Toward a Testimonial Function of Reason and Religion in the Public Sphere

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The public/private split lies at the heart of classical liberalism. One of its main tenets is that religion be confined to the private sphere so that the sphere of public reason can proceed peacefully. However, recent developments in philosophical conceptions of reason challenge the supposed neutrality of the public sphere and thereby call into question the viability of the public-private split. These consequences cry out for a re-examination of the proper roles of reason and religion in a re-conceived sphere of 'public' reason.

In this paper, I will begin by arguing for the notion of presuppositional reason, with support from Dooyeweerd, Derrida, and Quine (Section I). Having made my case for the presuppositional nature of reason, I will then argue that it requires some set of beliefs at its core that function 'religiously,' thereby challenging the supposed neutrality of the secular state (Section II). Without the neutrality of the secular state, the divisions between church and state and private and public that this neutrality makes possible are called into question. In the next section, then, I will suggest a new, testimonial function of reason and religion that can operate in a re-conceived notion of the 'public' sphere that gets beyond the myth of neutrality (Section III). Finally, I will end by showing how the testimonial differs from Habermas' conception of the role of self-reflexive religion in the public sphere, and how the position I put forward in this paper is therefore distinct from liberalism (Section IV).

Presuppositional Reason

W.V.O. Quine begins his groundbreaking Word and Object (1960) with a discussion of the relationship between truth and language. There, he claims that 'surface irritations' (his nomenclature for what can be broadly described as sense experience) do not directly yield to us objects. Rather, ordinary physical objects are "aposets," that is, things posited by us to make sense of surface irritations (22). These posits gain sense in a theory, which allows for a sharing of sensory supports by way of sentences (11). Such a theory can be consciously constructed, as in physics, or an "archaic and unconscious hypothesis," "shrouded in prehistory," such as the hypothesis of ordinary physical objects (22). Either way, a theory is necessary to move from the simple sentences directly verifiable by sense experience to the more complex interactions that constitute our everyday, linguistic manner of being in the world. Theories are necessary for a reasoned interaction with the world.

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1 Liberalism, even classical liberalism (as opposed to social or modern liberalism), is difficult to define without some degree of controversy. Minimally, classical liberalism refers to any set of political beliefs that holds individual rights (especially the right to private property) and the constitutional limitation of government to be key political goals. In limiting government from involvement in some areas of the life of its citizens, and supporting "private" property, classical liberalism, even on this minimalist definition, necessarily employs the public/private split under discussion.
What Quine is articulating here bears an analogical resemblance to what Herman Dooyeweerd calls "ground motives" – the deepest driving forces behind cultural and spiritual development (Dooyeweerd: 9). A fundamental difference, however, lies in the fact that Dooyeweerd sees the root of these ground motives, not in science, as had Quine (Quine: 23), but in religion (Dooyeweerd: 5), that is, in an absolute: for Dooyeweerd, theory is always relative, in a way that is detrimental to the viability of theory as a ground (ibid: 8), whereas for Quine, as discussed above, this is not the case. By making the ground motives religious, Dooyeweerd means to trivialize the role of theory: Theoretical thought is confined to relative oppositions, vis-à-vis an absolute that "has a right to exist in religion only" (ibid: 8).

Jacques Derrida seems to offer something of a rapprochement between these two positions. Derrida posits a similarity in the ground of Western religions and in the ground of Western thought (Derrida 1996: 66). At the heart of both is a certain "religious" character: a promise (Derrida 1989: 94), a vow, an affirmation (Derrida 1996: 67, 98). What Derrida means by the religious here, however, is not a form of absolutism, as it was for Dooyeweerd. Rather, for Derrida, it means only that no theory can be fully closed (Derrida 1973b: 163), that is, no theory can be fully proven on the basis of that theory alone (Derrida 1973a: 95).

Any theory of linguistic communication, for example, must first presuppose that people intend to communicate something to someone, that is, that we intend to say something true when we speak. Even lies are premised upon this presumption of honesty (Derrida 1996: 98). In this sense, every theory has a core that cannot be proven nor falsified, but serves as a ground of all interpretation and understanding.

Many other theories could be called on here to further support our claim: Wittgenstein's "language games" (Wittgenstein: § 23), for example, Strawson's "shared conceptual schemes" (Strawson 1959), or Lyotard's theory of metaprescriptives (which itself builds on Wittgenstein's language games). However, further proof is not necessary for us to draw our first conclusion: Reason functions, not absolutely, but within a certain, presumed framework; that is, the "pure" reason of the Enlightenment has been replaced by a reason that realizes its dependence on certain contingent factors. This is true, not just for some extreme postmodern relativism, but in the sober mind of Anglo-American philosophy as well. Across the philosophical spectrum, we are coming to regret his earlier position, realizing the veracity of Gadamer’s claims (Derrida 2004).

3 This seems to directly contradict what Derrida said in an earlier exchange with Gadamer (cf. Derrida 1981; Gadamer 1981). However, Derrida later came to regret his earlier position, realizing the veracity of Gadamer’s claims (Derrida 2004).
4 Lyotard links these metaprescriptives directly to presuppositions (cf. Lyotard 1984: 65).
5 This is what differentiates the notion of presuppositional reason that I put forward here from the presuppositions that underlie Kant’s moral philosophy. Those presuppositions are rationally demonstrable, for Kant, and indeed follow necessarily from the proper function of reason. Hence, it is not reason itself that is presuppositional for Kant, but merely a certain kind of reasoning (i.e., practical). However, there would seem to be a certain analogue to the presuppositional reason under discussion here in Kant’s practical reason, even if the analogy would break down at times.
6 Though it is, of course, a key tenet of most theories of postmodernism, without thereby rendering them relativistic. Lyotard, for example, will claim that postmodern science concerns itself with laying out the metaprescriptives that undergird it, thereby making those metaprescriptives themselves part of scientific discourse (Lyotard 1984: 65). This does not challenge the legitimacy of knowledge, but rather is the only way that knowledge can be truly legitimated in postmodern societies (ibid: 60-67).
see that reason must rely on certain presuppositions. What these presuppositions are can, and does, vary; what does not vary is that reason requires some presuppositions in order to function: Reason is necessarily presuppositional.

The 'Religious' Core of Presuppositional Reason

If every theory has a non-provable core, then liberalism, too, would have such an ideological core. Habermas seems to reveal this ideological core when he claims that the "norm of complete inclusion of all citizens as members with equal rights must be accepted before all of us, members of a democratic community, can mutually expect one another to be tolerant" (2004: 200). This inclusion is premised on the ideal of universal, natural reason, that is, "on public arguments to which supposedly all persons have equal access" (Habermas 2006: 4). It is the presumption of this "common human reason" that justifies the secularity of the state, that is, the state's ability to legitimate itself without recourse to religion or religious metaphysics, and hence makes possible the separation of church and state at the institutional level (ibid.). Only this "common human reason" can be used to justify public political decisions, and therefore the sphere of public political discourse must be religiously neutral, in order to allow only those reasons that are in principle available equally to all to factor into political decision-making. This theory of the neutrality of the secular underlies Rawls' description of the liberal state as a neutral module that can be accommodated to a series of different (religiously) orthodox justifications (Rawls 1993: 11 ff.; Habermas 2004: 201). It is due to this neutrality that "the major religions must appropriate the normative foundations of the liberal state under conditions of their own premises" (Habermas 2004: 201; emphasis in original). The secular core of liberalism, therefore, provides the ideological basis with which all other religions must conform (ibid.).

The meaning of 'religion' used here certainly differs from Dooyeweerd's conception of religion as the absolute. Habermas defines religion as "a 'worldview' or, as John Rawls would say, a 'comprehensive doctrine' – also in the sense that it lays claim to the authority to structure a form of life in its entirety" (2004: 201). It is precisely this encompassing definition of life that religions must give up in order to accommodate themselves to the liberal state: in the private sphere, people can define themselves according to religious affiliation, if they so choose, provided that, in the public sphere, that is, politically, they agree to abide by the norms and conventions of the liberal, secular state (ibid.).

It is one of the cognitive demands of the liberal state to require each of its citizens to "develop from his own worldview reasons that tell him why he may realize the ethos inscribed in the view only within the limits of what everyone is allowed to do and to pursue" (Habermas 2004: 202). But if every citizen must so justify his religion (construed as comprehensive doctrine of life, that is, as worldview) in terms of the norms of liberal society, then is not liberalism the comprehensive doctrine laying claim to the authority to structure a form of life in its entirety? By separating public concerns from private interests, and requiring the latter to be subjugated to the former, does not liberalism inscribe the limits of, and thereby

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7 I employ this definition of religion here, not just to show the internal inconsistency in Habermas' version of liberalism (i.e., that liberalism is "religious" by its own definition of religion), but also because it has the added advantage of not defining religion in reference to some divinity (which would exclude several Eastern religions) or defining religion in reference to superstition, myth, etc. (which would therefore define religion in opposition to reason, thereby begging the question against the possibility of a "religious" core of reason).
structure, the private sphere, and therefore all of life?

Habermas is not unaware of this problem, and he deals with it in the guise of the 'paradox of tolerance': "The ostensible paradox is that each act of toleration must circumscribe the range of behaviour everybody must accept, thereby drawing a line for what cannot be tolerated" (2004: 197; emphasis in original). Habermas' response is that this is only a problem if the delimiting of what is tolerated from what cannot be tolerated is done arbitrarily, and this stigma of arbitrariness remains as long as this delimiting is done in "an authoritarian manner, i.e., unilaterally" (ibid.). "Only with a universally convincing delineation of the borderline, and this requires that all those involved reciprocally take the perspectives of others, can toleration blunt the thorn of intolerance" (ibid.). In response to our earlier question, then, Habermas would seem to claim that liberalism does indeed delimit the private sphere, but this does not make it a religion because its reasons for doing so are (at least in principle) universally convincing, and because they are legitimated democratically, that is, because everyone who could be affected by these practices is also the author of the law of those practices (ibid.).

I remain ultimately unconvinced by Habermas' defense of the "neutrality of the state" (2004: 202). In order to be compelling, his defense requires at least two conditions that I am not adequately convinced obtain: first, that everyone affected by the secular state is allowed an equal share in determining the laws of that state (that is, the democratic legitimation of the state); second, that democracy can provide a non-circular legitimation and justification of the secular, liberal state in a way that avoids making secularism a comprehensive doctrine, that is, a religion. The first of these conditions is constantly being debated, and, in Habermas' opinion at least, the circle of inclusion is ever-widening. That it is ever-widening supports Habermas' theory, but it also undercuts it: if the democratic process is constantly realizing that it is excluding some members of the community that ought to be included, then it is constantly realizing that its laws, which affect those excluded members (hence giving force to the 'ought' in the phrase "ought to be included"), are not legitimate, as the excluded members are not also the authors of those laws. By bringing them into the community, democracy is enabling that future laws that govern those people will be legitimate, and even, perhaps, that present laws are legitimate, once they have consented to join the community – but previously, those laws had been illegitimate. Given how often this new inclusion is happening, we have, I would argue, good reason to contend that it is likely that current laws are illegitimate (at least for some sub-section of the community that is governed by laws that it does not also author).  

Potential defenses against this critique, however, bear no weight if the second of the above conditions does not obtain. When we

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8 One could argue, for example, that children are governed by laws that, by and large, they do not author; hence, these laws are illegitimate, at least as they apply to children. The notion that children are not fully developed humans, and therefore cannot participate directly in the legitimation of laws and of the State but are included in the State mediatly, through the representation of their guardians, is too reminiscent of the justification for the historical exclusion of women and visible minorities (especially slaves in the United States) to be fully convincing. In other words, it could be argued that it is not the dependence of the child on the parent that justifies the child's exclusion from authoring laws (i.e., the child is included if the person on whom it is dependent is included), but rather that the exclusion of children from the authorship of laws justifies and necessitates their (legal) dependence on parents. If, however, one does find the exclusion of children permissible, for the reason cited above, then further examples of subsections of the community that are governed by laws that they did not author would include: refugees, illegal immigrants, migrant workers, and perhaps even the poor.
recall what is meant by 'religious' in the liberal paradigm (i.e., a comprehensive doctrine or worldview that structures all of life), it becomes clear that the presuppositions that undergird reason would function 'religiously,' in that they structure the theory that they undergird. Following Section I, then, we would be inclined to believe that all theories have a religiously functioning core, and hence that no theory is religiously neutral. This would apply also to liberalism. Secondly, and following from the first point, it is not clear to me how mutual recognition and democracy can legitimate laws, except within the bounds of the liberal, secular conception of the state. As Quine pointed out (although not in this context), this is not a problem when viewed from within the system or theory understood as already built; it is, however, a problem when viewed from the perspective of building that theory (Quine: 22). In a liberal, secular state, one can use the norms of that state to justify the functioning of that state. However, when called on to justify the grounds of that state, Habermas’ appeal to democratic processes of legitimation and to mutual recognition are persuasive, it seems, only if one already grants certain premises regarding the universal neutrality of reason, the formation of subjects, the conditions of communication, and so on. These

These presuppositions would then be pragmatic presuppositions (i.e., beliefs that are taken for granted). Whether they could also function semantically (i.e., as the condition for the truth or falsity of claims built upon them; cf. Strawson 1950) would be a matter of debate. It seems to me that, to a certain extent, they could: the statement, “This law is just,” for example, is neither true nor false without some presupposition regarding justice. At least, it cannot be decided as true nor false. The extent to which the distinction between ontological and epistemological claims implied by the move from “is not” to “cannot be decided as” is relevant to this discussion will be discussed below.

On the difficulty of justifying the grounds of the liberal state, cf. Benjamin (1986) and Derrida’s discussion of it in Derrida (2001); see also Derrida (1986). For a critique of Derrida’s concern for the founding of the state, see Benhabib (1994).

We have already seen the importance of the neutrality of reason for liberalism. The neutrality of reason makes possible something being universally convincing: an idea or law can convince everyone only if it is founded on some kind of deliberation that “grounds the presumption of rationally acceptable outcomes” (Habermas 2006: 5), and does so equally for everyone. Something being (at least in principle) universally convincing is what legitimates political authority. Without this conception of universally neutral reason, then, not only does the public/private split begin to break down, but the very possibility of the public sphere—as a place for “generally accessible reasons” that are “equally justified vis-à-vis religious and non-religious citizens” (ibid.)—is also lost, and with it, the possibility of a legitimate secular state.

Given the importance of the neutrality and universality of reason, the suggestion in the first section of this paper that no reason is universal and neutral, but rather that all theories have a presuppositional core that cannot be proven but must be asserted, provides a potentially damning critique of liberalism. Liberalism’s desire to sharply distinguish between religion as a private interest and the political space of the neutral public sphere cannot accommodate this presuppositional view of reason. This is because the presuppositions that undergird any theory, as structuring forces, function ‘religiously’ in the sense that liberalism gives to that term. Hence, on liberalism’s own definition of religion, all theories and all reason have a ‘religious’ core. Where does
that leave religion vis-à-vis reason: must religion be allowed in the sphere of public reason? Can we still distinguish between a public and a private sphere?

The Testimonial Function of Reason and/as Religion

If the liberal state requires religious neutrality in the public sphere, and such neutrality is impossible, then the public sphere would also seem to be impossible. To assess how damaging abandoning the public sphere might be, we must first assess the purpose or function of the public sphere. In so doing, we will come to see why it was thought that the public sphere needed to be religiously neutral. In recovering this purpose, we will see that presuppositional reason—‘religious’ reason—can still be effective in the public sphere if a certain testimonial aspect of reason (and of religion) can be recovered, and the public sphere re-conceived accordingly. That is, if reason necessarily has a religious core, then one of the necessary aspects of any political conversation would seem to be acknowledging that religious core, and putting it also ‘on the table’ as an issue in the conversation.

The religious neutrality of the public sphere is meant to render a space in which citizens can disobey the state, but do so "by citing constitutional principles and express [their disobedience] by nonviolent, i.e., symbolic means" (Habermas 2004: 199). That the space of this disobedience must be religiously neutral is entailed by the first condition, namely, that disobedience must be rendered in keeping with constitutional principles of the state. The reason why the state is, in principle, religiously neutral in turn derives from the second condition, namely, non-violence: due to the

fundamental disagreements between worldviews/religions, disputes between differing worldviews tend to lead to violence. Hence, Habermas extends his call for religious neutrality in the public sphere also to "strong' secular communities (such as national or ethnic minorities, immigrant or indigenous populations, descendants of slave cultures, etc.)," and does so precisely because these secular communities "open up 'world perspectives' that, like religious world views, can come into conflict with one another" (ibid: 205; emphasis in original).

The purpose of the neutrality of the public sphere, then, is to open up a space for disagreement that need not lead to violence. Unfortunately, our above findings indicate that leaving behind the 'religious' core of our thought, that is, those things that structure how we see the world, is impossible if we are to continue to employ the thought that is structured by that core. Rawls himself seems to acknowledge as much, and states, in his infamous 'proviso,' that "comprehensive doctrines, religious or otherwise, 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" (1997: 783f.; emphasis added). These properly public and political reasons must stand independently of the comprehensive doctrines that they are called on to support; they cannot be "puppets manipulated from behind the scenes by comprehensive doctrines" (ibid: 777).

But Habermas, among others, questions the possibility of changing religious reasons into public and political

(Habermas 2003: 122). The claim here is not that liberalism is a type of faith, but rather that it has a 'religious' core, given its own definition of religion.

ones. Habermas concedes that "true belief is not only a doctrine, believed content, but a source of energy . . . [that] nurtures [the believer's] entire life," and as such is not conducive to "any flimsy switchover of religiously rooted political convictions onto a different cognitive basis" (2006: 8). This does not, however, prevent Habermas from instituting his own form of the proviso, what he calls the "institutional translation proviso":

Every citizen must know and accept that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold that divides the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries and administrations. . . . [Religious citizens] should therefore be allowed to express and justify their convictions in a religious language if they cannot find secular 'translations' for them (ibid: 9-10).

What Habermas' proviso suggests is that, at those moments when secular language cannot accommodate the introduction of religious ideas, religious people should be allowed to use religious reasons to justify their decisions, in the informal public sphere of discourse. It is absolutely not to be permitted, however, in the institutions of government. Permitting religious discourse there would threaten the secular society itself, by allowing it to disintegrate into "irreconcilable segments" of the population that would cease to feel the "reciprocal obligation to justify themselves in political debate before one another," and hence would allow "dissonant background beliefs and sub-cultural bonds [to] out-trump the supposed constitutional consensus and the expected civic solidarity" of the modern state (Habermas 2006: 13).

Rather than dooming us to perpetual violence, however, I think acknowledging the impossibility of bracketing (if I may employ a phenomenological term here) one's religious presuppositions will help achieve liberalism's stated goal of peaceful disagreement. It can do so, however, only if we acknowledge, not only that religious beliefs cannot be bracketed or suspended, but that we ought not try to bracket them: given that all theories have a 'religious' core, including liberalism, there is no longer any justification for suspending the 'religious' core of some theories for the supposed neutrality of another. Instead, citizens—in public and in private (if such a distinction still makes sense), religious and secular—must be willing and able to make their 'religious' convictions part of the public discussion. This need not be done in hopes of converting other people, but in the acknowledgment that: a) these convictions guide the actions of public citizens; b) that 'translating' these religious convictions into secular language will not (always) be sufficient to explain the reason for actions undertaken for 'religious' reasons; and c) any hope of understanding is only possible if we can enter our true reasons into the conversation.

By acknowledging the importance of our (non-provable) presuppositions, we seem to remove the universality that underlies the neutrality principle, i.e., we remove the possibility of our reasons being universally convincing. Does doing so not lead inexorably toward relativism? If we must all confess our deeply-held presuppositions, are we left unable to adjudicate between

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13 Though we can now start to see that, by liberalism's definition of religion, the secular is as religious as any other theory. Again, Habermas begins to lean in this direction when he puts "strong' secular communities" in the same boat as religions concerning their right to enter into the public sphere, but backtracks somewhat when he claims that they are only "world perspectives' that [are] like religious world views" rather than being religious world views themselves (Habermas 2004: 205 and page 40 above).

14 My thanks to Lovisa Bergdahl for pointing out to me the problems with using translation as the basis for interaction between religious and secular groups (cf. Bergdahl 2008; see also Derrida 1985; and Benjamin 1973).
differing presuppositions? Such an acknowledgment of our presuppositions leads to a relativism only if we fail to adequately acknowledge the presuppositional nature of reason to its core. As Quine said, in putting forward his notion of posits and theory: "Let us not look down on the standpoint of the theory as make-believe; for we can never do better than occupy the standpoint of some theory or other, the best we can muster at the time" (Quine: 22). In thus taking seriously the presuppositional nature of reason, claiming to speak from a limited perspective does not reveal a slide into relativism\(^\text{15}\) precisely because of the limit of our theory, of our presuppositions (ibid: 24). By taking our own position seriously, we give ourselves a ground from which to make judgments, although a ground for which we are responsible, one that we must make ourselves aware of and put up for critique and possible revision (ibid: 25). And this is possible only if a testimonial function of reason and religion can be recovered.

The testimonial function of reason has deep philosophical roots, beginning already in the Delphic injunction to "Know Thyself!" and the Socratic claim that "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Apology 38a). It calls for an examination of one’s presuppositions that can extend even to the ‘religious’ core of one’s thought, and to reveal those presuppositions to one’s interlocutors in the public sphere. In other words, the testimonial function of reason makes public our ‘religious’ presuppositions and how they structure our thought. This, of course, requires that we first understand what our presuppositions are and how they structure our thought. Once confessed, that is, placed in the public sphere, our ‘religious’ presuppositions can themselves become a matter of public debate: what are the goals and ends of those presuppositions – are they presuppositions that we ought to want to follow? Here, we can discuss what our presuppositions make possible, and how this compares to other sets of presuppositions.\(^\text{16}\) This is distinct from a second set of questions, revolving around our implementation of those basic presuppositions: Does our thought accurately reflect those presuppositions – are we being internally consistent? The purpose of this critique is less to evaluate the relative merits of our particular comprehensive doctrine than it is to discuss the efficacy with which we have put that doctrine into practice. Hence, the critique is an internal critique; this is not to say that it can be carried out only by people who share the set of presuppositions, but merely that the critique must be done on the basis of those presuppositions if it is to be convincing.\(^\text{17}\) There is, then, a two-fold testimonial function at stake in these discussions: 1) a discussion of the merits of

\(^{15}\) At least, into a "nihilistic" relativism where one believes in nothing or believes nothing to be true. However, a certain epistemological relativism of the type that suggests that everything gains a truth value relative to certain other conditions (e.g., presuppositions) would seem to follow. This relativism, however, is not particularly troubling, I do not think, provided it does not slide into the "nihilistic" relativism of "Truth is dead, so everything is permissible," to paraphrase Dostoevsky (cf. Dostoevsky 1990).

\(^{16}\) This can take the form of a critique that seeks to "out-narrate" other sets of basic beliefs, conceived of as competing mythoi (cf. Smith 2009: 8-11, esp. 10n.17), though it need not do so. The testimonial function of reason is concerned merely with laying out one’s basic presuppositions and does not necessarily entail a desire to have one’s presuppositions understood as the best. If one did seek such a goal, however, this form of attempted out-narration would seem, to me, to be the best avenue to pursue.

\(^{17}\) Habermas’ vision of public debate in the secular state seems, to me, to call for this type of internal critique, without acknowledging the need to also argue for the presuppositions that ground the secular state. That is, I think that Habermas applies the presuppositions of the secular state to all public conversation, thereby entailing that, to be effective, they must be ‘translated’ into the language of that secular state.
our basic presuppositions; and 2) a discussion of our ability to consistently put those presuppositions into action. Both of these, I contend, are necessary to properly political public discussions (though surely some discussions will focus on one or the other; that is, having agreed upon the merits of some set of presuppositions, we can focus exclusively on how to put this into practice, or, the opposite, prescinding from how to best put them into practice, we can debate the merit of what goals we should be trying to pursue).

It is important, therefore, that each participant in public discussions answers the question d'où parler vous – from where do you speak? This public confession of our presuppositions, however, is not of itself enough to combat potential violence. In addition to this first testimonial function is needed the second testimonial function. This entails that, in confessing the 'religious' presuppositions that structure our thought, we also acknowledge the gap between what Dooyeweerd calls the absolute (that one believes in) and one's practices. This absolute need not be construed along traditionally religious lines, but is rather that which drives and structures our thought. In acknowledging the gap between what structures our thought and our thought as structured, we keep alive the distinction between what Dooyeweerd calls a "dynamic, spiritual force that cannot be halted," on the one hand, and "the fixed boundaries of tradition," on the other (Dooyeweerd 1979: 4), or what Derrida calls the infinite call (e.g., of justice), on the one hand, and our concrete institutions (e.g., the law), on the other (Derrida: 2001). Without acknowledging this gap, confessing our presuppositions will not entail the possibility of peaceful disagreement; only by acknowledging that what we think and do might not be adequately living up to that which structures and drives those thoughts and actions do we see the fallibility of our own position, and therefore the possibility of disagreement that can be peaceful and beneficial, rather than a challenge to one's core beliefs. The acknowledgment of this gap, and hence of fallibility, also paves the way for the possibility of discussing the absolute, the 'religious' core, itself: its goals, its functions, etc. Hence, we see here again the two-fold function of the testimonial.

Conclusion: Differentiating testimony and self-reflexivity

Surely nothing I have said in describing the testimonial is absolutely novel to Habermas. Indeed, the first aspect of the testimonial function is very much in line with

18 Ricoeur's students, especially Richard Kearney, reveal that this was one of the questions that Ricoeur would ask most often in his seminars: d'où parler vous? It is a good hermeneutic question, and I am arguing here that it is an important political, epistemological, and perhaps even ontological question as well.

19 This, in many ways, is the issue that guides Derrida's deconstructive project, and is what he means by the auto-deconstruction of texts: the impetus for critique comes from within the text itself, some 'promise' that is made by the text that is not 'lived up to' by the text itself, whether that text is a book from the history of philosophy or is an institution, e.g., the law (cf. Derrida 2001). Some critics have claimed that Derrida does not adequately argue for the first of the two aspects of the testimonial function, namely, the set of presuppositions that guides his thought, and that this affects his entire deconstructive project (cf. Smith 2009).

20 In Habermas' case, this would seem to be something like the equal distribution of rights on a universal scale (2004: 199).

21 This two-fold function then, relates both to ontological and epistemological commitments. The fallibility that I am calling for here is that our (epistemological) understanding of the ontological status of our commitments may not accurately reflect their actual ontological status. An example of this would be the recent discourse on the "onto-theological" constitution of Judeo-Christian culture (cf. Heidegger 2002) and its implications for religion, and especially Christianity (cf. Derrida 1996; Marion 1991; and Kearney 2001).
Habermas' call to critique prejudices and struggle against discrimination (Habermas 2004: 200). He seems to acknowledge also the need for the second aspect of the testimonial function when he calls on all citizens to "behave in a self-reflexive manner toward each other in the political public sphere" (2006: 20). It is this call for self-reflexivity, Habermas thinks, that prevents his proviso from putting an "undue mental strain" on the religious citizen, because it puts a similar strain on the secular citizen as well: each side must see the reasons of the other as reasonable, that is, as having some (cognitive) substance (ibid: 15). Therefore, cannot what I seek with the testimonial be achieved already within Habermas' liberal paradigm?

I would contend that there are significant differences between Habermas' position and my own that make the testimonial not just an addition to liberalism but a thorough revision of it. The first such essential difference comes from the weight or value accorded to religious sentiments. While Habermas is (somewhat grudgingly, it seems) willing to admit these into the public domain, he views doing so as a failure: it is permissible only when no secular ‘translation’ can be found and can become functionally useful only after such a translation is found. Indeed, Habermas is adamant that religious reasons can never be cited in government institutions, and that they can "only enter into the institutionalized practice of deliberation and decision-making if the necessary translation [i.e., into secular reasons] occurs in the pre-parliamentarian domain" (Habermas 2006, 10). Habermas' concession to religious reasons, then, is a concession, while mine is an embrace: we have religious convictions, they are of fundamental importance to us (as Habermas himself admits; ibid: 8), and we should acknowledge and affirm these as essential to our human condition.

This leads to the second essential difference between my position and Habermas'. Because he does not see the inherent value of religious reasons, Habermas sees no reason for them to be entered into meaningful (that is, institutional: meaning-making or legitimizing) public debate. Habermas is clearly against permitting a political legislature to make use of religious arguments (2006: 11). Such a move is illegitimate precisely because it violates the neutrality principle (ibid: 12). For Habermas, this entails a violation of the discursive nature of political deliberation because it refuses to formulate, or justify, all political decisions "in a language that is equally accessible to all citizens" (ibid.). This neutrality, seen in the separation of church and state, must remain, even into elections: though Habermas finds any question of personality whatsoever to be an illegitimate factor in a voter's decision regarding which candidate to vote for, he finds it "all the more problematic if the voters take their cues from candidates' religious self-presentations" (ibid: 22n.31). There is no room for honesty about a candidate's religious self-identity for Habermas,22 precisely because there is no room for a candidate qua candidate to have a religious identity at all. The position that I am here putting forward, on the other hand, challenges the neutrality principle as the standard of discursive deliberative politics, insisting instead that the testimonial is a more accurate description of how discourse ought to work in deliberative politics (at least in regards to religious reasons).

Finally, and most basically, Habermas and I differ on the possibility of neutral reason. Though Habermas appeals to "post-metaphysical" thought to bolster his position (cf. Habermas 2006: 16-18), it seems to me that post-metaphysical thought is more radical than Habermas seems to realize. As indicated in Section I, post-metaphysical philosophy has come to the conclusion that

22 This is curious given the necessary relationship Habermas posits between democracy and truth: "A 'post-truth' democracy . . . would no longer be a democracy" (2006: 18).
reason—all reason—is presuppositional. This entails that every reason comes from a particular background, and in this sense does not provide equal access to all persons, but is more accessible to those familiar with that background. As such, secular reason is no more neutral, and no less a comprehensive doctrine, than any other religious reasoning. This entails that Habermas’ position is itself a worldview, reliant on presuppositions that need to be argued for and critiqued, and which may not be universally convincing. This, in turn, entails, I would argue, that rather than relegating our worldviews to the private sphere, or accommodating them to the secular public space (Habermas 2004: 201), we should instead bring them into the public space in an intentional way, critiquing and confessing that worldview, in order to increase the likelihood of genuine, but peaceful, disagreement between members of different worldviews.

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23 Though this goes against some of Habermas’ earlier statements (e.g., 2004: 197), Habermas himself realizes this point later on (cf. 2006: 19). He also realizes that this does not entail a slide into relativism, as a "strong reading of the liberal and republican foundations of the constitutional state should and can be successfully defended both intra muros and in the political arena" (ibid: 19).

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Works Cited


