as a developmental phase in the growth of modern, democratic societies.[36] Indeed, in his short work *The New Conservatism* (*Die neue Unübersichlichkeit*), published several years before in 1985, he suggests the possibility that "after the religious world views have collapsed" nothing of explicitly religious truth claims will remain other than the "secular principles of universalist ethics of responsibility."[37]

Yet scattered remarks in this period also offer more cautious and positive appraisals of the ongoing significance of religious meaning, pointing to religious traditions as vital resources for human living, whose hidden potential must be sought out and understood.[38] "Among the modern societies," Habermas writes in a tribute to his friend Gershom Scholem, "only those that are able to introduce into the secular domain the essential contents of their religious traditions which point beyond the merely human realm will also be able to rescue the substance of the human."[39]

Habermas would further develop this insight in subsequent writings. In the course of his ongoing work on morality and political theory from the late 1980s through the 1990s, he began to modify his position on the relation of religion and communicative rationality and

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34   J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, p. 77. Emphasis in original.

35   J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, p. 77.

36   M. Reder, J. Schmidt, *Habermas and Religion*, p. 5.

37   J. Habermas, *Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World*, in: Don S. Browning, F. Schüssler Fiorenza (eds.), *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, New York 1992, p. 237.

38   M. Reder, J. Schmidt, *Habermas and Religion*, p. 5.

39   J. Habermas, *Politik, Kunst, Religion: Essays über zeitgenössische Philosophen*, Stuttgart 1978, p.142.

to attend more carefully to the unique contributions of religious insight. On one hand, he continued to maintain that communicative rationality and postmetaphysical thinking have no need for a transcendent God as a guarantor of meaning or normative moral claims. To the contrary, he maintained, transcendence is built into linguistic exchange of communicative reason. In this respect, "postmetaphysical thought differs from religion in that it recovers the meaning of the unconditional without recourse to God or an Absolute."[40] Moreover, within this postmetaphysical context, religious truth claims still must undergo a process of "translation," as the meaning of religious practices, experiences, and beliefs has to be coded in the language of an expert culture, and organized according to standards outside the self-understanding of these communities.[41] On the other hand, Habermas also acknowledges in this period that religious practices retain meanings and values that cannot be usurped or replaced by philosophy, and which offer an important source both of untrammeled hope and solace: "philosophy cannot provide a substitute for the consolation whereby religion invests unavoidable suffering and unrecompensed injustice, the contingencies of need, loneliness, sickness, and death, with new significance and teaches us to bear them."[42] Further, he notes, religious traditions preserve powerful forms of recollection and give witness

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40   J. Habermas, *To Seek to Salvage Unconditional Meaning without God is a Futile Undertaking: Reflections on a Remark of Max Horkheimer*, in: J. Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, Cambridge 2002, p. 108.

41   See J. Habermas, *A Reply*, in: J. Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What is Missing*, p. 79. See also J. Habermas, *Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World*, p. 227. In part, Habermas notes, this project reflects the legacy of Hegelian thought, as the "sublation of the world of religious representation in the philosophical concept" also entails "the saving of its essential contents only by casting off the substance of its piety" (p. 227). Yet the demands of postmetaphysical thinking also lead on to different paths, with the focus falling on language and communication, not just or primarily concerning specific religious ideas but also meaning as embedded in ritual exchanges and communal interactions. Here, in language reminiscent of Kant's "kingdom of ends," the transcendence that is from within and in the world is that which points beyond limitations of respective historical and cultural standpoints to anticipate an "unlimited community of communication" (p. 237), "universal covenant of fellowship," or "solidarity among human beings who acknowledge one another unconditionally" (p. 238).

42   J. Habermas, *To Seek to Salvage Unconditional Meaning without God is a Futile Undertaking: Reflections on a Remark of Max Horkheimer*, p. 108.

to understandings of transcendence that strive to realize "this worldly goals of human dignity and social emancipation."[43]

In this regard, in the wake of his work on communicative action, Habermas's writings display a growing recognition that religious faith possesses a distinctive competency that is not matched or supplanted by other forms of philosophical or rational inquiry, and which cannot simply be translated into public reason without remainder. The inspiring contents and insights belonging to religion, insofar as they elude comparable expression in philosophical or generalized rational discourse, can neither be replaced nor repressed.[44] Therefore, "as long as no better words for what religion can say are found in the medium of rational discourse," communicative reason should "coexist abstemiously" with religion, "neither supporting it nor combatting it."[45]

Religious Faith and Public Discourse

Habermas's more recent writings have deepened and advanced this constructive engagement with religion. Since the turn of the century, he has produced a growing series of lectures and essays on the continued importance of religion in the public sphere – a subject, he notes, that takes on special urgency in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and amidst the ongoing threat of global terrorism.[46] These studies include considerations of human nature in light of advances in genetic engineering and biotechnology (*The Future of Human Nature*, 2003), inquiries into the growing clash of religions and the rise of fundamentalist forms of thought (*Between Naturalism and Religion*, 2008), his prominent public debates with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger,

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43   J. Habermas, *Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World*, p. 227.

44   See J. Habermas, *Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World*, p. 237; repeated from Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, Frankfurt am Main 1985, p. 60: "As long as religious language bears within itself inspiring, indeed, unrelinquishable semantic contents which elude (for the moment?) the expressive power of a philosophical language and still await translation into a discourse that gives reasons for its positions, philosophy, even in its postmetaphysical form, will neither be able to replace nor to repress religion."

45   J. Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, p. 145.

46   J. Habermas, *Faith and Knowledge*, in: J. Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, trans. H. Beister, W. Rehg, Malden 2003, p. 101.

later to become pope Benedict xvi (*Dialectics of Secularization*, 2006), and several published responses to critical dialogues of his work on religion.[47]

These later writings offer an important corrective to Habermas's earlier approach by disconnecting his theory of communicative action from the secularization thesis that insisted on the inevitable demise of religion.[48] Together with his call to postmetaphysical thought, Habermas's ongoing work on religion and reason highlights the increasing importance of shifting to a "postsecular" understanding of society, a recognition that religious voices have not fallen away but continue to play a vital role in western societies and on the global political stage. Not only do "religious communities continue to exist in a context of ongoing secularization," but they also stand to offer an important contribution to contemporary democratic discourse.[49] Such religious traditions, he suggests, are not merely to be tolerated as lingering remnants of archaic or irrational forms of thought; rather, properly critical religious interpretations of self and world have an "equal claim to recognition" in the public discourse of democratic societies.[50] While maintaining the priority of postmetaphysical thinking, Habermas thus points to the need to avoid the threat of fundamentalist thinking on both sides: the rigidity of a religious orthodoxy that permits no challenges from secular reason and the equally intolerant forms of scientistic fundamentalism that insist upon a naturalistic worldview and dogmatically reject all religious claims to validity.[51]

Within this postsecular context, Habermas still calls for a process of translation between religious faith and reason. Viewed apart from their original faith context, religious beliefs and practices can only command general public assent on the basis of criticizable validity claims. Significantly, however, Habermas casts this project no longer as a one-sided effort but as a mutually reciprocal and cooperative task of learning

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47   See J. Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*; J. Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. C. Cronin, Malden 2008; J. Habermas, *Dialectics of Secularization*; Habermas, *An Awareness of What is Missing*; and C. Calhoun, E. Mendieta, J. VanAntwerpen (eds.), *Habermas and Religion*.

48   M. Junker-Kenny, *Religion and Public Reason: A Comparison of the Positions of John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, and Paul Ricoeur*, Berlin 2014, p. 151.

49   J. Habermas, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 104.

50   J. Habermas, *Reply to My Critics*, p. 348.

51   J. Habermas, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 114–117.

and conversation. Religions, he acknowledges, have a still-unexhausted potential that provides important and provocative contemporary resources of meaning. They are not reducible to general ethical perspectives or to insights into the fullness or flourishing of an individual life. Instead, in the face of pressing global challenges, religious traditions possess distinctive strengths that have not been matched by other voices in the public sphere. They have the capacity to engender forms of social solidarity that can confront the de-humanizing power structures of market-driven globalization, to give voice to the vulnerability and powerlessness of the oppressed poor, and – amidst the growing commodification of human life in contemporary popular culture – to insist upon the ineradicable dignity of human beings and their freedom for self-determination.[52] In this sense, "religious traditions perform the function of articulating an awareness of what is lacking or absent. They keep alive a sensitivity to failure and suffering."[53] This "an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven," offers a crucially stubborn source of resistance to the self-destructive tendencies of rationalization and the social pathologies of modernity.[54]

Nevertheless, this religious potential for regeneration and resistance must be mediated through language and developed and tested in deliberate discourse. As Habermas notes, "it makes a difference whether we speak with one another or merely about one another."[55] In pluralistic and democratic societies, secular and religious citizens alike participate in the public sphere through reasoned critique and dialogue. Yet while both are called to join the interdisciplinary venture of reimagining and rearticulating the core convictions at the heart of political society, the foundation for this cooperative discourse remains the generally accessible reasons of public validity claims, an arena in which the appeal to personal religious experience remains inadmissible.

Consequently, for Habermas, properly critical reason must retain an ambivalent attitude toward religious faith, with a stance that is at once receptive and cautious. While religious faith may be open to and may nourish the pursuit of understanding, as indicated by the well-worn catchword *fides quaerens intellectum*, it nonetheless also remains

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52 J. Habermas, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 114–115.
53 J. Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, p. 6.
54 J. Habermas, *An Awareness of What is Missing*, p. 19.
55 J. Habermas, *An Awareness of What is Missing*, p. 16.

at root opaque to public and generalizable forms of rationality. It possesses a core that is not open to translation. The insights of religious faith, then, cannot be fully tranferred into public discourse. Rather, religious and non-religious perspectives present complementary intellectual formations and learning processes: "postmetaphysical thinking can relate to religion in a way that is *at the same time* agnostic and ready to learn. Faith retains something opaque for knowledge which can neither be denied nor just ignored. Secular reason insists on the difference between certainties of faith and publicly criticizable validity claims, yet abstains from a theory which judges the rationality or irrationality of religion as a whole."[56]

In this respect, Habermas maintains that religious faith holds continued promise for contemporary political society, offering meaningful contributions that cannot be dissolved or fully transferred into secular forms of reason. Yet believers and religious thinkers remains obligated to enter into the conversation with the broader intellectual community, and to explicate and set forth these positions in the publicly accessible language of rational discourse. The boundaries between "secular" and "religious" reasons are therefore fluid. And thus "[d]etermining these disputed boundaries should … be seen as a cooperative task which requires *both* sides to take on the perspective of the other one."[57]

Conclusion: The View From Afar

As this brief overview indicates, Habermas's critique of religion, and his treatment of the relationship between reason and religious faith, displays a gradual but notable developmental progression. Though his early works portrayed communicative reason and postmetaphysical thinking as superceding the role of faith, he subsequently began to emphasize their lasting complementarity, and his more recent writings outline a further basis for a cooperative and constructive dialogue between religious faith and secular reason. This development both signals important features of Habermas's own mature thought on religion

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56 See J. Habermas, *An Awareness of What is Missing*, p. 18: "Faith remains opaque for knowledge in a way which may neither be denied nor simply accepted."

57 J. Habermas, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 109 (emphasis in original).

and highlights several notable implications for ongoing conversations of religious faith in contemporary public discourse.

Habermas's progressing critical engagement with religion first of all highlights the distinctive dialogical posture of his thought. Throughout his career, Habermas has exhibited a salutary willingness to engage in sincere dialogue with religious thinkers and sympathetic scholars of religion, even while consistently maintaining his own position of "methodological atheism."[58] Not only as a matter of theory, but also performatively, his works underscore the importance of ongoing dialogue with religion and an openness to allowing one's positions be tested and refined through discussion: "Once we open ourselves to a dialogue we become caught up in its embrace."[59] This recognition of the ongoing need for dialogue highlights an important aspect of the self-limitations of critical reason, and Habermas has repeatedly displayed a readiness to modify and amend his treatments, to correct over-hasty assumptions, entertain new ideas, or clarify or expand older positions.[60]

Beyond this emphasis on the continuing importance of dialogue, however, Habermas's later treatments of religion also suggest something of a return to the insightful critiques of religion outlined by the early Frankfurt School. He acknowledges an enduring prophetic potential of religious traditions in their capacity for disruptive forms of recollection and remembrance that resist the forgetting concealed in modern rationalization and historicization of the past. Such remembering brings to heightened awareness the irrepressible demands for justice and solidarity that are absent in contemporary societies. As he notes in an essay reflecting on the contributions of the Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz, "remembrance preserves from decay things we regard as indispensable and which are in extreme danger."[61] These acts of recollection carry potential to drive dialectical reflection on the abridgements of reason and the decay that follows modern progress, but they also cultivate a sensitivity to the need for liberation from situations of misery and oppression, gesturing to "a community, which would entwine freedom

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58 See J. Habermas, *Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World*, p. 226–227; and J. Habermas, *Reply to My Critics*, p. 352–357.

59 J. Habermas, *A Reply*, p. 72.

60 J. Habermas, *Reply to My Critics*, p. 347.

61 J. Habermas, *Israel or Athens? Where does Anamnestic Reason Belong? Johannes Baptist Metz on Unity amidst Multicultural Plurality*, in: J. Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, p. 132.

and solidarity within the horizon of an undamaged intersubjectivity."[62] Even apart from the otherworldly promise of salvation, then, these cultures of remembrance can keep open a restless and passionate questioning toward the justice and solidarity which are lacking in "a world flattened out by empiricism, and rendered normatively mute."[63]

Further, Habermas recognizes the potential of religious traditions to meet a peculiar and recurring "political deficiency" existing in modern democratic societies, which stems from the individualistic orientation of contemporary forms of ethical thinking.[64] Amidst the emerging challenges of multicultural and global society, increased opportunities for national and international conflict, and the systematic and structural injustices that trail modern economic and technological growth, he notes, the public institutions and routine modes of social cooperation established in democratic societies have often proven themselves unable to offer an adequate collective response. Indeed, the enormity of such difficulties requires a thoroughgoing "shift" in "the parameters of the range of values" in political and social discussion, away from merely individual duties and responsibilities and toward solidarity and collective action that strives for liberating justice.[65] Faced with this challenge, practicing religious communities may thus offer some hope of motivating those crucial forms of shared action and enduring social movements which are especially required in times of social crisis yet conspicuously absent in contemporary western democratic societies, calling forth inspiring social countercurrents that are rooted in social solidarity and the promise of redemptive justice.[66]

Significantly, however, Habermas notes that this capacity of religious faith to offer prophetic and poignant social criticism and to mobilize collective resistance to social pathologies turns in an important respect on its untranslatable character. Precisely because religious

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62   J. Habermas, *Israel or Athens?*, p. 132.
63   J. Habermas, *Israel or Athens?*, p. 134.
64   J. Habermas, *Reply to My Critics*, p. 356.
65   J. Habermas, *Reply to My Critics*, p. 354.
66   Habermas finds the clear potential for such collective action in religious traditions: "Interestingly, the practice of religious communities bridges this *fault line of the individual facilitation* of solidarity in advance through the shared faith in the promise of a *'redemptive'* or *'liberating'* justice" (J. Habermas, *Reply to My Critics*, p. 356). He goes on, however, to suggest that the question whether this potential for collective action can be realized in fact is not yet settled (p. 357).

traditions remain aloof from the broader lines of public discourse and the generally accessible forms of public rationality, they may possess a corrective capacity to speak against social pathologies that prey on the powerless, to interrupt de-humanizing processes of rationalization and industrialization, and to reorient societies toward cooperative practices of solidarity.[67] Religious faith, then, draws its distinct potential to inform social critique from its distinct foundation. Habermas writes, "'Religion' owes its legitimizing force to the fact that it draws its power to convince from its own roots. It is rooted, independently of politics, in notions of salvation and calamity (*Heil und Unheil*) and in corresponding practices of coping with redemptive and menacing forces."[68] Thus, while religious contents such as human freedom, the dignity of life, and social emancipation may admit of some transference into a non-religious intellectual framework, central conceptions such as transcendent hope that prevails amidst despair, the promise of redemption and resurrection in the face of death, and indeed the concept of God itself resist any such translation out of their original horizon.[69] Religious traditions carry a distinctive potential for prophetic critique insofar as they retain the perspective of "the view from afar."[70]

Notably, this incommensurability between specifically religious and publicly accessible rational insights holds important implications for explicitly theological discourse as well. Habermas suggests that those theological approaches that seek to open themselves too eagerly to discourses in the human sciences and to social scientific approaches, and so abandon all substantive reference to foundational religious experiences and truth claims, risk losing their identity: "I hold that a conversation cannot succeed between a theology and a philosophy which use the language of religious authorship and which meet on the bridge of religious experiences that have become literary expressions."[71] Properly religious and theological discourse instead proceeds in living communities of faith, and is anchored in distinctive communal practices of ritual and worship.

67　See M. Junker-Kenny, *Religion and Public Reason*, p. 169.

68　J. Habermas, "*The Political*": *The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology*, in: E. Mendieta, J. VanAntwerpen (eds.), *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, New York 2011, 17. See also M. Junker-Kenny, *Religion and Public Reason*, p. 164.

69　M. Junker-Kenny, *Religion and Public Reason*, p. 181–182.

70　J. Habermas, *An Awareness of What is Missing*, p. 16.

71　J. Habermas, *Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World*, p. 233.

Those religious and theological perspectives that too greatly distance themselves from their originating institutions and practices run the danger of falling into merely trivializing moral trends toward self-fulfillment and generic conceptions of personal flourishing and could "forfeit precisely the solidarity-founding element of a communal practice of religious worship" that distinguishes religious traditions from other social movements and cultural communities. Therefore, Habermas argues, any "religion that had lost the capacity to organize the encounter with the sacred in ritual forms and survived only in the fleeting shape of religiosity would be indistinguishable from other ethical forms of life."[72]

Through this evolving critical treatment of religion, Habermas thus presents a distinctive and important voice in contemporary discussions of the place of religious and theological discourse in the public sphere. His position enables both a constructive critique of religious belief and a sober appreciation of the potential of religious communities to proffer poignant social criticism. Moving beyond the reductive narrative of a progressive secularization of religious values and concepts, his writings point to the promise of increasingly careful reflection on religious traditions and the need for more productive and nuanced frameworks of dialogue surrounding conceptions of religion and secularity. Indeed, for Habermas, the present challenges stemming from the faltering of global economic systems and political alliances, the rise of nationalistic anger, and the spectre of sectarian violence only serve to heighten the importance of this ongoing conversation, providing a vital avenue of cooperative social criticism that attends to the recurring gaps in the social fabric of contemporary political communities.

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72   J. Habermas, *Reply to My Critics*, p. 353–354.

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