

CHAPTER 10

Utopia and the Public Sphere

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Although the question of religion did not feature prominently in Jürgen Habermas's early political theory, his more recent work has continuously addressed the topic. For instance, in one of the few references to religion in his 1962 *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he noted the impact on the churches of the differentiation between the private sphere and public authority (Habermas 1989, 11–12).¹ Historic processes of secularization ultimately privatized religious institutions and did not require further comment. However, as recently as a 2011 compendium on *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, Habermas reiterated his more recent work on the subject, arguing that religious and secular citizens “both are involved in an interaction that is constitutive for a democratic process springing from the soil of civil society and developing through the informal communication networks of the public sphere” (Habermas 2011, 27). This later interest in religion is grounded in what one commentator in that same volume cited as the urgent need to integrate religious voices in the workings of public reason in order to avoid social disharmony and to thwart potential violence (Calhoun 2011, 127). However, this chapter argues that the hermeneutic procedures Habermas develops for the public sphere cannot bear the weight that his later understanding of religion demands of them.² Such an insight validates Paul Ricoeur's earlier argument that Habermas's “depth hermeneutics” (Habermas 1971, 218, 226, 256) were themselves utopian in nature. It is from this vantage point that a more productive understanding of the public potential of religious discourse can be understood.

1. Habermas's Public Sphere

Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* traces the development of what Hannah Arendt called the rise of the social over the course of

the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in Europe (Habermas 1989, xi). Key to this history is the differentiation between the private realm of family and commodity exchange and the public authority of state police and the legal court. As market economies of commodity exchange expanded, so too did the need to protect trade routes and marketplaces. Public authority met this need through military and political force. From this process was born the modern nation-state (Habermas 1989, 17ff.). The result was a distancing from the owners within the private market and the state that protected it.³ Through this process, Habermas discerns the extrication of a public social sphere that operated between private autonomy and state authority. The key to this mediation is to note the way the private sphere gains public relevance, and here Habermas cites Hannah Arendt's understanding of the rise of the social (Habermas 1989, 19; Arendt 1958, 46). He argues that over time, the capital and power base in the marketplace allowed for art, music, and other cultural products such as news agencies to flourish (Habermas 1989, 20). The newsagents began to critique and interpret good or bad art as both informative and representative of private taste and interest. Habermas cites the coffee house as a paradigmatic example of the critical consciousness that emerged in this sphere. Citizens met at coffee houses, salons, and private clubs to discuss the various socioeconomic issues that were now being published in journals and newspapers (Habermas 1989, 33). This conglomeration of property-owning, educated private citizens—the bourgeois—led to a public sphere where the opinions of private individuals were formed and propagated.

The public sphere thus arises directly from the communication networks that developed in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Moreover, it bears a tremendous burden in Habermas's account of democratic legitimacy. For instance, in a discussion of public opinion in constitutional law, he contrasts the mass sways of public mood with a reasoned deliberation of publicly engaged citizens. Citing Siegfried Landshut's 1957 essay "Volks-souveränität und öffentliche Meinung" (Sovereignty of the People and Public Opinion), he notes that

the modern state presupposes as the principle of its own truth the sovereignty of the people, and this in turn is supposed to be public opinion. Without this attribution, without the substitution of public opinion as the origin of all authority for decisions binding the whole, modern democracy lacks the substance of its own truth. (Landshut 1953, 586; cited in Habermas 1989, 238)

The constitutional requirement of public opinion for democratic legitimacy made it necessary to find ways of relating private autonomy to state authority without compromising either. It is in this sense that Habermas focuses on

the distancing of the public sphere as a principle of democratic legitimacy.⁴ Democracy is thus not understood simply as private interests (Locke) nor private autonomy (Mill). Habermas's aim is "the public use of reason (Kant)" (Habermas 2001a, 110; cf. Habermas 1998, 239–52), where private citizens can debate, form public opinion, and legitimate democratic authority. Habermas's public sphere is thus utterly opposed to the erosion of public deliberation in mass media with communication processes driven by political domination (Habermas 1989, 241, 249).

Habermas's public sphere is therefore a proposed cure to the coercive communicative practices of mass society. In order to ensure the autonomy of private individuals and legitimate democratic authority, he envisions a sphere of public debate whereby individuals congregate to argue out their ideas (Habermas 2001a, 110). As Habermas reflects on changes in twentieth-century democratic culture, he recognizes that there cannot be a return to a simple bourgeois dominance, with its various contradictions. Although he claims that its ideals may have been open to all, it remained exclusionary, as feminists and African Americans, among other marginalized groups, have pointed out (Fraser 1992). As such, Habermas envisions a more pluralist and diverse public sphere (Habermas 2004, 5–18), and it is precisely here that the communicative processes, which underwrite his account of the public sphere, face an increased burden. The reason is that he doesn't accept that these diverse groups have the necessary means to sort out differences among themselves. In his words, "The solidarity-generating energies of these fabrics of life do not directly carry over into democratic procedures for the settling of competing interests and power claims on the political level" (Habermas 1992a, 444). These groups are sources of solidarity that form their own worldviews, values, and traditions, but their modes of communication must avoid coercion in the public sphere. It is precisely here that religion provides a chief example as the "pacemaker" for the coherency of his proposal, a point I will return to later (Habermas 2004, 12).

Much of Habermas's subsequent work on the public sphere focuses on justifying and further articulating the manner in which private interests can be understood in terms of communicative practices (Habermas 1992b, 468). Although different communities do not have the tools within themselves to resolve conflicts between rival communities, Habermas argues that they can be understood to have within themselves the communicative procedures necessary to do so. On the one hand, there is a need for public procedures through which disagreements can be argued and resolved. For the legal force of the state's rational procedures to have democratic legitimacy, however, they must be agreed on by critically informed public opinions. To resolve this dilemma, Habermas's philosophy must demonstrate the interrelation between the state's rational procedures of argumentation and the communicative nature of all

private interest groups. What is at stake is the communicative possibility of a public that is genuinely representative of private interests, such as those of particular religious groups.

2. Habermas's Hermeneutics of Human Interests

Habermas's conception of the communicative nature of the public sphere is grounded in his critique of ideology's coercive power. Implicit to his account of the ideological problem is a critique of Marx. In *The German Ideology*, Marx analogized ideology to a camera obscura—a device that depicts images upside down. The ideology obscures or distorts. As Marx wrote, "If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process" (Marx 1970, 42). Habermas's contention, however, is that concealed in this analogy is the problem of understanding historical life processes. In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas claims that Marx threw "together interaction and work under the label of social practice (*Praxis*)."¹ This confusion resulted in "the idea of a science of man" that was obscured "by identification with natural science" (Habermas 1971, 62). This same confusion can be seen in the way Marx distinguished between relations of production and forces of production, which, on the one hand, led to an objectivist emphasis in the forces of production and, on the other, concealed the structure of symbolic action and the role of cultural tradition in the relations of production. We could layer this again with an emphasis on the infrastructure as the base for the ideological superstructures that distort the social reality. However, Habermas contends that these distinctions again conceal the manner in which ideology is at work precisely in the relations and in the superstructure. Habermas returns to Hegel's earlier emphasis on self-reflection and the struggle for recognition in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For instance, in the master–slave dialectic (Hegel 1977, 111ff.), the relation conceals the recognition between the two parties. This is not simply a matter of power but rather a breakdown in dialogue. As Habermas puts it, "The suppression and renewal of the dialogue situation are reconstructed as a moral relation. The grammatical relations of communication, once distorted by force, exert force themselves" (Habermas 1971, 58). Hence Habermas demands a more pervasive critique of ideology, which might ensure noncoercive discourse. Ideological critique cannot rely on natural science as its basis, because technically exploitable knowledge is not exhaustive of the ideological problem. Seeing things as they really are demands not only a natural scientific account of reality—it also requires a human scientific one. As Habermas concludes at one point, "The knowing subject" must also direct the critique of ideology at itself

(Habermas 1971, 61). Hence, for Habermas, “social theory . . . is only possible as the self-reflection of the knowing subject” (Habermas 1971, 62–63).

It is in this light that Habermas’s ideal public sphere can be understood. It is a sphere of “communication free from domination” (Habermas 1971, 53). Marx’s distinction between forces and relations of production, between infra- and superstructures, concealed the way ideological domination was at work in the communicative relations of production. The public sphere therefore must include a critique of the ways communicative action itself promotes certain interests over others, excluding some voices at the expense of others. Furthermore, this more self-reflective critique of ideology is put to use in considering the publicization of private interests in a public sphere of critical debate. As already noted, he is tied to a diverse public sphere, which must now work to overcome differences in a way that would not allow rival groups to coerce or dominate. The tension is most acute in the case of religion, which, continuing Marx’s critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, provides the foundation for all other ideological critique. The key, however, is to develop a mode of publicization of private interests that does not completely undermine the communicative basis of private groups as such.

To accomplish this task, Habermas turns to Freudian psychoanalysis and what he refers to as “depth hermeneutics.” In an addendum to the English translation of *Knowledge and Human Interests*, which was his 1965 Inaugural Address to the Frankfurt Chair, he makes a three-part delineation between the instrumental sciences, historico-hermeneutic sciences, and finally critical social sciences. The middle, hermeneutic science acknowledges the rise of philosophical hermeneutics after Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (1988). Habermas maintains that his own third social-science approach critiques and overcomes the coercive potential of rival traditions in a way that hermeneutics alone did not. In order to provide a critical account of the intersubjective and reflective nature of communication, Habermas turns to Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud provides the way beyond instrumental sciences while maintaining a depth of critique necessary to overcome coercive communicative practice. As Habermas puts it,

The derivation of the structural model from experiences of the analytic situation links the three categories ego, id and super-ego to the specific meaning of a form of communication into which physician and patient enter with the aim of setting in motion a process of enlightenment and bringing the patient to self-reflection. (Habermas 1971, 244)

It is this form of self-reflection where distortions can be interrogated. The interior tensions can be articulated—transferred into a discourse the physician and

patient can explain. What was once a pathological state of self-deception can be “superseded” and, most important, “reconciliation with excommunication” can occur (Habermas 1971, 244). Thus the therapist brings into recognizable discourse the private pathological distortion.

In the sixth chapter on the “Dream-work” in the *Traumdeutung*, Freud himself noted how “the dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation” (Freud 2010, 295). The structural analysis of this transference of the dream into the therapeutic narrative provides the explanatory phase, which in turn leads to enlightenment. This explanatory model thus uncovers or, more to the point, publicizes the repression (*Verdrängung*) of the dream. Thus the exclusion “from public communication,” the excommunication of the “private language” in the dream, must be uncovered (Habermas 1971, 224). It is this conflict between public and private that psychoanalysis can resolve. Freud’s *Durcharbeitung*, this “working-through,” “designates a dynamic component of cognitive activity that leads to recognition only against resistances” (Habermas 1971, 231). Thus, as Habermas writes, “what is unconscious is what is removed from public communication. Insofar as it expresses itself in symbols or actions anyway, it manifests itself as a symptom, that is a mutilation and distortion of the text of everyday habitual language games” (Habermas 1971, 238). Habermas’s approach to public communication, then, is modeled on a structural analysis of the transference of private language into public discourse. The translation, however, is not simply a matter of correcting distortions between common languages but rather liberation from systemic distortions.

3. Habermas on Public Religious Discourse

Habermas maintains the model of translation in his contemporary understanding of the publicity of private interest concerns. As he suggests, their interaction must be driven by a “world-wide, civilizing power of formation,” and “mutual recognition” (Habermas 2001b) should be the content of that power. However, more than any other interest, religious discourse in particular has tested Habermas’s theory. As recently as his essay in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* mentioned previously, he argues that “religious citizens who regard themselves as loyal members of constitutional democracy must accept the translation proviso as the price to be paid for the neutrality of the state authority toward competing worldviews” (Habermas 2011, 26). Religious and secular citizens thus must continually work toward domination-free recognition of each other’s viewpoints. However, it is precisely here that religious language poses the greatest danger. In an essay responding to theological engagement with his work, Habermas

contrasted theological transcendence with his alternative transcendence from within and “methodical atheism” (Habermas 1992c, 235). Here again Habermas draws on Hegel’s methodology⁵ in order to go beyond him. In this case, Habermas argues that Hegel’s philosophy of religion failed to claim the same basis of experience as the theological does with the religious tradition that it describes.⁶ It is important to emphasize again at this point how Habermas’s recent affirmation of the publicity of religious traditions is rooted in his reliance on strong forms of solidarity, adequate to the task of legitimizing democratic authority. To do so, interest groups such as religious communities must be able to articulate their concerns in their own voice. Habermas proposes his atheistic method as a means of maintaining communicative fellowship with that religious tradition in a way that doesn’t lose sight of religious belief and language altogether (Habermas 1992c, 235). As he puts it,

We are exposed to the movement of a transcendence from within . . . In this way we become aware of the limits of that transcendence from within which is directed to this world. But this does not enable us to ascertain the *countermovement* of a compensating transcendence from beyond. (Habermas 1992c, 238)

In this way, Habermas associates such accounts of transcendence with private pathology. His atheistic transcendence from within thus attempts to apprehend religious language at the interpersonal level and maintains the hermeneutic framework of translation. He justifies this in light of his method’s linguistic nature, which is able to capture a common communicative coincidence with the religious tradition’s own language about itself. This same approach is echoed in debates Habermas held with the then cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Habermas et al. 2006). As Habermas argues at that point, because religious membership differentiates itself from the societal citizen, “the universalist legal order and the egalitarian societal morality must be inherently connected to the fellowship ethos in such a way that one consistently proceeds from the other” (Habermas et al. 2006, 49). As such, he seems to concede the importance of Christian religion to Ratzinger but only in so far as religious language can inform a non-religious political discourse.⁷ Habermas’s positive statements about religion and Christianity in general should be tempered by the nuance of his hermeneutics. He concedes postsecularism in a more pluralist society, but this is not a recantation of his concerns about the pathologies of religious transcendence.

This best explains why Habermas consistently cites religious tolerance as the pacemaker for cultural rights, as he did in an essay by that title. It is precisely because religious groups maintain values that go beyond the secular order that they develop antirationalist discourse. This applies to not only religious violence but a range of ethical norms, such as those concerning gender and

marriage rights (Habermas 2004, 13). He therefore argues that religious communities must develop the normative principles of the secular order within themselves (Habermas 2004, 12). Religious groups are called to work out how to internalize the normative values of rational communicative procedures. Habermas recognizes that these procedures will inevitably be enforced by the democratic authority, even if only as a last resort. Habermas's recent remarks upon the acceptance of the 2005 Kyoto Prize also bear this out. He consistently qualifies his positive statements about the public expression of religious discourse by explicitly calling for translation to a secular mode (Rowe 2005). Again returning to *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, he promotes the ideal of a "reflexive consciousness" such that a religious group "makes the egalitarian premises of the morality of human rights compatible with its own articles of faith" (Habermas 2011, 26 and 27). Religious communities internalize the wider values in a way that eases and facilitates the translation, but this raises a serious question about the degree and manner in which such translation and interrelation can occur. It is precisely for these reasons that a return to Ricoeur's earlier critique of the utopic nature of Habermas's hermeneutics is justified.

4. Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of Utopia

In his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, Ricoeur draws particular attention to the way Habermas distinguishes between hermeneutic and critical social sciences. He agrees with Habermas's own aim to surpass instrumental sciences and the various ways in which "modern ideology may be defined as the reduction of all other interests to this interest" (Ricoeur 1986, 234). Implied here is Habermas's critique of the systematic social sciences of economics and sociology as well. However, Habermas refuses Hans Georg-Gadamer's emphasis on tradition and the enlightenment prejudice against prejudice itself in *Truth and Method*.⁸ Hermeneutics may provide nomological knowledge but not the ideological critique at the level of communicative action that Habermas claims is necessary for the public sphere (Habermas 1971, 310). Rather, as Ricoeur points out, Habermas's critical social sciences "draw a line between cases where theoretical statements grasp the real human situation and the cases where the laws developed describe in actuality the situation of reification" (Ricoeur 1986, 235). In Habermas's view, hermeneutics of coercive language at the level of superstructural relations of production doesn't "dismantle the system of distortion" (Ricoeur 1986, 236). However, Ricoeur contends with Habermas's critique of hermeneutics in three ways. First, he maintains that hermeneutics going back to Dilthey and Schleiermacher includes an explanatory and critical element. Furthermore, he points out that even in Habermas's critical social science, the hermeneutic dimension remains, as "depth hermeneutics" (Ricoeur 1986, 236). Hence, while he agrees

with Habermas that “distortions belong to the sphere of communicative action,” he rejects the opposition with Gadamer, because he does not “see how we can have a critique without also having an experience of communication” (Ricoeur 1986, 236–37). Ricoeur focuses on this more basic experience of communication in his own account of the integrative function of ideology.

However, Ricoeur’s critique of Habermas is ultimately aimed at his psychoanalytic model of overcoming private interests through public self-reflection. Ricoeur emphasizes this point precisely in order to demonstrate the utopic element in Habermas’s account of the public sphere (Ricoeur 1986, 244). Crucially, Habermas never maps the patient–physician relation onto the public situation. Ricoeur’s contention is that this oversight belies a much more significant problem with the analogy between psychoanalysis and public discourse. First, the thinker in the sphere of critical social sciences “does not transcend the polemic situation” (Ricoeur 1986, 247). There is no patient and no physician in this regard. Second, there is no transference in ideology critique, where the original scene is transposed onto the physician–patient dialogue in miniature (Ricoeur 1986, 248). The critical moment cannot claim such a space nor create one in the physician’s model. Third, recognition is not intrinsic to ideology critique. As Ricoeur argues, “Ideology critique is a part of a process of struggle and not one of recognition” (Ricoeur 1986, 249). Citing Althusser in *Lenin and Philosophy*, such a point of recognition is not possible until there is a classless society. This last point is where Ricoeur circles the utopic element in Habermas. The free and unfettered communication is not a realized situation. It remains unfulfilled, an illusion, in the positive and rational sense Freud gives this term. And here, Habermas himself admits the need for fantasy. As he says in *Knowledge and Human Interests*,

The “good” is neither a convention nor an essence, but rather the result of fantasy. But it must be fantasized so exactly that it corresponds to and articulates a fundamental interest. The interest in that measure of emancipation that historically is objectively possible in our given and manipulable conditions. (Habermas 1971, 288)

Ricoeur points out that utopia appears only at this point toward the end of Habermas’s *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Habermas has only extended this emphasis when noting the “ideal speech situation” and “communicative competence” with which this emancipatory imagination can be articulated and take hold as rational hope (Habermas 1971, 288). Hence, while Ricoeur agrees with Habermas’s critique of Marx and his emphasis on the ideological sphere of communicative action, he nonetheless demonstrates that the resultant space of critique in Habermas’s thought is, in the end, utopian.

Ricoeur accepts that this sphere of noncoercive and liberating communication between various actors is a noble aim. However, this is not to say that Habermas's nonideological communication, with its physician paternalism, provides a workable set of procedures to achieve that aim. Ricoeur's critique of Habermas focuses on the hermeneutic procedures, which depends on a more nuanced account of ideology itself. Ricoeur therefore discerns three levels of ideology. With Marx, already noted by Habermas, the first distortive level of ideology is identified. As Ricoeur puts it, "Marx depends on a model put forth by Feuerbach, who had described and discussed religion precisely as an inverted reflection of reality" (Ricoeur 1986, 4). Ricoeur finds Habermas helpful to understand the ideologies at work within social relations. However, Ricoeur appropriates this critique of Marx in a more rich account of the symbolic nature of ideology itself. As such, Ricoeur focuses on two further levels of ideology: legitimation and symbolization. Following Clifford Geertz's analysis in his essay "Ideology as a Cultural System," Ricoeur finds a supporting theory of cultural symbolism. After Geertz, ideological theory is brought into dialogue with the contention that "action in its most elementary forms is already mediated and articulated by symbolic systems. If this is the case, the explanation of action has to be itself mediated by an interpretation of its ruling symbols" (Ricoeur 1991, 316). Symbols have a constitutive function in ideology, as they are the basic building blocks that allow people to read and interpret cultural action. It is in this sense that Ricoeur contends that the critique of ideology must already function within a hermeneutic framework. Ideology is already at work in the process of recognition (Ricoeur 1991, 316). As Ricoeur argues, "Only because the structure of human social life is already symbolic can it be distorted" (Ricoeur 1991, 316). This symbolic level makes it possible to properly construe "the import of ideological assertions" (Ricoeur 1986, 257).⁹

In Ricoeur's own engagement with psychoanalysis in *Freud and Philosophy*, he recognizes that the goal of interpretation is always to expose the idols and embrace the symbols (Ricoeur 1970, 27).¹⁰ As one commentator put it, "Thus we must maintain a hermeneutics of suspicion which unmasks human wish-fulfillments and shatters idols, and [also] the hermeneutics of retrieval which listens to symbols and to symbolic narrative discourse" (Thiselton 1992, 372). In *Interpretation Theory*, Ricoeur summarized the manner in which symbols take on meaning in metaphor.¹¹ For Ricoeur, what enlightens symbol is metaphor, and what enlightens metaphor is symbol (Ricoeur 1976, 54): "On one side, there is more in the metaphor than in the symbol; on the other side, there is more in the symbol than in the metaphor" (Ricoeur 1976, 68). Hence symbolic experience is accessible only through linguistic and literary expressions that ultimately intertwine (Ricoeur 1976, 65). While symbols dictate the way in which metaphoric structures are put together, the metaphor supersedes the

symbol “in the sense that it brings to language the implicit semantics of symbol. What remains confused in the symbol . . . is clarified in the tension of the metaphorical utterance” (Ricoeur 1976, 69). Symbols are not metaphorical in and of themselves; rather, Ricoeur argues that metaphors become metaphorical in the tension that occurs between a literal interpretation and a figurative one:

The metaphorical interpretation presupposes a literal interpretation which self-destructs in a significant contradiction. It is this process of self-destruction or transformation which imposes a sort of twist on the words, an extension of meaning thanks to which we can make sense where a literal interpretation would be literally nonsensical. (Ricoeur 1976, 50)

So the literal interpretation leads to a contradiction and crisis that must be resolved by a figurative or metaphorical interpretation. For example, “When Shakespeare speaks of time as a beggar, he teaches us to see time . . . to see time like a beggar” (Ricoeur 1976, 51). These two disparate symbols are brought together to show a resemblance. This resemblance is the key to the metaphorical utterance and what creates a new relationship. Thus “real metaphors are not translatable . . . A metaphor in short, tells us something new about reality” (Ricoeur 1976, 52–53). It is in this sense that Ricoeur’s hermeneutic account of symbolic interactions in metaphor includes an inherent openness to new possibilities and alternative meaning.

Ricoeur’s account of metaphor provides the context through which to understand his claims about the mediating level of ideological legitimation and its relation to systems of power.¹² Legitimation stands between and often leads to the ideological distortion of the symbolically mediated social reality.¹³ Ideology can therefore fluctuate between levels of distortion and social constitution. In one case, ideology distorts individual subjects’ relationship to reality, and in the other, it constitutes it in a necessary and meaningful way. Legitimation processes are dangerous, because they are influenced by power structures that can disregard the symbolic mediation in favor of their own purposes. For instance, a power structure may coerce people to relate to the conditions of production in a way that suits it rather than a way that remains meaningful for people’s daily lives. However, by differentiating these three levels of ideology, Ricoeur is able to account for its ability to both distort and integrate societies: “At its three levels—distortion, legitimation, symbolization—ideology has one fundamental function: to pattern, to consolidate, to provide order to the course of action” (Ricoeur 1991, 318). It functions as a means of reproducing the relations of production, and it has a preserving function of stabilizing cultures.

However, if, for Ricoeur, ideology is an inescapable feature of social relations, its symbolic nature includes the possibility of critical progress toward free

communicative action. In this sense, Ricoeur's hermeneutics after Habermas depends on the notion of utopia:

What we must assume is that the judgment on ideology is always the judgment from a utopia. This is my conviction: the only way to get out of the circularity in which ideologies engulf us is to assume a utopia, declare it, and judge an ideology on this basis. (Ricoeur 1986, 172–73)

A dialectic emerges in Ricoeur's thought at this point. Ideologies function in light of and in connection with utopia. Utopia stands beyond ideology as its counterpart. Ricoeur picks up on the nature of this utopic "outside" from the word itself as developed in Thomas More: "a place which exists in no real place, a ghost city; a river with no water; a prince with no people, and so on . . . From this 'no place' an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange" (Ricoeur 1986, 16). This is not to say that any fanciful story can function as a utopia. In his lecture on Mannheim's criteriology of utopias, he states that they are situationally transcendent and, crucially, that "a utopia is fundamentally realizable . . . a utopia shatters a given order; and it is only when it starts shattering order that it is a utopia" (Ricoeur 1986, 273). This utopic "shattering" is crucial to the way Ricoeur links ideology and utopia. If ideology has an integrative symbolic function, its deepest distortion occurs in its stasis. Ideologies tend to look back to legitimate social elites. Utopias tend to look forward and typically arise from lower social groups. As Ernst Bloch also recognized in his *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* (1921 [1960]), it was Münzer, not Thomas More, who is the best exemplar in this regard, where a chiliastic or messianic moment is realized in history. As Ricoeur would comment, such moments mark "a transcendent point of departure for a social revolution" (Ricoeur 1986, 276). There are other types of utopias that Ricoeur cites, following Mannheim: liberal humanitarian, conservative, and socialist-communist. However, the point of each is to project a future goal of society that might shatter, reorient, and refigure its ideology. These goals and future orientations would drive ideology in a dialectical manner (Ricoeur 1986, 289). As Ricoeur puts it,

We must try to cure the illnesses of utopia by what is wholesome in ideology—by its element of identity, which is once more a fundamental function of life—and try to cure the rigidity, the petrification, of ideologies by the utopian element. (Ricoeur 1986, 313)

Such a dialectic, however, must not circle in on itself. Rather, the utopic, precisely insofar as it projects and motivates a shift toward the future, fosters progress.

5. Religious Discourse in the Public Sphere

Ricoeur claims, in the end, that Habermas's own project is better understood as a utopia, a vantage point from which ideological symbols can be understood as idols of distortion and oppression. As one commentator writes,

We may summarize Ricoeur's two criticisms of Habermas as follows: first, the critical theorist cannot and does not stand outside or above the social process. Second, the only possibility for judgment is one that contrasts ideology to utopia, for it is only on the basis of a utopia—the point of an ideal—that we can engage in critique. (Taylor 1986, xix)

Utopia thus stretches the scope of public imagination precisely at the sites of hermeneutic contest. Such a contest cannot be coordinated in a paternalistic model of pathological translation. Rather, as Ricoeur argues in an essay on "The Task of the Political Educator," the challenge is to develop new categories and contribute to the social imaginary as a vital contribution to social change.¹⁴ Here, he reiterates the importance of thinking "utopia in the social order" (Ricoeur 1975, 289) and draws particular attention to Claude Lévi-Strauss's explanation in *Tristes Tropiques* for why the tools of the colonizer were not employed by the local civilizations: "There was no category to apprehend them" (Ricoeur 1975, 279).¹⁵ This is the necessary context to understand his conclusion in his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*: "Hermeneutics without a project of liberation is blind, but a project of emancipation without historical experience is empty" (Ricoeur 1986, 237). Liberation demands new utopic categories that contribute to the social imaginary in order to impact historical change (Ricoeur 1975, 290). Ideology critique thus demands not an ideology-free zone of public communication but rather a more basic sense of the hermeneutic procedures necessary to distinguish between distortive idols and integrative symbols.

By returning to Ricoeur's hermeneutics of utopia in this way, it becomes possible to see that the challenge of religious discourse in the public sphere is not a matter of integrating religious voices into the workings of public reason. Rather, the challenge is to produce and maintain hermeneutic procedures for a public capable of coordinating a utopic vision of liberation, of which Habermas's own notion of the public sphere is a prominent example. Although Habermas's account of the secular public helpfully directs attention to the communicative procedures necessary for reasoned debate and democratic legitimacy, the persistent and new visibilities of religion in public surpass the model of excommunication. Moreover, a redoubling of the privatization of religious discourse, as Jacques Derrida suggested, will not suffice.¹⁶ Rather, my contention is that what is needed is a more thoroughgoing account of

the utopic capacity of public symbols, for which religious symbols are some of the most ambiguous and powerful. Ricoeur's hermeneutics of utopia provides the framework for such an account precisely because he maintained a more broad and open understanding of publication processes of distanciation: "For Ricoeur, the 'hermeneutical function of distanciation' consists in the autonomy which a written text receives at the moment when its author releases it onto the public" (Jeanrond 1994, 71). Public works thus stand in their own autonomy, ready for new appropriations. There is therefore no point at which the private sphere can be clarified of its pathologies as such—no Freudian scene of transference beyond this hermeneutic process of publication. Such a hermeneutic accepts that there will be public texts that produce disruptive interactions. Ricoeur demonstrates how to embrace this process as part and parcel to the very way symbols function. This utopic element has the capacity to shatter our present ideologies at the point at which religious symbols have turned to idols.

6. Postscript

The case of Islamic notions such as Sharia has become almost inextricably linked to ideological concerns in the public sphere. For instance, on February 7, 2008, Rowan Williams delivered the foundation lecture in the Temple Festival series at the Royal Courts of Justice on "Civil and Religious Law in England: A Religious Perspective." His discussion of the "rights of religious groups in a secular state" focused particularly on the case of Sharia or Islamic law. Early sections of the lecture cited public anxieties about the place of Muslims in British society and noted public opinion polls that indicated that what most people think they know about Sharia "is that it is repressive towards women and wedded to archaic physical punishments." In brief, it is understood to be "a pre-modern system in which human rights have no role" (Williams 2008b). In an attempt to indicate reasoned discourse, Williams went on to note the degree to which this public perception had effected debate of this issue among Muslim intellectuals. In *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, Tariq Ramadan writes,

In the West the idea of Sharia calls up all the darkest images of Islam . . . It has reached the extent that many Muslim intellectuals do not dare even to refer to the concept for fear of frightening people or arousing suspicion of all their work by the mere mention of the word. (Ramadan 2004, 31)

Despite these qualifications, the news media response to the speech was of almost total condemnation. At one point, *The Guardian* posted a photo of Williams with a crazed look in his eye, laughing in full clerical garb (Butt 2008).

It is a recent example, although others could be cited (Benedict XVI 2006), where even reasonable public conversation on Sharia results in incommunicable debacle. The result is that as “secular” societies become more diversely multireligious, the strategy to integrate religious citizens into the public order of reasonable conversation and debate results in further social exclusion. The secular program of translation and excommunication rules out certain words like *Sharia* from the start. Even reasoned scholars of Islam refrain from using the term, and one of the more reasonable and moderate Christian figures in Europe was publicly chastised for doing so. As it stands, public discussion of Sharia is excommunicated when linked to reasoned discussion of religious and secular law. However, after Ricoeur, such public texts could be understood in a utopic way with political educators working to expand the public imagination.¹⁷ Ricoeur’s model expects significant contradictions and the manner in which the symbol’s literal meaning explodes. But it is precisely here that the idolized sense is shattered and new meaning becomes possible. In this way, the utopic vision of an alternative sense of moderate civil society might be conceptualized.

Notes

1. For more on this transition, see Meyer (1995, 372).
2. A number of contemporary commentators have called for a rethinking and expansion of public hermeneutic procedures. For instance, in an essay on “Secularism, Faith and Freedom,” the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, contrasted programmatic to procedural secularism. The former case assumes “that any religious or ideological system demanding a bearing in the public is aiming to seize control of the political realm and to override and nullify opposing convictions” (Williams 2008a, 47). However, in a way akin to Ricoeur, Williams suggests that the procedures of public discourse be understood such that they are capable of coordinating ideological positions. Although not forthcoming in the specifics of such procedures, Williams was not naïve to the challenges his proposal posed for the realities of religious differences today. In the case of Islamic thought, he noted, “One of the questions that Christians will want to pursue in their continuing dialogue with Islam is whether the idea of a ‘secular’ level of citizenship with all that this implies about liberties of conscience is indeed compatible with a basically Islamic commitment in the shape of society at large” (Williams 2008a, 54). However, his emphasis is clearly on the need to promote democratic activism and echoes Jeffrey Stout’s similar claim that “democratic reform may indeed be achievable by democratic means in places where the majority of the citizens are religiously active if citizens are prepared to build coalitions of the right sort” (Stout 2008, 543). In the end, these commentators draw attention to the need to develop constructive hermeneutics, though without providing it in their essays.
3. One of the reasons for this was the state’s growing taxation of the tradesmen. The state could not protect trade routes without waging taxes. This led to the

publication of government—that is, political institutions paid for by taxed money were considered public. The system of taxation was thus a key instigating factor in the formation of a distinction between the private citizens and the public authorities. Thus the private realm of conjugal family, and the commodity exchange that supported it, generated the funds necessary to pay for the nation-state in the sphere of public authority. The realm of public authority secured the marketplace, which in turn protected the economic conditions for the private realm of the family to flourish. For further discussion of the reflexive relationship between the realm of pure humanity, commodity exchange, and the sphere of authority, see Habermas (1989, 46).

4. This notion of distanciation will be important for Ricoeur's contribution explored later.
5. In Hegel's lectures on *Philosophy of Religion*, the death of God in Christ represents a moment within God's own self-revelation and self-understanding in which there is a renunciation of the natural and finite. The Christian God sublates (*Aufgehoben*) or is elevated beyond, which allows God to transcend the finite and become the consummation of all religious concretizations. "It is a passing over of finite things, from the things of the world or from the finitude of consciousness . . . to the infinite, to this infinite being more precisely defined as God" (Hegel 1984, 414).
6. This is a point he made in more detail in terms of "detranscendentalization" (Habermas 1999, 130).
7. This can be seen in the way Habermas hangs on to the importance of translating religious language into public political language. Habermas resists the use of the term *secular* and even refers to a postsecular context, but he maintains the way religious language should be translated into something else—public discourse, broadly put. In any case, he believes that secular and religious people alike must take each other seriously, in language that is not necessarily religious, and that terms such as *the likeness to God* should be faithfully translated into *the equal dignity of all humans* (Habermas et al. 2006, 45ff.). This approach feeds back into his theories of rational argumentation, which he has defended on numerous occasions, including a contemporary discussion to the Ratzinger debate on religious tolerance.
8. Crucial to this concern was Gadamer's emphasis on a horizon of understanding, which included a person's effective history. Rather than a barrier to the text, he demonstrated how a person's history could function as a bridge: "A person who has an horizon knows the relative significance of everything within his horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small. Similarly, working out the hermeneutical situation means acquiring the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition" (Gadamer 1988, 302). As one commentator puts it, "The event of understanding . . . is the formation of a comprehensive horizon in which the limited horizons of text and interpreter are fused into a common view of the subject matter—the meaning—with which both are concerned" (Linge 1977, xix). "Prior understanding influences us in unpredictable and essentially uncontrollable ways. Through it, history affects and indeed effects consciousness; and consciousness so determined Gadamer

- calls 'effective-historical consciousness' . . . in brief, we are, more than we know" (Weinsheimer and Gadamer 1985, 13).
9. Ricoeur cites Geertz (1973, 209) at this point. For Geertz's comment on metaphor, cf. Geertz (1973, 259).
 10. Ricoeur's own self-understanding of *Freud and Philosophy* was that Freud had helped him enlarge hermeneutics "beyond a mere semantic analysis of double-meaning expressions" (Ricoeur 1977, 318).
 11. This book helpfully summarized his reflection in *The Rule of Metaphor* where Ricoeur worked through Aristotle's account of metaphor at the intersection of rhetoric and poetics and recovered his definition of metaphor as "giving the thing a name that belongs to something else" (Ricoeur 1977, 19). Cf. Aristotle (1995, 1457b). Although some modern theorists interpreted this as a "deviation" that implied a *substitution* theory of metaphor, Ricoeur argues that this is misleading. It is not a simple substitution but rather the sense of productive interaction that is important. "The modern authors who say that to make a metaphor is to see two things in one are faithful to this feature" (Ricoeur 1977, 24).
 12. Geertz also cited this connection insofar as he agreed that "ideology is always about power" (Ricoeur 1986, 259). In Geertz's words, "It is through the construction of ideologies, systematic images of social order, that man makes himself for better or worse a political animal" (Geertz 1973, 218).
 13. Ricoeur depends on Weber and Habermas for many of his ideas on legitimacy. As he remarks at one point, "Weber's analysis of the legitimation of authority reveals a third, mediating role for ideology. The legitimation function of ideology is the connecting link between the Marxist concept of ideology as distortion and the integrative concept of ideology found in Geertz" (Ricoeur 1986, 14).
 14. One wonders about the autobiographical nature of this essay. For instance, in an *Espirit* interview, Ricoeur acknowledged the gap between his political life and his own contributions to political theory (Ricoeur 1981).
 15. He went on to cite a similar example in Greek society, "which was able to develop an industry based on the invention of the techniques of geometry and nascent physics. But this industry was never systematically developed because the project of saving human labor in an epoch of slavery did not itself constitute a positive value" (Ricoeur 1975, 279–80; cf. Strauss 1974).
 16. For instance, in the essay "Above All, No Journalists!" he addressed the religious scene of Abraham's violence on Mount Moriah (Derrida 2001, 56ff.). Derrida commended the journalistic silence of Abraham in a way that left open the possibility of a purely private concern. Such was Habermas's response to Derrida in another place, which suggested that he had confused rhetoric for philosophical reason (Habermas 2006, 14ff.). See also Derrida's 2004 interview, which suggests a "messianicity without messianism . . . in a sense faith without religion of some sort" (Derrida 2006, 268–69). For a brief summary of Derrida's critique of Habermas, see Lasse Thomasen's introduction to the *The Derrida-Habermas Reader* (2006, 6–7).
 17. It is in this sense that it is possible to understand why Ricoeur addresses his lecture on the political educator not to party militants or disengaged citizens but to "intellectuals who are looking for ways they can honestly exercise effective action" (Ricoeur 1975, 271).

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