Lost in translation; A critique on Habermas' “translation proviso”.

Jurgen Habermas contends that only secular reasons can justify state coercion. However, he recognises our society as postsecular: religious plurality is here to stay. Furthermore, he takes on board Wolterstorff's insight that it belongs to the religious beliefs of many religious citizens that they ought to base their political decisions on those beliefs. Therefore, Habermas proposes his translation proviso: religious citizens can use their religious reasons in the public arena, but beyond the institutional threshold they ought to be translated to secular reasons if they are to justify coercion. This process of translation from religious to secular language is the cooperative task of society as a whole, in Habermas' view. This process of translation “salvages” the relevant content from the religious reasons and results in secular reasons, which are neutral, that is, “equally accessible to all”. Thus, religious as well as secular citizens can accept this requirement, Habermas argues.

But can religious reasons be translated to secular reasons? Are secular reasons neutral in the sense Habermas has in mind? I will argue that translation is not possible without inviting Wolterstorff's objection again.

According to Habermas, “freedom of conscience and religion is the appropriate political response to the challenges of religious pluralism.”1 This freedom, he continues, contains two corresponding liberties: “the positive liberty to practice a religion of one's own and the negative liberty to remain unencumbered by the religious practices of others.”2 In a deliberative democracy, this means that religious citizens should be free to express their religious views in public discussion, but at the same time citizens should be free from coercion by laws for which the only justification is the religious view of others.

But the balance between these two liberties is “precarious”,3 as Habermas warns us. If we assume that for many religious citizens their political views are informed by their religion, then how can they freely express these views in public deliberation without thereby imposing their religious views on citizens who don't share their religion? To protect the negative liberty – the right to be free from religious coercion – Habermas contends that a law is only justified if the support given for it is “equally accessible to all”4, which means for Habermas that it must be phrased in secular language.

Like Habermas, Rawls supports the view that although citizens are free to express their religious views in public, religious justifications alone are not sufficient to justify a binding law. Rawls's proviso: as democratic citizens we can “introduce into political discussion at any time our comprehensive doctrine, religious or nonreligious, provided that, in due course, we give properly public reasons to support the principles and policies our comprehensive doctrine is said to support.”5

But Rawls's proviso has raised the following objection by Wolterstorff, which suggests that it puts an undesirable psychological burden, a breach of political integrity, on the shoulder of religious citizens: “It belongs to the religious convictions of a good many religious people in our society that they ought to base their decisions concerning fundamental issues of justice on their religious convictions. They do not view it as an option whether or not to do so.”6 In other words: if a religious citizen truly believes policy X should be implemented, and her reasons for believing so are based on her religious convictions only, then to ask of her to not support this policy unless she can also offer a justification that does not depend on her religious conviction, would demand a kind of dishonesty of her that is not only undesirable for that reason alone, but also violates the positive liberty of the freedom of consciousness and religion. I will call Wolterstorff's objection henceforth the Integrity Objection.

Habermas takes on board the integrity objection, but he is not content with Wolterstorff's solution - to allow unrestrained access of religious justification in the institutional sphere, were laws are made – since that

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1 Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the Public Use of Reason by Religious and Secular Citizens,” 120.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
6 Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues,” 105.
endangers the negative liberty discussed above, and introduces the danger of tyranny of the majority in societies where one religion is dominant. Instead, he offers his “institutional translation proviso”: religious citizens can justify their political convictions in public discourse using religious language only, if they accept that “beyond the institutional threshold” only secular reasons count. This means that religious reasons must be translated to secular reasons. To avoid placing the burden of translation on religious citizens only, “this requirement of translation must be conceived as a cooperative task in which the nonreligious citizens must likewise participate”. See fig. 1 for a representation of this two-tier model.

Some have argued that placing the filter not in the public sphere, but instead on the institutional threshold does nothing to counter the integrity objection. After all, why would a religious citizen contribute her religious reasons in public discussion if she has to accept that they will not count in the institutional sphere? If she has to accept that they will not really be used to justify the laws they are meant to support?

This is where the metaphor of translation comes in. Habermas uses this metaphor throughout. He talks of “religious language” and “secular language” and maintains that the former can be “translated” into the latter. The translation proviso therefore does not function as a filter that simply stops religious reasons from entering the institutional sphere whilst letting the secular reasons through. Instead, it functions as a filter in which a transformation takes place: religious reasons are translated, that is, reformulated in secular terms. For this to work, Habermas must show that what comes out of that filter is in some recognisable way the same reason as the religious reason that went in. He must show that what makes the religious reason relevant to the discussion does not get lost in translation. Because if it does get lost, and translation into secular language does not enable the full force of the religious reason to enter the institutional sphere, then the integrity objection applies all the same.

Habermas is aware of this, but he is optimistic for two reasons: firstly he points out that his translation model depends on a mutual learning process that is facilitated by the premises of a deliberative democracy to which he takes all citizens to be committed, such as the principle of reciprocity and respect for each other's autonomy and co-authorship of the law. This means that they can be taken to understand that they owe each other...

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8 Ibid., 130.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 131.
other good reasons\textsuperscript{13}. Therefore, he contends, religious citizens can understand and accept that the religious formulation of the reasons they put forward cannot be enough to convince nonreligious citizens and that reformulation in secular language is needed to make these reasons equally accessible to all. At the same time, secular citizens can understand and accept that religion remains a source of political motivation for many and a vehicle for politically relevant meaning from which they might learn. For this reason Habermas believes that in a post-secular society nonreligious citizens can understand that religious reasons are to be taken seriously in public deliberation and not to be dismissed as belonging to the private sphere. Hence, Habermas speaks of a mutual learning process\textsuperscript{14}.

Secondly, he is optimistic that translation of religious language to secular language is possible. Translation, he notes, can “salvage” the relevant cognitive content from religious reasons and make them equally accessible to all. He gives several examples of the sort of translation he has in mind, for instance: the idea that human dignity deserves equal and unconditional respect can be seen as a translation of the idea that humans are made in the image of God\textsuperscript{15} and Marx’ idea of the emancipated society as a translation of the idea of the kingdom of God\textsuperscript{16}.

But a couple of examples don’t merit the optimistic view that all relevant religious reasons have good secular translations. For that, we have to look deeper at the process of translation, and what it means to “salvage” the relevant content from religious reasons. Habermas is somewhat vague on this account, so Maeve Cooke offers one answer. According to Cooke “[successful] translations retain the power of the original to inspire thought and action insofar as they succeed in making truth appear anew.”\textsuperscript{17} She claims that translations in this respect fulfil two functions: (1) “they enable critical engagement with these truth contents” and (2) “serve motivational purposes, for example, inspiring collective action.”\textsuperscript{18} She focuses in her article on exemplary figures and acts. How does one “translate” a story of an exemplary figure or act that inspires those who have access to the cultural tradition of the religion to which this story belongs, to those who have no access to this tradition? I will discuss one of her examples here.

Central to Orhan Pamuk's novel \textit{My Name is Red}\textsuperscript{19}, set in Istanbul, is the practice of manuscript illumination. Master Osman, the master illuminator, is inspired by a tradition in which stories are current about past great illuminators, many of which produced their best work when blind. One of the legendary illuminators is Master Bihzad. The story goes that Master Bihzad blinded himself voluntarily when he reached a state so close to the divine that he no longer needed physical eyesight to do his work. When Master Osman finds the needle which Master Bihzad reputedly used to blind himself, he proceeds to do exactly the same\textsuperscript{20}. The story of Master Bihzad has an exemplary validity for Master Osman. “But,” Cooke rightly asks “does it have it for us?”\textsuperscript{21} I doubt many of Pamuk's readers have blinded themselves with a needle. Yet, Pamuk, as a gifted intercultural translator, succeeds in opening up the premises of this story to his readers in such a way that the act of self-blinding is no longer utterly bizarre, but – seen from Master Osman's perspective – rather plausible. Pamuk opens up truths such as: there's more to seeing than physical eyesight, and great sacrifices are sometimes worth it.

This example shows that the first function of translation can be fulfilled: Pamuk's readers can critically engage with the truth contents implicit in the story of Master Osman. But for this story to have any motivational force – the second function – more is needed. It is one thing to understand that certain circumstances can call for a sacrifice – like self-blinding – but it is quite another to see oneself as being called to make such a sacrifice. And this, I take it, is beyond the scope of translation. Not because stories like the one Pamuk tells us have no effect on our motivations – they do! - but because the effect they have on our

\begin{thebibliography}{100}
\bibitem{13} Ibid., 136.
\bibitem{14} Ibid., 136–144.
\bibitem{15} Ratzinger and Habermas, \textit{The Dialectics of Secularization}, 45.
\bibitem{16} Habermas, “The Boundary between Faith and Knowledge: On the Reception and Contemporary Importance of Kant’s Philosophy of Religion,” 231.
\bibitem{17} Cooke, “Translating Truth,” 481.
\bibitem{18} Ibid., 483.
\bibitem{19} Pamuk, \textit{My Name Is Red}.
\bibitem{21} Ibid., 485.
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motivation is highly subjective. It depends on the vast network of other connections, not least the particular connection that binds us to the exemplary figures in the story, that determine our motivations. Therefore, I doubt there is any secular language available that is neutral in the sense of “equally accessible to all”, as Habermas hopes. Truths can be “salvaged” from a story like Pamuk's. Pamuk's readers can recognise that a truth like “great sacrifices are sometimes worth it” is universally applicable. Yet, they need the story of Master Osman to be able to critically engage with such a truth. But the story does not have the motivational force on them as it has on Master Osman, since Master Osman stands in a particular relation to Master Bihzad. Pamuk's readers don't. Likewise, religious citizens stand in a particular relation to the exemplary figures in their respective traditions, which citizens of another religion or none don't share with them. Translation cannot bridge that gap.

Finally, back to the integrity objection. If the motivational force of religious reasons is lost in the translation between the public and institutional sphere, then the integrity objection still applies. Firstly because without the motivational force it is no longer clear how the reason in question can be taken seriously in the institutional sphere such that it has an effect on decision making, and secondly because without the motivational force it is doubtful that the religious citizens to whom these reasons matter can still truly call them their reasons.

References: