

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Calhoun, Craig, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan Van-Antwerpen, eds., *Habermas and Religion*. London, UK: Polity, 2013. 477 pp., \$32.95 paper (9780745653273)**

**O**n the bus from the downtown hotel to the conference of the Canadian Sociology Association a few years ago, I began talking with a Dutch sociologist. At some point she commented on the ethno-cultural changes in The Netherlands, declaring, “I wish these Muslims would leave their religion at home – it has no place in public.” At my surprise, she explained that religion is and should be private because it rests on unarguable principles: only reason was legitimate, and, because religion was faith and belief, she eventually insisted, religious people are unintelligent.

Jurgen Habermas and the contributors to this collection of essays would resolutely disagree. This is important because “Jurgen Habermas has been one of the most influential theorists of secular modernity” writes Jose Casonova in the first essay (27). *Habermas and Religion* has its origins in a conference on precisely that topic. There are fourteen chapters plus a lengthy response to each of his critics by Habermas. The introduction examines Habermas’ recent work and points out the renewed interest on religion among many social theorists after a century of inattention because of expectations for the demise of religion in the face of seemingly inexorable secularity. Therefore, when Habermas began to pay direct attention to religion a little over a decade ago and even to call for a “post-secular society,” seismic waves rippled through philosophy and social theory circles.

This anthology is many things. First, it is an important example of a stellar mind willing to re-examine his earlier views. Second, it provides intense and philosophically deep analyses of a topic that is certain to arouse passion and fierce positions. Third, the question of how religious and secular citizens can engage together in political deliberation in the secular state is extremely salient in contemporary societies, especially if it is presumed that their foundations are so different as my Dutch conversant did. Fourth, that last point illustrates a persistent assumption through many of the contributions that there is more that separates religious and secular citizens than connects them.

This is clearly a collection of essays for serious scholars. Some chapters such as Casanova's exceptional short summary of types of secularity are more accessible than others. Numerous contributors point out that instead of viewing secularism as a neutral ground we must understand it as an ideology in its own right. Christina Lafont argues that if religious actors must present arguments in secular language, this assumes secularity is the baseline rather than a specific ideology. Similarly, Amy Allen challenges Habermas to be more reflexive about his own assumptions by noting that the cognitive burdens of post-metaphysical, public reason require the religious person to be quasi-secular (150), while there is no such burden for the secular person to be quasi-religious even on the level of intellectual familiarity with theological discourses (if such an expectation would seem odd to us, it illustrates Allen's point). In his discussion of developing solidarity with the past by critically examining historical wrongs, Max Pensky argues such awareness is "a corrective to philosophy's own overweening self-confidence" (318). While the chapter is about the German experience under the Nazis, it could be particularly useful to think through contemporary Canadians' responsibility for the effects of Aboriginal residential schools.

Habermas' response to the authors of this collection is engaging and illuminating. Although he admits his failure to address the work of two theologians (Milbank & deVries) and a religious philosopher (Wolterstorff) in the response, he nonetheless appears generally dismissive of their approaches, even stating that "I fail to understand" why Milbank argues what he does. (Milbank's stance is that Kantian critical reason – what Habermas calls the beginning of post-metaphysical philosophy – is plain wrong since it "render[s] out of court" any metaphysical claims (324), thus excluding billions of believers regardless of their specific religions.) Habermas reinscribes the dichotomization: "philosophy, the social sciences, and the humanities, on the one side, and competing religious views, on the other" (381). And yet, he also struggles to be inclusive, by engaging a number of theologians despite what he calls his "religious unmusicality". Other contributors resolutely hold to a post-metaphysical basis for philosophy, social theory, and citizenship, meaning that this collection grapples intensely and productively with fundamental issues, and points readers to the need to grapple further because there is no clear resolution.

One potential deficit to the anthology is that there is no clear description of what is meant by "post-metaphysical", which is prob-

lematic given its prominence throughout the collection. Furthermore, religions differ in form, content and types of social function, meaning homogenizing them as all one phenomenon is sociologically flawed. The dichotomy of religion and modern secularity may also be over-emphasized. Nicholas Wolterstorff argues particularly well that religion is not the antithesis of reason. He also makes the point that there are multiple rationalities just as there are multiple modernities, and thus, the potential for different foundations for genuine philosophy; Habermas admits he just doesn't comprehend this argument, giving the appearance of being completely wedded to a Western, liberal and post-metaphysical epistemology (and ontology). Other approaches to human existence besides conventional religiosity might also be untranslatable into the modernist, liberal democratic polity. For example, a corollary to the issue of the translatability of religion in secularist terms might be deep ecology's effort to accord intrinsic value to nature, which can founder on its incommensurability with classical liberalism. Unfortunately, other critiques that highlight the limits of human rationality or its humanist exclusivity are unrepresented in this collection. Lafont points out "[R]easons that are based on different and conflicting comprehensive doctrines and conceptions of the good cannot be expected to be generally acceptable to all citizens under conditions of pluralism, whether or not they are secular" (239). The collection is entirely western in orientation, as are all the contributors, making it a sort of throwback to a pre-postcolonial philosophical environment.

An interesting fact is that there is no list of contributors. Perhaps this was intentional since one of the most important debates in the collection is over universal versus contextualist knowledge and ethics. However, even short bios would have helped to contextualize each contribution.

Overall, this collection clearly acknowledges an astonishing resurgence in theoretical and philosophical attention towards religion. Such epistemic humility is refreshing, and may help social analysts to engage societal matters in a more fulsome way. Perhaps because Habermas and the contributors to this collection acknowledge that religion is about more than values, they also recognize the challenges facing those committed to understanding its varied expressions and place in modern secular polities and societies in general. In this regard, the essays collected as *Habermas and Religion* will reward readers who work through them, and insofar as readers also engage in the public sphere, that sphere will also be enriched. How we live well

together, amidst our diversity, is one of the most important questions of the contemporary world.

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