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Is Habermas' Philosophy of Religion Still Critical ?

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*Jürgen Habermas' latest book will most likely divide readers into two categories: those who, remaining attached to the philosopher of communication, will be surprised by such a thematic and methodological evolution, and those who had carefully read the *Theory of Communicative Action* and had been able to perceive in the analysis of the Durkheimian anthropology of religion the clue to a future topicality. Habermas laid the groundwork for a genuine political philosophy of religion inspired by North American theories of justice in his later writings. His aim was to define the legitimacy of citizens and social groups, of which faith communities are prominent examples, to argue on the basis of their beliefs. However, even for more sophisticated readers, Habermas's genealogical approach may come as a surprise.*

However, this new work must be considered as a major work, and it must allow us, as we propose here, to take stock of Habermas's philosophy of religion, which, without being completed, is nevertheless now capable of being understood in its overall structure. We have chosen for this conference to focus on the question of the Critique and the critical potential of his philosophy of religion.

For some, Habermas' entire philosophy has lost its potential to critique society and has become the framework for thinking about a reasonable social democracy that seeks to build consensus through communication based on the use of public reason.

It would have turned its back on the revolutionary potential of Critical Theory and would have been the very example of the cold tendency of Critical Theory which would have abandoned all conflictuality. This is, for example, the theory developed by the Greek Marxist philosopher Stathis Kouvelakis when he tries to reinterpret the history of the Frankfurt School as a political betrayal of the impetus of the founding fathers that Habermas and then Honneth would have watered down. However, in the precise field of the philosophy of religion, one could think that these remarks are not lacking in relevance insofar as a deep inflection has indeed taken place between the way in which the first theorists of the Frankfurt School used concepts coming from the theological domain by making them secular but by keeping their emotional charge and their power of political and ethical mobilization and the way in which Habermas approaches the question of religion. Habermas, unlike his predecessors, first addressed religion in a perfectly explicit way, even if this was late in his work, he abandoned all traces and remainings of theological conceptions and images of religious inspiration. He would have chosen to develop a communicational rationalism which appears as an extension of Kant's doctrine of judgment on the scale of political and social theory. Such a finding might therefore lend credence to the idea that Habermas' philosophy of religion doesn't include anymore critical aspects in the meaning we understand this word in contemporanean political theory. But, once again, such an assessment should be nuanced by the fact that Habermas' thought on religion is not monolithic and even that his latest evolutions made it much more complex to seize. Moreover, it shouldn't be

forgotten that the notion of Critique has a double dimension : it is not only the exploitation of the power of religion to inspire a critique of the society on which we will focus on, but also on the critique of religion itself. A secular use of theological concepts can't emerge without a previous overcoming of the religion itself as doctrine truth-oriented towards a conception of religion conceived rather as a meaning-oriented worldview.

It seems necessary here to distinguish three different steps in our presentation.

The first theoretical body of work that Habermas devoted to religion is therefore that of fundamental anthropology. From this point of view, his contribution does not appear to be very original at first sight, since it could be summarized as the organization of a dialogue between Durkheim and George Herbert Mead on the question of the fundamental modalities of the social bond. However, this dialogue will not be without consequences for the sociology of European religion, and we can read today a particularly vivid trace of it in the work of Hans Jonas, who will undoubtedly have retained from Habermas the need to integrate Mead's pragmatism into a holistic social theory and to make the latter more interaction. From this point of view, Mead was a central reference point for describing the modes of formation and structuring of

communication and action within human communities. However, Habermas will note that Mead does not succeed in explaining a faculty of pre-language symbolization that is always present, an always-already present symbolic that is embodied, for example, in rites or sacred objects or even images and representations, and emanates from an immanent collective authority that does not itself depend on rules or norms. For Habermas, a second stage in the exploration of the symbolic is therefore necessary: that which consists in thinking about the place of the symbolic in the religious, the only one capable of bringing completeness to the theory of the communicational community and of going beyond the logic of language interaction alone. It is in the inadequacies of Mead's model that Habermas' interest in an anthropology of religion is born. Habermas's criticism of Mead's incomplete theory of society stems from his reading and epistemological approach to Durkheim's theory of religion. Unlike Mead, Durkheim's characteristic is to abandon psychology and the ontogenetic conditions of the emergence of normativity in order to focus on the social fact and the phylogenetic structuring. On the two aspects criticized by Mead, Habermas notes that Durkheim's theory of religion allows for an account of these blind spots and of the place of the symbolic in the religious and, by extension, of the role of religion in the emergence of the communicational community.

A certain evolution in Durkheim's theory of religion is highlighted by Habermas: the study of Australian totemism provides Durkheim with the means to distinguish more strictly between beliefs and practices, in contrast, it should be noted, to Mead's continuism between gestures and symbols. This distinction leads Durkheim to focus on sacred material objects and their symbolic function. These objects thus represent a form of mediation between the domain of practice and that of mental representations: they synthesize collective ideals, materializing them in signs, totems, flags, relics, and various objects. Habermas tries to reconstitute the foundations of the communicational community by articulating the actionist and linguistic pragmatics coming from Mead and the normative pre-language theory of the sacred coming from Durkheim. It is thus the putting into language of the sacred, which is according to Habermas, the key to the emergence of the communicational community and the spring of the triple articulation between the symbolic, the religious and the communicational. Thus, at the roots of the definition of the communicational community is a reflection on the social mechanisms stemming from religion and their articulation with other symbolic forms such as language.

A second aspect of Habermas's interest in religion is his involvement in discussions related to theories of justice: Habermas thus rethinks the relationship of philosophy to religion on a dialogical model, emphasizing

that his own post-metaphysical conception of philosophy is accompanied by a new negativity in the history of philosophy: the end of the possibility for philosophers to enact the conditions of the good and exemplary life. The ethical dimension of philosophy stops at the elaboration of formal frameworks and procedures for the adoption of norms and not at their contents, and is more a matter of a general meta-ethics. The pluralism of the democratic society empirically marks the demonstration of the impossibility of any axiological and ethical monism, even when it seems guaranteed by the seal of rationality. It is conceivable that only this particular form of rationality, which is communicative rationality, allows such a conclusion. Such a postulate would be impossible within the framework of the classical demonstrative rationality to which philosophy was attached since the opposition Logos and Doxa inherited from the Greeks. Empirically, the maintenance of religious beliefs in our democratic societies proves, according to Habermas, that their cognitive and ethical contribution is not null. If this were the case, they would have effectively disappeared, no longer being able to claim any legitimate ethical contribution. The empirical fact of their existence is enough to prove the reality of their ethical and semantic relevance. The fallibilist role newly devolved to philosophy thus leads to attribute to other instances of the differentiated society, such as communities of faith, a role of co-construction of ethical contents for which philosophy simply determines the modalities of adoption and the

guiding principles. Religion fulfills, in part, a function of proposing what the good life ought to be, although it does not have a monopoly in this task in our modern secular democracies. However, it has a reciprocal relation to philosophy that should be redefined as reciprocal learning, which implies a redefinition of religion within the communicative community and of its communicative externalization modalities. The recognition of religions as interpretative communities thus contains a restrictive aspect insofar as the interpretation of the contents of faith is not public, and an extensive aspect insofar as their legitimacy to propose their ethical conceptions to the argumentative exchange is reaffirmed beyond any submission to the process of public reason. Habermas thus draws a line in the sand with regards to dialogue and inter-comprehension within the framework of the communicative community.

Furthermore, the contents of experience of the members of the faith community are not comprehensible as religious experiences by philosophy or by secular discourse. Philosophy cannot claim a methodical atheism, even when it decides to break with the post-Hegelian tradition of taking up and transforming theological concepts and metaphors in the discourse of Reason. The ethical abstention possesses therefore a value, not only in itself ethical, but also methodological and epistemic, in that the philosophy remains bearer of

universalizable concepts that cannot know contents of internal language games. In order to base his argument in a principled way, Habermas adopts a deflationary version of Rawls's critique, which comes from the dialogue between Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff. For the latter, in particular, the principle of public reason invoked by Rawls does not respect the requirement of impartiality demanded of the liberal State, insofar as it is a principle of non-neutral "secular justification". Thus the requirement to use public reason constitutes a form of epistemic bias for Reason. This epistemic bias is accompanied by recommendations as to the civic virtues required: the traditional civic expression of democratic voting, for example, is one that abstracts from personal religious motivations in its preferences. This amounts to adopting epistemic and civic positions constitutive of the secular spirit that can never be compensated in return by a self-limiting use of reason by secular citizens. The balance of reciprocal obligations within society is not respected. In one case, that of secular citizens, a limitation within an already mastered cognitive field is demanded, in the other case the adoption of new cognitive models is demanded.

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not respected. In one case, that of secular citizens, a limitation within an already mastered cognitive field is demanded, in the other case the adoption of new cognitive models is demanded. The limitation as to the preference for Revelation asked of the believing citizen requires a costly theoretical position because it is empirically true that these citizens base most of their practical moral obligations or deontological conceptions on their religious convictions.

Finally, the third moment of Habermas's reflection on religion is the one we have entered: the genealogical moment. According to Habermas, there is a line that starts from Spinoza, crosses Kant's work and aims rather at founding a philosophy that privileges a functionalist analysis of religion and announces the approach of the social sciences. Where Hobbes does not push the audacity to the point of metaphysical creativity but remains in the immanentization of the theological field within the Politics, Spinoza does not hesitate for his part to confront his theory of *Deus Sive Natura* to the Mosaic doctrine in order to extract the potential of rationality from the Scriptures in the service of his doctrine. Kant will continue this movement within the welcoming framework of the *Aufklärung* movement in order to link his own criticism of religion to the use of the rational content of the religious tradition. The originality of this first approach and of the genealogy drawn up here between Spinoza and Kant should be noted: what constitutes the *summa divisio* of

subsequent philosophical developments is the attitude towards the existing content of religion, which thus oscillates between avoidance and separation on the Hobbesian side and transformation on the Spinozist and Kantian side. Here Habermas departs quite considerably from the Straussian account of modernity, which identified from Machiavelli to Spinoza via Hobbes a gradual rise of philosophical disbelief and a single continuous line.

Another new account of modernity seems to begin: in order to position himself clearly, Habermas will confront the previous great German theories of modernity, which he explicitly writes are pursuing goals opposite to his own. In his eyes, these theories embody a form of cultural criticism that systematically aims to find in the present the identical reconstruction of past patterns in a concealed form. However, this pattern should not be confused with the transformations that the Frankfurt philosopher mentioned earlier when he emphasized Kant's dialogue with theological concepts from Lutheranism. For Habermas, such a dialogue creates new forms of thought and justifies the recognition of the "new" theological concepts.

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content combined with the use of social sciences and a research program of multidisciplinary analysis of society. We are thus witnessing a justification of the genealogical method as proceeding from a synthesis between these two aspects.

This three-step description should now allow us to attempt to answer the question we posed at the beginning of this paper. One of the two aspects of the question we are dealing with seems to be simpler to elucidate, namely whether Habermas's thought incorporates a critique of religion itself, and thus to know what it has inherited from the German critique of religion. First of all, it should be noted that, in *Fundamental Anthropology*. It is the theory of religion that comes to remedy the insufficiencies of Mead's theory of action. Thus, religion plays an essential anthropological role here insofar as it allows Habermas to stress that the purely cultural and immaterial aspects of social exchange are irreplaceable. One notices here the important step away from the Marxist tradition, which takes place from two angles. On the one hand, the concrete and material aspect of the society is not so much apprehensible by the institutions or by the economic exchanges and the social positions as by the sum of the concrete interactions that produce the action and the language. Communication and action thus maintain a link of reciprocal fusion. Moreover, this concrete and material aspect is thus insufficient to account for social processes and the form of collective symbolization proper to the passage from a logic of interactions to a logic

of universal communication is allowed by religion. If we now turn to the theory of justice aspect, we realize, not without surprise, the importance of the concessions that Habermas makes to the fundamentally theological critique of Wolterstorff's Public Reason. Finally, the genealogical logic of his last work relies heavily on the notion of axial epoch inspired by Karl Jaspers and which thus underlies the idea that religion is in a certain way a necessary stage in the development of historical consciousness.

To conclude univocally that there is no criticism of religion in Habermas's thought would be hasty, however. First of all, because when Habermas adopts Durkheim's sociological theory, he does so in order to combine it with Mead's theory of action and language. We must then recognize that Mead corrects Durkheim as much as Durkheim corrects Mead and that action and language become privileged processes preceding the appearance of symbolic thought. Moreover, we must remember here how much Durkheim's approach creates the conditions for a purely secular social approach to the religious phenomenon

As far as the question of the theory of justice is concerned, Habermas will certainly have criticized the notion of Public Reason, but he will also have created a kind of stress-test in order to define the conditions under which communities of faith can validly employ arguments inspired by religious

beliefs. Two preconditions are necessary: the recognition of the legitimacy of other discourses on truth and thus of religious and ethical pluralism, and the recognition of the primacy of the discourse of science over the discourse of Faith. Thus, faith communities are also subject to a minimal rule of public Reason necessary for democratic dialogue. Finally, the notion of axial period is in line with the idea of the impossibility of confusing the emergence of a religion with a discourse on Revelation. If the great religions emerge in a certain period of the history of humanity, it is also because the technical development, therefore the language and the action have reached a certain level of maturity which allows the development of a complex symbolization. Habermas's theory of the history of religions is directly linked to his anthropology of action. Indeed, Habermas' vision refutes any possibility that religion is a discourse aimed at truth but rather at meaning, and is thus in line with Cassirer's discourse on symbolization.

A second question remains open: did Habermas admit the critical role of religion towards society? Here again, a quick examination of the three modalities is necessary: Concerning fundamental anthropology, the question actually seems irrelevant because it is difficult to define in what way such an anthropology, which claims to explain the role of religion as the founder of the original norms of society, could be critical. It is actually at the antipodes of the anarchist anthropology of authors like Scott or Clastres if we remain in a critical anthropology of politics.

However, we can say that by considering that the rite is first and the symbolization second, that the act is first and its narrative justification second, Habermas seems to us to see religion here as a Critique of violence, of the potential violence of the gesture. If another mode of symbolization than gesture and speech is required, it is because in reality pure gesture and speech contain seeds of violence that only Obligation prevents. Religion then becomes a relative of law: It is in fact the thesis that a historian of Greece like Louis Gernet defended. Religion is opposed to the unleashing of violence of the pre-symbolic relations. It is a criticism of the facticity of the world, of the literalness of its interpretation.

As far as the aspect linked to the theories of justice is concerned, we have seen that the requirement of a kind of stress-test limits the recognition of the critical symbolization faculty of religion. This tokenizing faculty is really only a stage that has to be overcome by the establishment of norms. When Habermas recognizes the benefits of this symbolization, it is when it leads to normative application. Habermas uses the example of Martin Luther King to emphasize the hopeful potential of religion as an example of the culmination of religion's critical potential against injustice. However, this critical and contentious impulse must be resolved in the Law and thus in the Norm. The real critique here is a Critique of Law, here, of the law that creates segregation, a critique of which religion can mobilize the emotional and moral aspects, but which only ends in

the elaboration of the new Law, thus in the insertion of religious values into the discourse of public Reason. This is the great difference between Habermas and Horkheimer for example: the latter thought that it was symbolization that had a critical function. Habermas thinks that it is when symbolization is exceeded and externalized in the ethical norm that the critical potential of religion is expressed. From this point of view, it would be quite interesting to compare Habermas with the great Protestant theologian Bonhoeffer, and it would not be surprising to find links: I am convinced that the ethical model of a critique by religion of society is for Habermas the German Confessing Church of the Second World War, the one that resisted Hitler at the cost of his life (Bonhoeffer was murdered by the Nazis).

Finally, the genealogical aspect of Habermas's thought also remains critical insofar as it is critical of the theories of secularization and that it refuses a world subjected only to forms inherited from religious symbolization and that, at the same time, it does not recognize the absolute novelty of modernity, the idea that it makes of itself as a pure historical overcoming is rejected by Habermas to the extent that