At the heart of current debates over religion in the public sphere lies the work of Jürgen Habermas, a political theorist famous for his attempts to delineate a sphere of public rationality, debate and eventual consensus that can serve as the basis of legitimacy for the liberal democratic state, despite the pressures of pluralism and competing belief systems. The vast production surrounding this author, both positive and negative, is more than can be dealt with in this short essay. Instead, I intend to bring the work of Susan Friend Harding on Bible-believing Christians, commonly referred to as “fundamentalists,” into conversation with two of Habermas’ most recent essays, “Intolerance and discrimination” (2003) and “Religion in the Public Sphere” (2006), in an attempt to assess the impact of Habermas’ thought on the political participation of Bible-believing Christians.

A number of thinkers have engaged with Habermas’ thought in the years since the publication of “Religion in the Public Sphere.” This essay intends to differentiate itself from these critiques by bringing Habermas’ work into conversation with a community of religious believers representative of the ones with whom his theory hopes to contend. Thus, the contribution of this essay will be to move the discussion of public rationality, language and tolerance out of the theoretical realm and into the practical one. By bringing Habermas face to face with a community of Bible-believing Christians, represented by Harding’s ethnographic word, *The Book of Jerry Falwell,* this essay hopes to examine several key questions. Is language a transparent medium of communication, or a force in the formation of subjectivity? Can the public sphere ever be totally free of coercion and power? What are the limits of tolerance? In short, where do Bible-believing Christians fit into Habermas’ theory? Clearly all of these questions cannot be answered definitively in the space allotted. As a preliminary entry into the

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topic, I hope to show that (1) it is unlikely that Bible-believing Christians can be accommodated within the model of public rationality as it stands, regardless of how welcoming to religious lexicons Habermas tries to render his theory, because (2) Habermas’ theory of communicative rationality presumes a degree of transparency and universality that does not account for the ways in which language structures subjectivity and (3) the mutual perspective taking and translation at the core of Habermas’ theory of consensus-building in the public sphere does not recognize the incommensurability of visions of the human, history, time, knowledge and truth between Bible-believing discourse and secular discourse, as characterized by Harding.

To set the stage for the inclusion of religion in “Religion in the Public Sphere,” Habermas demarcates his basic understanding of the constitutional state that allows it to function as a pluralist political community of equal citizens. He states,

From the practice of constitution-making, there emerge those basic rights that free and equal citizens must accord one another if they wish to regulate their coexistence reasonably on their own and by means of positive law. The democratic procedure is able to generate legitimation by virtue of two components—first the equal political participation of all citizens, which guarantees that the addresses [sic] of the laws can also understand themselves as the authors of these laws;—and second the epistemic dimension of a deliberation that grounds the presumption of rationally acceptable outcomes.4

The epistemic dimension of deliberation to which he refers presupposes the fact that the contract of the constitutional state is based on natural reason and thus laws must be derived from “public arguments to which all persons have equal access.”5 As Seyla Benhabib argues, rational debate is conceived of

as a conversation of justification taking place under the constraints of “an ideal speech situation.”6 The procedural constraints of the ideal speech situation are that each participant must have an equal chance to initiate and to continue communication; each must have an equal chance to make assertions, recommendations, and explanations; all must have equal chances to express their wishes, desires, and feelings; and finally, within dialogue, speakers must be free to thematize those power relations that in ordinary contexts would constrain the wholly free articulations of opinions and positions.7

In short, there is an assumption that the political community is composed of persons who respect and are civil to each other, owe each other good reasons for their political convictions, are willing to phrase those convictions in a vocabulary accessible to all, and will listen to and try to understand the convictions of others.8

Habermas maintains throughout the essay that the institutions of government must remain secular, allowing for no

4 Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 5.
5 Ibid, 4.
6 Habermas has tried to distance himself from the notion of “the ideal speech situation,” although, as we will see, his theory depends on a number of preconditions to function properly.
7 Seyla Benhabib, “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas,” In Habermas and the Public Sphere, edited by Craig Calhoun (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992), 89.
8 Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 5.
religious reasoning whatsoever since the constitutional state rests on the separation of church and state. However, within the realm of the public sphere—an ambiguous entity existing somewhere between civil society and the government—Habermas entertains the possibility of allowing for religious reasoning. He cites Rawls’s most recent formulation as follows,

‘Reasonable 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

\[\textit{whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support.}^{11}\]

This suggests that groups may argue for policies based on religious reasons if they then translate those reasons at some point into public rationality, in order to make them acceptable to all.

Habermas, however, feels that Rawls’s concession does not go far enough, arguing (1) that some believers may not have the ability to translate their religious reasons into secular reasons, and, more importantly, (2) that they may have no desire to do so. Habermas takes seriously in his 2006 article the possibility that a religious individual might actually live her faith, in the sense that she believes that her political, economic, and social choices should be determined by her religious convictions, and thus it would not be possible for her to argue for her preferences in another idiom. Consequently, Habermas alters Rawls’s formulation slightly to say that the religious citizen should be allowed to present her arguments in the public sphere in a religious idiom as long as someone can translate them into a generally recognizable vocabulary. Of course, he still considers it necessary for the arguments to be transferred into a secular idiom since that is the only way they can enter the (secular) legislative process. Habermas believes that such a process will guarantee that the religious believer becomes an author of the laws of which she is an addressee, which is what legitimizes liberal democracy. Habermas goes on to insist that while it is still necessary for the religious believer to accommodate herself to the demands of the secular state, by being reflexive about her beliefs and tolerant of others beliefs, this does not place an undue burden on the believer, because the secular

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9 Maeve Cooke and Lasse Thomassen both highlight the fact that Habermas’ theory of communicative rationality exists on a continuum between “traditional” societies, in which mutually agreed upon ideas of the good restrict the possible terms of debate, and “postconventional” societies, in which debate is radically open, questioning even the conditions of possibility for truth claims. As Cooke notes, such postconventional societies come closest to the ideal speech situation, and Habermas imagines that all societies will move in that direction. See Thomassen, “The Inclusion of the Other?: Habermas and the Paradox of Tolerance,” and Cooke, Language and Reason: A Study of Habermas’ Pragmatics (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

10 For a more fulsome definition of the public sphere, see Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). Seyla Benhabib also provides a definition of public spheres, noting that they come into existence “whenever and wherever all affected by general social and political norms of action engage in a practical discourse, evaluating their validity.” Seyla Benhabib, “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition and Jürgen Habermas,” In Habermas and the Public Sphere, edited by Craig Calhoun, 73-98 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). This would suggest that a society might contain multiple public spheres, one for every issue under debate.

11 Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 5-6. Italics are Rawl’s.

12 Ibid, 8.
citizen must also be critical of her own position, and not deny the justification or constitutive content of religion, or rely solely on scientistic concepts of truth.\textsuperscript{13}

However, such attempts at inclusion are still haunted by the shadow of the exclusions of Habermas’ 2003 article, “Intolerance and discrimination,” in which he lumps fundamentalists in with racists, misogynists and other types of bigots, who refuse to grant equal citizenship to all, and thus do not themselves deserve tolerance.\textsuperscript{14} Habermas attempts to avoid the arbitrary exclusions of constructing a regime of tolerance by making its constitution dependent on consensus reached through deliberation by all persons to whom the norm will apply. However, as Lasse Thomassen notes, all demarcations of tolerance require some intolerance. Habermas cannot allow those whom he designates as fundamentalists—defined as “persons who do not accept pluralism and the burdens of reason”\textsuperscript{15}—into the debate concerning tolerance without risking the hijacking of that debate by the intolerant. Political inclusion in a pluralistic society demands that political discourse be separated from ethical discourse, and that the ethical give way to the political in the public sphere. Thus, greater inclusion at the political level can only happen if all participants accept the political/ethical divide and the preeminence of the political in policy deliberation.\textsuperscript{16} Habermas justifies this exclusion by arguing that fundamentalists do not accept “the cognitive limits of life in modern, pluralist societies,”\textsuperscript{17} the reality that as one ethical worldview among many, they must recognize the relative nature of their claim to truth and equality with other concepts of the good. On the other hand, as Thomassen indicates, to the fundamentalist it would seem to be Habermas who is violently imposing a rigid lifeworld by denying her a voice unless she agrees to acknowledge the political/ethical divide. From Habermas’ perspective, she is excluding herself, but from her point of view the structure of the public sphere denies her the right to participation unless she compromises her belief system.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, fundamentalists are categorically excluded based on their beliefs even though they are citizens of countries in which all members are intended to set the rules for the practice of tolerance. This would not necessarily be problematic if Habermas would admit that the state makes certain decisions about what lies inside or outside the bounds of tolerance, and enforces it through state power. He wants to insist, however, that such rules of tolerance are not exclusionary or based on power because they are founded on publicly shared reason and deliberation.

His argument becomes even more complicated when he simultaneously asserts that religious freedom should be the model of cultural freedom, in the sense that “[l]ike the free expression of religious belief, cultural rights serve the goal of guaranteeing equal access to one’s own community’s forms of communications, traditions, and practices that people require in order to maintain their personal identity.”\textsuperscript{19} So on the one hand, he supports the right of a person to maintain the forms of communication and tradition that ground her sense of identity, while at the same time insisting that “[t]he state expects that the religious consciousness of the faithful will became [sic] modernized by way of a cognitive adaptation to the individualistic and egalitarian nature of the laws of the secular community,”\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 13-16.
\textsuperscript{14} Habermas, “Intolerance and Discrimination,” 3.
\textsuperscript{15} Thomassen, 443.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 444.
presumably altering the believer’s traditional identity. While the later article does tone down the rhetoric of asymmetric assimilation, preferring the language of complementary learning processes, it still prioritizes secular rational language, dismisses out of hand the participation of fundamentalists unless they can accept the foundational tenets of constitutional democracy, including the division between the political and the ethical, and insists both that religious language can be translated into publicly accessible rationality and that believers and non-believers will generously work together in order to learn to understand and respect each other.21

Susan Harding would certainly not be surprised to find fundamentalists portrayed by Habermas as the unassimilable “other.” As she notes in her article, “Representing Fundamentalism,”22 fundamentalists—she prefers the term “Bible believers”—have long been figured as the repugnant other of modernity, “the opponents of modernity, progress, enlightenment, truth and reason,”23 that define their opposite. Marginalized, but not politically valorized like other subcultural ethnic or religious groups, they create their own cultural idioms, while being discursively created by those around them as the disruptive fringe which seeks to undermine the liberal-secularist narrative of progress from superstition into enlightenment.24 Habermas demonstrates this sense of liberal besiegement early in the 2006 essay on public religion, when he laments violent manifestations of fundamentalism in the non-West, and then connects them to the regrettable backsliding of the United States into religiously motivated politics. Surprisingly, in an article putatively intended to reconcile religious and secular discourse in the post-secular political arena, Habermas begins with a strong conflation of religious and political values, assuming that the “religiously motivated” supporters of President Bush also fall on the ultraconservative side of issues including the death penalty, abortion, torture, same-sex marriage and prioritization of rights over collective goods.25 Like a man surveying wreckage, Habermas states,

The European states appear to keep moving forward alone on that path which, ever since the two constitutional revolutions of the 18th century, they had trodden side by side with the United States. The significance of religions used for political ends has meanwhile grown the world over. Against this background, the split within the West is rather perceived as if Europe were isolating itself from the world. Seen in terms of world history, Max Weber’s ‘Occidental Rationalism’ now appears to be the actual deviation.26

He continues with another indiscriminate analogy between persons who believe in the Virgin Birth and persons who were easily duped into believing Bush’s framing of the Iraq war (neither of which, he argues, are based on empirical facts), surmising that this may bode poorly for democracy.27 It is as though we hear Harding speaking mockingly through Habermas about Bible believing Christians, “You cannot reason with them. They actually believe the Bible is literally true.”28

21 Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 11-19.
23 Harding, “Representing Fundamentalism,” 375.
26 Ibid, 2.
27 Ibid.
28 Harding, “Representing Fundamentalism,” 373.
How much truth is there to the claim that Bible believers summarily reject constitutional-democratic values? As Harding notes, the rise of the Religious Right in America would seem to suggest that Bible believers do not prima facie reject the tenets of constitutional democracy, as Habermas claims all fundamentalists do. In fact, Jerry Falwell’s community participates in and reaps the benefits of liberal democracy. Whether this contributes to its continuing stability or serves to adulterate it is unclear. However, given the reality of their participation, we are justified in attempting to understand if and how Bible believers might fit into the model of religious reason-giving and translation proposed by Habermas in his 2006 article.

To begin to answer such a question, this essay intends to focus on one of the issues that vastly separates Habermas from Bible-believing Christians, the nature of language. Habermas makes a distinction in his early work between communicative and purposive language. Purposive language is the language of religion and other metaphysical systems. It does not attempt to achieve dialogic understanding, according to Garth Gillan, but specifies and reproduces the content of the religious faith.

Habermas makes a distinction between communicative and purposive language. Purposive language is the language of religion and other metaphysical systems. It does not attempt to achieve dialogic understanding, according to Garth Gillan, but specifies and reproduces the content of the religious faith. It is unclear given Habermas’ later rapprochement with religious reasoning whether he finds this type of non-communicative language to be pathological; however, it clearly has no place in the realm of public debate. As Lenore Langsdorf asserts, Habermas prioritizes communicative language, language composed of propositional utterances exchanged for the purposes of reaching understanding. What this suggests is that he conceives of “discourse (an argumentative form of language that requires giving good reasons as justification for claims) [as] the privileged form of language use” and that the epistemic goal of discourse (consensual understanding appropriate to a pragmatic conception of truth, expanded to include correctness in regard to the moral and legal domains and sincerity in regard to the personal domain) is privileged as the telos of all communication.

For Habermas, language exists to communicate ideas and information between persons and to allow citizens to deliberate and develop consensus around convincing reasons.

Does this formulation require the transparency and universality of communicative rationality? Maeve Cook argues that communicative action “expresses the potential for rationality that is supposedly implicit in the everyday linguistic practice of modern societies,” a rationality more procedural than substantive. As Habermas states,

When we use the expression ‘rational’ we suppose that there is a close relation between rationality and knowledge. Our knowledge has a

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30 However, as noted by Lenore Langsdorf, Habermas’ relationship to the field of psychoanalysis, which he conceives of as attempting to recuperate language that has been excommunicated from the social environment for having failed to follow the ‘rules of public communication,’ would seem to suggest that language that fails to adhere to basic pragmatic rules of communication would be rendered unintelligible. Lenore Langsdorf, “The Real Conditions for the Possibility of Communicative Action,” In Perspectives on Habermas, edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 25.

31 Langsdorf, 31-32.

propositional structure; beliefs can be represented in the form of statements. I shall presuppose this concept of knowledge without further clarification, for rationality has less to do with the possession of knowledge than with how speaking and acting subjects acquire and use knowledge.\(^3^3\)

In other words, rational actors gain knowledge through propositional debate and use it to achieve consensus around superior validity claims. The purportedly procedural nature of communicative rationality allows Cooke and Gillan to argue that the public sphere should be open to all propositional claims, regardless of their substance, and even that such radical openness could lead to the questioning and possible reform of standards of validity for particular contexts.\(^3^4\) However, Cooke also acknowledges that the functioning of Habermas’ system of consensus relies on some basic assumptions, which she calls “strong idealizations,” the most essential of which is the requirement that “participants in the communicative exchange are using the same linguistic structures and expressions in the same way.”\(^3^5\) This precondition, which necessitates a certain amount of transparency and universality, is at the heart of Habermas’ belief that reasons given in public debate can be accessible to all citizens and that religious reasons can be translated into secular reasons, and vice versa.

Essentially, without a belief in transparency and universality, Habermas could not speak of a generally understandable or acceptable language, the language of public rationality, which creates the possibility for full inclusion in the legislative process. When Habermas recognizes that religious believers strive to shape their lives based around their convictions, that they do not see their political and social lives as separate from their faith,\(^3^6\) he cannot imagine that this might entail different grammars surrounding human agency, time and history, and understandings of knowledge and truth that are radically incommensurate with secular discursive structures. This is not to say that all persons of faith use such discourses exclusively—Harding herself notes the different lexicons used by the persons she interviews in Lynchburg, some Bible-believing, some secular, some a mixture of the two. However, the possibility of such incommensurability, as portrayed by Harding in The Book of Jerry Falwell, calls into question the feasibility of Habermas’ model.

In contrast to Habermas’ conception of the communicative function of language, Harding’s work focuses on the ways in which language structures the worldviews of the persons living and acting within its web. She begins her journey into the world of Jerry Falwell by spending time in Lynchburg attending services at Thomas Road Baptist Church and interviewing leaders and members of the community, including students and professors at Liberty University. She describes the way in which the language of Bible-believing Christians creates a number of categories, amongst them “the saved” and “the lost,” which structure believers’ thought. Based on her own experience, the experience of others in the community and analysis of statistical data on converts, Harding argues that born-again conversion occurs through religious language which divides the mind and begins to reorient the way the listener perceives


\(^{34}\) Gillan, 20-22 and Cooke, Language and Reason, 35-37.

\(^{35}\) Cooke, Language and Reason, 30.

\(^{36}\) Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 8.
herself, the world and God. By internalizing the dialect of the Bible-believer, the convert begins to appropriate her ways of thinking as well.

Harding’s ethnographic conclusions find theoretical support in the work of George Lakoff, whose 2008 book, *The Political Mind* explores the connections between neuroscience, language use and political policy preferences. He argues that metaphors structure language and are, in fact, hard wired in the brain, the synaptic connections becoming stronger and thus metaphors more dominant—and more seemingly natural—the more frequently they are used. According to his theory, most basic metaphors are based on fundamental physical experiences. Lakoff believes that metaphors develop like muscles, when certain metaphors are activated in the brain, the synapses fired by them strengthen, regardless of whether the statement concerning the metaphor is positive or negative. Hence, giving good reasons in political debate is not sufficient if you are using the wrong kinds of language. To change people’s minds, you have to change metaphors altogether, saying, for example, “the prosecution of terror,” rather than “the war on terror,” i.e. characterizing terror as a crime rather than an act of war.

Lakoff uses this theory of language to show that Democrats in America have been losing the political battle for hearts and minds because they rely too heavily on the notion of individuals as rational subjects and language as a transparent means of communication. They believe that the truth, if presented clearly and bolstered by facts, will win people to its side. This seems also to be the assumption behind the notion of communicative rationality. In the ideal speech situation a general consensus should develop surrounding policies. More simply, because of transparency, the conditions of public rationality will create a consensus around truth. However, Lakoff concludes in his book that this does not describe how brains actually function. Rather than “truth,” political debates are won and lost by compelling metaphors.

Following the same logic, Harding spends a large part of her book explaining the types of metaphors at play in the Bible-believing community in Lynchburg and the ways in which they instantiate a worldview quite different from that of their secular neighbors and fellow citizens. A significant part of this worldview revolves around the notion of figuration. Quoting Erich Auerbach, Harding defines figural interpretation as one in which ‘an event on earth signifies not only itself but at the same time another, which it predicts or confirms...The connection between occurrences is not regarded as primarily a chronological or causal development but as a oneness with the divine plan, of which all occurrences are parts and reflections.’ There is no distinction between biblical and historical stories here. Both are ‘events on earth’ related by figuration, enabling Christians to conceive of foreign policy.

As an aside, it is quite difficult to imagine a different and equally compelling metaphor to describe US action to react to or prevent acts of terrorism, which proves how ingrained the notion of “a war on terror” has become.

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39 For example, the metaphor of a loving person being “warm” might derive from the warmth of a parent’s embrace. Similarly, the notion that we move forward through time may be due to forward motion through space denoting duration.
40 For instance, when one argues against the concept of “the war on terror,” one strengthens “the war on terror” metaphor in the brains of one’s listeners, despite not believing it to be a useful way of conceiving of foreign policy.
41 As an aside, it is quite difficult to imagine a different and equally compelling metaphor to describe US action to react to or prevent acts of terrorism, which proves how ingrained the notion of “a war on terror” has become.
envision ‘the real world as formed by the sequence told by the biblical stories.’

One of the most obvious manifestations of this type of figuration is the persistent attempt amongst Bible believers to work out whether events in the world today herald the coming apocalypse. Nor does this figural thinking remain divorced from political action in the world. Everything from abortion clinic bombings to evangelical support for the nation of Israel derive from figural interpretations surrounding the Book of Revelations.

Similarly, Harding notes that figural identification between religious leaders and Biblical figures allows for semantic leaps of faith that baffle non-Bible believers, but act as a proof of salvation for the community. Evidence of scandal in the lives of religious leaders of Bible-believing communities abounds. Within the biography of Jerry Falwell alone there have been issues of money mismanagement, support for segregation, extortion of Thomas Road employees in the form of forced tithing, and a dark past filled with childhood bullying and the snatching of Falwell’s wife from under the nose of his seminary roommate, her then fiancé. However, Harding argues that where non-Bible believers see hypocrisy that delegitimizes, Bible-believers often produce their faith in the leap it takes to harmonize the discrepancy between Biblical teachings and worldly misdeeds. As Harding writes,

Falwell becomes ‘a course on miracles.’ The narrative interactions that bind Falwell and his faithful, though not marked as miracles, partake of the same structure. He produces the gaps, the anomalies, the excesses, the apertures for the uncanny, and his people produce faith by harmonizing his discrepancies.

So, to return to Habermas, where does this picture of cognitive formation through linguistic metaphor and the creation of a unique type of self-understanding and worldview through Biblical language leave the possibilities of public rationality, communicative action and consensual politics in a pluralist society?

Clearly the issue of the transparency of language plays a crucial role in the viability of Habermas’ theory. If a shared rationality does not exist and cannot be cultivated within the strictures of pluralism, then his attempts to derive rational policy outcomes from the deliberative legislative process can never be as free of power as he hopes them to be. Indeed, he himself insists that a Foucauldian notion of the power-laden nature of discursive formations, including those inspiring Enlightenment ideals, contradicts the normative self-understanding of the constitutional state. However, even though Habermas does not want to acknowledge the power of discourse to form persons and instead insists on language’s transparent and universal ability to convey information, he becomes mired in the issue of cognitive dissonance at the end of his article on religion in the public sphere. In his


43 Ibid, 90. She notes a similar production of faith through overcoming uncertainty in the act of sacrificial giving, the main way that Bible-believing ministries raise money. Although pleas for money may seem ludicrous to the uninitiated, as when Oral Roberts insisted that God threatened to “bring him home” if he failed to raise eight million dollars in one week (a dog racing mogul came through at the last minute) or when money continues to be donated to ministries with blatantly illegal business practices, Harding argues that Bible believers give because “God does miracles because people give sacrificially, because they obey God and act on faith, because they step out on a limb for God, and the shakier the limb, the firmer the faith, the greater the blessing” (p. 124).

44 Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 14.
earlier essay on tolerance, he feels comfortable conflating fundamentalists and racists because their beliefs do not persist for good reasons and thus are not worthy of tolerance.\textsuperscript{45} He suggests that inherently dogmatic belief systems like Christianity and Islam cannot treat citizens equally because they feel compelled to save souls above all other goods, thus leading to attempts to compel others to join the religion. However, he argues that, ideally, when each group in a state does recognize and respect other groups’ rights to different systems of belief, contradictions on the cognitive level\textsuperscript{46} can be neutralized on the social level by adherence to constitutional principles.\textsuperscript{47} In this essay, he continues to maintain that religious groups will go through a cognitive shift and become modernized based on exposure to the “individualistic and egalitarian nature of the laws of the secular community.”\textsuperscript{48} He continues, “[a] religion that has become just one among many confessions must abandon this claim to comprehensively shape life.”\textsuperscript{49}

However, by 2006, he has come to doubt the ethicality of this pronouncement. Intrigued by John Rawl’s question; “How is it possible for those of faith, as well as the non-religious, to endorse a secular regime even when their comprehensive doctrines may not prosper under it, and indeed may decline?”\textsuperscript{50} Habermas attempts to understand what is at stake for believers who also consider themselves citizens of the constitutional state. He acknowledges, contrary to his indictment of fundamentalists, that post-secularist thought should remain agnostic and avoid the “rationalist presumption that it can itself decide what part of the religious doctrines [sic] is rational and what part irrational.”\textsuperscript{51} This would also seem to suggest that it would be more difficult to make a distinction between which parts of a comprehensive doctrine persist \textit{without good reason} and are thus unworthy of tolerance. In addition, Habermas recognizes that religious reasoning and secular reasoning may produce different types of cognition. However, it seems that when he employs the adjective “cognitive,” he means it to relate to processes of judgment and reasoning, rather than linguistic processes within the brain, thus continuing to evade the importance of the transparency or non-transparency of language.

Even with this more accommodating perspective, the attempt to reintegrate religious communities into the public sphere creates a number of problems for Habermas. First, the Bible believer, if she considers herself a citizen of the nation-state, must be facilitated in becoming the author of the laws to which she is an addressee through the deliberative legislative process. However, given that the liberal democratic state rests on a foundation of the separation of church and state, the actual institutions of government cannot employ religious reasoning. As we have seen, Habermas solves this problem by proposing the translation of religious reasoning into secular reasoning in the course of public sphere debate, stating,

Given that [religious persons and communities] may only express themselves in a religious idiom under the condition that they recognize the institutional translation proviso, they can, trusting that their fellow citizens will cooperate for accomplishing a translation, grasp themselves as participants in the legislative process,

\begin{itemize}
  \item Habermas, “Intolerance and Discrimination,” 3.
  \item Of course only those contradictions that persist for good reasons.
  \item Habermas, “Intolerance and Discrimination,” 4.
  \item \textit{Ibid.}, 6.
  \item \textit{Ibid.}
  \item \textit{Ibid.}
  \item Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 19.
  \item \textit{Ibid.}, 17.
\end{itemize}
although only secular reasons count therein.\footnote{Ibid, 10.}

However, he soon acknowledges that mutual perspective taking and deliberative civility, the bases of rational debate, cannot happen unless both sides (in reality probably more that two) are willingly to be self-reflexive about their own truth claims, something that seems as unlikely on the side of the faithful as amongst secularists. Habermas counters that the precedent of previous religious accommodation to secularism renders future negotiation plausible. However, he himself concedes that such hybridity may not represent true faith in the eyes of religious persons.\footnote{Ibid, 19.} Habermas also addresses the problems inherent in convincing secular citizens to have appreciation for religious reasons. As we have seen above, without a mutual willingness to imaginatively occupy others’ perspectives and listen civilly to their reasons, public rationality cannot function in a non-coercive way. Habermas finally admits this fact,

Every ‘ought’ presupposes a ‘can’. The normative expectations of an ethic of citizenship have absolutely no impact unless a required change in mentality has been forthcoming first; indeed, they then serve only to kindle resentment on the part of those who feel misunderstood and their capacities over-taxed.\footnote{Ibid, 13.}

Thus, Habermas holds out hope that “complementary learning processes,” which allow all groups to accommodate themselves to a post-secular society,\footnote{Ibid, 18.} can occur, but acknowledges that to assume that his “discourse on a liberal constitution and an ethics of democratic citizenship is correct and we have the right understanding of it leads us into a terrain where the normative arguments no longer suffice.”\footnote{Ibid, 19.}

Harding would likely argue that while Bible believers want to participate in the political process, they would not be able to do so outside of their faith. Such believers feel strongly that their religion forms a comprehensive system that influences all parts of their lives. Although there may be more hybridity and internal negotiation of linguistic structures and worldviews between religious perspectives and secular perspectives than any of these authors fully acknowledge, Harding’s theory would seem to suggest that Bible believers could not remain faithful to their figurally-oriented methods of interpretation if they attempted to reason through a secular idiom, or even adopt a secular perspective for the purposes of debate or complementary learning. As noted above, secular notions of history orient events causally or chronologically, whereas figural interpretation orients events based on their place in the cosmic plan. Secular rationality sees Jerry Falwell’s failings as proof that he is not a man of God, whereas his community views his discrepancies as an opportunity to generate and demonstrate faith. Without an acceptable hybridity, Bible believers will continue to feel left out of and besieged by liberal society, and should their religious viewpoints enter the deliberative legislative process in the form of translated secular reasoning, it may result that such “inclusion” would not, in their minds, render them the authors of the laws to which they are addressees.

Of course, for many scholars the most problematic part of Habermas’ theory is his assertion that power can be removed from the public sphere of deliberative rationality at all. According to Chantal Mouffe, \footnote{Ibid, 19.}
democracy requires inclusions and exclusions, for example who should be counted as a citizen and who should not, as well as structures of power, such as how much influence corporations should have on the political system. When Habermas theorizes a political arena denuded of power based on a system of deliberative negotiation and consensus, she believes that all he is actually doing is masking the power relationships that form its normative infrastructure. Unlike Habermas, she does not believe that the persistent and necessary presence of power contradicts the constitutional state; rather it is intrinsic to it. Nor does she believe that the modus vivendi consensus so anathema to Habermas proves inherently problematic to political systems. Instead, she maintains that the real danger to democracy is the erasure of real distinctions between political positions, a persistent move towards the middle. “When political frontiers become blurred,” she argues,

the dynamics of politics is obstructed and the constitution of distinctive political identities is hindered. Disaffection towards political parties sets in and it discourages participation in the political process… the result is not a more mature, reconciled society without sharp divisions but the growth of other types of collective identities around religious, nationalist, or ethnic forms of identification.

Conversely, Mouffe calls for a move from antagonism to agonism, from enemy to adversary. When persons and groups, like Bible-believing Christians, are excluded from the system, they only have the option of attacking or undermining it. However, when recognized as valid members of the political community, despite their differing interpretations of the meaning of that community, they can work within the structures of a system based on liberty and equality—values which in her mind must be inculcated—to achieve their goals.

It seems that even as an ideal Habermas’ theory cannot stand without a massive reconceptualization taking into account the non-transparency of language, the linguistic structuring of the brain, and the problems of untranslatability between worldviews. Obviously, he would bristle at the proposition that political negotiation might mean the continual attempt to convert others to one’s way of thinking, rather than a civil discussion in which citizens give each other good reasons for their policy preferences. On the other hand, it might be time to acknowledge the gulf between the theoretical and the practical. Habermas and Mouffe concur that the US political system is becoming an election-driven modus vivendi, demonstrating massive citizen disaffection, a focus on scandals and partisan bickering rather than governing, and a deeply divided citizenry, not only between political parties (despite their similarities to one another), but amongst ethnic, religious, and other groups as well. With the continuing influence of money, public relations and the media in the political process, it does seem that an emphasis on the importance of linguistic metaphor may worsen rather than ameliorate the commodity approach to political policy and electioneering. However, to stick one’s head in the sand and dream of an ideal world of unconditional equality and civil deliberation as the real political world is crumbling around one is even less productive than simply accepting the reality of the current


58 All issues that Habermas has been concerned with since the beginning of his career, without seeming, until recently, to conceive of them as potentiality intrinsic to the system of liberal democracy, rather than pathologies of it.
system. If any positive change is to occur, we must have our eyes clear. Facing up to the role of language in the realm of politics is a start.

Bibliography


