

PHILOSOPHY AS MEDIATION BETWEEN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS, INSIGHTS FROM JÜRGEN HABERMAS

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Abstract

The task of this paper is to show how philosophy can mediate in the conflict of religious traditions, using the insights of Jürgen Habermas in his acceptance speech on the occasion of the award of the Karl Jaspers Prize of the Town and University of Heidelberg on 26 September 1994, “The Conflict of Beliefs, Karl Jaspers on the Clash of Cultures.” Habermas may not have addressed the problem directly, but his insights provide meaningful hints in the conduct of inter-faith dialogues of religious communities.

One of the negative impacts of globalization is the homogenization of cultures, sometimes referred to as “McDonalization” or “Cocalization,” that has resulted in the dismantling of social diversity and pluralism of cultures. The standardization of life styles by the domination of a centralized culture identified with the West undermines a culture’s self-reliance and identity and attacks the traditional religious values that hold the community together. Religion occupies a central position in one’s culture, for in spite of the cultural transformations brought about by greater mobility and the mass media, it is still religion that gives a distinct identity to a culture. But while globalization has given rise to multi-religious cities, has increased the knowledge of each other’s religious traditions and the levels of interaction between peoples of different religious traditions, “the same global processes that draw communities together have also been experienced as a threat to the specificity and identity of religious communities.”¹ Consequently, there is a new resurgence of religious traditions, reasserting themselves in groups,

“polarizing peoples, creating enemy images, and using religious identity as one of the powerful forces to mobilize faith communities against each other.”² The many religious conflicts in many parts of the world (the Middle East, Sudan, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, India, the former Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, and the Philippines) attest to this resurgence, the extreme form of which is fundamentalism. Thus arises the urgent need for inter-religious dialogue not only between individual representatives of different religions but also between communities themselves.³ A re-emergence of religion into public life and discourse is necessarily happening today.

The Problematic

There is something unique and at the same time universal in religious traditions. The uniqueness comes from the inner cohesive vision of reality peculiar to the place of origin or to the prophetic figure who taught and gathered disciples, from the specificity in the expression of this vision as “enveloped in the philosophical, cultural, linguistic and geo-political realities of the place of its origin,” eventually finding articulation as systems of beliefs, rituals, and culture.⁴ The universality, on the other hand, is explicit or implicit in the validity claims of the faith-experience of each religious tradition, that these are for all people, and therefore the message must be spread to the four corners of the earth. “Universality of religious traditions can also be argued on the basis that most of them emphasize common human values like love, compassion, justice and peace, even though diversities would emerge if one were to interpret these concepts in concrete situations.”⁵ Thus Christianity proclaims that Jesus is the Son of God while Islam considers Jesus as only a prophet, and Buddhism teaches the path to Nirvana, which is not God but perhaps godhead. And yet all three religions preach the values of love and justice.

Habermas states the problem in this way: “Can those who belong to different cultures meet on a common basis of understanding, and where might this universal, all embracing commonality be found?”⁶ In the words of Karl Jaspers, which Habermas quotes in the opening of his lecture,

Today we are in search of the basis on which human beings from all the various religious traditions could encounter each other in a

meaningful way across the entire world, ready to re-appropriate, purify and transform their own historical traditions, but not to abandon them. Such common ground for the (plurality of) faiths could only be clarity of thought, truthfulness and a shared basic knowledge. Only these (three elements) would permit that boundless communication in which the wellsprings of faith could draw each other closer, by virtue of their essential commitment.⁷

Karl Jaspers' Answer

Before discussing Karl Jaspers' response to the problem of the conflict of beliefs, Habermas outlines the different current philosophical answers that can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. *Universalism* of the Western tradition that emphasizes the unity of reason innate in every human being and criticizes the religious truths using the current standards of science or philosophy.

2. *Relativism* "which assumes that all strong traditions have their own incommensurable criteria of the true and the false, criteria which are internal to them."⁸ Both 1 and 2 do away with the problem of intercultural understanding.

3. *Contextualism*, also skeptical of universal human reason, holds that unconditional validity claims "are so deeply immersed in the context of a specific tradition that the criteria of truth and falsehood are inseparably woven with a concrete understanding of self and world."⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre and Richard Rorty fall in this conception of philosophy even as they want to avoid the paradoxical standpoint of relativism that has to exempt its own statement from the context-dependency of other statements.

4. Philosophical Hermeneutics, against the assimilationist model, uses the dialogical model of understanding but with a relational symmetry of the dialogical situation. "Through the exchange of first-and-second person perspectives... they are able to effect a *rapprochement* between the divergent horizons of their linguistic pre-understanding. Thus hermeneutics wrests the universalistic potential of a linguistically embodied

reason from the conditions of successful communication as such, and encourages us in the quest for intercultural understanding.”¹⁰

But here in Philosophical Hermeneutics, Habermas asks, towards what is the quest for intercultural understanding? Towards a substantive agreement or simply a modest “mutual respect for the sincerely attested power of opposed traditions?”¹¹ The answer will depend on how we view the process of Enlightenment occurring in the modern period, on how we understand the triple relation of philosophy:

1. to its own history, whether as a continuum, leveling out the transition from tradition to modernity, by construction as in Hegel, or deconstruction as in Heidegger, or as a break between tradition and modernity, criticizing metaphysics and transferring inherited from problems to the realm of belief,

2. to the biblical tradition, in one of the three ways: a) in service of religion, b) independent of religion, or c) as superior cognitively to religion; and

3. to other religions, where “Western philosophy was very rarely sympathetic or even generous. In this respect Jaspers represents an interesting exception.”¹²

In the first place, Jaspers considered Buddha, Confucius and Jesus as great philosophers. For him, “they broke the spell of mythical thought with their words and deeds, and triggered the process of disenchantment which has continued right up until the modern period.”¹³ The process of disenchantment continues in the Enlightenment by freeing us from the dogmatism of faith based on inherited authority and communicated in ciphers. Postmetaphysical thinking in prohibiting images treats the metaphysical and religious doctrines “as so many encodings of fundamental experiences which are inaccessible to conceptual explanation.”¹⁴ But this philosophical translation of symbolic meanings runs the risk of forfeiting the enciphered truth-contents of the religious tradition, while the modern sciences reduce the lifeworld simply to the domain of what is objectively knowable and technically controllable. The result is that ciphers are no

longer taken seriously and understood as the language of transcendence, “so that they no longer illuminate the space of existence.”¹⁵

The task of philosophy then for Jaspers is to “disclose and preserve the truth-content concealed in the semantic potentials of traditions shattered by enlightenment.”¹⁶ “By contrast with the sciences, philosophy moves in the space of essential—in other words: existential-experiences, a space occupied and structured by faith. But, in contrast to tradition, it retrieves these experiences with the argumentative tools of postmetaphysical thinking.”¹⁷ Philosophy must restrict itself to being a philosophy of existence without resorting to a belief in revelation, as in the case of Kierkegaard. As a philosophy of existence, it must have an ethics *after* metaphysics, without the support of comprehensive interpretation of the world. “Fundamental philosophical knowledge establishes the conceptual framework for a possible ethical-existential self-understanding.”¹⁸ Yet, this self-understanding is not achievable without a clear understanding of ‘transcendence,’ “Jaspers’ name for that which always sustains and encompasses us.”¹⁹ Habermas equates Jaspers’ ‘transcendence’ with his own notion of the ‘linguistically structured life-world.’ And rightly so, because Jaspers, in contrast to Heidegger, emphasizes the intersubjective character of authentic self-becoming: “Being a self and being in communication are inseparable.”²⁰ This communication is not a clinical discussion with a therapist but an ethical-existential conversation, where participants engage in a friendly argumentation of competing life projects. “In our encounter with the existence of others we get clearer about the faith from which our own existence draws its strength. Thus existential communication takes the form of a struggle of beliefs. What is disputed is how to read the ciphers of these beliefs, and how to release their semantic potential through the right conduct of life.”²¹ Fundamental philosophical knowledge takes the form of a substantive ethic: the sincerity of self-conscious conduct of life is the ethical criterion to assess the existential viability of a form of belief. And “to understand each other through ciphers implies a form of communication in contact with the transcendent.”²² Thus the participants in the communicative dispute are guided by the “hope for unanimity,” “a form of agreement which is not to be found at the level of propositional content but at the way in which these contents are made manifest in one’s conduct of life.”²³

In the end Jaspers takes this fundamental philosophical knowledge as ‘faith,’ ‘philosophic faith.’ Habermas interprets this as coming from the perspective of a specific tradition, that of the Reformation. And as such, “it can only appear in plural forms, and can no more claim universal validity than the metaphysical religious doctrines whose truth content it seeks to save. . . [it] remains dependent on communication between human beings, who are obliged to talk to each other, but not necessarily to pray with each other.”²⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

Habermas’s Critique of Jaspers

Habermas finds difficulty in Jaspers’ conception of philosophic faith because of the interpretative role philosophy must *also* take on. “For if fundamental philosophical knowledge is distinguished from the comprehensive doctrines of the tradition only by virtue of its undogmatic posture, then it lacks the impartiality which is needed if it is to establish the rational basis on which *contrary* faiths can enter into fruitful communication with each other.”²⁵ Jaspers confuses the two tasks he himself assigns to philosophy: as an *ethical project*, his philosophy “is an advertisement for one form of faith amongst others,” and as an *analysis for the conditions of a successful communication* between essentially competing faiths, “its arguments must be directed towards an agreement concerning the rules of the game.”²⁶ Habermas finds a similarity of this tension in the ‘political liberalism’ of John Rawls, where philosophy plays a double role: as a metaphysical doctrine, it raises strong context-dependent truth claims that cannot be universalized in view of other competing worldviews, and as theory of justice, it hopes for an acceptance that may be “based on a fortunate convergence of non-public reasons,” and waits “to find out whether its proposal is sufficiently neutral to find access to all the competing world views.”²⁷ Unlike Jaspers, however, Rawls extends the scope of reason to the conditions of a just political life and not just to a mutual acknowledgement of divergent conceptions of a fulfilled life. For Habermas, “intercultural understanding must be considered from both angles—from the angle of the good, as well as from that of justice,”²⁸ or what he would term in another context as the “ethical” and the “moral” respectively. The

moral use of practical reason inquires into what is equally good for everyone, while the ethical into what is respectively good for me or for us. The moral pertains to the questions of justice or what all could will, whereas the ethical can be rationally clarified only in the context of a specific life-history or a particular form of life.²⁹

For Habermas, if we interpret Jaspers' philosophical faith as an expectation "that, *after the Enlightenment*, strong traditions will abandon their dogmatic claims to truth and that, instructed by insight into the fundamental situation of human beings, they will transform themselves into versions of philosophical faith," this will mean the death of religions.³⁰ Even as the enlightened philosopher sees the members of other religions as members of different communities of interpretation, each united around its own conception of the good life (ethical), the religious person would insist on the *redemptive* significance and binding character of prophetically disclosed truths that are essential to his life.³¹

Habermas's Conception of Philosophy

In criticizing Jaspers, Habermas comes up with his own response to the problem: "only an impartial fundamental knowledge could foster the desired communication *between* different forms of belief."³² Here, philosophy as fundamental knowledge takes the task of disclosing to religious and metaphysical worldviews their own inherent reflexivity. Philosophy "elucidates the difference between religion *before* and *after* the Enlightenment. It teaches other traditions about that distancing step away from themselves which reason requires them to take as soon as they become aware that they share the same universe of validity-claims with other faiths."³³

But even before such communication can take place, certain preconditions must already be agreed upon: First, parties must renounce the use of violent imposition of their convictions (militaristic, governmental or terroristic). Second, they must recognize each other as partners with equal rights and third, be willing to learn from each other. These preconditions, an overcoming of fundamentalistic self-understanding, "imply not only the reflexive tempering of dogmatic truth-claims, in other words a

cognitive self-limitation, but also the transition to a different stage of moral consciousness.”³⁴ In this stage of moral consciousness, Jaspers’ ‘will to communication’ is driven by the moral insight “that intercultural understanding can only succeed under conditions of symmetrically conceded freedoms, a reciprocal willingness to view things from the perspective of the other.”³⁵

Given such preconditions, can communicative reason expect unanimity beyond Jaspers’ meaning of mutual respect for each other’s authentic form of life? For Habermas, one should not expect a consensus in controversial existential questions, in questions of ethical self-understanding. “The pluralism of world views means that comprehensive doctrines, whether across the globe or within the same political community, come into conflict concerning the truth of their declarations, the rightness of their commandments, and the credibility of their promises.”³⁶ Reflexivity does not mean an abandonment of essential truth-claims, or a reinterpretation of truth-claims as context-dependent claims to authenticity.³⁷ In another context, Habermas speaks of this reflexivity as the ‘modernization of faith,’ since in our societies today, religious doctrine has “to accommodate itself to the unavoidable competition with other forms of faith, and other claims to truth.”³⁸ Only through self-criticism can a religious tradition “stabilize the inclusive attitude that it assumes within a universe of discourse *delimited* by secular knowledge and *shared* with other religions.”³⁹ Again, “this decentered background consciousness of the relativity of one’s standpoint certainly does not lead to the relativization of articles of faith themselves.”⁴⁰

From the point of view of the religious tradition, the modernization of faith is necessary for the preservation and transmission of tradition. Religious tradition must be rationally justified for it to be re-legitimized. “The tradition of modernity is the critique of tradition for the sake of tradition.”⁴¹

This modernization of faith has important political consequences: the community of the faithful must refrain from the use of violence, especially state-sponsored violence, in promoting its religious belief. It is “an important cognitive presupposition for the achievement of religious tolerance and the construction of a neutral state power.”⁴²

Needless to say, this reflexivity must also be applied to the West with its ‘unholy trinity of colonialism, Christianity and Eurocentrism.’⁴³ “Thus the West, molded by the Judaeo-Christian tradition, must reflect on one of its greatest cultural achievements: the capacity for decentering one’s own perspectives, self-reflection, and a self-critical distancing of one’s own traditions. The West must abstain from any non-discursive means, must be only one voice among many, in the hermeneutical conversation between cultures.”⁴⁴

Conclusion

What then is the mediating role of philosophy in the conflict of religious traditions? It is the task as philosophy of reflection in the sense of reflexion. It is to engage in argumentative discourse, a more specialized form of communication, where validity claims previously implicit in religious symbolic language is made expressly thematized and reinserted back into the everyday praxis constituted in the lifeworld.⁴⁵ Philosophy “seeks to re-express what it learns from religion in a discourse that is independent of revealed truth. . . . The ambition of philosophy’s ‘translation program’ is, if you like, to rescue the profane significance of interpersonal and existential experiences that have so far only been adequately articulated in religious language. In contemporary terms, I would like to think of responses to extreme situations of helplessness, loss of self, or the threat of annihilation, which leads us speechless.”⁴⁶

Does this mean that philosophy as the modernization of faith or the linguistification of the sacred will replace religion? Not quite, “for indispensable potentials for meaning are preserved in religious language, potentials that philosophy has not yet fully exhausted, has not yet translated into the language of the public, that is of presumptively generally convincing reasons.”⁴⁷ Religious traditions, especially monotheistic traditions, “have at their disposal a language whose semantic potential is not yet exhausted, that shows itself to be superior in its power to disclose the world and to form identity, in its capability for renewal, its differentiation, and its range.”⁴⁸ And for “as long as religious language bears with itself inspiring, indeed, unrelinquishable semantic contents which elude (for the moment?) the

expressive power of a philosophical language and still await translation into a discourse that gives reasons for its positions, philosophy, even in its postmetaphysical form, will neither be able to replace nor to repress religion.”⁴⁹ Philosophy and religion need each other, for “in Habermas’s view, religion without philosophy is speechless, philosophy without religion is contentless; both remain irreducible as long as we must face our anthropological vulnerability without consolation, without ultimate guarantees.”⁵⁰

Philosophy enables the religious traditions in inter-religious dialogues to stand in their own individualities, and it is only in their own stubborn but rationalized individuality that religious traditions can make a positive contribution to a world culture of globalization.

ENDNOTES

¹ S. Wesley Ariarajah, “Religious Diversity and Interfaith Relations in a Global Age,” *Quest*, vol. 2, number 2, November 2003, p. 11.

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

⁴ S. Wesley Ariarajah, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁷ Karl Jaspers, *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung* (Munich: Piper, 1984), p. 7. Quoted by Jürgen Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 40.
- ²⁷ Ibid., pp. 40-41.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 41.
- ²⁹ Jürgen Habermas, “Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World,” in Don S. Browning and Francis Schussler Fiorenza (eds.), *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), p. 243.
- ³⁰ Jürgen Habermas, “The Conflict of Beliefs,” pp. 41-42.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 42.
- ³² Ibid., p. 42.
- ³³ Ibid., p. 42.
- ³⁴ Ibid., p. 43.
- ³⁵ Ibid., pp. 43-44.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 42.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. 43.
- ³⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “A Conversation about God and the World, Interview with Eduardo Mendieta,” *Religion and Rationality, Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity* (Cambridge, the MIT Press, 2002), p. 150.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 150.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 150.
- ⁴¹ Eduardo Mendieta, “Introduction” to Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, p. 17.
- ⁴² Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, p. 151.
- ⁴³ Ibid., p. 152.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 154.
- ⁴⁵ Jürgen Habermas, “Transcendence from With, Transcendence in this World,” p. 240.
- ⁴⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, p. 164.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 162.
- ⁴⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “Transcendence from Within, Transcendence from this World,” p. 220.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 237.
- ⁵⁰ Eduardo Mendieta, op. cit., p. 28.