

Life-world, Language and Religion: Habermas' Perspective

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1. Communicative Action and Religion

In the book *The Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas analyzes religion mostly from a sociological perspective, namely related to the problem of the “rationalization” of world-views. He dedicated the chapter “The Authority of the Holy and the Normative Background of Communicative Action” to the question of the relationship between this process and social practices, which seem to be structured by a corresponding evolution of the human language. Along the line of the thoughts of Weber, Mead and Durkheim, Habermas analyzes the evolution of human rationality, which at earlier stages was characterized by an “analogical coordination” between humans, nature, society and God. On this point there is a very illuminating passage:

“The core of collective consciousness is a normative consensus established and regenerated in the ritual practices of a community of believers. members thereby orient themselves to religious symbols; the intersubjective unity of the collective identity defines the circle of those who understand themselves in the first person plural. The symbolic actions of the rites can be comprehended as residues of a stage of communication that has already been gone beyond in domains of profane social cooperation”¹.

This passage represents the core of the Habermasian peculiar view of religion, that is based on the “linguistification of the sacred”. Religion linguistifies the world through its elaboration of symbols that are embedded in ritualistic practices. As symbols establish certain semantic and syntactic relations so they introduce the very distinctions and oppositions (God vs. world, God vs. Us, God and Us vs. Others, etc.) and give rise to the linguistification of the sacred². This process is the core of the logic of secularization or the “disenchantment of the sacred” which linguistically re-elaborates the normatively binding power stored in ritualistically achieved fundamental agreements. But, Mendieta points on a tension that is actually present in the Habermasian relationship between religion and communicative action: has religion been totally absorbed into norms of social

¹ J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Cambridge, Polity, 1987, vol. 2, p. 60.

² See E. Mendieta, Introduction, in J. Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, Cambridge, Polity, 2002.

interaction, leaving nothing behind but the memory of ecstatic rituals and the empty pedestals of exiled gods?

In the book *Post-metaphysical Thinking*³ we can observe a more cautious reconsideration of the substitution and the dissolution of religious thought. To clearly conceive notions such as morality and ethics, person and individual, freedom and emancipation, we ought to assimilate the semantic potential entailed by the judaic-christian history of salvation. The rhetorical force of the religious discourse remains valid until we are able to provide a convincing language to express those experiences and innovations it preserves. The notion of “transcendence from within”⁴ characterizes the Habermasian post-metaphysical thought and aims to assign the motivational capacity of religion to a plausible discourse theory. On the one side, language becomes the transcendental dimension that allows us to express our freedom namely our own convictions. On the other side, it is undoubted that religion retains a fundamental role that philosophy cannot replace: the need for consolation and salvation.

This force is the challenge for the communicative rationality that coexists with religion and theology⁵. But, a group of theologians thinks that forms of cooperation are possible and indeed they offered it (for instance Peukert and Schlusser-Florenza). Along this line, post-secularization is the label for the thoughtful debate between Habermas and Ratzinger. They conclude that religious doctrines ought to be included in the public sphere, in virtue of their motivational force. But, according to Habermas, they must express themselves in a “laic” manner, namely generally comprehensible and acceptable. This move has the consequence to renounce to an apodictic presentation of their own thesis.

2. Life-world, ordinary and extra-ordinary communication

To consider life-world is to seriously consider human nature and natural evolution. Post-metaphysical thought does not admit any dualism between objective world and mental world or scientific reductionism (generally speaking, materialism) but concentrates on the structures of cognitive and moral development. Life-world becomes the horizon of human perceptive and

³ J. Habermas, *Post-metaphysical Thinking*, Cambridge, Polity, 1992.

⁴ This notion is the title of the essay *Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World*, in *Religion and Rationality*, op. cit. pp. 67-94. For the discussion of the notion I am following my analysis in the essay *Juergen Habermas: il concetto di trascendenza nella teoria dell'agire comunicativo*, in “Per la filosofia”, n. 38, 1996, pp. 58-69.

⁵ See the book edited by E. Arens, *Habermas und die Theologie*, Dusseldorf, Patmos, 1989.

cultural experience and the background from which we raise our validity claims and exchange our reasons for knowing and acting. Following the lesson of Husserl, we cannot understand who we are if sciences become too specialistic and philosophy does not try to cooperate with them.

Life-world is the space where reasons become symbolically embodied. But, differently from the point of view of *Theory of Communicative Action*, they do not acquire normativity only from ordinary communication but also from extra-ordinary communication.

Life-world as the “space of reasons”(to use the metaphor of Sellars) is intersubjective. This very intersubjectivity is typical of human beings who, differently from apes, are able to have collective intentionality in the form of cooperation (Tomasello)⁶. So, we have two forms of normativity: I. we have a weak normativity entailed by linguistic conventions and II. we have a strong normativity coming out of traditions and moral norms. The problem is how we intend the notion of collective intentionality⁷. If we embrace Searle’s account, we must admit a space for the intentionality of individuals who impose conditions of satisfaction on conditions of satisfactions, namely use status functions imposed on objects in the world or creating institutional reality like corporations. But, Habermas has a full social view about collective intentionality. He thinks that human nature is social and this option means that the source of normativity are traditions, roles and institutions.

Rituals represent the form of extra-ordinary communication which embeds the strong normativity of the cultural background. The function of rituals is to make individual motivations shareable and to solve the conflict between individual self-affirmation and collectivity. Rituals were bound to myths in the so called “axial” age; but, nowadays, we do not need myths to explain reality. With the growing of science, religion had to find the way to establish a fruitful dialogue about objective knowledge. What is very important to underscore is the intimate relationship between religion and rituals as the source of social solidarity. According to Habermas, the sacral complex did not dissolve itself; religious traditions, in symbiosis with the communitarian cult, are still sources of values and sense.

3. Post-secular Autonomy

⁶ See J. Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, Cambridge, Polity, 2008.

⁷ See J. Habermas *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, Suhrkamp, Berlin, 2012, Chapter 2. Traduzione italiana, *Verbalizzare il sacro. Sul lascito religioso della filosofia*, di L. Ceppa, Laterza, Bari, 2015.

Given this result, religious communities continue express their voice in the public sphere of the post-secular society⁸. The debate on the genealogy of post-secular thought corresponds to the acquisition of a critical stance that allow religious and secular citizens to give meaningful contributions also in the public and political arenas⁹. A serious problem is raised by Cristina Lafont, who thinks that it is desirable that reasons expressed for reciprocally justifying beliefs must be reasonably acceptable from everyone¹⁰. This proposal:

“On the one hand, it is trivial, because it boils down to the obvious requirement that every citizen, when contributing to public political debates, should respect the limits laid down by the principles of constitution. On the other hand, the proposal is empty because it does not speak to the interesting point, namely, whether religious fellow citizens must be taken seriously *as such* in their contributions to the democratic formation of public opinions, and whether their religious utterances can possess a cognitive potential that the secular state must not ignore”¹¹

Contrary to Lafont, Maeve Cook, observes that all normatively substantive contributions to political discourse are embedded in some religious and metaphysical context. Thus secular contributions should not claim the presumptive advantage of being generally accessible. This move would not mean to embrace contextualism because (as MacIntyre exemplarily shows) public, unrestricted discussions force the participants to engage in process of creative reimagining and re-articulating of their own convictions¹². But, as Habermas noticed in his criticism to MacIntyre, we cannot rely only on the process of bargaining reasons grounded on traditions and context of particular communities¹³.

We are subject to a cognitive and moral development that takes place in interaction and that constitute us as autonomous agents. Autonomy has an intimate relationship with communicative rationality, namely to the recognition of presuppositions or linguistic rules as conditions of the

⁸ For the meaning of the notion of postsecular society, see Josè Casanova, *Exploring the Postsecular: Three Meanings of “the Secular” and their Possible Transcendence*, in C. Calhoun, E. Mendieta and J. VanAntwerpen, *Habermas and Religion*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, pp. 27-48.

⁹ See A. Allen, *Having One’s cake and Eating It Too: Habermas’ Genealogy of Postsecular Reason*, in *Habermas and Religion*, op. cit. pp. 132-153.

¹⁰ C. Lafont, *Religion and the Public Sphere: What are the Deliberative Obligation of Democratic Citizenship?*, in *Habermas and Religion*, op. cit. pp. 230-248.

¹¹ J. Habermas *Reply to My Critics*, in *Habermas and Religion*, p. 373

¹² M. Cooke, *Violating Neutrality? Validity Claims and Democratic Legitimacy*, in *Habermas and Religion*, op. cit. pp. 249-276.

¹³ On this topic see R. Giovagnoli, *The Relationship between Translatability and Competence*, in *Analecta Husserliana LXXXII*, 2004, pp. 245-260.

universal validity of theoretical and practical claims. Beyond the Rawlsian notions of “justice” and “overlapping consensus”, the notion of autonomy is worthy to be analyzed in the terms of a plausible philosophy of language¹⁴. Stability can be the result of a discussion of autonomous citizens who are able to decentralize their own perspectives in order to have a fruitful confrontation with the other participants to public dialogues. This perspective aims at overcoming strong forms of relativism as well as religious fanaticism.

In conclusion, I would point on some observations on religion that are important to prevent fundamentalism and nihilism. We take for granted that with the transition to modernity the knowing and morally judging subject reaches the divine standpoint, insofar as it assumes two highly significant forms of idealization. (a) The subject objectifies external nature, by discovering the laws governing events and sets of affairs and (b) he overcomes the limit of the familiar environment to an unbounded community of all responsibly acting persons. The process of rationalization, as Weber describes it, characterizes our western culture by virtue of a grasp of reality that seems not to have correspondence in eastern religions. Another important point underscored by Weber is that Christianity not only fulfilled the cognitive initial conditions for modern structures of consciousness, it also provided motivational aspects. According to Habermas:

“Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love (...) Everything else is idle postmodern talk.

Surely, the globalization of markets - the rise of electronically interconnected financial markets and the acceleration of capital mobility - have led to a transnational economic regime, markedly diminishing the leading industrialized nation’s capacities for action (...) As I said, religion and the Church served an important role as pacemakers for this mentality. But the same cannot be said for the emergence of globalized commerce and communication. Christianity is far more deeply affected and challenged by the unforeseen consequences of this new infrastructure, as are other forms of ‘objective Spirit’ ”¹⁵.

Concerning some contemporary esoterical tendencies, which Habermas label as a symptom of ego weakness and regression, something like an impossible return to mythical forms of thought, he recognizes a “genuine” discourse that is worthy to be highlighted:

¹⁴ Habermas continues his discussion on the Rawlsian thought in *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, op. cit. part III.

¹⁵ J. Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, Cambridge, Polity, 2002, pp. 148-49.

“Reading Aquinas’ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I am struck by the complexity the sheer degree of differentiation, the gravity and the stringency of a dialogically contracted argument. I am an admirer of Aquinas. He represents a form of spirit that is able to ground its authenticity from out of its own resources. It is also simply a fact that there is no longer this kind of firmament in the morass of contemporary religiosity. In a homogenizing media society, everything loses its gravity, perhaps even institutionalized Christianity itself”¹⁶.

¹⁶ J. Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, op. cit. p. 152.