

RELIGIOUS REASONS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: A CHALLENGE TO HABERMAS

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Abstract

Habermas argues that religious reasons can enter the public sphere so long as they undergo a translation that meets the standards of public reason. I argue that such a translation may be either unnecessary or impossible. Habermas does not sufficiently consider the possibility that religious reasons are already publicly accessible such that there no translation is required. Moreover, Habermas entirely fails to consider the possibility that, if he is right about religious reasons not being publicly accessible, these reasons may be of a kind such that they cannot be translated into a publicly accessible idiom as he supposes they can be.

Introduction

Proponents of liberal democratic political theory find themselves asking the following questions vis-à-vis religion: Should a just ethic of citizenship permit religious discourse in the public sphere of a liberal democratic state? If so, why, and under what conditions? If not, why not, and with what justification? The questions stem from dueling theoretical ideals. An ethic that prohibits religious discourse in the public sphere seems to violate the liberal democratic commitment to free exercise and expression of religion. And yet, one might worry that an ethic that permits religious discourse in the political arena would violate the liberal democratic commitment to the use of public reason in deliberative democracy. So it seems there are good liberal democratic reasons for both prohibiting and allowing religious discourse in the public sphere.

Contemporary critics have responded to this difficulty by either promoting or opposing what Paul Weithman calls the “standard approach.” All parties advocate the use of publicly accessible reason in liberal democratic discourse, but they diverge on the issue of whether religious discourse is, or ever could be, publicly accessible. Advocates of the standard approach (e.g., Rawls, Audi) argue that religious reasons are not publicly accessible and must undergo a secular translation before having a proper place in liberal democratic discourse. Opponents of the standard approach (e.g., Weithman, Wolterstorff) reject the demand for translation, arguing that such a demand is itself inimical to liberal democratic principles, and furthermore there is no good reason to think that religious reasons aren’t already public. Jürgen Habermas has attempted to mediate the controversy by offering a revised version of the standard approach that corrects for oversights in each position. In this paper I argue that Habermas’s revised version of standard approach, while an improvement on earlier versions, is vulnerable on two fronts.

On the one hand, Habermas does not sufficiently consider the possibility that religious reasons are already publicly accessible. If this is the case, it would be redundant to require the translation of religious reasons and the project of the standard approach would be unnecessary. The result would be that religious reasons should be allowed to enter the formal and informal political sphere without restriction. On the other hand, Habermas entirely fails to consider the possibility that, if one does deny that religious reasons are publicly accessible (which Habermas does) these reasons may be of a kind such that they cannot be translated into a publicly accessible idiom. If this is the case, then the project of the standard approach becomes impossible. If religious reasons cannot be made publicly accessible then Habermas’s own theory of deliberative democracy requires an ethics of citizenship in which religious reasons are kept out of the public political sphere. While I do not endorse one view over the other, I argue that both deserve closer scrutiny than they have received. If one wishes to uphold the project of the standard approach, both the necessity and possibility of the project must be more adequately established.¹ I conclude by suggesting that the problem of religious reasons in the public sphere

ought now to be approached more as a practical problem rather than a theoretical one.

In part (I) I present and critique the main arguments for the standard approach as expressed by Rawls and Audi. I then do the same for Weithman's and Wolterstorff's criticism. In part (II) I present Habermas's contribution to the debate, elucidating his mediation of the standard approach and its critics. In part (III) I issue two challenges. First I provide arguments for the idea that religious reasons are already publicly accessible. Next I draw on Kierkegaard to illustrate a vein of thought suggesting that religious reasons might defy rational discourse such that they can never be made publicly accessible.

I.

Rawls's *Political Liberalism* instigated a new debate on the role of religion in the public sphere (Rawls 1993).² At issue for Rawls is not the idea of religious freedom, positive or negative, as guaranteed by the First Amendment. Rather, he prompts us to consider the role that religion, and religious reason in particular, ought to play in the formal and informal political sphere. Habermas explains that Rawls's motivation to address this issue stems from the following commitment:

The democratic procedure owes its legitimizing power to two components: first, the equal political participation of all citizens, which ensures that the addressees of the laws can also understand themselves to be the authors of these laws; and, second, the epistemic dimension of a deliberation that grounds the presumption of rationally acceptable outcomes. (Habermas 2008, 121)

The idea is that citizens in a liberal democratic society must be answerable to each other for their political convictions if they are to understand themselves as authors of the laws they are subject to. And for one's political discourse to be considered open and available, it must be presented in the form of public reason. Rawls's notion of public reason is complex, but for the purposes of this debate we can understand the standard of public reason to be that we deliberate using "premises we accept and think others could reasonably accept" (Rawls 1997, 786).³

Rawls's motivation to address religion and religious reasons is understandable given the aforementioned commitments of the liberal,

deliberative democratic view. Citizens of a liberal democratic state have the right to practice (or not practice) whichever religion they choose without encouragement or discouragement from the state. However, if one also subscribes to the idea that citizens ought to engage in public political discourse, and that this discourse ought to make use of publicly accessible reason, and if one takes the view that religious reason is not publicly accessible, then it appears that religious citizens ought to refrain grounding their public political discourse and convictions with religiously derived reasons.⁴

Rawls concedes that religiously derived beliefs are not the only beliefs that fail to meet the standards of public reason. No belief grounded in what he calls comprehensive doctrines (of which religious doctrines are subset) can be considered public. Comprehensive doctrines are systems of belief that “include conceptions of what is of value in human life, and ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of friendship and familial and associational relationships, and much else that is to inform our conduct, and in the limit to our life as a whole” (Rawls 2005, 13). He cites utilitarianism as an example of a secular comprehensive doctrine that, no less than a religious comprehensive doctrine, might provide a citizen with reasons that are not publicly accessible and thus ought not to be invoked in public political discourse.⁵

After explaining the prohibition against invoking reasons that derive from religious and other comprehensive doctrines Rawls introduces his proviso. It is not the case, he argues, that religion ought to be banned outright from the public political sphere. Some public use of non-public reasons is permissible even under the ideal of citizenship. Discussing Rawls’s proviso, Habermas writes: “The principle of the separation of church and state obliges politicians and officials within political institutions to formulate and justify laws, court rulings, decrees, and measures exclusively in a language that is equally accessible to all citizens” (Habermas 2008, 122). But this is only a requirement for those persons operating within the state’s formal political institutions, a requirement for, say, judges and legislators. Citizens operating in the informal public political sphere are not, on Rawls’s view, subject to this requirement. Rather, Rawls argues that in the informal public political sphere “comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided

that in due course proper political reasons—and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines—are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support” (Rawls 1997, 783).

Consider an example of what Rawls might have in mind. Citizen X attends a community meeting hosted by the Rotary Club prior to a local election. The aim of the event is to help inform citizens about issues relevant to the election and to provide a forum for debate. One of the issues in the election is a proposed increase in public funding for Planned Parenthood. Citizen X weighs in on what he sees as the demerits of this proposal: “Planned Parenthood supports the right of a woman to abort, and in some cases helps women facilitate abortions. The Pope has decreed that abortion is murder, thus a mortal sin, thus something that we must seek to prevent. For this reason, I will not support the proposed funding increase, and I urge others to do the same.”

Citizen X’s contribution to the political discourse would have been impermissible had Rawls not added his proviso. However, given the proviso, there is nothing *prima facie* wrong with his use of religious, non-public, comprehensive doctrine-derived reasons in support of his/her political contribution. The proviso allows for Citizen X contribute in a religious idiom so long as he/she comes to provide “proper political reasons” for his position in “due course.” It is not clear what Rawls means by “due course”; still, we can imagine Citizen X fulfilling the requirements of the proviso by restating his point thusly: “Planned Parenthood engages in a variety of practices that are morally repugnant to many local citizens. Since the issue concerns a matter of morality, and since morality is not properly a matter for the state, I object to the use of public funds to support an organization that many citizens regard as immoral. Citizens may donate privately if they wish, but I should not be obligated to financially support unjust termination of innocent human lives.” So the expression of Citizen X’s political contribution in religious terms was permissible, though it needed a subsequent translation into publicly accessible reasons, i.e., reasons not derived from a comprehensive doctrine.

This is the heart of the standard approach, but there is a contribution from Audi that deserves mention (see Audi and Wolterstorff 1997, 26

and Audi 2005, 197–218). Going further than Rawls, Audi claims that the proviso does not sufficiently limit the influence of religious reason in the public sphere. He argues that it is not enough simply to give secular, public reasons in support of one's political contribution, and that one cannot merely translate a religious conviction into a secular idiom. A proper ethic of citizenship requires that one's actual political motivation stem from secular, public reasons and not from the commitments to any particular comprehensive doctrine. Habermas notes that Audi is, in effect, demanding "that the secular reasons must be strong enough to direct the citizen's own behavior, for example when voting in elections, quite independently of the concomitant religion motivations" (Habermas 2008, 126).

Consider again the example of the community meeting. The initial political contribution was dependent on non-public religious reasons. Realizing this, Citizen X accedes to the proviso and attempts to translate his or her religiously laden contribution into a supposedly public and secular one. Two factors deserve note. First, the essence of Citizen X's political contribution did not change: he or she remains opposed to an increase in public funding for Planned Parenthood. Second, it is not clear that Citizen X's political motivation has changed; he or she has merely translated the contribution so that it accords with Rawls's proviso. Or maybe Citizen X translated the contribution because they live in a predominantly Protestant town and realize that an appeal to Papal authority is unlikely to hold sway. Either way, when Election Day comes, Rawls's proviso says nothing about whether citizens must be motivated to cast votes based on the second, secular formulation of the reason, whereas Audi is clear on this point: a proper ethic of citizenship requires that we give and be motivated by public, secular reasons. We cannot merely translate our contributions in accordance with Rawls's proviso and then vote against the proposal *just because* the Pope wants us to.

Paul Weithman and Nicholas Wolterstorff have responded to the standard approach with empirical and theoretical objections (see Audi and Wolterstorff 1997 and Weithman 2005). Empirically, they argue that stifling or limiting the extent to which religious citizens may be politically active *as* religious citizens and *in* a religious idiom would negatively impact the aims of a liberal democracy, and they

draw attention to historical examples in which religious citizens acting from religious reasons have furthered the liberal democratic agenda. Theoretically, they argue that Rawl's proviso and Audi's motivational demand constitute, as Habermas puts it, an "asymmetrical burden" on religious citizens. Furthermore, Weithman and Wolterstorff challenge the grounds for thinking that religious reasons, simply by virtue of being religious, are less publicly accessible than other kinds of reasons.

The empirical objection to the standard approach stresses the positive influence that religious organizations and religious citizens have had for democracy, particularly in the United State. The Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-Defamation League are powerful examples of religious citizens furthering the ends of the liberal democratic state while justifying their convictions in a religious idiom and being motivated by those very convictions. Weithman pushes the empirical objection further. He not only notes that there have happened to be religious actors and motivations behind important American social movements, he argues that American democracy is intrinsically strengthened by the presence of politically conscious religious citizens and organizations. In Habermas's analysis, Weithman

describes churches and religious communities as actors in civil society who fulfill indispensable functional imperatives for the reproduction of American democracy. They provide arguments for public debates on crucial morally loaded issues and fulfill tasks of political socialization by informing their members and encouraging them to participate in the political process. (Habermas 2008, 125)

Religious organizations are often adept at providing forums through which politically marginalized groups like racial minorities and the economically disadvantaged can become politically active. To require religious citizens and organizations to adhere by Rawl's proviso, let alone Audi's motivation demand, would be to ask them not to be what they are, i.e., religious. This in turn could stifle wellsprings of democratic participation. Religious citizens and organizations may even turn away from the political arena completely if they sense that their opinions, methods, and confessions are being discriminated against. Weithman argues that such a result would be damaging to the liberal democratic aims to which Rawls and Audi are committed.

Wolterstorff contributes to the empirical objection by asserting that there is no reason to think that religion or religious reasons are especially inimical to liberal democracy. Indeed, he reminds us that some of the twentieth century's greatest social evils—the Holocaust, the Soviet gulags, Mao's Cultural Revolution, the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge—were committed by secular states for supposedly secular reasons. Given this fact, Wolterstorff argues that it is unfair to single out religious reasons as posing an especial danger to liberal democracy.

Wolterstorff's point is apt, but I have two rejoinders. First, Rawls and Audi would place the same restrictions on political contributions derived from Stalinism and Maoism as they do on those derived from religious confessions, as the former fall under the category of comprehensive doctrines.⁶ Second, I do not think Rawls and Audi are picking on religious comprehensive doctrines while purposefully ignoring secular comprehensive doctrines. It just happens to be the case that their primary audience and object of analysis—Europe and the United States—has far more confessed Christians, Muslims, and Jews than confessed Utilitarians and Communists.

The empirical objection to the standard position is compelling. There certainly are many examples of religious citizens using religious reasons to support liberal democratic ends, just as there are many examples of nefarious regimes employing secular and potentially public reasons to the detriment of liberal democracy. Yet I question whether the empirical objection should have much influence on the debate at hand. It is a truism to point out that religion, like science and technology, can be used for good or for ill. Today we might point to the Crusades or Muslim wars of expansion as a case of religious reasons gone mad, while also lauding the central role that religion played in the US Civil Rights Movement and the good work done by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Yet neither extreme case should be used to condemn or condone religion as a political force. The fact that religion *can be* and sometimes *has been* influential in furthering democratic aims does not prove that it will continue to be so and do so in the future. Even if Weithman is correct that religion is a wellspring of democratic energy (and this is far from certain) it does not make the case that religion *ought* to be an instrument of liberal democratic progress in an ideal society.⁷

The theoretical objection to the standard approach is subtler and more significant. Two aspects of the theoretical objection discussed by Weithman and Wolterstorff deserve particular attention: firstly, that a limitation on the use of religious reasons in the public political sphere is inconsistent with justice in the liberal democratic state; secondly, that any such limitation is itself unreasonable.

Both Weithman and Wolterstorff stress that it is unjust for a state to grant its citizens religious freedom only to burden these citizens with political requirements and restrictions that are inimical to leading their religious lives. "It belongs to the religious convictions of a good many religious people in our society," writes Wolterstorff, "that they ought to base their decisions concerning fundamental issues of justice on their religious conviction. They do not view it as an option whether or not to do it" (Audi and Wolterstorff 1997, 105). In addition to being unjust, the theoretical objection charges that the standard approach is unreasonable for seeking to bar religious reasons *qua* religious reasons. "I may reject utilitarianism," writes Weithman, "but I can still see utilitarian considerations as reasons of a sort. I can still see the people who offer them as not unreasonable, even when they offer them as the basis for settling fundamental political questions" (Weithman 2002, 167). Weithman is challenging advocates of the standard approach to explain just what it is about reasons derived from comprehensive doctrines that make them intrinsically less public, less generally accessible, and thus less permissible than other reasons. He asks rhetorically: "Why think that rational adults cannot see the reason-giving force of religious reasons?" (*ibid.*, 135). If the only answer to this question supposes that religious reasons are not publicly accessible then it begs the question and Weithman's challenge stands. I will return to this point later.

II.

Habermas is sympathetic to the liberal democratic commitments that motivate Rawls's proviso, yet he recognizes the force of Weithman's and Wolterstorff's objections. He ultimately introduces his own proviso, one that seeks to do justice to the insights of the theoretical objections while retaining the spirit of Rawls's formulation. He also gives his own empirical objection to the standard position by claiming that

religions have a special power to express moral intuitions that can be beneficial to a liberal democratic polity. In what follows, however, I focus on Habermas's continuation of the theoretical objection. I have given reasons for doubting the value of Weithman's and Wolterstorff's empirical objections, and these same reasons apply to the empirical objections given by Habermas.

Habermas is impressed by Wolterstorff's criticism that "it belongs to the religious convictions of a good many religious persons" that they must be motivated by and act on their religious reasons. Even if we drop Audi's motivational demand as inimical to a religious life and leading to disingenuous political expression, Habermas worries that Rawls's translation proviso results in an asymmetrical burden that unfairly targets religious citizens.⁸

The burden is asymmetrical in that it encumbers the religious but spares the secular. Rawls's proviso does allow for the introduction of religious reasons in the informal public sphere, but in doing so, Habermas thinks it saddles religious citizens with the responsibility of becoming their own ideological translators. He writes: "The liberal state must not transform the necessary institutional separation between religion and politics into an unreasonable mental and psychological burden for its religious citizens" (Habermas 2008, 130). This entails that "the liberal state, which protects all religious forms of life equally, must release religious citizens from the burden of having to make a strict separation between secular and religious reasons in the public arena when they experience this as an attack on their personal identity" (*ibid.*, 130).

We must remember, though, that Rawls's proviso is meant to apply to all comprehensive doctrines and not religious comprehensive doctrines specifically. Thus a Rawlsian may respond to Habermas by pointing out that there is no asymmetrical burden afflicting religious citizens specifically. The asymmetrical burden of the proviso is meant to weigh on utilitarians and communists no less than Jews and Muslims. Habermas meets this objection by claiming that the proviso's encumbrance is significantly greater on holders of religious comprehensive doctrines. Hugh Baxter explains: "His [Habermas's] idea must be that secular reasons deriving from a comprehensive view are more easily translated into Rawls's 'proper political' reasons than are religious

reasons” (Baxter 2011, 202). If one accepts the idea that it is harder to make religious reasons publicly accessible than it is to make, say, utilitarian reasons publicly accessible, then the asymmetrical burden appears doubly asymmetrical towards religious citizens.

Habermas proposes two ways of alleviating the asymmetrical burden. He first introduces what he calls the institutional translation proviso, and then suggests that secular citizens share the burden placed on religious citizens by taking an active role in the translation of religious reasons into proper political reasons. Habermas’s institutional translation proviso differs from Rawls’s proviso in the scope of its application. Rawls’s proviso requires that all citizens, even those operating in the informal public political sphere, eventually translate their religious contributions into proper political reasons. Thus in the example of the community meeting Citizen X was required to translate the religious reasons for their contribution into publicly accessible secular reasons. Habermas recognizes no such requirement. On his view, a translation proviso should not come into play until one’s reasons seek to pass beyond the informal public political sphere and into the institutionalized political system of the state. Habermas contends that Rawls’s “strict demand” for the translation of religious reasons into proper political reasons “can only be made of politicians operating within state institutions who have a duty to remain neutral among competing worldviews, in other words, of all those who hold public office or are candidates for such” (Habermas 2008, 128). Since many religious citizens may be unable to provide secular, public translations for their religious reasons, Habermas agrees with Weithman and Wolterstorff that demanding translation of them is tantamount to preventing them from participating in the political process. This would hinder the ability of religious citizens to see themselves as the authors of the laws they are subject to (*ibid.*, 130).

However, even with the introduction of the institutional translation proviso, Habermas believes the burden on religious citizens remains asymmetrical inasmuch as religious citizens remain burdened by the responsibility of translating their reasons if they wish them to enter into the political system’s institutional core. He addresses the remaining asymmetrical burden by suggesting that the burden of translation ought to be shared by religious and secular citizens alike. “The basic

idea of this alternative,” explains Baxter, “is that . . . the burden of translation should be mutual” (Baxter 2011, 203). So while Habermas’s institutional translation proviso maintains that the “truth contents of religious contributions can enter into the institutional practice of deliberation and decision-making only when the necessary translation already occurs . . . in the political public sphere,” he is arguing that this “necessary translation” ought to be a collaborative undertaking between religious and secular citizens (Habermas 2008, 131). The asymmetrical burden would thus be alleviated by making the task of translation a collaborative burden.

Habermas is not suggesting that we cheapen our criterion for truth just to keep the religious from feeling politically disenfranchised. To the contrary, part of Habermas’s collaborative burden requires that secular citizens take seriously the possible truth content of religious claims. The demand to recognize this possible truth content follows from Habermas’s commitment to “postmetaphysical” thinking. Postmetaphysical thinking insists “on a strict demarcation between faith and knowledge,” and yet it remains agnostic on the matter of religious truths, neither seeking to verify nor falsify them. Moreover, postmetaphysical thinking does not attempt to exclude religious truths from “the genealogy of reason” (ibid., 140).⁹

What then is the result of Habermas’s mediation between the standard view and its critics? He acknowledges the legitimate motivation for Rawls’s proviso but stops short of endorsing it in light of Weithman’s and Wolterstorff’s empirical and theoretical objections. Empirically, he agrees that religion can play a positive role in a liberal democratic society; theoretically, he concedes that Rawls’s proviso and Audi’s motivational demand will make it difficult if not impossible for religious citizens to lead a devout religious life, and that they might result in an unjust asymmetrical burden on religious citizens. In the end, Habermas leaves us with a revised version of standard approach in which the translation of religious reasons is not necessary until the reasons seek to penetrate the state’s institutional political core, and in which the asymmetrical burden on religious citizens is alleviated by requiring that the process of translation be a collaborative effort between religious and secular citizens.

Habermas's revision of the standard approach is not an acceptance of Weithman and Wolterstorff *in toto*. Habermas maintains that there are legitimate limitations on the use of religious reasons, limitations that should prevent religious reasons from entering the formal, political system without first undergoing proper translation into publicly accessible reasons. "By contrast," writes Habermas, "Nicholas Wolterstorff and Paul Weithman wish to jettison even this proviso. However, they thereby infringe against the principle that the state should remain neutral toward competing worldviews, contrary to their claim to remain in line with liberal premises" (Habermas 2008, 132).

III.

I challenge Habermas's project in two ways: firstly because his project may be unnecessary inasmuch as religious reasons are already publicly accessible, and secondly because his project may be impossible inasmuch as religious reasons can never be made publicly accessible. Again, I do not here endorse one position over the other, as doing so would involve theological and epistemological issues far beyond this paper's scope. My goal is to expose two significant challenges to Habermas's project. Anyone wishing to maintain some version of the standard approach, Habermas's or otherwise, must meet them with an adequate response.

My first challenge to Habermas is in line with one of Weithman's theoretical criticisms. Weithman asks: "Why think that rational adults cannot see the reason-giving force of religious reasons?"¹⁰ I submit that the religious reasons of the kind Rawls, Audi, and Habermas seem to have in mind (there may be another kind that I will discuss in my second challenge) are simply reasons—more accessible to some people, less accessible to others, but reasons nonetheless. As such they deserve to succeed or fail in the marketplace of ideas on their own merit without special restrictions.

To say that religious reasons aren't publicly accessible reasons, as the standard approach does, is really just to say that one is not likely to accept them without first accepting some more basic antecedent premises. For example, "Don't do that; the Ten Commandments forbid it," is a reason that might be given against lying. Now the force of this reason is limited if one does not first accept that the Ten Commandments come from God and that divine command theory is a sound moral

philosophy. But the situation is not significantly different for supposedly public, secular reasons. Take the principle of non-contradiction (PNC). The PNC is a cornerstone of logic and rational discourse, yet, as Aristotle notes in the first book of his *Metaphysics*, there is no way to demonstrate the PNC that does not beg the question. One cannot prove that it is irrational to simultaneously assert P and not-P without ultimately drawing on the principle of non-contradiction itself. Here, then, is an example of a simple reason, entirely public and secular, that still requires an antecedent assumption on the part of all who wish to accept its reason-giving force.

One might respond that the PNC is logically basic in a way that “*God would disapprove*” is not. This is true. The PNC may require an antecedent assumption that cannot itself be demonstrated (in a non-question begging way), yet acceptance of the PNC is a necessary condition for our ability to reason about anything—we can’t seem to do without it. The same cannot be said of religious reasons and their necessary antecedent assumptions. One can continue to reason, and reason well, without accepting the divine origin of the Ten Commandments. But this merely shows that religious reasons are more complex than the PNC. It does not show that religious reasons are not publicly accessible.

Consider a case involving more complex secular reasons. Suppose the United States Senate is debating a bill that would increase taxes on fossil fuels. A particular Senator (call her Senator Green) speaks in favor of the bill and attempts to give publicly accessible reasons for her position. She argues that increasing taxes on fossil fuels will encourage the development of affordable renewable energy, which will then decrease the burning of fossil fuels, thus reducing carbon in the atmosphere. The reason to reduce carbon in the atmosphere, she says, is so that we can maintain a healthy planet with healthy ecosystems so that future generations may have the environmental resources and conditions necessary to pursue their own conceptions of the good.

Senator Green’s reasons appear to be reasons that rest on premises she accepts and can reasonably expect others to accept. But now consider some of the antecedent assumptions required for us to take Senator Green’s reasons seriously. First, that taxes on fossil fuels will encourage the development of renewable energy; second, that afford-

able renewable energy will lead to a decrease in the amount of carbon in the atmosphere; and third, that we have moral duties towards future generations. Senator Green's contribution carries no weight unless one has already accepted these antecedent assumptions. We can suppose that Senator Green believes she can, in due course, provide reasons for these antecedent assumptions just as she provided reasons for her support of the bill. But this puts her in the same position as the Christian or Jew who argues that we should not lie because God commanded otherwise. As I said, this religious reason carries several antecedent assumptions, but why think that the reasonable Jew or Christian could not also argue for these assumptions using premises he accepts and can reasonably expect others to accept? Regardless of whether we find their arguments convincing, this is exactly what many Jews and Christians have been doing for centuries.

Rawls, Audi, and Habermas think that economic, scientific, moral and other secular reasons (so long as they don't rely on comprehensive doctrines) are publicly accessible in a way that religious reasons are not. But perhaps they are conflating the notions of *publicly accessible* (a theoretical condition) and what I will call *accessible to the public* (a practical condition). Again, a reason is publicly accessible just in case it relies on premises we accept and can reasonably expect others to accept. But we might say that a reason is accessible to the public to the extent that it is practically intelligible and acceptable, that is, to the extent that citizens in a given society are likely to—and not just in principle *can*—find the reason intelligible and acceptable. A reason either is or is not publicly accessible; there is no middle ground. But being accessible to the public is a matter of degree. Some reasons will be more accessible to the public than others, but this has no bearing on whether the reasons in questions are publicly accessible.¹¹

Perhaps some secular reasons *are* more accessible to the public than some religious reasons, but this does not make them more publicly accessible. It is important note, however, that many secular reasons are actually *less* accessible to the public than religious reasons. This is certainly the case with many important economic, scientific, and moral reasons. What could be less accessible to the general public than econometrics, quantum physics, the non-identity problem, felicific calculus, and the categorical imperative? In comparison, many

religious reasons are far more accessible to the public, e.g., the Ten Commandments.

Experience overwhelmingly suggests that people can and do find religious reasons both intelligible and based on premises that one can accept and think others could reasonably accept. To deny this fact would be to deny that the political contributions of, say, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela—many of which are laden with, and reliant on, religious reasons—were and are publicly accessible. It would be to deny, for example, that a confessed Jew like Elie Wiesel would be unable to recognize the intelligibility of the religiously laden political contributions of a confessed Christian like King, that Wiesel would be unable to see King's contribution as, at the very least, not *unreasonable* (regardless of whether he likes, endorses, or agrees with them). But surely this is false.

My second challenge to Habermas concerns his failure to consider the possibility that, if religious reasons are not already publicly accessible, it might be impossible to make them so. In other words, he ignores the possibility religious reasons might be immune to the translation on which the standard approach depends. It is a crucial aspect of Habermas's theory of democracy that citizens owe each other publicly accessible reasons for their political convictions. So if there is a class of reasons—say, some religious reasons—that are intrinsically untranslatable because they escapes rational expression, then Habermas must either bar these reasons from even the formal political sphere or repudiate his belief that we owe each other publicly accessible reasons for our political convictions. I do not see that Habermas's discourse theory of democracy can allow for the latter option.

The belief that religious reasons are somehow reducible to or translatable into public, secular reasons depends on the belief that the essential truth content of the two kinds of reasons are the same, that there is no deep metaphysical conflict between faith and reason. The idea is at work, for example, in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel argues that religious reasons *are* reasons, but they are reasons of a lower historical and intellectual order. Not yet able to grasp reason *qua* reason, the religious consciousness continues its dialectical pursuit of the Absolute with the aid of images, icons, and myths. Religion is a matter of *Vorstellung*, representation or picture-thinking. The truth

content of religion is ultimately the truth content of reason itself, and eventually, according to Hegel, the religious consciousness will be able to accept this truth content without the help of picture-thinking. Habermas endorses this view to an extent when he writes: "I defend Hegel's thesis that the major world religions belong to the history of reason itself" (Habermas 2008, 6).

But what if this is not the case? What if the religious is distinct from the rational, or at least not entirely coextensive?¹² The idea that religious reasons might never be publicly accessible is not a novel suggestion. It has been explored and argued for by Rudolph Otto, Karl Barth, Max Scheler, Paul Tillich, and Jean-Luc Marion among others, yet Habermas entirely fails to consider the idea.¹³

The finest exposition against the reduction of religious reasons to secular reason comes from Kierkegaard, a thinker on whom Habermas himself draws in presenting his revised version of the standard approach. In arguing against a secularist view of religion, Habermas cites Kierkegaard as an example of what philosophy can do when "it succeeds in freeing cognitive contents from their dogmatic encapsulation in the crucible of rational discourse" (Habermas 2008, 142).¹⁴ Habermas is right to cite Kierkegaard as example of what philosophy can do when ventures beyond the limits of positive science and takes religious thinking seriously. But I believe he overlooks the influence that Kierkegaard's philosophy, and not just Kierkegaard's philosophical attitude, has on Habermas's own topic. I submit that Kierkegaard's interpretation of the story of Abraham and Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*, particularly his notion of a teleological suspension of the ethical, forces us to consider the possible irreducibility of religious reasons to secular reasons. It thus gives us cause to question the translatability of religious reasons upon which Habermas's revised version of the standard approach is predicated.

Kierkegaard introduces the teleological suspension of the ethical in conjunction with the story of Abraham and Isaac. He argues that the teleological suspension of the ethical is necessary if we are to understand Abraham as anything other than a madman and a murderer. Now, we may ultimately decide that Abraham *was* a madman and a murderer, but if we do then we must relinquish all talk of faith and concede that religion is simply disguised secular rationality, and those

acting on faith are actually mad. However, if we wish to maintain the belief that Abraham's act was one of faith rather than madness we must be open to the idea of faith as something distinct from reason and the truly religious as more than disguised secular rationality.

In the Abraham story, God commands the future patriarch to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham complies and journeys with Isaac to Mt. Moriah where he prepares an altar and binds the boy. At the last moment, God intervenes and Isaac is spared. The story is usually interpreted as a test of Abraham's devotion. As such, Abraham is great because he is willing to give up that which he loves most, and God is great because he does not actually require the sacrifice.

Kierkegaard suggests that this interpretation fails to grasp the true nature of Abraham's act because it remains within the sphere of the rational and the ethical. It allows us to understand Abraham as a tragic hero, but not the father of faith. A tragic hero is one who overcomes, through suffering and sacrifice, his particularity (his particular desires, loves, joys, and interest) in favor of that which he takes to be a higher, universal demand. The overcoming of the particular in favor of the universal is what Kierkegaard calls the ethical. The ethical is both rational and communicable. Agamemnon became a tragic hero when he sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia, to ensure the Greeks a favorable wind and a chance to sail for Troy. He overcame his particular feelings of love; he overcame his paternal obligation; he forced himself to give up one thing in order to gain another.

Kierkegaard denies that Abraham was like Agamemnon. We understand why Agamemnon did what he did even if we disprove. To be sure, Abraham would have been great had he been a tragic hero. To sacrifice the particular (his love for his son) in favor the universal (God's will) might have been a noble thing. Yet Kierkegaard argues that Abraham is not a tragic hero, but a knight of faith. Abraham is willing to sacrifice his only son, but as a knight of faith he trusts in God's earlier promise he will leave countless descendants and father a great nation. He believes even though his rationality scoffs at such belief: how can an old man kill his only son and still expect countless descendants? Reason can neither make sense of this belief, nor justify it in a way that is publicly accessible.

The knight of faith believes by virtue of the absurd. This kind of belief marks Abraham off from an Agamemnon, and marks what Kierkegaard sees as true religious conviction off from disguised secular rationality. After all, Agamemnon is also supposed to have been acting on religious principles—the goddess Diana demanded a sacrifice and he obeyed. But notice how different his religious conviction is from Abraham's. Agamemnon did not expect to give up the particular in favor of the universal and still somehow retain the particular. He knew that killing his daughter meant killing his daughter, giving her up for a greater good. He understood this fact and expected his fellow Greeks to understand it as well. Kierkegaard draws attention to the fact that Abraham does not resign himself to losing his son. Through faith, by virtue of the absurd and a belief that flies in the face of reason, he expects to give up Isaac and yet still have him. Abraham does not believe that his reason for action is, in principle, intelligible to all rational beings, nor does he think that it is based on premises he can reasonably expect others to accept. His action requires a leap of faith, a term Kierkegaard's invents to describe (if not rationally explain) Abraham's behavior.

Abraham is also marked off from Agamemnon in that the former never really could have been a tragic hero. Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter for the good of his nation; he gave up a personal good for a communal good. But Abraham is going to sacrifice Isaac . . . for what? God does not tell Abraham that if he withheld Isaac God will send a plague, or a storm, or some other piece of nastiness. There is no threat made; hence, there is no ethical reason that Abraham can give to explain his decision. He could not argue that he was killing one to serve a thousand, as Agamemnon could; such a reason may still be rejected in public sphere, but it would be publicly accessible. What can never be rationally discussed or understood is the individual relation to the absolute that compelled Abraham, by virtue of the absurd, to be willing to kill his son without expecting to become a tragic hero.

In the language of liberal democratic political theory, Kierkegaard's point is that the movement from the ethical to the religious involves a movement beyond publicly accessible reason. Either we accept such a thing as the teleological suspension of the ethical or we condemn acts of faith as madness. Either religion is something distinct from reason

such there is room for the concept of faith, or else religion is just what Hegel thought it was: *Vorstellung*, picture-thinking, a lower order of reason. If Kierkegaard is correct in thinking that religious reasons are only truly religious when they transcend publicly accessible reasons, then no amount of translation will make them acceptable for liberal democratic discourse. Religion, and religious reasons, must remain an entirely private affair. Since such reasons would be untranslatable, Habermas's discourse theory of democracy would need to bar them from the political sphere, and it should not be bashful about doing so.

IV.

Habermas's revised version of the standard approach is an improvement upon the formulations of Rawls and Audi. It recognizes the possible truth content of religious reasons; it alleviates the asymmetrical burden on religious citizens; it jettisons Audi's motivational demand; and it aims to allow religious citizens to be politically active *as* religious citizens without compromising Habermas's postmetaphysical belief in a strict demarcation between faith and knowledge, his liberal democratic commitment to a strict separation of church and state, and his discourse theory of democracy. But despite its merits, Habermas's revised version of the standard approach remains vulnerable to the two challenges presented in this paper.

The main fault of the standard approach is simply this: it assumes that religious reasons aren't publicly accessible but that they can become so. This is a bold assumption in want of an argument. Habermas, and all who are sympathetic to the project of the standard approach, must step back and make the case that the project is both necessary and possible. To show that it is necessary they must provide stronger arguments for the belief that religious reasons are not already sufficiently publicly accessible, for if and when religious reasons are just secular reasons in theological garb there is no legitimate justification for restricting their use in political discourse—if they admit of translation, then they are, at heart, just reasons. Furthermore, they are often more accessible to the public than the secular reasons favored by the standard approach. To show that the project is possible, advocates of the standard approach must engage with the idea that true religious reasons might never be made publicly accessible. If it is the case that

truly religious reasons evade rational discourse such that they cannot be made publicly accessible—according to Habermas’s own theory of democracy, such reasons must not be allowed into the political arena of a liberal democratic state. Additionally, as this debate moves forward, it will be helpful for advocates of the standard approach to disambiguate between ‘publicly accessible’ and ‘accessible to the public.’

My suspicion is that Habermas (and other thinkers committed to the principles of liberal democracy) will continue to reject the suggestion that religious reasons should be barred from the political arena *tout court*. This will require that they muster arguments against the idea that religious reasons are not, and cannot ever be made, public. But if this is the case then it changes the problem at hand. No longer should the focus be on the theoretical debate about whether religious reasons are public. Rather, the focus should shift to a practical debate about the best way to make religious reasons more accessible to the secular public and secular reasons more accessible to the religious public.

Notes

1. Lafont has also argued that Habermas’s mediation is not entirely successful, though for different reasons than those presented in this paper. She argues that Habermas’s mediation makes conflicting allowances that alternately coincide with Rawls’s position and the Wolterstorff/Weithman position without maintaining logical consistency with either (Lafont 2009, 140). But like Habermas, she fails to consider both the necessity and possibility of Habermas’s project inasmuch as she assumes, like Habermas, that religious reasons are not already public but can be made so.
2. Rawls revised and amended some of his ideas four year later. See Rawls 1997.
3. Rawls explains what it means for a reason to be publicly accessible in a variety of ways. In *Political Liberalism* such reasons are reliant on “forms of reasoning and argument available to citizens generally, and so in terms of common sense, and by the procedures and conclusions of science when not controversial” (Rawls 1993, 162). Public reason asks us to “live politically with others in the light of reasons all might reasonably be expected to endorse” (Rawls 1993, 241), and to consider what it is “reasonable to expect others to think who stand to lose when out reasoning prevails” (Rawls 1993, 162). To be considered public “arguments and evidence supporting political judgments should, if possible, be not only sound but such that they can be publicly seen to be sound”(Rawls 1993, 162). In “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited” he writes that the standard of public reason requires that our public deliberation employ “premises we accept and

think others could reasonably accept” (Rawls 1997, 786). This latter explanation encapsulates and simplifies the others. More importantly, it is the explanation Habermas works from in *Between Naturalism and Religion* when arguing that citizens owe each other reasons that are public and expressible in a publicly accessible idiom. Habermas himself uses several terms to express the idea: “publicly accessible,” “publicly acceptable,” and “generally accessible” (Habermas 2008). Commenting on Rawls and Habermas, Christina Lafont uses the same terms as Habermas while also describing publicly accessible reasons as “generally acceptable” and “reasons acceptable to everyone” (Lafont 2009).

4. Rawls limits his public reason requirement to constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice, though it is not clear that this cannot be interpreted so as to include all matters of policy. Public reason is meant to operate in the original position, from behind the veil of ignorance, and is the “reason of equal citizens who, as a collective body, exercise final political and coercive power over one another in enacting laws and in amending their constitution” (Rawls 1993, 214).
5. Of course, Rawls rightly takes it to be the case that that the vast majority of comprehensive doctrines, especially in the United States, are those of particular religious confessions. He is also writing with the religious wars of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe in mind (Rawls 1993, xxiv–xxv, 159).
6. It is an open question whether Stalinism, and Maoism were actually secular movements given the blatant and sometimes intentional religious structure, language, and ritual they employed.
7. For a useful inquiry on the influence of religion on American liberal democracy see Putnam and Campbell 2012.
8. On the asymmetrical burden see also Habermas 2003.
9. On post metaphysical thinking, see also Habermas 1993.
10. Influenced by Weithman’s critique, Baxter claims that Habermas’s mediation actually results in a repudiation of the Rawls/Audi standard position (Baxter 2011, 208).
11. Habermas and Lafont fail to disambiguate this issue. They speak of reasons that are “publicly acceptable,” “generally accessible,” and “acceptable to everyone.” But does this mean that the reasons in question are *able to be* accepted by the general public in theory, or *likely to be* accepted by everyone in practice? If the former, then religious reasons seem to qualify as public.
12. Recall that Habermas himself is committed to a strict demarcation between faith and knowledge, i.e., he affirms that the one cannot be fully understood in terms of the other.
13. See Otto 1958, Barth 1970, Scheler 1960, Tillich 1956, Marion 1991.
14. By “secularist” Habermas means polemically aligned against religion as such.

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