HABERMAS: THE RELIGIOUS SIDE OF A POSTMETAPHYSICAL THINKER

by

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ABSTRACT

LUCIANO ALEJANDRO MOLINA. Habermas: The religious side of a postmetaphysical thinker (under the direction of Dr. MARK SANDERS)

The goal of this paper is to show Jürgen Habermas's recent work on religion as a well-intended effort to deal with religious conflicts in the world that yet presents two serious and related flaws: on one hand, Habermas claims his ideas on religion are universal in both nature and scope while in reality they exhibit a clear Western bias that is anything but universal; and second, I want to show how much the Judeo-Christian tradition informs his understanding of "religion", evincing a distinct preference for this tradition in his work despite considering his approach to religion "postmetaphysical".

DEDICATION

To my wife Mabell, without whose support, patience and love I would have never

become a professional philosopher.

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INTRODUCTION

The work of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has undergone an important shift in recent years. Themes such as the public sphere, the legitimation of political institutions, his conception of a universalistic morality (all of which he considered from the perspective of his theory of communicative action) had been the central focus of his work ever since he entered the philosophical scene (as a thinker in his own right rather than a representative of the Frankfurt Schools and critical theory) with his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962. However, with the publication of *Rationality and Religion* in 1998 Habermas began to show a marked interest in religion, which was only accentuated after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Since then, Habermas has not only written profusely about religion and its different areas of influence (in morality, international politics, terrorism, the public sphere, etc.), but has even collaborated with recognized religious figures in dealing with some of these areas. Without a doubt the most important of these collaborators has been Cardinal Joseph Razinger, who became Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, and with whom Habermas co-authored a small book called *The Dialectics of Secularization* dealing with the role of religion in the genesis of secular thought in the West and its current role in modern political institutions.

Habermas has made it clear that his interest in religion is not merely philosophical but political; and in view of the increasing outbursts of religious-motivated war conflicts and terrorism, his interest in religion stems from humanitarian considerations. He writes, "religious conflicts are forcing their way onto the international stage" rising fears about a

possible "clash of civilizations"[1]. But what makes this shift of focus interesting in

Habermas's work is not the urgency of the task at hand, but the fact that he is known for

being a "secular thinker" with ideological convictions that, in essence, are more atheistic

or agnostic than religious. These convictions, however, are not of the anti-religion type,

which is why Habermas prefers to call his philosophical attitude "postmetaphysical

thinking", which is a way of doing philosophy that rests fundamentally on an inter-

subjective conception of reason and that avoids "the twin dangers of a nostalgic return to

or a radical critique of metaphysics"[2]. Postmetaphysical thinking, therefore, allows

religion to enter into discourse while remaining "atheist" in its convictions (pages 26-27).

In this paper I want to show that despite his acknowledged secular convictions,

and despite his postmetaphysical commitment to avoid any extreme attitude regarding

religion (or "metaphysics"), Habermas' recent work on religion reveals flaws that are not

only inconsistent with his philosophy, but reveals a preference for the "Judeo-Christian

tradition"[3] that will hardly be welcomed in other parts of the world, beset by the religious

conflicts that he is trying to address and to find a solution to in his books. These flaws are

more visible when we consider Habermas' work under two particular aspects: his ideas

for how to solve religious conflicts in the world, and his very personal interest for

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[1] See Jürgen Habermas' *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Polity Press: Malden, 2014), pages 114-115.
[2] See the introduction to Habermas' *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 1992) by William Mark Hohengarten, page vii.
[3] This is Habermas' generic way to refer to these two important religious faiths. Despite the fact that these two religions exhibit today multiple differences even within themselves, which have produced multiple doctrines with their own *traditions*, Habermas does not seem mindful of these important differences but prefers to encompass these two religion under the same expression. This can certainly make one argue for the inadequacy of his treatment of religious conflict in the world, but it is a point I will not address here. However, for the sake of utility, in this paper I will employ the same expression when speaking of Habermas' own religious preferences, but making it clear here that this is Habermas' rather than *my* way of referring to these two important religious faiths.

appropriating from religion whatever normative content that can be beneficial in our dealing with suffering and injustice in the world.

What I want to do in my paper is bring to light aspects of his thought that he has not given due consideration, and that are for this reason deemed to suspicion. My hope is to make a contribution to the study of Habermas' recent work on religion. In this sense, by examining Habermas' "religious side" I do not intend to portray him as insincere regarding his intentions and philosophical convictions. But I do believe there is *something missing* in his work on religion that has to do with two things: a clear Western bias in his understanding of religion, and an ideological sympathy to the Judeo-Christian tradition present in his work; all of which makes it impossible to abstract from religion normative contents can be universalized, as he wants to do. This is what I will attempt to do in my paper: to make this missing element evident to my readers, and to make them understand why, because of it, Habermas' work on religion, though noble-intended, is in need of revision and clarification.

HABERMAS' THEORY OF DISCOURSE

In this section I will attempt to offer a brief summary of Habermas' theory of discourse so as to offer the reader a general idea of his philosophy as well as the universal scope he pretends to give it. It is this last aspect of his philosophy I am most interested in, rather than the complex theoretical structure of his thought. After all, my analysis on Habermas will be conducted less from a *theoretical* plane than an *ideological* one, despite the obvious relatedness of these two. In other words, it is not his theory of discourse what I find flawed, but Habermas' *universal pretentions* that are present both in his theory and his recent work on religion.

Offering an overview of Habermas' philosophy is by no means a simple task. Habermas is a very prolific writer and his ideas are disseminated throughout his many books dealing with different philosophical topics. The very book where his theory of discourse is concretely laid out comes in two thick volumes filled with concepts multiple references to other works, all of which can be hard to grasp by a reader unfamiliar with European (or "continental") thought and American pragmatic-linguistic philosophy[4]. And yet, because my interest is mainly putting Habermas' ideas in the context of his "religious side", I will avoid going into unnecessary theoretical details in order to be succinct in my descriptions.

Habermas' philosophy is known as a "theory of discourse". As such, its conceptual foundation rests on human communication, on our ability to express ourselves through speech. No doubt this foundation may look quite simple and "down to earth" to

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[4] I mean his *Theory of Communicative Action*, volume I (Beacon Press: Boston, 1992). From now one *TCA*.

many of us, but behind Habermas' theory of discourse there is an enormous amount of theoretical underpinnings that carefully support each thought and describe its role in the theory.

Habermas' theory of discourse deals with one particular kind of speech-scenario: communicative action or *communication oriented to reaching understanding*[5]. At times Habermas also calls this kind of communication "pragmatic" or "practical" for its everyday usefulness. Thus, every time we communicate with others with the goal addressing a particular problem in order to come up with an agreed course of action, we are engaged in communicative action[6]. Examples of this kind of communication can vary tremendously and can be as relevant to our lives as they can be prosaic. Habermas gets to the point of affirming: "The term 'reaching understanding' means, at the minimum, that at least two speaking and acting subjects understand a linguistic expression in the same way"[7]. We can think, for example, of a man who orders a hamburger at a fast food restaurant, where a service-attendant takes his order, charges him and gives him his meal[8]. Both participants of this speech-scenario understand one another without difficulty as both of them are clear on the objective to be pursued: to order a meal and pay for it (without considering other interrelated objectives, such as satisfying one's hunger or getting a paycheck, all of which is implied to both participants). Another example of communication action (from now on CA) can involve faculty members who meet to determine whether or not a particular curriculum should continue to be used for the next

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[5] *TCA*, I, page 25.
[6] Ibid., page 86.
[7] Ibid., page 307.
[8] A similar example of "acting communicatively" is given by Donald Moon while discussing Habermas' practical discourse and communicative ethics in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas* (Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 1999).

school year. While differences of opinion are normally held and expressed, very rarely such meetings would end up not achieving the desired objective-expectation. That is, faculty members will enter this speech-scenario knowing very well that, in the end, a particular course of action will be taken: either continuing using the curriculum or not. Things are more complex and nuanced, of course, when the context is one of politics or moral argumentation. And yet, in all instances CA presupposes the same *telos* of reaching understanding among its participants[9]. That is, all speakers know what the objective is, and they engage in CA with this aim in view.

As can be seen, CA does not take place in the abstract, but in concrete real-life contexts. Such backgrounds constitute another essential feature of Habermas' theory of discourse. Participants of CA understand one another because they share a common "prereflexive context of interpretation"; something Habermas often calls a *lifeworld*; merely, a set of "taken-for-granted background assumptions" that makes the task of reaching understanding clear and easy[10]. In our restaurant example, these taken-for-granted assumptions can be, again, the clerk's need of a paycheck, the customer's desire to satisfy his hunger, knowing what a "number five" represents in the restaurant's menu, etc.[11] In the theoretical style that characterizes him, Habermas defines the *lifeworld* as the

> fundamental background knowledge that must tacitly supplement our
> knowledge of the acceptability conditions of linguistically
> standardized expressions if hearers are to be able to understand their
> literal meanings.[12]

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[9] *TCA*, I, page 287.

[10] Ibid., pages 335-336.

[11] This is why it is useless for Habermas to think, as counter examples, of abstract discourse scenarios where people do not have a clear idea of the objective to be pursued. For even when confusion is quite common in our world, it is unlikely to find restaurant clerks who are unclear about the nature of their job, or faculty members who do not have a clear notion of the purpose of a given meeting *before they participate discursively in it*.

[12] *TCA*, I, pages 335-336.

Thus, it is impossible for speakers to understand one another without a common

lifeworld, that is, without a shared "world" of social facts in whose context their

expressions are meaningful. In a sense, the *lifeworld* is more essential to CA than the

language being spoken. Think of an international forum on global warming where

scientists from different countries meet. In this scenario, it matters little whether

participants in the forum speak a different language; so long as a *shared world of*

scientific facts exists for them, the language spoken will not be a problem once an

interpreter is provided. The same is not the case for a person who can speak the

languages of all participants, but knows very little of science. The lifeworld thus

manifests the *universal* character of communication, which is fundamental to Habermas

as we will see in brief.

Individuals engaged in CA, according to Habermas, put forth three kinds of

expressions which imply a particular "validity claim". He explains it this way:

> [In] linguistic processes, the actors make three different claims to
> validity…[13] as they come to an agreement with one another about
> something. Those claims are claims to truth, claims to rightness, and
> claims to truthfulness, according to whether the speaker refers to
> something in the objective world (as the totality of existing states of
> affairs), to something in the shared social world (as the totality of the
> legitimately regulated interpersonal relationships of a social group), or
> to something in his own subjective world (as the totality of
> experiences to which one has privileged access)[14]

In other words, CA comprises three different speech-scenarios: one where we make

statements appealing to a particular "state of affairs" we assumed to be true (as when we

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[13] Here Habermas uses the term "speech act" which is part of the theoretical foundation of his theory, for which he draws on John Austin's philosophy of language. See *TCA*, I, pages 288-291.
[14] See Jürgen Habermas' *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 1991), page 58.

say to a friend: "You need to see a doctor"); one where what is appealed to is a moral

norm (as when we say: "You must be kind to elders"); and one where we simply appeal

to an inner desire, motivation or conviction (as when we say "I am hungry"). All these

scenarios imply a claim to validity that we expect our interlocutors to take as true, right

or truthful. However, only when our (implied) claim to truth, rightness and truthfulness is

questioned, or reasons are demanded by our interlocutors, does CA take the form of

discourse in a Habermasian sense of the term.

Discourse has for Habermas a *reflexive nature*. Once participants in CA are

required to provide reasons to convince each other of the validity of their claims,

communication turns into argumentation; and only when such argumentation assumes the

critical role of considering our interlocutors' perspectives when advancing our arguments

of claims, does argumentation turn into discourse. Habermas explains it this way:

> all those involved [in discourse] must abandon the perspective from
> which they judge what is good for me or for us in favor of a uniformly
> inclusive "we" perspective. This impartial point of view is not of an
> ideal observer; it is a first-person plural perspective that includes all
> members of a collective or… the ideally extended universe of all
> responsible persons… Every participant in practical discourse must
> seek to enlarge his understanding of himself and his situation through
> reciprocal perspective-taking to include the relevant aspects of all
> others' understanding of themselves and their situations[15]

This inter-subjective element of discourse not only serves to legitimize our

assertions and arguments in CA, but entails an appeal to validity that, according to

Habermas, has the quality to be *universal*. This is one of the most salient features of

Habermas' theory. Arguments in discourse are not limited to the particular CA scenario

in which we happen to find ourselves, but have the capacity to *transcend* their locality

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[15] See *Habermas and Religion*, edited by Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2013)

considering that all reasons put forth to justify our actions or arguments can be questioned and comprehended by *anyone*[16]. This "we perspective" of discourse entails a crucial conceptual requirement that Habermas calls the *principle of universalization* or (U). According to Habermas (U) is a "reformulation" of Kant's categorical imperative, but with an important discursive twist. Habermas writes,

> Rather than ascribing as valid to all others any maxim that I can will to be a universal law, I must submit my maxim to all others for purposes of discursively testing its claim to universality[17]

(U) therefore substantiates a very particular kind of CA: the one we use in moral argumentation, where what is appealed to is the validity of moral norms.

Habermas has made it clear that his theory of discourse is not so much concerned with "claims to truthfulness" (whose validity can only be corroborated by others through a "consistent behavior" in the person putting forth a claim[18]). Rather, he is interested in *claims to truth* and *rightness* whose claim to validity can have clear moral implications for all participants in discourse who, because of this, may demand reasons to justify those claims[19]. For example, we can see the moral implications of a claim to truth like "You need to see a doctor" when we consider the potential suffering that both the addressee and her significant-others can experience for not accepting the validity of the claim and/or neglecting to act on it. For while "You need to see a doctor" has all the form of a claim to truth, its *moral normativity* is quite evident. Moral implications are more obviously perceived in claims to rightness of the form "You must be kind to elders". It is

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[16] *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, page 47.
[17] *MCCA*, page 67.
[18] See *MCCA*, page 59; and *TCA*, I, page 15.
[19] This is why, in Habermas' terminology, such claims are "discursively redeemable". See *MCCA*, page 59.

because of this moral dimension in claims to truth and claims to rightness that Habermas

considers important to test their validity by means of (U).

The moral nature of (U) can be immediately recognized when we consider

Habermas' formulation of it. According to him, (U) requires that

> *All* affected [by the normative character of our claims] can accept the
> consequences and the side effects its *general* observance can be
> anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone's* interests (and
> these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative
> possibilities for regulation)[20]

When I consider (U) in the context of discourse, therefore, I am not simply applying a

"universal moral test" to my arguments or claims, but I am extending my own

perspective to embrace those of all potentially affected by them, and who can corroborate

the (universal) validity of my arguments-claims if I am both willing and capable of

justifying them with reasons.

Habermas calls this hypothetical discursive scenario an "ideal speech situation"[21].

This situation is *ideal* because, first, it only has the *potential* to be realized universally

(that is, with the approved consent of *all human beings*, which seems impossible to

realize in practice), and second, because it *relies* on speakers to be sincere in their

arguments-claims while at the same time subjecting these to the normative demand of

(U). The ideal speech situation, more than a simply providing an ideal standard for

practical discourse, serves as a "critical principle" to which participants must submit

themselves to if their intention is truly to achieve consensus through discourse.

Interestingly, however, the ideal speech situation also relies on concrete, practical

requirements that need to be fulfilled in order for discourse to take place. These

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[20] *MCCA*, page 65.
[21] See *MCCA*, page 88, and *TCA*, I, page 25.

requirements simply stipulate conditions for speakers to participate freely and without

fear. These conditions require that

> 1. All individuals capable of speaking and acting are allowed to be
> part of the discourse
> 2. All individuals are allowed to question any assertion whatever in
> the discourse
> 3. All individuals are allowed to introduce any assertion whatever in
> the discourse, and/or express their attitudes, desires and needs
> 4. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion,
> from exercising his/her right to any of the above[22]

The practical, moral and political character of these conditions is evident as they have

been traditionally guaranteed (at least in our country) as a basic constitutional right for all

citizens: freedom of speech. Under political regimes where these conditions are not

constitutionally guaranteed, it is impossible to come up with discourse scenarios that

would be in tune with Habermas' theory. This is why the ideal speech situation not only

makes a moral demand to all (and potential) participants in discourse, but a political one

as well. Discourse participants must not only adopt a reflexive "we perspective" towards

their utterances, and subject these to the moral imperative of (U). They also need to prove

to each other that their utterances are not moved by ideology or coercion, but by the

unforced force of the better argument. This is the critical test the ideal speech situation

provides speakers: a test of honesty, self-criticism and freedom. For, according to

Habermas,

> We are intuitively aware that we cannot rationally convince anyone, not even
> ourselves, of something if we do not accept as our common point of departure that
> all voices that are at all relevant should be heard, that the best arguments available
> given the current state of our knowledge should be expressed, and that only the
> unforced force of the better argument should determine the 'yes' or 'no' responses
> of participants[23]

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[22] *MCCA*, page 89. Habermas is following here Robert Alexy's rules of discourse.
[23] See Jürgen Habermas' *Religion and Rationality* (Polity Press: Cornwall, 2002), page 107.

Having laid out Habermas' theory of discourse, which gives us a general ideal of his philosophy, our next step is to see how much his recent work on religion fits in with this philosophy and, especially, with the universal aspects of it.

HABERMAS' CONCERN WITH RELIGION

As stated in the Introduction, most of Habermas' work in the past two decades has been concerned with religion. Two motivations are most prominent in this work: his concern with the current increase of religious-motivated conflicts in the world, and his interest in "appropriating" from religion whatever normative content can be valuable in dealing with other problems in the world, most importantly, the lack of solidarity among people of different cultures/nations in dealing with poverty and suffering. Let us deal with the first.

In speaking of Habermas' concern with religious conflicts *in the world*, it is important to emphasize this local point-of-reference. A considerable part of his work, in fact, is not dedicated to deal with religious conflicts in the world but *in the public sphere*, that is, in discourse-scenarios that take place in "pluralistic societies with a liberal constitution"[24] where an ideal speech situation is more likely to take place and where the four conditions for participants in discourse can be legally guaranteed and enforced for all (see pages 10-11). This distinction of his work on religion *in the world* and *in the public sphere* is important for two reasons. First, because many times Habermas' work on religion switches this dual-context indiscriminately, making it difficult for the reader to appreciate the real practical value of his ideas. After all, religious conflicts have a completely different meaning when the context of discussion is the US Congress, the UN

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[24] See Jürgen Habermas and Cardinal Joseph Razinger's *The Dialectics of Secularization* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2006), page 50. Habermas has written extensively about the public sphere in his writings, but I do not intend to offer a more nuanced description of it here for considering it unnecessary and irrelevant to our present purposes.

or Syria. And yet, it seems that, at times at least, Habermas does not pay enough attention to the importance of this distinction in the exposition of his ideas on religion[25].

The second reason for my distinction relates to my paper in an essential way. I am not concerned here with knowing what Habermas' theory of discourse has to say about religious conflicts in liberal-pluralistic societies (where the idea of public sphere is valued both culturally and institutionally). Rather, I want to focus on that part of his work that seeks to resolve religious conflicts *in the world*, in many places of which nothing close to a liberal society exists. Interestingly, however, his work on religion *in the world* has the underlying purpose of providing the necessary notions and even institutions where discourse scenarios like the public sphere can take shape. For, according to Habermas, only with such notions and institutions (human rights, the rule of law, democracy, rationality, modernity and secularism) will we be able to resolve religious-motivated conflicts worldwide. There is, therefore, an essential connection between Habermas' ideas on religion in the world and his intention to spread liberal-democratic ideals worldwide. But of this connection more will be said later. For now let us simply say that his whole theory of discourse seems only workable in Western liberal democracies, which is why I see his ideas on religion *in the world* play a more fundamental role in this paper. Finally, the emphasis *in the world* will not only allow us to see how truly *universal* Habermas' ideas are, but it will also provide an opportunity to examine the religious side of his work more closely, particularly, in regard to the second part of my analysis here:

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[25] For example, in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, and more specifically in a chapter entitled "Religion in the Public Sphere", Habermas pretty much lays out his views on how religious arguments should be dealt with in liberal-democratic societies. However, this very chapter starts with Habermas voicing his concern for the multiple conflicts motivated by religious fundamentalism going on in the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia and India, that is, in countries where nothing close to a liberal democracy exist.

his intention of appropriating from religion valuable normative content that also pretend to have a universal character.

If there is one motivation moving Habermas political thought, if there is one goal his arguments on religion in the world try to achieve, it is to promote liberal-democratic values worldwide. This is, in short, Habermas proposed solution to the problem of religious conflicts in the world. In this regard, all his writings on religion can be seen as a well-thought-of effort to advance liberal democracy worldwide.

Before proceeding, let me make clear that I am well aware that "liberal democracy" is not Habermas' preferred choice of expression when it comes to define his political tendencies. In *Dialectics of Secularization* he speaks of personally advocating for "Political liberalism… in the specific form of a Kantian republicanism"[26]. But throughout this section I will use the former expression because it is a more popular way of referring, in general and despite circumstantial differences, to our political systems in the West. Only one aspect of the latter expression, however, deserves a more nuanced analysis: the part that directly alludes to Kant.

No reader acquainted with Habermas' philosophy should be surprised to find an important reference to Kant in almost every one of his books. I think it is safe to say that Kant was mostly responsible for the universalistic aspect of Habermas' work. In the previous section, for example, it was shown how his principle of universalization (U), which is for Habermas a "reformulation" of the categorical imperative, serves to give his theory of discourse not only a normative foundation but one that is universal in both nature and scope. But this is far from being Kant's most significant influence to

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[26] *The Dialectics of Secularization*, page 24.

Habermas. His whole approach to religion in the world, in fact, can also be said to have its origin in Kant.

In chapter 11 of *Between Naturalism and Religion*, Habermas speaks of the "Kantian project" of establishing, in a not-so-distant future, a world republic that could guarantee "perpetual peace" among nations[27]. Habermas argues that such project is still workable today after the conceptual modifications he proposes. These modifications seek to address shortcomings in Kant's project that proved to be inconsistent with the actual historical steps our world has taken, since Kant's time, in regard to its political development (for example, the fact that our political world has moved more towards cosmopolitanism and multi-national federalism rather than to a centralized sort of world government, as Kant thought it would[28]). Putting these shortcomings on a side, Habermas believes we can still preserve the Kantian idea of a world constitutional order as he sees in it the best way to guarantee human rights and liberties for all inhabitants of the world, thus establishing realistic standards of peace among nations[29], many of which are now beset by religious conflicts. But contrary to Kant, Habermas is not interested in establishing a world-federation sort of government, or in turning the UN into a centralized political organism with, say, military power. Rather, Habermas is interested in setting up a *world constitution* that would protect and enforce basic human rights and freedoms[30] worldwide *by effective legal means* (that is, backed up by legitimized

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[27] Though I'll be quoting mostly from *Between Naturalism and Religion,* Habermas' exposition of the Kantian project appeared originally in his earlier book *The Divided West.*

[28] See Kant's *Perpetual Peace.*

[29] *Between Naturalism and Religion,* page 313.

[30] By "basic freedoms" I mean those traditionally held most valuable in the Western world: freedom of speech, of conscience and of political participation. More will be said of universal human rights and freedoms in the next section.

international organisms, like a world-police, an international supreme court, etc.).

Habermas thus shares Kant's conviction that law can play a "pacifying function [that]…

remains conceptually intertwined with the function of a legal condition that the citizens

recognize as legitimate in promoting freedom"[31].

This relationship between law and freedom, essential for both Kant and

Habermas, is particularly meaningful to the latter as law and freedom are both part of *the*

moral dimension of his thought. This, in fact, one of the most fundamental conceptual

distinctions in Habermas' work: the ethical and the moral. In his book *Justification and*

Application, Habermas explains this distinction in the following way:

> the question "What should I do?" takes on… an ethical, or a moral
> meaning depending on how the problem is conceived… [E]thical-
> existential discourse is advice concerning the correct conduct of life
> and the realization of a personal life project. Moral judgment of
> actions and maxims is again something different. It serves to clarify
> legitimate behavioral expectations in response to interpersonal
> conflicts resulting from the disruption of our orderly coexistence by
> conflicts of interests[32]

As can be seen, this distinction between the moral and the ethical has a simple though

very practical reason. There is indeed an essential difference when we hurt someone than

when we help someone in need. Both actions have a clear moral value, but while the

former tends to have direct legal implications (depending of the gravity of the hurt), the

latter is typically sustained by mere personal convictions (be them religious,

philosophical, communal or simply personal) which conform to a particular and well-

defined idea of "the correct conduct of life and the realization of a personal life project".

Therefore, while the moral deals with limiting our actions in our interactions with others

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[31] *Between Naturalism and Religion,* page 313.
[32] Jürgen Habermas' *Justification and Application* (The MIT Press: Cambridge, 1993), pages 8-9.

on the basis of the possible harms the latter can receive from us, the ethical gives us a somewhat coherent picture of what kind of individuals we want to be (which is why Habermas also refers to this kind of ideas in his writings as "existential"), and thus guides us as to how we should conduct ourselves for the realization of such a life-goal. The ethical constitutes an important topic within political philosophy: the role that the Good or the good life is to play in law and politics. But in Habermas' theory of discourse, it is *the moral* which has traditionally been given precedence. The reason is simple. Ethical arguments can hardly be universalized considering that every individual can have a different idea of what counts as a good life, and consequentially may have very particular values molded after such view. The moral, on the other hand, provides a common ground for all participants in discourse to debate and find agreement, for it deals strictly with limiting our actions in our interactions with others on the basis of the possible harms they can receive from us; and we can all see the universal dimension of this kind of harm.

The moral, therefore, is essential to guaranteeing everyone's freedom of speech and the right to participate in discourse without coercion or fear of possible consequence. In a larger political context, the idea of the moral pretty much sustains the legal protection of individual's rights and freedoms in a polity (which is why many contemporary thinkers prefer to use the term "justice" over "the moral"). In regards to our discussion, what Habermas wants to rescue from the Kantian project is the idea of a *world constitution* that would serve to protect these rights and freedoms *universally*, though without the need of a world government. Habermas writes,

> [this] liberal type of constitution that limits the power of the state
> without constituting it… provides a conceptual model for a

constitutionalization of international law in the form of a politically constituted world society without a world government[33]

Habermas believes that such a world constitution will neither conflict with the laws of a particular government nor with its cultural identity. Because the nature of this constitution is *moral* and not *ethical*, it will not tell nations how to conduct their affairs, nor will impose on them a particular ideology of the Good[34] . This is why Habermas speaks of a liberal constitution that would "limit the power of the state *without constituting it*". In this sense, Habermas is less committed to the Kantian project *per se* than to enforcing human rights and freedoms globally as a way to deal with religious conflicts, both among nations and within them, and to establish peace in our world.

Habermas' version of the Kantian project not only reveals part of his plan for dealing with religious conflicts in the world and promoting peace, but also gives us an idea of why advancing liberal democracy worldwide is essential in this endeavor. Habermas speaks of a *liberal* world-constitution because only in countries where *liberty* plays a defining political role have these rights and freedoms been legally and effectively guaranteed. Moreover, these rights and freedoms are deemed "universal" because they make no distinction of race, ideology or nationality. Thus, for Habermas, it is only reasonable to expect, and even demand, the same *moral* standard from all nations. Habermas' plan for dealing with religious conflicts in the world, therefore, is only workable if people of all cultures are willing to embrace these moral rights and freedoms, which in turn implies being willing to move towards adopting a liberal-democratic type of government for their nations.

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[33] Ibid., page 316. The emphasis is mine.

[34] Certainly, the whole conception of the moral and of establishing universal legal norms based on it can be seen by non-Westerners as an ideological imposition. But of this objection I will speak briefly.

Here two objections to Habermas can be raised. First, that his whole approach to religious conflicts in the world rest on the fundamental assumption that human rights and basic freedoms are equally understood and valued by all (or at least most) individuals in our world regardless of their national or cultural identity. The objection is that this is a mere Western assumption, and that people in other parts of the world may not entirely agree with it. To this objection Habermas may respond that arguing against liberal rights and freedoms for all human beings is a very questionable position to take considering that no reasonable individual in the world would argue against his own right to life or his own freedom of speech. A more serious objection, however, can point to Habermas' conviction that only in a liberal democracy can these rights and freedoms be best guaranteed, which seems very problematic considering that many countries in the world have not taken this path, while many others are even hostile to the idea. Political participation, for example, is one of those liberal rights and freedoms that in the West are traditionally considered "basic". And yet, this is precisely what many governments in our world want to deprive their citizens of, arguing on religious or merely ideological grounds.

Why, therefore, insist on the Kantian project? Why continuing to promote liberal democracy in the world as a way to deal with religious conflicts, considering that many people see this as a mere Western agenda? Certainly, those nations that have not taken the path to liberal democracy not only have a very different historical development compared to the West, but also have an underdeveloped grasp of many of the West's most basic democratic values and institutions. As Francis Fukuyama argues, it is unwise to think of implementing an ideal form of democratic government, like that of Denmark,

in a country with a different historical and ideological development[35]. Interestingly, Habermas is well aware of this circumstantial difference between Western and non-Western nations, and yet still believes that the various cultures in our world, despite their political variations, are yet moving in the same direction. Regardless of historical developments and cultural identities, Habermas thinks there is a *moving force* in our world that seems to push us all to embrace the same liberal values, and to implement the same democratic institutions, that we have in the West. An important part of this force is global capitalism[36], which to a big extent dictates the course of international politics today. Another part relates to cultural globalization, which is not only spreading technological innovations worldwide but, most importantly, *universal values* such as human rights, gender equality, rationality and (indeed!) democracy. Habermas believes in this "force" in our world, and has a word for it. He calls it *modernity*. And whether we like it or not "the current state of the world… is without any clearly recognizable alternative"[37].

In Habermas' work, modernity is a heavy-loaded concept, and one that can take several pages to unpack. But one aspect of it that deserves especial consideration for being essential to Habermas' democratic agenda, is *the self-critical attitude that demands individuals to find a reasonable justification for their values, political institutions and even traditions*. Let us remember that, for Kant, it was essential for citizens to see in law an institution they "recognize as *legitimate* in promoting [their] freedom"[38].

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[35] See Francis Fukuyama's discussion on Denmark as a political model in *Political Order and Political Decay* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux: New York, 2014).
[36] *Religion and Rationality,* page 153.
[37] Ibid.
[38] *Between Naturalism and Religion,* page 313.

According to Habermas, one of the greatest cultural achievements of the West has been its modern "capacity for decentering one's own perspectives, self-reflection, and a self-critical distancing from one's own traditions"[39]. The aim of this self-critical attitude is not simply to question ideological beliefs and traditional institutions, but to find reasons to justify their existence and practice. Such justificatory process, however, requires a fundamental democratic principle: that all concerned with these traditions, beliefs and institutions (from now on TBI) have the right to participate in this self-critical process of legitimation. It is not up to a group of experts or political leaders to decide which TBI counts and which one does not, and move on to impose their conclusions to the rest. Many of these "experts" may claim to be the protectors of TBI and of the cultural identity to which they belong, seeing in this modern attitude a danger that can potentially strip TBI of their cultural-historical value and expose them as irrational, harmful and obsolete. But it is precisely this democratic "risk", this self-critical test, that can *legitimize* TBI in the eyes of all those concerned[40]. Habermas believes this is only positive for TBI, for modernity "functions less as a filter separating out the contents of traditions than as a transformer which redirects the flow of traditions"[41], which is why modernity has also been understood as "the critique of tradition for the sake of tradition"[42].

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[39] *Religion and Rationality,* page 154.

[40] An important objection to this view is presented by Nicholas Wolterstorff who denies that all individuals of any given nation do in fact have a say in this legitimation process, and affirms that the opposite is actually the case. This is most clearly in the legitimation of laws: "There has never been and never will be a society all of whose members can regard themselves as co-authors of the laws. For there has never been and never will be a society all of whose members agree with all the laws. If I disagree with some law, I cannot regard myself as co-author of that law". See *Understanding Liberal Democracy* (Oxford UP: Oxford, 2012), page 78.

[41] See Jürgen Habermas' *An Awareness of What Is Missing* (Polity Press: Malden, 2010), page 18.

[42] *Religion and Rationality,* page 17.

The Arab Spring may provide Habermas good reasons to believe his thoughts on modernity are correct. After all, it can be argued that modernity provided Arabs with technological tools that allowed them to be informed about the corrupt nature of their governments, having now access to news-sources from different parts of the world. Their revolt and call for democracy can be seen as an expression of their disapproval, of their considering their government *illegitimate*. Modernity, and the global spread of technology and information that are said to be part of it, can be seen as that force that opened the eyes of the Arabs who now consider themselves entitled to question their government and their TBI *for their own sake*. However, because the Arab Spring proved in the end to be an isolated event that did not trigger any concrete political or ideological development in this part of the world, but provided Muslim scholars the opportunity to highlight the irreconcilable differences between the "West and the rest" (as we will see in the next section), it can hardly count as evidence for modernity to be the only "clearly recognizable alternative" for our world, as Habermas thinks[43].

So far we have merely described Habermas' main motivations behind his ideas on religion in the world. We are left to explain Habermas' interest in working with religion so as to appropriate from it normative content that can be beneficial in dealing with suffering and injustice in our world. In other words, we will consider now Habermas' work on religion from *the ethical* dimension of his thought.

As we already explained, in Habermas' philosophy *the moral* deals with questions of justice and the legal restriction of our actions based on possible harms done to others, while *the ethical* deals with questions of the Good and principles that guide our actions in

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[43] Ibid., page 153.

order to fulfill a particular existential goal. To simplify this notion even further, we can just say that while the moral tells us *what not to do*, the ethical tells us what *we should do*. This distinction is useful in approaching Habermas' work on religion as this work can be analyzed from both of these dimensions. In fact, we can see his ideas on dealing with religious conflicts worldwide as stemming from *the moral* dimension of his thought. For, according to Habermas, if we are to tackle this problem in the world, and if we are interested in allowing religion (regardless of its form) to continue flourishing in our world in a peaceful way, the moral must find an *effective enforcing mean* (like a world constitution and an international sort of Court) so as to punish religious-motivated crimes among nations and within them. As we know, one of the rights and freedoms that the moral traditionally guarantees (at least in the West) is *freedom of religion*, which states that every individual should have the right (or be free) to practice the religion he or she wants. For the same reason, it is also morally important that religious practices never violate other individuals' rights and freedoms. For whenever religion allows for this kind of behavior, it can be seen as a clear violation of the *moral,* which is in essence what Habermas wants to legitimize by means of a world constitution.

When it comes to *the ethical* aspect of his work on religion, however, things are not as simple and clear-cut. When Habermas discusses how to find in religion ethical-normative content that can be useful in dealing with suffering and injustice in the world, we can be sure to find an arsenal of concepts, arguments and methodological distinctions in his work that can make it difficult for one to keep track. The reason is simple. Habermas knows that arguing for an ethical role for philosophy is a complex matter indeed. Moreover, he is also aware of how unpopular it can be, particularly among

contemporary thinkers, to argue for a positive role to religion. Richard Rorty happened to

be one of those thinkers. In his *Philosophy and Social Hope*, for example, Rorty put forth

a famous argument for the *privatization of religion*, that is, for making of religion a pure

personal matter that one should keep strictly to oneself instead of using it to talk others

into it or, worse still, to advance a particular political agenda[44]. Rorty, in other words,

considered religion *strictly from the limiting scope of the moral*. For him, the (ethical)

idea of using religious beliefs to better understand how to live our lives and to guide our

actions would have been simply unthinkable. And yet, this is precisely what Habermas

believes we should do. For him, there are indeed important ethical contents in religion,

some of which can be valuable in promoting *social solidarity* in our world.

Habermas has been emphatic about how religion has a proven potential to

promote a sense of solidarity among its followers that no other ideology or philosophy

can match[45]. On one hand, he believes his theory of discourse is capable of providing a

scenario of moral argumentation that can be both free of metaphysical assumptions and

have a universal in scope. On the other, he has acknowledged a clear deficiency in "the

enlightened modern age" to provide ethical ideas that both religious and non-religious

individuals can find meaningful[46]. This is particularly true in regard to social solidarity.

In a short book entitled An *Awareness of What is Missing*, Habermas writes:

> Rational morality… does not foster any impulse towards solidarity,
> that is, towards morally guided, collective action… Secular morality
> is not inherently embedded in communal practices. Religious
> consciousness, by contrast, preserves an essential connection to the

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[44] See "Religion as Conversation-Stopper" in Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Penguin Books: London, 1999).

[45] See for example *Religion and Rationality*, pages 162-165, and chapter 2 of *An Awareness of What is Missing*.

[46] *An Awareness of What is Missing*, page 15.

ongoing practice of life within a community and, in the case of the major world religions, to the observances of united global communities of all of the faithful[47]

Elsewhere in the same book, Habermas makes a similar statement, but this time in regard to the limits of his own program in promoting ethical ideas.

[P]ractical reason fails to fulfill its own vocation when it no longer has sufficient strength to awaken, and to keep awake, in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven[48]

To put it simply, Habermas believes religion has an ethical potential that philosophy (at least for the time being) cannot match. Philosophy, he says, "will be able neither to replace nor repress religion as long as religious language is the bearer of a semantic content that is inspiring and even indispensable"[49]. Certainly, this attitude towards religion is not at all popular among contemporary philosophers like Rorty. But for Habermas, philosophers today should not be skeptical or apprehensive of religion *provided they work under the premises of postmetaphysical thinking*, a way of doing philosophy that is capable of discovering and appropriating the normative ethical-content from religion through secular (and we can even say "atheist") means[50].

This should not surprise us: postmetaphysical thinking (PT) is a philosophical attitude that relies fundamentally on Habermas' theory of discourse. That is, PT relies on the same standards of validity and universality that operates in his theory. However, PT can be seen as playing a *complementary role* to practical discourse, considering that the latter has "failed" in providing, among other things, a substitute for religious solidarity.

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[47] Ibid., pages 74-75.
[48] Ibid., page 19.
[49] *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, page 51.
[50] Ibid.

PT marks a clear shift in Habermas' thought that, originally, only expected discourse to operate on a strict moral terrain where arguments and claims are universalizable in principle. Perhaps, in his earlier work, Habermas underestimated the role of the *lifeworld* where not only discourse and moral beliefs are grounded but ethical practices as well. This is surely why he gives the *lifeworld* a major role in his book *Postmetaphysical Thinking*. In it Habermas acknowledges that the *lifeworld* "which is… present only as horizon and background, evades the grasp of theoretical objectification"[51]. In the context of PT, this can only mean one thing: that contemporary philosophers are wrong in pretending to determine *objectively* what type of discourse must count in moral or political philosophy and which one not. This attitude is deemed "logocentric" by Habermas. He writes,

> But philosophy liberates itself from logocentrism when it is not completely absorbed by the self-reflection of the sciences, when its gaze is not fixated on the scientific system, when it reverses this perspective and looks back upon the thicket of the lifeworld. It then discovers a reason that is already operating in everyday communicative practice[52]

This way Habermas not only acknowledges the abysmal and almost arcane nature of the *lifeworld* (that "evades the grasp of theoretical objectification"), but also reaffirms the fact that the *lifeworld* sustains all discursive interactions as well as all moral and ethical beliefs. PT acknowledges that "religion… has largely been deprived of its world-view functions". And yet, because religious beliefs and practices are also embedded in the *lifeworld*, PT thinkers should consider religion "indispensable in ordinary life for

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[51] Ibid., pages 50-51.
[52] *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, page 50.

normalizing intercourse with the extraordinary". "[P]ostmetaphysical thinking continues

to coexist with religious practice", Habermas concludes[53].

PT therefore should not be understood as a way of doing philosophy that is *anti-*

metaphysical. The prefix *post* in this regard simply implies a conscious commitment to

avoid any form of metaphysical thinking that pretends to be *unitary*, that is, that claims to

have any *objectivizing power* over the *lifeworld* [54]. PT recognizes the "semantic

potential" of religious ethical beliefs and practices[55], and seeks to "appropriate" this

normative "content" for the betterment of our world. But in order to properly appropriate

this normative content, and give it a universal (or secular) form, Habermas insists we

adopt an approach he calls "methodological atheism"[56]. To put is shortly, methodological

atheism (MA) is "a program of demythologization" that seeks to appropriate this valuable

normative content of religion by getting rid of their "pietistic cover"[57]. To explain how

this works, Habermas makes the following comparison:

> Theological discourse… distinguishes itself from religious by
> separating itself from ritual practice in the act of explaining it, for
> example that it *interprets* sacraments such as baptism or the
> eucharist… This situation only changed with the collapse of
> metaphysics. Under the conditions of postmetaphysical thinking,
> whoever puts forth a truth claim today must, nevertheless, translate
> experiences that have their home in religious discourse into the
> language of a scientific expert culture –and from this language
> retranslate them into praxis[58]

In other words, philosophers employing MA must do two things. First, they must

take religious beliefs and practices with a valuable ethical-normative content and

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[53] Ibid, page 51.
[54] See chapter 6 of *Postmetaphysical Thinking*.
[55] *Religion and Rationality*, page 71.
[56] Ibid., page 75.
[57] Ibid., pages 75 and 68.
[58] Ibid., pages 75-76.

"translate" this content into a "secular language" that is comprehensible (and meaningful) to *all* people, that is, to people of different or no religious convictions. Second, philosophers must take this now *universal* normative content and reconverts it "into praxis" by finding concrete and practical forms of expression (or discourse) that promote social solidarity, equality or whatever important ethical norm is indispensable in our world today. This is arguably what liberal thinkers of the Lockean tradition did when they took the religious doctrine of a *God who created people according to His image* to develop a conception of *individual human rights* that found its most significant political expression in the American Declaration of Independence. Habermas, in fact, often speaks of this particular "translation" as one of the most important contributions of the Judeo-Christian tradition to the world[59], and thus he constantly exhorts contemporary thinkers to employ MA as a way to "linguistify the sacred"[60] in order to appropriate valuable ethical content in religion, and restating it in a form that is universally comprehensible.

In this section I have presented Habermas' work on religion from the perspective of the moral and ethical dimension of this own thought. The task remains of exposing the short comings of his project by highlighting those aspects of his thought that are hardly to be called "universal", but that stem from very particular convictions, some of which can be even deemed "religious". This is the climatic part of my paper. By exposing the "religious side" of Habermas, I not only want to bring to light the non-universalizable aspects of his work on religion, but I want to make evident the influence of the Judeo-

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[59] See for example *An Awareness of What is Missing*, page 80; *Religion and Rationality,* page 149; *Between Naturalism and Religion,* pages 229 and 305.
[60] *Religion and Rationality,* pages 11-24, 76 and 164.

Christian tradition in his personal understanding of religion, and the religious-like needs that he believes our world have and that he (inadequately) projects *universally*.

HABERMAS' CONVICTIONS REGARDING RELIGION
AND RELIGIOUS INCLINATIONS

Habermas' work on religion has a broad scope. His books and papers deal with a variety of different topics: the way philosophers should approach religion, his treatment of religious argument in the public sphere, his thoughts on how to deal with religious conflicts worldwide, what he believes religion can contribute to social solidarity and world peace, etc. Some of these topics have been considered here, either tangentially or directly, with some depth or in passing. When the specific task is to understand *the influence of religion on Habermas'* theory of discourse and its universal scope, the situation is no less complex. This task can also lead us to approach Habermas from different angles: philosophical, hermeneutical, psychological and even biographical. My account in this section will exhibit no critical or exhaustive investigation of the philosopher's religious beliefs, nor will it encompass all these different angles of analysis.

Let us begin with a fragment that we partially quoted before. In explaining the need our world has for the *ethical* in dealing with conflicts that require a more community-oriented approach, and the failure of secular rationality in filling this gap, Habermas writes,

> rational morality explains why enlightened reason unavoidably loses its grip on the images, preserved by religion, of the moral whole – of the Kingdom of God on earth – as collectively binding ideals. At the same time, practical reason fails to fulfill its own vocation when it no longer has sufficient strength to awaken, and to keep awake, in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity

throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven[61]

This statement seems pretty peculiar coming from a "postmetaphysical thinker" (perhaps it would be less peculiar coming from a *postsecular thinker* whose philosophical orientation may at times go beyond the realm of the strictly secular). While employing the usual terminology of his work ("practical reason", "rational morality" and "enlightened reason"), the allusions to "the Kingdom of God on earth" and "what cries out to heaven" can no doubt leave contemporary thinkers a bit confused. But Habermas does very little (not to say "nothing") to dissipate or avoid such confusion. Neither after nor before this passage does he explain what he means by the "kingdom of God of earth", or who is "crying out to heaven" or what is exactly being cried out. There is certainly an explicit reference to "solidarity" and a clear recognition of the limitation of practical reason in producing "collectively binding ideals" in the passage. But much (a very important "much" indeed) remains unexplained. Habermas wrote "An Awareness of What is Missing" in part to expose the limitations of "enlightened reason" in producing *universal ethical norms and principles*. And yet, to the reader there is something equally *missing* in what Habermas is trying to say in this paper[62].

Habermas has written a lot about religion. And yet, because I feel there is still *more that needs to be said* by Habermas on this topic, I find it pertinent to examine what Habermas has said about religion in his recent work; what he has not fully acknowledged, and the reasons for the latter. This will tell us something about his convictions on religion

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[61] *An Awareness of What is Missing*, page 19.

[62] To avoid confusion, "An Awareness of What is Missing" is Habermas' introductory article to the book he co-authored with other thinkers and that bears the same name. This is why at times the same phrase is written in this paper in italics.

as a philosopher displaying a particular religious preference in him, and expose the

(Western) ideology sustaining his whole understanding of religion. It is trhough this

analysis that I will try to expose *what is missing* in his work on religion, and whether this

work (particularly the part dealing with the Kantian project and the philosophical

appropriation of ethical norms from religion) passes its own universal test.

In the previous section mention was made of the importance of the prefix *post* in

understanding what postmetaphysical thinking (PT) really stands for: an attitude that is

not *anti*-metaphysical (and by logical extension not *anti-religious*) but that is willing to

"learn from religious traditions"[63] though without compromising its secular, atheistic

principles. PT thinkers must understand that "secular reason may not set itself up as the

judge concerning truths of faith, even though in the end it can accept as reasonable only

what it can translate into its own, in principle universally accessible, discourses"[64].

We also examined Habermas' calling this translating approach "methodological

atheism" (MA) to evince that fact that this method is by no means committed to any

religious principle or belief. With this in mind, it seems clear that Habermas' expressed

intention is to appropriate from religion whatever idea from which human beings may

benefit *universally*, just like the doctrine of human rights arguably did and as religious

bonds of solidarity potentially can. But there is more in religion that Habermas finds

valuable. Consider this excerpt:

> Without initially having any theological intention, the reason that
> becomes aware of its limitations thus transcends itself in the direction
> of something else. This can take the form of a mystical fusion with a
> consciousness that embraces the universe; it may be the despairing
> hope that a redeeming message will occur in history; or it may take

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[63] *The Dialectics of Secularization*, page 42.
[64] *An Awareness of What is Missing*, page 16.

the shape of a solidarity with those who are oppressed and insulted,
which presses forward in order to hasten on the coming of the
messianic salvation[65]

Habermas speaks here of the need of secular reason to adopt attitudes and beliefs that

have been traditionally regarded as metaphysical or religious: a *mystical fusion* with the

universe, a *consciousness that embraces the universe*, a *redeeming message* for humanity,

and a sense of solidarity that has the expectation of a common *messianic salvation*. Here

again, as with the above-quoted paragraph from "An Awareness of What is Missing",

Habermas left much un-explained before and after this quote. And yet he is not timid in

using such metaphysically-loaded terms and expressions to describe the attitude PT is

supposed to adopt when approaching religion. Thus, while speaking of a "messianic

hope" may upset a secular philosopher, it should not necessarily disturb a PT thinker for

whom the expression can still say something meaningful and useful.

But regardless of expressions and words used, once one is familiar with

Habermas' work on religion it becomes clear that when the philosopher employs the term

"messianic" is almost invariably to refer to the goal of fighting poverty in the world and

putting an end to human suffering, whatever its form. That is, Habermas gives the term

"messianic" an *activist* meaning. This is why in *Religion and Rationality* he speaks

approvingly of Catholic theologian Jans Glebe-Moller, who apparently inspired him to

adopt this meaning of the term. This is Habermas quoting Glebe-Moller:

we must make the consciousness of guilt [instilled by the belief in a
God and the sinful condition of all human beings] into something
positive, something that spurs us to fight against the conditions that
have produced the guilt. That can happen when we hold fast to our
solidarity with all who have suffered and died, now and before. This

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[65] *The Dialectics of Secularization*, pages 40-41.

> solidarity or fellowship contains within itself a 'messianic' power that transforms any passive consciousness of guilt into an active struggle against the conditions for guilt –just as it was when Jesus… forgave sinners and set people free to continue that struggle… But can we be in solidarity? In the last analysis, we can be nothing else, for solidarity –the ideal communicative fellowship– is presupposed in everything we say and do![66]

Apparently, it is this kind of theological analysis which makes Habermas feel comfortable using such religious expressions, and thus exhorts PT thinkers to do the same considering the need of universal ethical norms in our world. In this regard, I think that what Habermas is actually doing is adopting his own approach (MA) to translate the religious belief of a "messianic salvation" into a more secular ideal: *a social-political condition where all human suffering brought about by avarice, apathy and neglect has finally come to an end*. This condition, despite of its evident utopian character, has yet a practical value if our desire is to make our world a better place to live.

But that is not all Habermas has expressed about religion. A recurrent acknowledgement he makes in his work is that regarding the Judeo-Christian tradition and its contribution to modernity and civilization, particularly in the genesis of universal human rights. For example, in *Religion and Rationality*, Habermas expresses with clear emphasis:

> Universal egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethics of justice and the Christian ethic of love[67]

Habermas surely knows that many thinkers may not agree with this conviction, and yet it strikes one as suspicious seeing the number of times he makes this acknowledgement in

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[66] *Religion and Rationality*, page 78.
[67] Ibid., page 149.

his work and with the same emphatic boldness[68]. In fact, Habermas says very little of concrete contributions to humanity or to modernity made by other religious traditions. The fact that he has only co-authored books with Christian theologians (*An Awareness of What is Missing* and *The Dialectics of Secularization*) evinces a preferred religious tendency in him. For while Habermas finds much to praise in Christian theologians (like Glebe-Moller and Johann Baptist Metz, and Christian activist ideologies like liberation theology[69]), when it comes to Islamic or Buddhist thought he is quite laconic. This attitude certainly does not show Habermas as a Christian thinker, but it does evince an ideological reciprocity, a sympathetic affinity, between his thought and the Judeo-Christian tradition he often praises. To this point I want to turn now.

In speaking of the "kingdom of God of earth" and the lack of solidarity that "cries out to heaven" without further explaining what is meant by these expressions, Habermas may be simply trying to use a language that, despite its clear religious tones, can be "inspiring" to all individuals regardless of their religious beliefs. Most people in our world, in fact, seem comfortable speaking of God in a colloquial (and even trivial) way, as when thanks is given to God for a particular benefit received, or when expressing surprise or wonder. The same is true of the afterlife, a religious belief that helps people in their time of grief. No doubt, for those people who speak of "God" with a capital "G" but without any serious doctrinal commitment, and who speak of "heaven" in the same way (as in songs like "Knocking on Heaven's Door" and movies like "All Dogs Go to

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[68] See, for example, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, page 305; *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, page 15; *Religion and Rationality* pages 74, 147, 149-150, 164; *The Dialectics of Secularization*, page 24; see also his "Reply" in *Habermas and Religion*, page 361).
[69] We can find several references to liberation theology only in *Religion and Rationality*.

Heaven"), the religious expressions Habermas uses can be inspiring. But little may they

know that these expressions actually come from *the Bible*.

For example, what "cries out to heaven" is actually the "blood of Abel" who was

murdered by his own brother, Cain, as it is related in chapter 4 of the biblical book of

Genesis.

> Now Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let's go out to the field.' While
> they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.
> Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' 'I don't
> know,' he replied. 'Am I my brother's keeper?' The Lord said, 'What
> have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood *cries out to me from the
> ground*. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground,
> which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your
> hand' (NIV version; the emphasis is mine)

The *cry* is thus a *demand for* (divine) *justice*, considering Abel was a righteous, innocent

man who was the victim of a brother who was both insensitive to his wellbeing and

indifferent to their brotherly relationship, but was instead moved to act by jealously and

hatred. The connection to *solidarity* (or the lack of it) is quite clear: the apathy we may

feel for a suffering "brother", for a fellow-human being in need, evince the need of a

solidarity that "cries out to heaven" to a *just God* who condemns such actions and thus

may expect us to do something about it.

Similarly, the idea of a *Messiah*, of a God-sent man who would eventually come

to redeem humanity of all sin, and the world of all evil, is found in the Old Testament.

This idea, therefore, constitutes a most essential element in both Judaic and Christian

eschatology. In the Christian tradition, this messiah is no other than Jesus Christ who

preached about such "kingdom of God on earth" as it is recorded in several passages of

the New Testament[70]. This kingdom is the promise that Jesus will return to earth one day to rule as "King of kings", and who will then remove, along with sin, all suffering and poverty in the world[71]. Here, too, we can see a clear connection with what Habermas refers to as a "messianic salvation", that is, a utopic vision of a better world that has yet a practical activist character: fighting poverty and human oppression in our world. It is inspired by these Biblical motifs, and the Catholic liberation theologians who gave them this activist meaning, that Habermas tries to advance PT in his books on religion.

Habermas' reliance on the Judeo-Christian tradition to find "meaningful" religious ideas betrays a clear religious preference. I am not accusing Habermas of being something like a religious thinker "in disguise". Rather, my contention is that much of his work on religion rests on a frame of mind that is more distinctively Judeo-Christian than anything else.

Therefore, the "thing missing" in Habermas' work is the acknowledgement that most of his expressed hopes for the world are Judeo-Christian in nature; the hope of a world devoid of poverty and suffering (or *sin*); a world that does not cry out to heaven anymore because solidarity is the rule of law (under *the Kingdom of God*); a world where all people acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being, the "consciousness that embraces the universe" Who, as King of kings, is the sole Guarantor and Protector of this utopic and yet eternal status quo. For Habemas, this hope must come in the form of a "redeeming message" for the world, just like the Gospel whose etymological origin comes from the Greek word *evaggelion*, or *good message*, which also gave rise to the word "evangelical". The realization of such hope certainly sounds like the establishment

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[70] See Matthew 12:28; Mark 1:15; Luke 10:9-:11, 11:20, 13:29, 22:18 and 23:51.
[71] See Revelations 17:14, 19:16 and 22:2

of *the kingdom of God on earth*, an idea that not only serves to sustain this utopic expectation for a better world but can also help us in our grieving and tribulations. The problem is that the evident Judeo-Christian connotations of these hopes cannot be completely removed in an attempt to abstract universal principles from them.

This is one of the things that have most impressed me about Habermas' work on religion: the idea that PT can appropriate from religion something like an afterlife hope. But Habermas is not alone in this regard. This hope for an afterlife seems to be shared by close colleagues of his who despite consider themselves "secular" or "agnostic" appear to feel the same longing for a blessed and eternal afterlife, a longing that exhibits a clear religious behavior. I am talking about an event that Habermas describes at the beginning of "An Awareness of What is Missing" and which I find most interesting and revealing. The passage is worth quoting in full.

> On April 9, 1991, a memorial service for Max Frisch was held in St Peter's Church in Zürich. It began with Karin Pilliod, Frisch's partner, reading out a brief declaration written by the deceased. It stated, among other things: 'We let our nearest speak, and without an 'amen.' I am grateful to the ministers of St Peter's in Zürich… for their permission to place the coffin in the church during our memorial service. The ashes will be strewn somewhere.' Two friends spoke. No priest, no blessing. The mourners were made up of intellectuals, most of whom had little time for church and religion… At the time the ceremony did not strike me as peculiar. However, its form, place and progression *were* peculiar. Clearly, Max Frisch, an agnostic who rejected any profession of faith, had sensed the awkwardness of non-religious burial practices and, by his choice of place, publicly declared that the enlightened modern age had failed to find a suitable replacement for a religious way of coping with the final *rite de passage* which brings life to a close.[72]

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[72] *An Awareness of What is Missing*, page 15.

Habermas, I must say, never speaks of the afterlife in this passage or afterwards in the paper, but merely alludes to the "failure of modernity" in producing a secular way of coping with loss and grief. And yet this hope is at the very heart of the *message* of Jesus Christ who, according to the Gospel of John, consoled a woman whose brother had recently died saying: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he dies, yet he shall live." Right after saying these words, Jesus resuscitated the dead man[73]. I think it was this very hope what motivated Frisch to organized such particular memorial service, what inspired Habermas to relate this anecdote, and to employ all these religious expressions in his books on religion. But this is merely speculative. And yet, this anecdote at the beginning of "An Awareness of What is Missing" seems to suggest that, for Habermas, what is *missing* in "secular rationality" is the hope of the Gospel and its grief-consoling message, and that what he deems "messianic salvation" is closer to a *saving Messiah* than he would like to admit. Habermas may argue that the only thing he is pointing out is *modernity's inability to produce universal ethical norms and principles* which, however, can be appropriated from religion by means of PT. But I suspect that under PT's acknowledgement of the mutual dependence between philosophy and religion (articulated in the claim "religion without philosophy is speechless, philosophy without religion is contentless"[74]) Habermas seems to not fully acknowledge that *his own* religious longings which he projects *universally* by means of PT are Judeo-Christian in nature and thus carry with them a strong bias regarding what is missing in our world and what is needed to fill this gap.

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[73] The whole story is found in the Gospel of John, chapter 11.
[74] *Religion and Rationality*, page 28.

I want to turn now to my conviction that much of Habermas' thoughts on religion, as well as his personal religious inclinations, have been largely shaped by his environment: a Germanic culture that despite its political and intellectual commitment to secularity has been traditionally nourished by Christian ideals and institutions. To sustain my contention, I will make use of William P. Alston's most insightful epistemological analysis of what he deems "overrider sytems*"*, that is, the cognitive paradigmatic-schema that pretty much grounds all our religious convictions, intuitions and even perceptions.

An Epistemological Analysis of Habermas' Religious Convictions and Inclinations

In his book *Perceiving God* William P. Alston provides a most revealing account of the way people interprets religious experiences they attribute to God, and how these experiences and (most importantly) the beliefs they give rise to can be considered "reliable" and even epistemologically "justified". Alston calls these experiences *manifestation-beliefs* (or M-beliefs), which religious people often claim to have "by virtue of perceiving God as being or doing so-and-so"[75].

M-beliefs can be formed through a variety of religious experiences: dreams, visions, moments of religious ecstasy or by simply listening to one's "inner voice". For this reason, these experiences can be extremely subjective and thus liable to criticism and doubt. But according to Alston a person can be *justified* in deriving convictions from these experiences if the conviction in question presents no discrepancy in regard to a common background of religious beliefs the person and his fellow believers share. Alston calls this ideological background an *overrider system*, which consists on a system "of

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[75] See William P. Alston's *Perceiving God* (Cornell UP: Ithaca, 1991), page 1.

beliefs… that the subject can use in subjecting [their] prima facie justified beliefs to further tests when that is called for”[76].

An overrider system typically has a rich ideological structure whose genesis can incorporate sacred documents, formal doctrinal statements, theological conceptions, traditions, etc., all of which provide the religious individual with “a general picture of the nature of the Ultimate Reality and our relations thereto, and some generalizations concerning the conditions under which mystical perception is likely to be veridical or the reverse”[77]. It is this structure that provides religious individuals with coherent way to understand the events surrounding them, and do it in a way that other religious individuals, of the same religious tradition, can find “justifiable” and even reliable.

To offer an illustration, let us think of a Christian American woman who claims to have listened to God’s voice during a difficult time of her life involving the tragic loss of a young child. Let us say that while expressing her grief during prayer, she reports to have heard God’s voice saying: “Don’t worry, my child. I will hold your hand during this process and I will give you the strength you need now, and peace when this is over”. Let us assume, moreover, that the woman actually finds peace and strength after this experience, which she later reports to her friends and fellow believers. Her report will come as no real surprise to them, as it is perfectly consistent with her and her friend’s overrider system, which in fact sustains the idea of a personal God who listens to people’s prayers and who is known for providing such peace and strength in difficult times. The woman’s testimony will not only be considered *reliable* to others, but her M-belief will be epistemologically justified for being in perfect accord with her Christian

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[76] *Perceiving God,* page 159.
[77] Ibid., page 190.

overrider system. Had the woman claimed to have heard God saying something like "Your life is pointless" or "Take your own life", her testimony would have lacked epistemological justification as there is very little (or nothing) in this particular overrider system to support those kinds of words as actually coming from God.

In this illustration, I used the expression "Christian overrider system" to distinguish it from other religious paradigmatic-systems of different cultures which Alston also acknowledges in his book. As everyone knows, there are substantial doctrinal and theological differences among Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and Christian cultures. Due to these differences their overrider systems can render radically different interpretations even of the same religious experience, as a particular overrider system gives the believer a particular way to *understand what he or she perceives*. But it is not only in regard to religion that these cultures differ among one other at the time of justifying one's experiences and the beliefs one forms from them. The way people interpret certain "social facts" can also produce a manifold of interpretations that can even conflict with one another, depending if one is a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Jew, a Christian or an agnostic. In this sense, overrider systems constitute but one among several paradigmatic systems (like science, ethics and even sense perception[78]) we use in order to make sense of the reality around us, a reality that affects us in physical, social and mental ways. It is true that we often make these paradigmatic distinctions when we consider a particular scenario affecting our lives. And yet, all these systems are part of the same overarching cognitive background that ground all our discursive interaction

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[78] Alston refers to sense perception as such kind of paradigmatic system throughout his book.

with others members of our culture; this background is what Habermas calls our *lifeworld*.

But how is an overrider system different from a lifeworld? Let us use again the example given on page 7 about the international conference on global warming where, despite the different languages of participant, they can still be able to understand conference speakers provided they have a translator and, most importantly, helped by a world of scientific facts all attendees of the conference share in common. I used this example to show the broader paradigmatic scope of the lifeworld (which comprises such a share world of scientific facts) compared to language (which one may share with conference speakers but which for that reason alone do not guarantee an adequate comprehension of the issues being discussed in the conference). In any event, a share "world of scientific facts" is very similar to what Alston calls an overrider system, but where the former helps us understanding global warming, dark matter and mitosis, the latter helps us understanding sin, redemption and grace. The only difference is that while the former provides a unified way of understanding science to *all individuals regardless of their culture*, the latter provides a unified way of understanding religion *to members of a particular religious tradition*. And yet, because religious overrider systems have no clear ideological boundaries but are many times fused in the overall thought of a particular culture, it is easy to be misled in having a notion of the religious that we think is appropriate (or universal) but that in reality has been profoundly influenced by the particular overrider system that our culture exhibits. But this can also work the other way, for we may be equally misled in holding a notion we believe is scientific when in reality is sustained by convictions that are anything but scientific. The history of the West is full

of examples of this. The geo-centric model of the universe is perhaps the most famous one. This happens because all these paradigmatic sub-systems (science, religion, secularity, tradition, etc.) are all part of the lifeworld, which grounds all our ideas, thoughts and expressions.

The point I am trying to make is this: the same overrider system that makes religious experiences meaningful and reliable to the Western religious individual, makes much of our Western secular thoughts on religion *meaningful and reliable*. Why? Because our notion of the secular and of the religious form part of the same lifeworld we Westerners share with all other members of our culture *regardless of their religious beliefs*. This is why the doctrine of human rights makes sense to people in West: the idea of human beings having equal value can appeal to both the secular individual, who holds liberal rights dear, and the religious individual, who believes we were all created in the image of God. The way we in the West argue for the foundation of those rights, however, may be different. But the idea that all human beings shared or have similar values is something we do not normally debate about[79]. The same can be said (in fact, have been said) regarding Martin Luther King and his motivations to fight for civil liberties in America[80]. His speeches, always accompanied by biblical references, touched the hearts of religious and non-religious Americans alike because they were in perfect harmony with his Christian overrider system and the lifeworld he shared with all his fellow American citizens. This serves to show that it is not always a bad idea to draw from our

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[79] By "normally" I mean debates about the equality of human value and rights do not constitute a major ideological issue in the West *today*, particularly when this notion is conceived in legal-political terms, as when we argue against sexual discrimination or racial segregation policies.
[80] A notable example is John Rawls who acknowledges the religious motivations behind the civil rights movement in his book *Political Liberalism* (Columbia UP: New York, 1996), pages 249-251.

lifeworld normative contents that are religious in origin. This is what Habermas is trying to do.

However, Habermas seems unaware of the fact that his whole program of translating religious beliefs into secular language (his so called "methodological atheism" or MA) can only make sense to the religious individual of the West provided that such translation presents no relevant discrepancy to her overrider system. This logic can also work the other way: whatever religious practices and beliefs Habermas (or any Western secular individual) finds meaningful and valuable to translate, it is simply by virtue of the lifeworld showing no real discrepancy between his notion of the secular and the overrider system that grounds the religious belief in question. In this sense, it is equally possible to translate secular beliefs into a "religious language" *provided that such translation has a common lifeworld.* For whenever our Western lifeworld and its Judeo-Christian overrider system agree on what is good, or on what is right or what is wrong, a meaningful translation (either secular to religious or vice versa) will be possible. What allows Habermas to make these "translations" is this simple fact. A real breakthrough for him, however, will be to come up with a secular translation that is meaningful *across cultures*. But this is challenging considering that different cultures have different religions with different overrider systems, which make the religious individual *perceive things differently*. But this is exactly what Habermas seems to ignore.

Habermas has been born, brought up and academically educated in a country that has not only been an important actor in the development of the West, but a country whose Christian heritage has contributed to its lifeworld with a strong and philosophically rich overrider system. It is only natural for Habermas to seek to establish a discursive

correspondence between the religious and the secular when both ideological strands do not necessarily show serious discrepancies in the West when it comes, at least, to liberal democracy[81]. But the same is not the case if we argue for liberal democracy and secularism in a different, non-Western culture. In reality, Christianity and secularism, by virtue of having a common home in the West, are closer ideologically than, say, Islam or Hinduism and secularism[82]. This is why secularism in the West has found several justifications in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. A well-known example, and one that seems lacking in other religious traditions, comes from Jesus' exhortation to "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God" [83]. Certainly, there has been much debate in the West regarding the role that Christianity is to play in politics. And yet, because Jesus' words are well-known to most Christians today, the conception of church and state as two separate entities is still justifiable in their overrider system and, as a consequence, can be considered a sound religious perception, even to a Western secular thinker like Habermas.

This does not mean, of course, that one needs to be a Westerner in order to conceive and embrace secularism. We can indeed find examples of individuals of other cultures who have also embraced this notion. However, in most cases, such individuals have either spent a considerable number of years living in the West or have been

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[81] We can think, for example of John Locke, whose arguments for a liberal democratic government (put forth in his *Second Treatise of Government*) were compelling for him and for most of his contemporaries because they were not only consistent with Christianity but actually supported by it (as he argues in the *First Treatise*).

[82] See for example Charles Taylor's genealogical history of secularism in *A Secular Age*. A more radical view can be found in Ernst Bloch's *Atheism in Christianity* where it is argued that these two ideologies are closer to each other than what most people think.

[83] See Mark 12: 14-17.

profoundly influenced by Western thought[84]. In reality, secularism and the West are

essential to each other not only because the former was conceived in the latter, but, most

importantly, because they are part of one and the same *lifeworld*. What is of interest to

our present purposes is not that fact that most secular thinkers have actually been born

and raised in the West, but that in the genesis of the Western lifeworld Christianity has

been a major actor, which is why it is possible that such contrasting ideologies as

Christianity and secularism can *cohabitate* and even *interact* with each other. Habermas

is aware of this interaction and has acknowledged the role of Christianity in the

development of the West[85]. But while he remains optimistic about PT and its capacity to

"appropriate meaningful contents" from religious beliefs by means of MA, he is

uncritical to the fact that his program, by virtue of being conceived in the West, will

hardly be embraced in cultures whose ideological genesis comprises a different religious

tradition, and where, for that reason, individuals perceive religion and politics in a totally

different way.

     To illustrate my point, let us once more use the example universal human rights.

Not only have these rights been rejected by most religious and political leaders in Muslim

nations, but in response these leaders have devised and adopted their own versions of

human rights, such as the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (CDHRI) and the

Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights (UIDHR). To these leaders and

scholars[86], the real problem with the former version of universal rights is that, being a

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[84] The example of Ibn Warraq comes to mind: a former Muslim who grew up in London and who wrote a book entitled *Why the West is Best: A Muslim Apostate's Defense of Liberal Democracy*.

[85] *Between Naturalism and Religion*, pages 140-143.

[86] There is an important number of figures, both political and intellectual, who have argued against the Western nature of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: former Saudi Arabian representative Jamil

Western product[87], it clearly contradicts basic religious principles that most Muslims

share and hold dear. Many of these principles find their origin and justification in their

most important doctrinal tradition, the *shari'a* or Islamic law, which along with the

Koran form the basis of a completely different way of perceiving and understanding the

world around them. For this reason a conception as noble (for us Westerners) as universal

human rights has been perceived by dissenting Muslim scholars and political leaders not

only as contrary to their cultural ideology (lifeworld) but even hostile to their religion

(overrider system). For them, the entire project of institutionalizing the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights in the whole world is nothing but a Western imperialist

agenda that seeks to destroy their values and religion by means of secularization[88]. On the

other hand, Western scholars tend to perceive this rejection of the Declaration as clearly

unjust in regards to women, who in many Islamic nations do not enjoy the same rights

and privileges as men do. Thus Westerners like Elizabeth Mayer (a scholar dedicated to

the study of conflicting interpretations of human rights in the world) has not only

condemned this attitude of Muslims leaders but has asserted that Islamic versions of

human rights, such as the CDHRI and UIDHR, "aim to degrade human rights"[89]. Mayer

has gone as far as to blame the *shari'a* itself for this discriminatory attitude as it has

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Baroody, Iranian scholar Sultanhussein Tabandeh, Sunni religious leader Abu'l A 'la Mawdudi, among many others. To this number we can also add important Islamic organizations, like the Islamic Research Academy of Cairo, the al-Azhar University and the Arab Union of Lawyers with base in Sweden. Their role in addressing the issue of Western notions of human rights can be found in Ann Elizabeth Mayer's book *Islam and Human Rights* (Westview Press: Boulder, 2013).

[87] I think it is quite revealing that the Arabic term for "western", *gharb*, derives from *gharib* which means alien, strange, outlandish (see Malise Ruthven's *Islam, a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford UP: New York, 2000), page 2).

[88] Mashood A. Baderin's *International Human Rights and Islamic Law* (Oxford UP: Oxford, 2003), page 13.

[89] *Islam and Human Rights*, page 2.

"traditionally called for restrictions on rights, such as the rules relegating women and non-Muslims to subordinate status"[90].

But here Mayer seems to be committing the same mistake of Habermas: ignoring the fact that in many Muslim societies a different overrider system inhabits their lifeworld, which makes people *see* gender roles as a *sound religious perception*. Imagine the opposite was the case. How would most of us Westerners react if gender-roles restrictions were imposed on us by non-Western NGOs? How would we react to non-Western media propaganda presenting gender discrimination in favorable lights? It is very unlikely, for example, that the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences would grant an Oscar to a Muslim movie that paints a very favorable picture of patriarchal values, say, in the form of a household whose husband is the sole provider of his meek, obedient and uneducated wife and their seven children, all of whom are shown as living in perfect harmony and happiness. These themes are pretty unpopular to most Westerners. But the same happens with many Muslims who have bitterly rejected Western values portrayed in Hollywood films, and have even banned some of them in their countries for considering contrary to their ideology and religion. Interestingly (or perhaps *hypocritically*), many of us Westerners feel a sense of outrage when we hear of this kind of "cultural bans" on our movies taking place in certain countries[91].

The truth is, most Westerners perceive the sexual discrimination that takes place in certain Muslim countries as something abhorrent and archaic, especially when it is backed by religious reasons. But we cannot blame Muslims for not having our secular

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[90] Ibid., page 86.
[91] One can find an innumerable amount of sources online describing this outrage, but a recent one I have read comes from Mark Tapson's blog article "Top 10 Movies Banned in the Middle East" (http://www.investigativeproject.org/2235/top-10-movies-banned-in-the-middle-east#).

mentality. Their lifeworld is different from ours. Being a culture with a different religion tradition, their lifeworld have completely different overrider system, and thus individuals have a completely different way of perceiving and understanding the social reality surrounding them. Thus both Habermas and Mayer are to blame for not seeing their democratic agenda and criticisms, however well intended, as an imposition to non-Western cultures. Habermas may be right in saying that, in the long run, the process of modernity (with its spread of secular and liberal ideals by means of capitalism and globalization) will be embraced worldwide whether we like it or not. And yet, as the serious thinker he is Habermas should be more sensitive to those who will reject this process on religious or ideological grounds. Moreover, he should be more self-critical of his Western lifeworld and its pretentious universal scope, and finally be more conscious of the extent to which the Judeo-Christian religious tradition has molded his philosophical thought. But of this last point I will say more in my conclusion.

CONCLUSION

If there is a single challenge our world today faces today, a conflict that has unjustly claimed the lives of thousands of people of different nations and cultural backgrounds, a tragedy so urgent and pressing that demands our best efforts and most careful strategies to address, is the tragedy of religious-motivated conflicts and acts of terrorism around the world. Ever since September 11, 2000, people in our world (not just Americans or Westerners) have understood this tragedy as part of our present reality, a reality that makes many of us live in fear while making others question the role that religion is to play in our world. It seems unlikely that this issue will ever be resolved with more violence, or with efforts to eradicate or restrict religious influence in the modern world. A compromise must be sought where both religious and non-religious individuals can peacefully cohabitate while professing their own convictions freely and without fear. Therefore, any well-intended effort to produce, or at least to incite, this kind of compromise should be seen favorably, *though never uncritically*.

I think Habermas deserves our approval for being willing to take up the challenge and for attempting to produce some form of reconciliation (in the form of a dialectical correspondence) between the secular and the religious with the goal of addressing the issue of religious-motivated conflicts in the world. My goal in this paper has never been to be critical of Habermas' intentions, but of the ideology sustaining his approach: an ideology that is most distinctively Western, and sympathetic to religion but *only* in a Judeo-Christian sense.

Let us start with ideology. To address the issue of religious conflicts in the world Habermas wants to promote liberal-democratic values worldwide so as to make it possible for people to willingly adopt a "universal constitution" (the so called Kantian project) that would be effective in dealing with violations of human rights worldwide. The problem is that such liberal-democratic values are so Western in nature that, in order to make people of other cultures embrace them, a notion as fundamental as the separation of church and state must be widely accepted first. But not only does this notion seem antithetical to the culture of several non-Western nations, but it can even be *perceived* as hostile by most religious members in these nations. On the other hand, for a Western individual like Habermas, whose religious fellow-citizens may be more prone to accept the notion of church and state separation *even on religious grounds* (considering, again, Jesus' Biblical exhortation "to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God"), liberal-democratic values are not necessarily perceived as trampling on any religious or cultural norm deemed precious by most fellow-citizens. The Reformation brought to Westerners the conviction that religious practices and beliefs are mainly a personal matter, and as such are not to be enforced or policed by any ecclesiastical or governmental authority, like the Catholic Church and different European kings did prior to this important event. Therefore, it is only normal for a Western individual to accept the notion of church and state separation when it has served to ensure equal rights and freedoms to both men and women in order for them to practice the religion (or no religion) they want, the way they want it. The same is not the case in a culture whose lifeworld does not sustain that idea, and where the religious individual, whose understanding is shaped by a completely different overrider system, tends to perceive

men and women as entrusted with a particular role in society (as in most Islamic nations), or understands certain individuals to possess special rights and privileges based on their descent (as in the Indian caste system). In such cultures not only will the Kantian project fail to be properly understood and accepted, but it will only serve to accentuate resentment and motivate further conflicts. In this regard Habermas' ideas for dealing with religious conflicts in the world not only fail, but fail to meet his own standard of universalization.

In this paper I have also been critical of Habermas' very particular understanding of religion, and I have argued that his ideas on this point are so essentially tied to the Judeo-Christian tradition that, even though he acknowledges the influence of this tradition in the West and even in his own work, he still fails to see that his postmetaphysical philosophy and his program of translation (MA) has only proven to work in the West (where they were conceived) whose lifeworld not only sustains liberal values but most of their moral, legal and even religious underpinnings. Therefore, when Habermas thinks of *religion*, it is *the Judeo-Christian tradition* that he is drawing upon; and when he says that our world needs something like a "messianic salvation", or the establishment of "the kingdom of God on earth", in order to promote social solidarity, he is not just trying to find a place for religion but specifically for Judeo-Christian religious ideas in his philosophy. Habermas seems incapable of thinking that a religious person from a different culture (with a Hindu, Muslim or Taoist religious tradition) will likely have a hard time conceiving such needs for the world, considering these themes are totally alien to their overrider systems. As for solidarity, while Habermas understands this concept to have a universalizable normative content that could potentially help resolve

religious conflicts in the world, his understanding not only rests on Judeo-Christian

notions of solidarity, but the realization of such notions in our world also rests on

Western liberal values that would protect and guide individuals in this pursuit. But such

conception of "solidarity" is not clearly compatible with non-Western cultures with

different religious traditions.

I also made mention of Habermas' claim that "the enlightened modern age" has

"failed" in coming up with a secular *rite de passage* to cope with death and grief (pages

39-40). What I find striking in this claim is that it does not highlight the need for

universal solidarity in a way that would help us dealing with religions conflicts in the

world, promoting equality or fighting for social justice. If anything, the claim expresses a

need that is more "messianic" in a Christian sense than universal. And yet, the paper in

which this claims appears, "An Awareness of What is Missing", is intended to evince the

need our world has for a religious-like sense of solidarity; and instead of using an

example of religious-based solidarity that can inspire his readers[92], Habermas chooses to

start this paper with an anecdote dealing with death, loss and the need for secular *rite de

passage*: the burial of an agnostic friend of his in a Catholic Church in Zurich[93]. Not only

is this anecdote peculiar (and perhaps, we may add, suspicious), but the book itself in

which this paper appears was co-authored with a group of theologians of Catholic

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[92] I know of several examples that Habermas could have used to illustrate the importance of faith-based acts of solidarity, as the assistance given by Christian organizations to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, or the multiple faith-based NGO's which provide free education to children in different parts of the world, or build essential infrastructures (most notably, water-pipe systems) in several impoverished parts of the world.

[93] I have been inclined to believe, though this is purely personal and speculative, that Habermas has perhaps sensed his own religious need of a *rite de passage* dealing with death and dying in the burial of his agnostic friend, considering he is old and smart enough to see the proximity of his own death; and I will be not in the least surprised if one day we all wake up with the news that this important "postmetaphysical thinker" has suddenly converted to Catholicism.

denomination! And yet, it seems obvious that no one other religious group will understand Habermas' ideas on religion better considering they all share the same overrider system. But if these ideas are really intended to be universal in scope, I ask, should he not have included intellectuals of other religious traditions? A more diverse group of religious intellectuals would have potentially offered a more promising test for the universability of his ideas.

I hope this paper has been useful in bringing to light important aspects in Habermas' recent work on religion that require revision and clarification. Certainly, his postmetaphysical philosophy distinguishes itself from other Western philosophical attitudes in that it does not reject or exclude religion from its vision, but it is "willing to learn" from it[94]. But failing to see that "the Kingdom of God on earth" and "what cries out to heaven" are expressions of a distinctive Judeo-Christian flavor whose normative content *cannot* be universalized, makes Habermas guilty of not meeting his own universal standards. Finally, the fact that he does not consider possible problems other cultures may have in embracing "the Kantian project", but relies on modernity to globalize Western values simply because "there is no recognizable alternative", makes him guilty of at least not stopping to consider other alternatives that may be out there.

Interestingly, in one of his books on religion Habermas reports an occasion where he was confronted by a Muslim colleague who said to him that, as many studies have shown, European secularization has proven to be the "odd" case "among the various developments –and that it ought to be corrected"[95]. But to such an unquestionable fact, and to such a compelling accusation, Habermas says *nothing*. He reports no response in

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[94] *Dialectics of Secularization*, page 42.
[95] Ibid., pages 37-38.

his book. Can such a brilliant thinker be so blind as to not recognize the gravity of the accusation, and not considering his own position with a more critical (that is, a non-Western) eye?

My paper has only aimed to highlight these shortcomings in Habermas. In this regard, my work here offers no philosophical contribution to the task of dealing with religious conflicts in the world. I do maintain this is a most noble task that must be pursued, and that Habermas is much to be praised for at least attempting to provide a solution to this global problem. But as long as he fails to be more critical of his own Western biases, and continues to project Judeo-Christian notions of solidarity as *universal*, his whole program will not only continue to fail but it may exacerbate religious conflicts even further.

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