CHAPTER 1

Religion in public

How can there be argument between members of different traditions? This is arguably the most important question in contemporary moral philosophy and theology. To be a modern person is to participate in a public sphere characterised by rival voices, dissonant worldviews and forms of life that are baffling to each other. How are they to be coordinated? Many moral questions are bound up with religious affiliation. The major traditions have different narratives rehearsing God's care for the vulnerable: the young, the old, the abandoned, the poor, the imprisoned, the enslaved, the sick, the disabled. How do these narratives inform and hinder public argumentation? This study engages with Jürgen Habermas' views on religion and theology in the context of his understanding of the modern public sphere. Habermas is an unusual atheistic and secular philosopher: he makes positive claims about religion in modern society at the same time as insisting that moral theory must be post-religious or post-traditional. He has developed a well-known theory of communicative action and a discourse ethics whose purpose is to address the question of argumentation in the public sphere. His work over fifty years can be viewed as an attempt to articulate the unity that makes it possible to hear cultural differences as a diversity of voices rather than merely as a mass of dissociated utterances that are unintelligible to each other.

Religion plays a curious role in this theory. Habermas both values it and distances himself from it. He values it as the bearer of cultural life; he distances himself from it because it claims its members with an authority that undermines human autonomy. Religion, for Habermas, is what gives members of modern societies the vital material over which they argue. Without religion there

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would be no values and no forms of life about which to disagree. Yet at the same time the public sphere where such argumentation takes place cannot, and must not, be claimed as territory by any one tradition. The public sphere needs to be the locus of peaceable unity, within which there can be heated conflict, rival claims and unresolved differences. For Habermas the public sphere thus cannot be 'religious' or 'traditioned', because its task is to coordinate and host all religions and traditions. Habermas sees religious thought as 'mythic' and 'metaphysical', whereas modern thought is 'rational' and 'post-metaphysical'. He has argued that only a secular forum can adequately host a diversity of sacred and post-sacred spaces.

This study is neither a defence of Habermas nor yet another critique. There are voices in theology which defend and applaud Habermas' discourse ethics, or which try to put his theory of communicative action to work as a basis for theology, but these are plainly in the minority, and have not shown themselves to be convincing beyond a narrow circle. At the same time, there are critiques from many different perspectives which cause insurmountable problems for Habermas' project. This study takes seriously Habermas' claims about the public sphere and the need for genuine argumentation (and not merely rival voices) across traditions, and tries to repair his theory where it most obviously fails. The major problem for philosophers and theologians who wish to engage Habermas' views on religion is that they are embedded in complex arguments whose principal focus is often something other than religious life and thought. The main task here is thus to reconstruct what he says about theology and religion, and to situate it in the context of his wider claims about societal development and the nature of reason. At the same time, Habermas shows no knowledge of post-liberal theology, and I try to show not merely that his approach fails to do justice to contemporary theology, but that some of his own problems can be worked through more fruitfully when investigated in a post-liberal theological context. Post-liberal theology is a relatively new phenomenon, and has lacunae of its own. The most important from the perspective of this study is its uncertainty as to how to conceive the plural public sphere while doing justice to the specificities of traditions and their patterns of

worship.[1] I do not solve that problem, but attempt to develop some useful tools for addressing these concerns. My argument will be that Habermas is too positive about religion because he is too ignorant of theology, and that being more circumspect about the difference between 'mythic' and 'modern' thought removes the need for moral theory to be post-religious.

Habermas' bibliography is large, and the secondary literature is substantial even within theology. Comprehensiveness is impossible. A limited spread of essays from across Habermas' whole career is considered here, in order to show both where Habermas has remained constant and where he has changed his mind, but no attempt has been made to include all his relevant writings. Texts from his early *Theory and Practice* up to his recent *The Future of Human Nature* and *Truth and Justification* are considered. For the most part the secondary literature does not receive detailed commentary; theological engagements are generally set to one side for reasons to be rehearsed below. Some of the secondary literature is very important, however. The challenges to Habermas that are most instructive for theology come from philosophers who reconstruct Hegel's philosophy of 'ethical life' as a critique of Habermas' heavy indebtedness to Kant. These challenges are rehearsed in more detail. Habermas is read in this study as a German philosopher contributing to, and reasoning reparatively within, the German tradition from Kant to Gadamer and Adorno. Habermas famously tries to make connections between the German tradition and Anglo-American philosophy, and where this bears upon questions of religion the relevant arguments are rehearsed. The German tradition is, however, not as widely known in theology as it was a generation or so ago, and where it seems appropriate the main topics are explained: detailed knowledge of the German Idealist tradition is not presupposed.

The work of Jürgen Habermas presents challenges to contemporary philosophers and theologians alike. It poses a simple question, and makes a simple acknowledgement. His simple question is: how can there be public moral debate between members of different

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[1] There are exceptions. For three different attempts to describe spheres of public argumentation theologically, see Welker 1995; O'Donovan 1996; Fergusson 2004.

traditions? His simple acknowledgement is: all substantial ethical commitments have their roots in religious life. Christians are able to enter moral debate with each other, despite denominational or cultural differences, because they share a tradition. This tradition is admittedly contested, fractured and sometimes divisive, to the extent that members of some denominations are forbidden by those in authority to share holy communion with members of some other denominations. However, it is precisely the schisms that reveal the authority of tradition. To have such disagreements is to acknowledge common objects of debate: scripture, sacraments, priesthood, liturgy. The public sphere that arose in Europe in the wake of the reformations was a forum of discussion and argument within the tradition of Christian life and thought. Today things are more complex. The two most significant changes to the public sphere are difficult to reconcile: the rise of voices that reject their Christian heritage, and the participation of voices from other religious traditions. There is an anti-religious rhetoric that understands its tradition as 'secular' alongside a bewildering variety of religious voices that are often not bound together by common objects of debate.

Habermas' question about argumentation and his acknowledgement of modern life's religious roots goes to the heart of contemporary moral debate. If substantial ethical positions are rooted in religious life, and if the public sphere is a forum where different religions meet together, it is difficult to know how there can be argument over matters like law, education, medicine or art. It seems that modern people are doomed merely to repeat their own traditions' positions, perhaps in each other's hearing, but without agreed criteria for judging each other's reasonings. Habermas has produced a range of theoretical work aimed at transcending tradition, in order to solve this problem. This means systematically setting aside substantial ethical positions and common objects of debate. In their stead, he has argued for agreement on procedure. Habermas' conception of a public sphere is a forum where all participants agree on *how* argumentation is to take place, and he has various arguments to support his position which will be rehearsed in later chapters. Habermas' vision of the public sphere is a place where people willingly submit their substantial ethical commitments to criticism

whenever these are contested by other parties. He thus needs some model for describing the process by which such criticisms can be raised, pursued and addressed. No one tradition can claim its common objects of debate or its ethical commitments as normative for all. This model is underpinned by Habermas' theory of communicative action, and its details (and aporias) are investigated in his discourse ethics project. Those who agree with Habermas have to explain how processes are related to substantial commitments. Those who disagree with him have to offer an alternative model for coordinating discussion in the public sphere. This study ends with an attempt at such an alternative.

'Public sphere' is here being used very loosely to mean the arena within which public debates take place. Habermas began his intellectual career with a more specific historical analysis, from a Marxist perspective (Habermas 1989a). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* charts the rise and development of 'public opinion' in bourgeois society: the world of letters, coffeehouses, *salons* and *Tischgesellchaften.* It is a story about the end of feudal monarchy and the cultural dominance of the court, and the increasing power of the bourgeois trading class, whose interests were debated in new kinds of 'public' life. What is most striking about Habermas' study, given his wider interest in universal reason, is its emphasis on cultural specificity. This nicely encapsulates the problems with which he struggles in all subsequent work. The notion of public opinion – something general – is shown to have arisen in situations whose history is unique – something particular. This acknowledgement is made right at the start of his book, right at the start of his intellectual career:

We conceive [the] bourgeois public sphere as a category that is typical of an epoch. It cannot be abstracted from the unique developmental history of that 'civil society' originating in the European High Middle Ages; nor can it be transferred, idealtypically generalised, to any number of historical situations that represent formally similar constellations.

(Habermas 1989a: xvii)

In other words, the public sphere was European; and that means it was, for the most part, Christian. Is there a Middle Eastern public sphere? Is there an East Asian public sphere? Is there a Muslim

public sphere? Is there a Buddhist public sphere? Strictly speaking,
no. This generates further problems. The ideas of civil and criminal
law, of government, of taxation, are all to some extent products of
the Christian European public sphere. They have analogues in other
countries, not least because of cultural exchanges forged by trade,
war and colonisation, and these cultural exchanges often predate the
European High Middle Ages. At the same time, however, there are
significant differences. What counts as an appeal to 'tradition' in
Britain or the Netherlands is heard as an appeal to 'colonisation' in,
say, India or South Africa. Democracy is arguably one of the effects
not only of ancient Greek political practice but, more recently, of
the rise of the Franciscan order in Italy in the thirteenth and four-
teenth centuries. The Franciscans modelled a transformed relation
between Church authority and *popolo*, at much the same time as the
trading classes began to grow in power and towns started to become
cities. The centuries in question are measured by a Christian calen-
dar. Presumably it will not be a simple matter to hope for democ-
racy in China, for example, whose traditions include neither Greeks
nor Franciscans, and it would require enormous sensitivity and
cultural-historical knowledge even to imagine the characteristics of
a Chinese democracy. The point of this is that even the term 'public
sphere' is a problem: it refers to an arena that is Christian through
and through. This study will continue to use the term to describe
the public arena in which different traditions might meet and
debate, but only in default of a better term. I take it that there are
no tradition-neutral terms; indeed, it is the guiding argument of
this book that attempts to transcend tradition *in advance* in theory
need to be replaced by more modest enterprises of making sense of
instances in which different traditions actually and *already* meet
together in practice.

If one best understands the rise of public spheres by attending
to European Christian culture, it is obvious that one needs a greatly
expanded set of intellectual tools to understand their contemporary
forms. Habermas himself, in his earliest work, already noted the
shift from cultural debate to cultural consumption together with a
changed relation between public and private life in the world of
work, and the advent of mass media in the form of newspapers
and then radio and television (and now the internet). One can

supplement and correct Habermas' account in various ways: by doing more precise historiography, by attending to theological transformations, by doing better ethnographies of contemporary everyday practices, and so forth. The real challenge to the very idea of a public sphere, however, comes from the twin advent of secular identities and religious variety in politics. If there is no Muslim public sphere, how can we best understand public argumentation between Muslims and Christians over matters of law? How are observant Jews or devout Hindus to enter debate with partners whose Christian cultural identity is masked by claims – the more difficult the more sincere they are – to be secular?

The rise of secular self-understandings, which are largely the product of shifts within *Christian* theology in Europe, has produced significant variations in how religious identity is related to political discussion in European universities and seats of government. The presence of Anglican (but not Roman Catholic) bishops in the House of Lords in Britain, the existence of a successful Christian Democratic Party in Germany, the relative absence of theology in the French university: these all call for specific attention to cultural histories and local theological debates if one is to make sense of their contemporary meanings. The historical accounts of law, of government, of economy and so forth are largely – though not exclusively – Christian. With the rise of secular self-understandings by politicians and political theorists there is a corresponding need to rethink all these categories, and in a context where the contemporary meanings of the secular are contested within philosophy. Appeals to scripture or received doctrines cannot be made in the same ways as in the past. But in any case these ways were the object of significant disagreement from the 1200s onwards in Europe, within the Christian tradition, and there was no ideal consensus to which one might return. Rethinking the Christian tradition in secular terms is a vast undertaking, and to be modern is to confront all the problems it entails. To attempt its rethinking in a public sphere where many other religious traditions are partners in dialogue, and thus where secularism is seen explicitly as a Western threat, seems problematic many times over.

Any account of political and moral debates in Europe and North America has to do justice to the significant role played by those

whose identity has been formed in synagogues, mosques and temples as well as churches. Even this little recitation of religious houses betrays a Christian perspective: Jewish identity is arguably formed in the home more than in the synagogue; Muslim worship takes place just as significantly in the workplace as in the mosque (there is no Muslim 'Sabbath'). However one tries to describe such matters, it is certain that arguments in public debate cannot be settled by appealing either to Christian authorities *or their secularised forms.* Presbyterians and Roman Catholics may not celebrate Mass together, but they can debate with each other on how to interpret 1 Corinthians 11:23–34. Such fundamental agreements make disagreement possible. This is not the case when public debate includes members of other religious traditions. One cannot appeal to Paul's epistles. Perhaps one can cast one's net wide for shared commitments. What about democracy, or freedom or human rights? Our notions of democracy are rooted in developments in the European High Middle Ages; our ideas of freedom are stamped with the mark of the American and French Revolutions; the concept of human rights has its origin in the tradition of Christian natural law. It is difficult to think of any of our noble ideals whose genealogy does not unfold in this way.

The public sphere is no longer European, and it is no longer Christian. Christianity itself is no longer European. There are Europeans and Christians participating in the public sphere, but they are numerically inferior. It is in this confused situation that Habermas asks his question: how can there be moral debate between members of different traditions? His life's work is a long and complex response to this question. His answer is simple in conception. As I have already indicated, Habermas argues that one has to identify *rules* for argumentation that transcend tradition. Without such rules, there can be only the clash of competing views, or a succession of positions that do not engage with each other. The difficulty for Habermas is specifying those rules, and showing that they are binding on all participants in debate. Habermas' strategy has been to interrogate the tradition of modern thought, which admittedly is an often Christian and sometimes Jewish tradition. Habermas has never sought a view from nowhere, and he has never argued that one can occupy a position outside any tradition

whatsoever. Instead, he has argued that there is a universal 'reason' that makes possible the diversity of traditions and forms of life. Habermas willingly admits that any substantial description of this reason, and indeed any substantial ethical position at all, will inevitably and rightly be located within a tradition. At the same time, he challenges anyone to deny that there is a *unity* that makes possible *diversity*. Without such a unity, he argues, there is no diversity: only unrelated objects and events. More than this, Habermas believes that it is possible to get a theoretical purchase on this unifying reason. This is not done via claiming a God's-eye view of things. This was, he says, the 'metaphysical' approach of the late Middle Ages which sought to establish an identity between thought and world, such that knowledge was the perfect correspondence between one's ideas and reality itself. Such a view has been made impossible, he believes, since Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* of 1781. Kant set the agenda for subsequent philosophy by showing that there are conditions for knowledge. Kant may have been unpersuasive in his attempts to identify those conditions (sense data and concepts), but no-one has successfully retreated behind Kant to a position that denies there are conditions for knowledge. Instead, one's purchase on unifying reason has, for Habermas, to be 'post-metaphysical'. It acknowledges the situatedness of all human thinking, and has no access to an absolute perspective that can judge whether one's thoughts correspond to reality. To know that one's thoughts correspond to reality would require a viewpoint external to *both* reality *and* one's thoughts. To insist in the face of this that one's thinking nonetheless corresponds to reality is dogmatism; to insist that one has no way at all of linking thought and reality is scepticism. Kant's post-metaphysical transcendental idealism was a brilliant but flawed attempt to avoid both of these extremes. Whether one follows the details of Kant's philosophy or not, all philosophy, including all moral theory, must be post-metaphysical in this sense.

Habermas' attempt to produce a post-metaphysical account of the rules of public debate is riven with aporias, like all philosophy and theology. He himself has entered vigorously into debate with his critics, and like all great thinkers, he has generously risked positive claims while his opponents have had the luxury of identifying the problems in those claims. Habermas has shown himself tirelessly

willing to produce theory, and to mount theses which can be tested, in an era which shows itself worryingly content with criticism and deconstruction. Any serious engagement with Habermas surely has to produce better theory, and theses which better withstand testing. The problems Habermas identifies, and the difficulty of the question he raises about argumentation in a plural public sphere, are acute, and he has few rivals who have produced a better answer to his question. The difficulties with his own theory are overwhelming, and his theses have not withstood testing: for this reason it makes no sense to be a Habermasian. Nonetheless, the question he poses is urgent. If the changing social composition of geographical regions requires a rethinking of the public sphere, taking account of secular self-understandings and a variety of religious identities, it cannot be sufficient merely to identify the shortcomings of Habermas' theory. Better theory, or perhaps something better than theory, is required.

It is the need for better theses that presents challenges for philosophers and theologians. Habermas has made many claims about religion in his work over the last half-century, and his views have changed over time. Discussions of religious life admittedly play almost no role in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, but his amateur interest in theology extends well back into his earliest work, for example in essays in the first edition of *Theory and Practice* (1963).[2] His engagements with theologians, especially German Roman Catholics, have sharpened his views on contemporary religious life, while also furnishing him with an attentive (and perhaps overly enthusiastic) audience for his pronouncements on the persistence of religious attitudes in modernity. Habermas' work is shot through with claims about religious belief and practice: they are part of his theory of communicative action, they are integral to his political theory, and they characterise his more meditative judgements about post-metaphysical thinking. For Habermas modern moral theory is only intelligible as a development out of (and

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[2] I do not investigate the different kinds of public sphere today; nor do I update David Zaret's criticisms that Habermas pays too little attention to religious life in the public sphere: David Zaret, 'Religion, Science, and Printing in the Public Spheres of England', in Calhoun 1992: 212–35. This is a topic for future work.