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Response

A Response to Heuser: Two Problems in Habermas' Recent Comments on Religion: Discursive Extraterritoriality and the Rational Appropriation of Religious Contents

Stefan Heuser's review of *Habermas and Theology* raises two continuing difficulties with Habermas' comments on religious life in modernity. These problems relate to the question: how can members of religious traditions genuinely argue in the public sphere, rather than merely rehearse their claims? Habermas asks the right questions, but his answers stand in need of repair. I do not think his answers display logical fallacies or that he misrepresents the histories of religious traditions. Rather, I argue that he needs to pay attention to the details of religious life all the way down: these details need to provide structures for addressing his questions, not merely provide "contents" that can be "rationally appropriated" by a general theory. Heuser invites his readers to consider Habermas' more recent work, implying that Habermas has changed his views in ways that force a reconsideration of his relation to theology. I will try to show that the problems I identified in Habermas' earlier work persist, and even intensify, in *Between Naturalism and Religion* (2005). I am not pursuing yet another critique of Habermas, as I did not in *Habermas and Theology*. Instead, I take seriously the specific repairs offered by Habermas, in response to real contemporary problems, and try to repair them in turn.

The two problems I wish to consider are (1) discursive extraterritoriality and (2) the notion of appropriating religious "contents" or their "semantic heritage." I argue that Habermas' binary opposition between "faith" and "reason" has the effect (unintended by him) of conceding too much to the rhetoric of the religious right. I share Habermas' concerns about this rhetoric and wish to strengthen his arm in querying the justification of some of its key assumptions about religion in modernity.

Before doing so, however, Heuser quite correctly identifies a case where Habermas' recent work offers a different evaluation of the place of religious traditions in modernity from the impression he gives in earlier work. This relates to my claim that Habermas describes religions as ancestors, in some way, of modern rational thought. Habermas has recently explicitly suggested that it is a mistake to treat contemporary forms of religious life as if they are archaic remnants that persist into the present time.[1] He still maintains nonetheless that the ancient

1. "Religion in the Public Sphere," 138. All references are to essays in the translated collection Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

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moral "contents" of religious traditions are both (a) the origin of secular morality and (b) available in some way for rational appropriation.[2] There is a further case where Habermas settles a matter that had been uncertain. I previously claimed that Habermas associates religious traditions with metaphysics, and wondered what qualities Habermas might attribute to postmetaphysical theology. Recently, Habermas names Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard, and by extension Bultmann and Barth, as theologians working within a postmetaphysical frame.[3] I should acknowledge, as I did not in *Habermas and Theology*, that Habermas identifies a long tradition of postmetaphysical theology.

(1) Habermas insists upon the importance of maintaining a strong division between faith and reason, and faith and knowledge (space prevents considering the difference between them here). The purpose of this division is to aid in the clarification of which kinds of claim can be publicly debated, and which cannot. Such a division is a commonplace in German philosophy, extending back at least to Jacobi and Kant. Jacobi claims that reason leads to nihilism, and that the decision to base one's life on faith is a *salto mortale*. Kant claims his limits on pure reason made room for faith. Attempts to oppose this strict division go back just as far. Hamann claims that reason, like faith, is a matter of habitual use and that their authority derives from traditions of such use. Further back, in the thirteenth century, Aquinas and Scotus agree that what one can know of God from "natural knowledge" (which has a family resemblance to late eighteenth-century "reason") is more limited than what one learns from "supernatural knowledge," that is, from scripture interpreted in the church. The rules for debating "natural knowledge" are different from the rules for debating "supernatural knowledge." In the first case, one draws on a wide range of arguments from ancient Greek, classical Roman and contemporary Islamic sources, and the rules for evaluating them are internal to those traditions themselves. In the second case, one draws on a more limited range of arguments from the Church fathers and their successors, and seeks to display the wisdom of scripture, the harmony of the tradition and one's considered obedience to them both. The rules for evaluating rival arguments depend on faithfulness to scripture and the church's traditions of its interpretation. In both cases there are rules for handling disagreements, but the rules are different. In the context of Habermas' question about public argumentation, the key difference between the two cases, natural and supernatural knowledge, is the range of authorities admitted, and the scope of the readership to which one addresses oneself. Aquinas can address his interpretation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and perhaps his arguments about divine simplicity, to a relatively broad readership, including contemporary Muslim scholars; he should address his questions on the Trinity more narrowly, not merely to fellow Christians but fellow Christians in the Western tradition. The breadth of prospective readership is a "more or less" matter, not a strict separation between whether one is considering matters of "faith" *or* "reason." By

2. "Religion in the Public Sphere," 131; "The Boundary between Faith and Knowledge," 212.

3. "The Boundary between Faith and Knowledge," 237.

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the time of the eighteenth century, in Jacobi's hands, matters of faith are associated with claims one makes only to oneself: it is an individual immediate decision needing and having no defence. By contrast, matters of reason are available for public discursive evaluation. For Hamann, against Jacobi and Kant, matters of faith and of reason are, alike, matters of language and tradition. One might say that they are as public as a language, although one should add that the existence of different traditions means there are different publics, and the range of authorities on which one draws will determine the scope of the readership that will find one's arguments persuasive.

We can notice some interesting features of Habermas' way of distinguishing between faith and reason. The "certainties of faith" are contrasted with "fallible convictions of a secular nature"; an "inviolable core of infallible revealed truths" is contrasted with the "unreserved discursive examination" that secular conceptions of the good receive. Faith is thus accorded a state of "discursive extraterritoriality": in other words, matters of faith are non-negotiable.[4] It is notable that the distinction is whether or not claims can be subjected to public argumentation, rather than being a question of the scope of the public to which one addresses oneself. It is more like Jacobi, and less like Aquinas or Hamann. This has four unfortunate effects. First, it makes it difficult to make sense of argumentation within a tradition, such as a church council. Are these not public in a sense? Second, it makes it difficult to make sense of argumentation between two traditions that share a significant belief, for example that there is one God. Is this not public in a sense? Third, there are probably no "certainties of faith" or "infallibly revealed truths" in any tradition that have not at some time provoked debate, and very few that do not continue to do so. When and how did they become "discursively extraterritorial"? Fourth, it makes it easy for ideologues on the religious right to claim immunity from criticism when appealing to "matters of faith." How can they ever be wrong?

Habermas might reply that there is no such thing as a "limited public," and that arguments within religious traditions are thus not public in his sense. But surely public argumentation is a "more or less," rather than a "public" versus "not public," matter. There are different publics, broader or narrower scopes of readership, and complex interrelations between them. Matters of faith should thus not be accorded "discursive extraterritoriality," but should invite questions about who expects to persuade whom, of what, to what degree, in which contexts. Habermas himself suggests this way of thinking elsewhere, in discussing the difference between *Gültigkeit* and *Geltung*. It is unfortunate that when considering contributions by religious participants in public argumentation the idea of "a generally accessible language," into which religious claims must be rendered, predominates rather than the more fruitful idea that "the two-place relation of the validity [*Gültigkeit*] of propositions is extended [in reflexive communicative action] into the three-place relation of a validity [*Geltung*] that valid propositions have 'for us'."[5]

4. "Religion in the Public Sphere," 129–30, and also 143.

5. Compare "Religion in the Public Sphere," 120, 129, 131 and "Communicative Action and the 'Use of Reason'," 43.

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(2) Habermas suggests that philosophy should appropriate the "possible truth contents" or "semantic heritage" of religious traditions. With this suggestion, the "contents" or "heritage" of religious life appear to be separable from the religious traditions. This is a serious problem. In some of his work, Habermas makes it clear that he wishes to learn from religious traditions: their long histories of ritual, narrative, formation; above all the rich, meaningful lives that religious traditions make possible. This is evident in the first and last essays of the collection *The Future of Human Nature* (2001). Habermas is equally attentive to the possibility that without the rich textures of living religious traditions, secular society itself might produce shallow attenuated institutions and would probably fail to produce of its own accord certain practices of care for the vulnerable and hope in the face of apparent disaster. In other parts of his work, including essays in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, Habermas seems to reproduce Kant's idea that religions have a "core" or "content" that is contained in a "shell."[6] This account stands in urgent need of repair.

The Abrahamic religious traditions incorporate complex performances which include forms of discipline, repetition of certain habits (including prayer), modes of praise and lament, rhythms of work and rest, periodizations of the year with festivals and so forth. To suggest that these complex performances have a "content" that can be pried out of them, like shucking and consuming an oyster, suggests (surely unintentionally) a violent relation between philosopher and religious person. The ethnographer who describes a primitive rain dance in terms of the claims made about it by his informants ("we are trying to make it rain") or who tries to reduce it to his own claims ("they are trying to make it rain") fails from the start to notice the way in which language and ritual evoke a world in which rain may focus all sorts of concern, involve or exclude various participants, whose role in the community may be reflected or even determined by the part they play in the ritual, and so forth. It is a poor ethnographer who *already* knows what 'rain' is and tries to work out what claims about rain his informants might make. This is true *a fortiori* of practices of fasting, repetition of ancient prayers, burying the dead and so on. It is strange and slightly idiotic to try to get at the "content" of a wedding or a baptism, especially when the central participants may themselves only discover what they were doing many years afterwards, if at all. Phrased even more critically, the distinction between "shell" and "content" is not native to the traditions themselves, but is imported from outside. From where? With what warrants is the distinction imported? Whose authority determines the way the distinction is made? Whose rules govern disagreements about what is shell and what is content? The list of questions can be extended indefinitely.

It is thus disappointing that Heuser, a theologian, so calmly rehearses the ideas that propositional contents from religious life may crystallize within our discourses, without any reference to performance, or that "the distinction between God and man" can be made without any reference to the notion of divine grace, or most bluntly: "Philosophy is invited to listen to the propositional contents

6. "The Boundary between Faith and Knowledge," 213–4, 223.

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of religious traditions and to critically appropriate their semantic heritage." Even Habermas himself is careful not to instrumentalize religious traditions so brutally: his interest is in how validity claims made within a tradition can be understood by those outside it, or how the density of religious practice enriches the lives of even resolutely secular members of society.[7]

Drawing attention to performance is not to deny, absurdly, that theology involves propositions, or to suggest, irresponsibly, that its propositions are of little importance. It is rather to insist that understanding those propositions means understanding the questions to which these propositions are answers, and appreciating that those questions arise because of uncertainties relating to the meanings of religious performance in the face of novelty or suffering.

What is true of the Abrahamic traditions is true of scriptural reasoning. It is a practice to whose details one needs to pay attention. If its practitioners make claims about it, as I have done, these claims should not be evaluated in isolation from the performances which give rise to them. No one who has even cursory familiarity with scriptural reasoning would think it requires participants to abandon their traditions, or that complex questions of authority are smothered by a vaguely threatening mantle of "friendship." Scriptural reasoning is interesting because it requires participants to make their deep reasonings public, not abandon them, and because it displays complex and inspiring practices of friendship whose meaning arises from within religious traditions, rather than coercing participants through notions that arise in none of them.[8]

Habermas asks the right questions, and articulates well-considered and important modes of repair in the face of urgent contemporary problems. His work is worth repairing in turn, for this reason. The best repairs are those that insist on closer attentiveness to the complexities of actual practice, and on more detailed historical investigations.

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7. "Religion in the Public Sphere," 131.

8. Nicholas Adams, "Making Deep Reasonings Public," *Modern Theology* (July 2006): 385–401.

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