



# Communicative Life-world and Religion

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### Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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## ABSTRACT

Life-world represents the background of beliefs, moral values, cultural norms that are presupposed in ordinary life and communication. Our social world evolves through communication that can assume the form of the uses of language (ordinary and extra-ordinary). We will see that both aspects are crucial to understand the process of secularism and the new "post-secular" society.

Keywords: Life-world; communicative action; secularism; post-secularism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of "post-secular society" is at the center of a lively debate and I'll try to analyze it by following the recent work of Juergen Habermas and his critics. Habermas thought has been devoted to religion since his earlier works about critical theory and the rationalization of society. I think that, because of the original theory of rationalization through the medium of communication, it is important to consider both

"ordinary" and "extra-ordinary" aspects so that religious practices are not indetermined. This is a option that connotes Habermas last thought.

What does it mean "post-secular"? According to Connolly: "Generally speaking, we can detect three layers of meaning in the overall application of this term: [1] to the multiform manifestations of the *phenomena* pertaining to the permanent presence - according to certain interpretations, the growth - of religious influence within the

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contemporary cultural and socio-political context, in its traditional and new forms alike; [2] to those *questions* that are in any way related to those occurrences, and, [3] to the *discourses* constituted by this situation on a wide scale of disciplines like philosophy, theology, social theory, theory of culture, literary theory and other branches of science" [1].

The post-secular question can be seen under different aspects which refer to different research fields. Religion is a central topic for social theory (...) Politics and ethics ought to be analyzed as referring to each other in the post-secular age, that represents the descriptive basis of the pluralistic society. The idea of "toleration" can be grounded on the Habermasian idea of "equal respect" (Kabasakal). One main point of the Habermasian view about post-secularism is the "linguistification of the sacred". It is a fact that we can see a residuum of the sacred persisting in the form of the linguistically approached consensus of autonomous and rational agents (Lowonczki).

## 2. COMMUNICATIVE ACTION AND RELIGION

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

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

beyond in domains of profane social cooperation" [2].

This passage represents the core of the Habermasian peculiar view of religion, that is based on the "linguistification of the sacred". Religion linguistifies the world through its elaboration of symbols that are embedded in ritualistic practices. As symbols establish certain semantic and syntactic relations so they introduce the very distinctions and oppositions (God vs. World, God vs. Us, God and Us vs. Others, etc.) and give rise to the linguistification of the sacred [3]. This process is the core of the logic of secularization or the "disenchantment of the sacred" which linguistically re-elaborates the normatively binding power stored in ritualistically achieved fundamental agreements. But, Mendieta points on a tension that is actually present in the Habermasian relationship between religion and communicative action: has religion been totally absorbed into norms of social interaction, leaving nothing behind but the memory of ecstatic rituals and the empty pedestals of exiled gods?

In the book *Post-metaphysical Thinking* [4] we can observe a more cautious reconsideration of the substitution and the dissolution of religious thought. To clearly conceive notions such as morality and ethics, person and individual, freedom and emancipation, we ought to assimilate the semantic potential entailed by the judaic-christian history of salvation. The rhetorical force of the religious discourse remains valid until we are able to provide a convincing language to express those experiences and innovations it preserves. The notion of "transcendence from within" [5,6] characterizes the Habermasian post-metaphysical thought and aims to assign the motivational capacity of religion to a plausible discourse theory. On the one side, language becomes the transcendental dimension that allows us to express our freedom, namely our own convictions. On the other side, it is undoubted that religion retains a fundamental role that philosophy cannot replace: the need for consolation and salvation.

This force is the challenge for the communicative rationality that coexists with religion and theology [7]. But, a group of theologians thinks that forms of cooperation are possible and indeed they offered it (for instance Peukert and Schlüsser-Florenza). Along this line, post-secularization is the label for the thoughtful debate between Habermas and Ratzinger. They conclude that

religious doctrines ought to be included in the public sphere, in virtue of their motivational force. But, according to Habermas, they must express themselves in a “laic” manner, namely generally comprehensible and acceptable. This move has the consequence to renounce to an apodictic presentation of their own thesis.

### 3. LIFE-WORLD, ORDINARY AND EXTRA-ORDINARY COMMUNICATION

To consider life-world is to seriously consider human nature and natural evolution. Post-metaphysical thought does not admit any dualism between objective world and mental world or scientific reductionism (generally speaking, materialism) but concentrates on the structures of cognitive and moral development. Life-world becomes the horizon of human perceptive and cultural experience and the background from which we raise our validity claims and exchange our reasons for knowing and acting. Life-world reveals itself in the dialogical situations where the pragmatic structure of communication acquires its fundamental role. Following Humboldt, language must be pragmatically interpreted, namely starting from the communicative praxis of the subjects who, while trying to dialogically solve their questions, are also able to learn. Communication possesses a constitutive role: it continuously forces the participants to undertake a positions for or against available validity claims. So, they find themselves always running the risk to be contradicted and so, they have the possibility to correct their opinions in a autonomous and rational manner [8].

Following the lesson of Husserl, we cannot understand who we are if sciences become too specialistic and philosophy does not try to cooperate with them. Habermas inherits the Husserlian notion of life-world which entails to establish an epistemological and ontological background for the sciences. The problem for Habermas is how we can intend the practices that open and project a world as something that happens in the world. Indeed, we can project a world only by facing the contingency of the events. For this reason, we are forced to postulate a sort of interaction between our practice and these very events. This relation shows itself when our projects fail: without this confrontation we could not learn from the world.

On the one side, it seems that our practices would deeply structure our knowledge of the

world; on the other side, there is the possibility to give a strong metaphysical solution coming from the traditional primacy of the phenomenological consciousness or by providing a religious interpretation of the world. But, Habermas proposes a third solution: the transcendental spontaneity of the Kantian Ego manifests itself in the very practices where the reproduction of life-world is connected from the inside with our mundane processes of learning. These learning processes are possible by virtue of an interactive exchange among intentional relation with the world, reciprocal assumption of perspectives, use of a propositionally differentiated language, instrumental reasoning and cooperation. The mediation of life-world and world through communication is the epistemological dimension which characterize our learning and development. But, it is important to stress that Habermas is not content with a merely “cultural” solution. He thinks that the surprising results of the bio-sciences, psychology and cultural sciences could play a central, heuristic in the development of the natural history of the spirit.

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

Life-world as the “space of reasons”(to use the metaphor of Sellars) is intersubjective. This very intersubjectivity is typical of human beings who, differently from apes, are able to have collective intentionality in the form of cooperation [9,10]. So, we have two forms of normativity: I. we have a weak normativity entailed by linguistic conventions and II. we have a strong normativity coming out of traditions and moral norms. The problem is how we intend the notion of collective intentionality [11]. If we embrace Searle’s account [12], we must admit a space for the intentionality of individuals who impose conditions of satisfaction on conditions of satisfactions, namely use status functions imposed on objects in the world or creating institutional reality like corporations. But, Habermas has a full social view about collective intentionality. He thinks that human nature is social and this option means that the source of normativity are traditions, roles and institutions.

Rituals represent the form of extra-ordinary communication which embeds the strong normativity of the cultural background.

Symbolization goes beyond the mere embodiment of the semantic contents as it shows the “bounding effect” produced by traditions, roles and institutions. Institutions possess an affectively and emotively bounding force namely express the intersubjective bond of social obligations and collective authorizations. Therefore, it would be senseless to reduce the use of linguistic symbols only to the “cognitive” presuppositions required by the coordination of actions, because we could not make sense of our following values and “strong” collective expectancies. The function of rituals is to make individual motivations shareable and to solve the conflict between individual self-affirmation and collectivity. Gestural communication which characterizes rituals represents, from the social pragmatics perspective, a new form of intelligent, useful cooperation. In this sense, when Ego and Alter institute a common meaning they allow their individual consciousness to overcome an egocentric perspective. They begin to communicate on different dimensions and to try to cooperatively face world’s contingencies, moving from their common life-world. As Durkheim has shown in his elucidating analysis, rituals reveal their function in the re-generation of solidarity as well as in the self-thematization of the communitarian identity.

Rituals were bound to myths in the so called “assial” age; but, nowadays, we do not need myths to explain reality. With the growing of science, religion had to find the way to establish a fruitful dialogue about objective knowledge. What is very important to underscore is the intimate relationship between religion and rituals as the source of social solidarity. According to Habermas, the sacral complex did not dissolve itself; religious traditions, in symbiosis with the communitarian cult, are still sources of values and sense.

#### 4. POST-SECULAR AUTONOMY

Given this result, religious communities continue to express their voice in the public sphere of the post-secular society [13]. The debate on the genealogy of post-secular thought corresponds to the acquisition of a critical stance that allows religious and secular citizens to give meaningful contributions also in the public and political arenas [14].

There is an interesting debate since the early 1990s on the process of secularization in India and Europe. While Habermas suggests a post-

secular stance that allows for more participation from religious communities, critics such as Connolly point on an intolerance within secularism towards religion [15]. But, differences apart, the crucial challenge to the secular ideal is how to accommodate an increasing religious plurality in Europe today. There are several interesting analysis of the decline and failure of secularism in India [16,17] as well as criticism of it as a process mostly not appropriate for the Indian context [18-20]. The main problem is the secularism’s ability to cope with pronounced religious plurality. In Europe the plurality of religions seems to threaten liberal values, while in India the problem is to modify liberal values to make them adequate to a more complexly diverse cultural landscape. The dialectic between liberal values and pluralism resides in the relationship between the normative conception of the citizen as individual and the pluralistic fact of individuals deriving identity from belonging to different groups [21].

Differently from Casanova, Taylor argues that the secular is not in contrast to religion, or the absence of religion, but it is a worldview that in many ways has been shaped by post-reformation Christianity. Moreover, he thinks that secularism is not a neutral model but an “immanent frame”, which refers to making sense out of the world in terms of human temporality and a “this-worldly causality” [22]. Another important difference is that in Europe secularism is often opposed to religion, while in India it is contrasted with communalism. It is a fact that the Indian State and, in particular, the Congress Party, has proposed a commitment to taking a neutral stance towards religion, meaning that secularism has been articulated largely in terms of the State’s explicit commitment to avoid favoring one religion over another. Despite the claim to neutrality, some thinkers observe the influence of values specific to Hinduism on Indian Secularism. An example is the translation of Gandhi’s nationalist ideals into the vocabulary of Neo-Hinduism [23]. Gandhi shared the views of Vivekananda and Aurobindo about religion as the source for the revitalization for both social and political change.

Beyond this view, Nandini Chatterjee individuates the sources of the Indian secularism in the contributions of the leaders of the last centuries’ Indian Christianity. She calls “theological liberalism” the intellectual basis for their non-secularist approach to religious identity (like McIntyre, Nandy, Bhargava and Sen). It

seems very difficult to separate “secular values” and “faith values” (Ganeri). But, Wenman underscores the Habermasian proposal about a post-secular view, which requires that individuals give up any claim to the universality of their faith to favor the principle of reciprocity.

A serious problem is raised by Cristina Lafont, who thinks that it is desirable that reasons expressed for reciprocally justifying beliefs must be reasonably acceptable from everyone [24]. This proposal:

“On the one hand, it is trivial, because it boils down to the obvious requirement that every citizen, when contributing to public political debates, should respect the limits laid down by the principles of constitution. On the other hand, the proposal is empty because it does not speak to the interesting point, namely, whether religious fellow citizens must be taken seriously *as such* in their contributions to the democratic formation of public opinions, and whether their religious utterances can possess a cognitive potential that the secular state must not ignore” [25].

Contrary to Lafont, Maeve Cook, observes that all normatively substantive contributions to political discourse are embedded in some religious and metaphysical context. Thus secular contributions should not claim the presumptive advantage of being generally accessible. This move would not mean to embrace contextualism because (as MacIntyre exemplarily shows) public, unrestricted discussions force the participants to engage in process of creative re-imagining and re-articulating of their own convictions [26]. But, as Habermas noticed in his criticism to MacIntyre, we cannot rely only on the process of bargaining reasons grounded on traditions and context of particular communities [27].

We are subject to a cognitive and moral development that takes place in interaction and that constitute us as autonomous agents. Autonomy has an intimate relationship with communicative rationality, namely to the recognition of presuppositions or linguistic rules as conditions of the universal validity of theoretical and practical claims. Beyond the Rawlsian notions of “justice” and “overlapping consensus”, the notion of autonomy is worthy to be analyzed in the terms of a plausible philosophy of language [28,29]. Stability can be the result of a discussion of autonomous citizens

who are able to decentralize their own perspectives in order to have a fruitful confrontation with the other participants to public dialogues. This perspective aims at overcoming strong forms of relativism as well as religious fanaticism.

Two main political questions are central: Religious freedom and principle of tolerance [30]. It depends on local communities or subcultures not to impair the freedom of their members to recognize each other as active parts of a common political community. Citizens of the *state* are able to give themselves the laws which deserve to protect and respect that cultural identity they have as citizens of the *society*. The new constellation of “democratic state”, “civil society” and “autonomy of the subcultures” becomes the key to understand the two systems of motivations which nowadays are in competition. Indeed, universalism characterizing the political enlightenment ought not to be in contradiction with the peculiar sensibility of a plausible multiculturalism. Tolerance is required to decide questions such as the demand from the Turkish communities of Berlin, Colony and Frankfurt to build mosques outside the shared courtyards. This is an example of the application of the principle of tolerance that rests on the inclusive and deliberative procedures of a democratic formation of the will. The bond between positive freedom (the right to exercise our own cult) and negative freedom (the right not to have interference from the cult of others) will be continuously put into question. And, in a democratic regime, the citizens themselves ought to decide on their own questions (even though by way of representative organs).

In our post-secular society, it becomes important also to reflect on an interesting difference as regards the attitude of citizens toward religion. Habermas proposes to distinguish between “laic” and “laicistic” person. The laic person merely assumes a neutral attitude toward the religious validity claims, namely he is indifferent on this regard. The laicistic person assumes a polemical attitude toward religious doctrines, sometimes by opposing hard scientific views. This is what ought to be avoided if we want to implement a democratic process of inclusion of different perspectives. Habermas challenge is to find this possibility in the very local and religious communities and this means to try to translate the semantic contents of religious beliefs into comprehensible validity claims that can compete in an egalitarian dialogue. The laic persons ought

not to rule out the possibility to discover semantic contents in the religious contributions (as MacIntyre exemplarily shows in his reconstruction of the idea of “social justice”). These contents can be usefully translated on the level of the public argumentation. Under an optimistic situation, both parts can commit themselves, from their own point of view, to interpret the relationship faith/knowledge to promote a reflexively enlightened coexistence.

## 5. CONCLUSION

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

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

Surely, the globalization of markets - the rise of electronically interconnected financial markets and the acceleration of capital mobility - have led to a transnational economic regime, markedly diminishing the leading industrialized nation's capacities for action (...). As I said, religion and the Church served an important role as pacemakers for this mentality. But the same cannot be said for the emergence of globalized commerce and communication. Christianity is far more deeply affected and challenged by the unforeseen consequences of this new infrastructure, as are other forms of ‘objective Spirit’” [31].

Concerning some contemporary exoteric tendencies, which Habermas labels as a symptom of ego weakness and regression,

something like an impossible return to mythical forms of thought, he proposes a “genuine” discourse that is based on an “open” communicative lifeworld.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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