CHAPTER 8

Exclusive Pluralism: The Problems of Habermas’ Postsecular Argument and the “Making of” Religion

Maria Birnbaum

Jürgen Habermas’ accounts of the postsecular and religion became publicly visible through his speech on Faith and Knowledge (Glauben und Wissen) at the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in the fall of 2001, shortly after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September that year. Four years later he published a collection of essays, building on the foundation laid in the earlier speech, titled Between Naturalism and Religion (Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion), where he laid out his vision of a postsecular society in more detail. Following these publications were an ever growing body of literature on the secular and the postsecular reaching across the fields of political theory, international relations, sociology, queer and gender theory, law and beyond (Braidotti 2008, Butler et al. 2011, Danchin 2011, Hurd 2008, Taylor 2007).

As one of the most prominent contemporary liberal theorists, Habermas develops a critique of the exclusionary tendencies in political liberalism which he sees as heavily dependent on a particular version of secular reason. After developing this critique he suggests an alternative “postsecular” account, in which the “unexhausted semantic resource” of religion and the truth potential of religious arguments are not a priori ruled out of public discourse. (For a critique of the concept of the postsecular, see Joas 2008a: 107, Joas 2008b). This chapter reads Habermas’ account of the postsecular society not only as an account of a broader inclusive public sphere but as an argument for the particular inclusion of religion on epistemological grounds; religion is, for Habermas, able to keep knowledge “hermeneutically vibrant” that “would have been lost elsewhere” (Habermas 2008: 110). In what follows, I shall make three central claims. First, I argue that there is a distinctive productive power in Habermas’ argument for the recognition of religion and that he “makes” religion through arguing for its recognition. Second, I look at the kind of religion Habermas envisions entering the public sphere, and critically address the way in which his postsecular arguments constitute a legitimate speaker under the banner of “religion.” I point out that Habermas’ vision of religion is conservative; that is, it reproduces the social and political structures within which this recognition takes place. Concluding the paper, I shall present a proposal for a
different approach. Here I argue that Habermas’ critique of the lack of self-reflection on the limits of secular philosophy and the critique of the exclusionary tendencies in secular political theory, does not need to amount to a positive recognition of religion in public life. The issue is more fruitfully addressed through a different take on the remedies of exclusion, namely a “new pluralism.” In this sense, the answer to Habermas’ critique of the exclusion of religion from the public sphere is not the inclusion of religion into the public sphere, but rather a contestation of the term religion itself. It is a refocus from the need to preserve an inclusive form advocated by Habermas to a need to preserve the conditions of plurality. This emphasizes a critical take on the term “religion” and calls for a genealogical sensibility seemingly lacking from the recognition models. This means that the alternative approach brings to the foreground the processes by which different versions of religion have come to be seen as “religious,” how they have come to include particular constituencies, and who has come to represent them. It opens up an analysis of different productive powers working to strengthen a particular meaning of the term and disallowing others. It further allows for an analysis of the performative power of “religion,” that is, an analysis of the outcomes of particular understandings of religion—what religion “does”. Who does this form of religion benefit, which arguments can be legitimized, and who will be silenced?

I shall proceed as follows. In the first part of the chapter I sketch the normative and the epistemological arguments of Habermas’ post-secular account. In the second, I shall examine some problematic features of the epistemological argument, such as how the arguments for recognition “make” religion—the productive power of recognition—proposing an alternative approach that focuses less on recognizing religion on the grounds of its assumed epistemological value, and more on creating the conditions for a different kind of plurality.

**Habermas’ Arguments for a Postsecular Society**

**Normative Argument**

In his 2001 speech Faith and Knowledge Habermas was responding to the events of 9/11 and the growing fear of radicalization of partisan positions at either end of the secular-religion spectrum. In his essay collection in 2005, this was amplified by a more general diagnosis of a problematic development in contemporary liberal democratic societies: the withering of social solidarity and civic integration. Habermas sees how, in the wake of the ever-expanding logic, language and imperative of the market, the social bond of liberal democratic societies is eroding and is being replaced by growing self-reference, individual