

## The Challenge of Postmetaphysical Thinking and the Nature of Religious Thought

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In contrast to reactionary efforts attempting to dismantle the importance of discursive reason in order to conserve or restore the authority of metaphysics and theology, Jürgen Habermas has developed a postmetaphysical, intersubjective approach to social and political development that does not anticipate an unambiguous role for religion in the modern world. While Habermas uses the insights of this approach to respond to and often criticize theological and metaphysical claims, the relation between postmetaphysical thinking and religious thought and practice, as many of his critics suggest, has yet to be clarified in a satisfactory manner. To make matters worse, misapprehension about the nature of religious thought and practice is leading to increasingly muscular solutions with no small or insignificant implication for models of deliberative democracy and the role of religion in modern life. As is argued here, this lack of clarity is the result of an overgenerous reading of religion as inspiring and an overly critical reading of theology as religious.

Using insights developed by Habermas regarding the nature of symbol formation as well as insights articulated by Donald Wiebe, I argue that many of the criticisms of Habermas's perspective can be alleviated if we understand theology to be a branch of science rather than a form of religious thought. While such a position may seem contradictory, it will be argued that theology can be guided by a methodological framework that is incompatible with the mythopoetic elements of religious thinking and thus comparable to any of the other academic disciplines. Theology, as "talk about religion," is not strictly identifiable with "religious talk."<sup>1</sup>

Without rejecting Habermas's overall framework of a social evolutionary scheme, I argue that religion is better approached as a heuristic category referring to the dialectics of mythic thought and modern theology than as analogous or synonymous with

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to make clear that while I agree with Donald Wiebe's reading of theology as a scientific discipline, insofar as it commits itself to a scientific and disciplined study of the activities of divinities, it does not follow that such a project is not without serious problems. It is only acknowledged here that there are good reasons to reject the suggestion that theology must be viewed as synonymous with religious practice.

metaphysics or metaphysical thinking.<sup>2</sup> Since Habermas's understanding of religion is based on a social evolutionary model, wherein religion is approached as a mediating stage between mythic and modern worldviews, my study aims to take advantage of Habermas's insights about the dialectics of symbol formation without getting mired in the history of ideas or a dubious historical understanding concerning evolution of world religions.

The first part of my essay outlines Habermas's understanding of postmetaphysical thinking and is followed by a second section that provides an interpretation of his writings on rationality, mythic thinking, and the linguistification of the sacred, aiming to make his eclectic theory of religion more explicit. The third section examines Maeve Cooke's critique of Habermas's attempt to salvage and secularize the semantic content of religion. Within this section I acknowledge the correctness of several aspects of Cooke's position and then draw on the work of Donald Wiebe, whose theorization of theology and the nature of mythopoeic thought can be used to provide an instructive rejoinder.

### **Postmetaphysical Thinking**

Postmetaphysical thinking emerges out of the insoluble problems encountered by metaphysical thought: skepticism regarding its totalizing claims, the intrusion of historical consciousness, the shift in paradigms from the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language, and the reverse of the classical precedence of theory over practice.<sup>3</sup> Out of these contradictions, postmetaphysical thinking emerges and refers to our self-conscious awareness that linguistic meaning and validity are constituted communicatively. In opposition to models of consciousness assuming the priority of Ideas, Habermas argues that self-consciousness "is not a phenomenon inherent in the subject but one that is communicatively generated."<sup>4</sup> As such, it is properly characterized as a participating in a new stage of communication that emerges through processes of socialization and intersubjective recognition. The learning processes involved in the shift from conventional to postconventional forms of thinking simultaneously bring about a profound shift in the epistemic self-relation (*Selbstbeziehung*) and practical relation-to-self (*Selbstverhältnis*).<sup>5</sup> This is why postmetaphysical thinking demarcates a transformation and reevaluation allowing us to see the world with new eyes.

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<sup>2</sup> On the importance of using religion as a category of classification, see Jonathan Z. Smith, "Introduction," *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi-xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Habermas, "Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking," 33-34. These themes are discussed in a less succinct form in Habermas's *The Theory of Communication Action*.

<sup>4</sup> Habermas, "Individuation through Socialization," 177.

<sup>5</sup> Self-relation refers to a transition from one mode of communication to another, from prelinguistic to linguistic. Relation-to-self refers to the emergence of a new mechanism of behavioral control, from reactive instinctual impulses to thoughtful symbolically mediated interaction. Habermas, "Individuation through Socialization," 177-182.

In this view, postmetaphysical thinking is characterized by an appreciation for a procedural understanding of rationality, both in terms of the manner of the resolution of theoretical problems for a community of inquirers and for moral and practical problems for the community of citizens.<sup>6</sup> Procedures of argumentation, and not religious revelation or aristocratic entitlement, constitute the justifiable manner in which criticizable validity claims concerning the rightness of social norms and scientific truth can be impartially adjudicated.<sup>7</sup>

Habermas's procedural understanding of rationality is based on a theory of communication action and he stipulates that only in instances when actors pursue the aim of coordinating their actions with the help of the illocutionary binding and bonding effects of speech acts without reservation can we speak of communicative action.<sup>8</sup> Communicatively achieved agreement can be said to have a rational basis when and only when the process of understanding meets the conditions of rationally motivated assent to the content of an utterance.<sup>9</sup> Any situation where actors are interested in guiding their behavior in terms of mutually recognized norms, in order to be distinguished from coercion or manipulation, must take up in actual discursive practice the principles of egalitarian reciprocity and universal moral respect.<sup>10</sup> The stringency required for these conditions suggests that the anticipated ideal, the participation in discourses free from violence, has an incontrovertible role to play as the normative yardstick for the critique of coercive powers at work in any community of good will.<sup>11</sup> Without the realization of these moral principles underlying communicative action, as the field wherein the impartial adjudication of moral, political, and scientific claims takes place, discourses cannot rise above the suspicion of being unduly coerced. Nevertheless, communicative action is also the site of the reproduction of the lifeworld, and thus a commonplace and relatively unproblematic occurrence.

While the more unconditional criteria regarding the possible realization of these ideals may seem unrealistic, they serve to provide a normative grounding for Habermas's critical theory. In particular, the critique of distortions in communication, including ideological prejudice, abuses of power, social pathologies, and deformations of the lifeworld. As Habermas puts it: "Communicative rationality provides a standard for evaluating systematically distorted forms of communication and of life that result when the potential for reason that became available with the transition to modernity is

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<sup>6</sup> Habermas, "Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking," 35.

<sup>7</sup> Habermas, "The Horizon of Modernity is Shifting," 6.

<sup>8</sup> Habermas, "Social Action, Purposive Activity, and Communication," 128, 139; see also Habermas, "Actions, Speech Acts, Linguistically Mediated Interactions, and the Lifeworld," 220-227.

<sup>9</sup> Habermas, "Social Action, Purposive Activity, and Communication," 120.

<sup>10</sup> I have adopted the formulation of these principles from Seyla Benhabib, "In the Shadow of Aristotle and Hegel," in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 29.

<sup>11</sup> I do not mean to suggest that "good will" is a requirement of communicative action. Rather, that we can designate only those situations as communicative wherein participants are oriented by the aim of coordinating their action consensually. I use the phrase "good will" to signify participants who unreservedly pursue illocutionary aims.

selectively utilized.”<sup>12</sup> One of the central points of Habermas’s analysis of communication is to show that this critical function is neither arbitrary nor imposed using an external standard; rather, with the transition from linguistic analysis to a formal pragmatics Habermas argues that one can detect the peculiar presence of strong idealization that are part of the pragmatic presuppositions of consensus formation, argumentation.<sup>13</sup>

The theoretical architecture of Habermas’s position was worked out in conjunction with Karl-Otto Apel in the 1970s.<sup>14</sup> As shown in their pragmatic analyses, idealizations are present in speech acts as unavoidable pragmatic assumptions in discourse. This gives validity claims an unconditional character while at the same time anticipating and supposing the counterfactual realization of communication free from distortion, an “ideal communication community.” While these idealizations are counterfactual, the validity claims raised by a speaker casts a transcendental projection anticipating a wider range of references than present in the immediate context. In other words, we counterfactually assume the redemption of the claim as a contingent outcome of an actual discourse where this may or may not be possible. Such idealizing assumptions project a utopian shadow allowing us to detect deviations as well as envision our capacities to “settle all conflicts without violence.”<sup>15</sup>

Given that such idealizations are only instantiated in communicative practices, it follows that it is an illusion to think that conscious life is able to reach enlightenment about itself by way of the self-privileging of the context of individual contemplation, one of the characteristic hallmarks of the philosophy of consciousness. The legacy of metaphysical thought inherited by this model preserves an elitist and isolationist character by purging itself “of all traces of its earthly origin” through the enshrining of particular attitudes and practices at the expense of the establishment of interpersonal relations. As Habermas observes, the promise of contact with the extra-ordinary it is typically proffered through the “renunciation of the natural attitude toward the world” and the devaluing of the social relation.<sup>16</sup> However, isolated reflection lacks the stability

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<sup>12</sup> Habermas, “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking,” 50.

<sup>13</sup> Habermas, “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking,” 46.

<sup>14</sup> See Karl-Otto Apel, “The *A Priori* of the Communication Community and the Foundations of Ethics,” in *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy*, trans. Glyn Adley and David Frisby (London: Routledge, 1980), 225-300 and Jürgen Habermas, “What is Universal Pragmatics? (1976),” in *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, edited by Maeve Cooke (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 21-103. For a recent recap of Habermas’s position with an eye toward a procedural concept of democracy, see *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 322-326.

<sup>15</sup> Habermas, “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking,” 47; Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 323. See also “From Kant’s ‘Ideas’ of Pure Reason to ‘Idealizing’ Presuppositions,” in *Truth and Justification*, trans. Barbara Fultner (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2003), 83-130.

<sup>16</sup> Habermas, “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking,” 32-33. I am tempted to remark that this instability is what gives the philosophy of consciousness an almost paranoid character. Most metaphysical forms of thought are inevitably concerned with purges and purifications. The stability sought through acts of purification (e.g. the relinquishing of context, history, and

that can only be provided by intersubjective recognition and thus trades the ambiguities of implacable self-doubt and uncertainty for the more assured grounding made possible only within larger and more inclusive communicative communities.

Making matters more difficult for the religious thinker or metaphysician, under the rubric of postmetaphysical thinking the philosophy of consciousness, containing the final refuge of metaphysics, undergoes dramatic conversion into linguistic analysis as subjective knowledge concerning objects is recast in terms of competing representations of states of affairs, the intersubjective paradigm.<sup>17</sup> While metaphysical thinking is not abandoned by Habermas, its faculty is indeed pressed for credibility in that its self-privileging character becomes all the more apparent and all the more illegitimate.

In contrast to the caricature of Habermas's position as advocating the suppression of plurality, postmetaphysical thinking vividly realizes that "the intersubjectivity of linguistically achieved understanding is by nature porous, and linguistically attained consensus does not eradicate from the accord the differences in speaker perspectives but rather presupposes them as ineliminable."<sup>18</sup> As shown in his essay "Individuation through Socialization," autonomy and individuation go hand in hand. Thus, recognition depends on the recognition of a claim to uniqueness and irreplaceability and yet simultaneously embodies the idealizing supposition of a universalistic form of life.<sup>19</sup> This pluralizing aspect of postmetaphysical rightfully permits Habermas to point to the unity of reason and the diversity of its voices.

I have not enumerated all of the various aspects of Habermas's conception of postmetaphysical thinking, only drawn attention to several of its most salient characteristics: the rise of a procedural understanding of rationality, the anticipatory-utopian dimension of communicative action, the decentering of the philosophy of consciousness, the deflation of the extra-ordinary, and the simultaneity of unity and difference.<sup>20</sup> The next section provides an outline of Habermas's theory of religion, including his understanding of myth as well as the nature of religious thought.

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relations with others) expresses a cognitive error. Stability is only possible in relation with others, not their exclusion. This inside in many ways coincides with the magisterial study of anti-Semitism, racism, sexism, and homophobia by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *The Anatomy of Prejudices*.

<sup>17</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Metaphysics after Kant," in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, 11, 13, 21, 23. Habermas defines metaphysics as "the science of the universal, immutable, and necessary" (13) as articulated within the philosophy of consciousness. Three aspects of metaphysical thought include: identity thinking, the doctrine of Ideas, and the strong concept of theory. For further details, see "Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking," 29-34.

<sup>18</sup> Habermas, "Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking," 48.

<sup>19</sup> Habermas, "Individuation through Socialization," 186.

<sup>20</sup> This phrase "anticipatory-utopian" is indebted to Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 226. Further details on Habermas's understanding of postmetaphysical thinking can be found in his essay "Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking" which I have tried to approximate in a condensed form here.

## Habermas's Theory of Religion: Between Mythology and Modernism

Habermas's understanding of religion is an eclectic blend of theoretical writings across several disciplines: philosophical theology, sociology of religion, cultural anthropology, and comparative religion. In his earlier work religion occupies a mediating role between myth and modernity. Given the high level of abstraction through which Habermas articulates his theoretical concerns, the selective nature of his sources, recent developments in biotechnology and the rise of fundamentalism, it should not be surprising that he has found it prudent to rethink how best to theorize anew the relation of religious thought to cultural and political processes. Nevertheless, while his later writings reflect his earlier orientation, defining religion as a kind of switching station, they also encompass a more programmatic appraisal regarding the proper role religion is to assume in the public sphere.

To be sure, Habermas's conception of religion has always occupied a dialectical position in his critical social theory. It is decidedly not mythological in orientation yet it also falls short of postmetaphysical thinking. Religious thinking is most strongly identified with the monotheistic traditions (Judaism and Christianity, with a more inclusive reference to Islam in recent writings) but it is also suggested that Buddhism has achieved an equivalent level of abstraction.<sup>21</sup> Less precisely but more frequently, Habermas indicates that all of the "great world religions" embody a cognitive advance out of a mythological era. This usually accompanied by a reference to Karl Jasper's understanding of the "Axial Age."<sup>22</sup>

While religion is viewed as a qualitative advance out of mythic forms of thinking, it is simultaneously a transformer, the crucible of imagistic preserve and concept-formation. Habermas also suggests that religion is analogous to art. Whereas art strikes a graphic equilibrium between images and concepts, religion is tipped either toward the mythological or the metaphysical.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, religion is defined more often than not in ethical terms, viewed as expressing a tension between the spellbinding power of ritual interaction and the illocutionary power of norm guided communicative action.<sup>24</sup>

Each of these moments mentioned above speak to a particular aspect of Habermas's work should be approached dialectically – one cannot reduce his understanding of

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<sup>21</sup> In his most generous formulation, Habermas remarks that the concepts of morality and ethical life without cannot be salvaged without appropriating some substance from the history of religions can be transmitted and transformed through philosophy of any one of the "great world religions." Habermas, "Metaphysics after Kant," 15.

<sup>22</sup> For example, see Habermas, "The University of Reason and the Diversity of Its Voices," 120 and, especially, the introduction of *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 1-7. See also "Karl Jaspers: The Figures of Truth (1958)," 45-52 and "The Conflict of Beliefs: Karl Jaspers on the Clash of Cultures," 30-45.

<sup>23</sup> See Habermas, "The Liberating Power of Symbols: Ernst Cassirer's Humanistic Legacy and the Warburg Library," 1-29 and "Symbolic Expression and Ritual Behavior: Ernst Cassirer and Arnold Gehlen Revisited," 53-70; see also *Between Naturalism and Religion* (add reference).

<sup>24</sup> TCA, vol. 2, 77ff.

religion to any one part nor treat all aspects simultaneously. Religion needs to be situated in an appropriate way in relation to the context in which it arises. Given the overall social evolutionary nature of Habermas's understanding of religion, this section begins with a generic introduction followed by his understanding of myth before moving through the developments that culminate in postmetaphysical thinking and the post-secular society.

Only sporadically discussed in his early writings, religious and mythic worldviews were addressed a bit more directly in the two volumes of *The Theory of Communication Action*. It is evident, however, that Habermas was not at this point interested in religion as such. Habermas's discussion of myth and religion were necessary stepping-stones toward the elucidation of the concept of rationality and the genesis of individuation and socialization through symbolically mediated interaction.<sup>25</sup> Since the late 1980s however, Habermas has found reason to remove religion from the margins of his work and rethink its role and claims with regard to contemporary life through what is coming to be called the "post-secular" society.

In terms of the reception of his work in English, Habermas's most sustained theoretical engagement with a theological community took place in 1988 at a conference held at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, the proceedings published as *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*.<sup>26</sup> Not too long afterward, Habermas took up the theme of religion and religious symbolism in several of his essays in a collection entitled *The Liberating Power of Symbols*. In addition, the essay "Faith and Knowledge," the interview "Fundamentalism and Terror" (2003), and his contribution to the dialogue with Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, published as *The Dialectics of Secularization* (2005), can be added to the growing list of relevant works. *Between Naturalism and Religion* is Habermas's most sustained and engaged contribution to date. Also of note is Eduardo Mendieta's anthology *Religion and Rationality* (2002), a volume of essays translated into English bringing many of Habermas's essays on religion and theology together in a single binding. Looking ahead, Habermas has also been writing and speaking about secularization and a post-secular society for that past few years, including lectures given in Iran and Turkey as well as a lecture series in October at Yale University (2008 Castle Lectures). No doubt these will eventually appear as a collection of essays on post-secular society.

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<sup>25</sup> TCA, vol. 1, "Introduction: Approaches to the Problem of Rationality," esp. 43-74; TCA, vol. 2, "The Paradigm Shift in Mead and Durkheim," esp. 43-111.

<sup>26</sup> Edited by Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1992) with, in addition to the essays by the editors, contributions from Fred Dallmayr, Charles Davis, Matthew Lamb, Helmut Peukert, Gary M. Simpson, David Tracy, Robert Wuthnow, and Jürgen Habermas. Habermas's essay, "Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World" is one of his most widely anthologized and important essays dealing with theology and religious thought. I should note, however, that Habermas has always endeavored to include and engage religious thinkers in dialogue, from his dissertation on Schelling to his essays on Gershom Scholem and Johann Baptist Metz. See also, for example, the essays by Dorothee Sölle, Johann Baptist Metz, and Jürgen Moltmann in the anthology edited by Habermas in 1979, translated as *Observations on 'The Spiritual Situation of the Age': Contemporary German Perspectives*, trans. by Andrew Buchwalter (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987).

In the first volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, in his discussion of the relation between reason and knowledge, Habermas argues that in “archaic societies myths fulfill the unifying function of worldviews in an exemplary way – they permeate life-practice.”<sup>27</sup> The immediacy of images and powers for the mythic thinker prevents them from making distinctions held to be axiomatic by modern thinkers. Thus, Habermas observes, the “savage mind” is systematically impeded from being able to separate an objectivating attitude to a world of existing affairs from a conformist or nonconformist attitude to a world of legitimately regulated interpersonal relations.<sup>28</sup> This does not confer straightforward irrationality to the mythic worldview. Rather, Habermas argues that the rationality of worldviews cannot be measured “in terms of logical and semantic properties but in terms of the formal-pragmatic basic concepts they place at the disposal of individuals for interpreting their world.”<sup>29</sup> In this sense the appellation “rational” (designating a performative attitude toward validity claims) is inappropriate insofar as distinct knowledge domains (truth, rightness) have not been established. At the same time, this does not deny the propriety of the designation in a more holistic sense. Habermas’s dialectical view allows a society governed by myth to be rational on its own terms although irrational when compared to a modern society.

Habermas outlines the characteristics of mythic thinking as follows: a concretistic and analogical thought process, confusion between nature and culture, a deficient differentiation between language and world, and a confusion between internal connections of meaning and external connections of objects.<sup>30</sup> He notes that “mythical interpretation of the world and magical control of the world can intermesh smoothly because internal and external relations are still conceptually integrated.”<sup>31</sup> This point is clarified in later essays on the writings of Ernst Cassirer on symbolism where Habermas approvingly observes that the genesis of symbol formation moves in two directions simultaneously: a “spellbinding tendency toward the formal congealing of isolated impressions into a symbolic image” and a complementary yet contradictory “concept-forming tendency toward generalization and differentiation.”<sup>32</sup> In the case of mythic thinking, the crystallization of sensory impressions into images is predominant.

In broad strokes, the mythic perspective expresses an insufficient differentiation among attitudes to the objective social, and subjective worlds as well as a lack of reflexivity can rightfully be identified as “closed” in contrast to the more reflexive and differentiated, “open” worldview of moderns.<sup>33</sup> While such a worldview possesses an “intensely poetic quality in everyday life and thought, and a vivid enjoyment of the passing moment”<sup>34</sup> it can also be characterized as sociocentric. As such, the mythological worldview is fated to be transformed from within by learning processes and contradictory

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<sup>27</sup> Habermas, TCA, vol. 1, 44.

<sup>28</sup> Habermas, TCA, vol. 1, 49.

<sup>29</sup> Habermas, TCA, vol. 1, 45.

<sup>30</sup> Habermas, TCA, vol. 1, 45-49.

<sup>31</sup> Habermas, TCA, vol. 1, 49-50.

<sup>32</sup> Habermas, “Symbolic Expression and Ritual Behavior,” 63.

<sup>33</sup> Habermas TCA, vol. 1, 52.

<sup>34</sup> Robin Horton quoted in Habermas, TCA, vol. 1, 65.

experiences that decenter its undifferentiated qualities. Habermas concludes his discussion of mythic worldviews drawing on the work of Jean Piaget as a means of conceptualizing development that extends to worldviews as a whole.<sup>35</sup>

Turning to the history of religions, Habermas observes a tremendous innovation when mythic forms of thought turn “against its own principle of imagistic condensation” in the form of iconoclastic monotheistic religion. This marks the first step toward propositional meaning and is symptomatic of progressive decontextualization and objectification.<sup>36</sup> This presents us with the peculiar character of religion. On the one hand, religion is rooted in mythic origins. Habermas writes, for example, the “major religions can never entirely liberate themselves from their mythic origins; otherwise they would destroy their distinctive symbolic form and forfeit their sacred character.”<sup>37</sup> This point reinforces Habermas’s earlier claim that surely the limits of a critical or public theology culminate in the refusal of the religious adherent or the theologian to translate the whole of religious experience into secular discourses, noting that the “syndrome of revelation faith, held together in ritualized praxis” forms a barrier to complete translation: “For religious discourse would lose their identity if they were to open themselves up to a type of interpretation which no longer allows the religious experiences to be valid *as* religious.”<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, religion is conceived as a crucible: the very location that congealed images are liberated from a petrified form and freed into increasingly propositional forms.

The “collective” break with mythological forms of thought is illustrated by Habermas in two domains. The first domain is located in the fields of cultural anthropology and sociology, pertaining to the reconstruction of the rise of a new form of communication (from gestures to symbols) and the transition from ritual to normatively regulated action. The second domain concerns the historical development of these events within the philosophy of ideas. Whereas the former is discussed in relation to the writings of George Herbert Mead, Emile Durkheim, and Ernst Cassirer, the latter is usually illustrated with reference to the “Axial Age,” with specific examples taken from the trajectories of western philosophical thought. Habermas identifies ancient Greece as the birthplace of scientific thought, albeit oriented toward metaphysics and ontology, and claims an analogous break within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, not in terms of science but in terms of ethical cosmology.<sup>39</sup> The destructive potential of such breaks is evident in Habermas’s claim that a cultural modernism must cling to its own historical self-understanding. Without doing so the advance may be perceived as destruction without compensation, citing fundamentalism as an example of this.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Habermas, TCA, vol. 1, 68ff.

<sup>36</sup> Habermas, “Symbolic Expression and Ritual Behavior,” 63.

<sup>37</sup> Habermas, “Symbolic Expression and Ritual Behavior,” 63.

<sup>38</sup> Habermas, “Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World” 234.

<sup>39</sup> See Habermas, TCA, vol. 1, 1; Habermas, “Israel or Athens: Where does Anamnestic Reason Belong? Johann Baptist Metz on Unity amidst Multicultural Plurality,” 78-89.

<sup>40</sup> Habermas, “A Conversation about God and the World,” 152-153, 156-157.

When speaking of religion it is clear that Habermas has in mind both a dialectical concept and a scale, with religious thought closer to mythology on the one side and religious thought closer to modernity on the other. When Habermas speaks of the return of myth he invokes the dangers and limitations of the former. The latter, however, is (paternalistically?) encouraged rather than condemned. For example of religion that moves in the direction of myth, we can turn to his “Fundamentalism and Terror.” Here, Habermas argues that “fanaticism” can be understood in terms of the “repression of cognitive dissonances” that become necessary when “the epistemological innocence of an all-encompassing worldview has long since been lost and a return to the exclusively of pre-modern outlooks is advocated under the cognitive conditions of scientific knowledge and religious pluralism.”<sup>41</sup> This comment further qualifies his view that fundamentalist viewpoints that react to modernity by breaking off communication participate in a regressive “cognitive self-limitation.” The regression to premodern ways of thinking requires a “transition to a different stage of moral consciousness” that cannot be accomplished without the triggering of learning processes intimately connected with the criticizable nature of validity claims raised in everyday communicative practices.<sup>42</sup> Religious fundamentalism thus lies closer to myth despite being an “exclusively modern phenomenon.”<sup>43</sup> As an addendum, I could also add Habermas’s discussion of Cassirer, who perceived in the political practice of the Nazis an “ominous fusion of myth and technology.” Habermas adds,

Political myths return because they are hybrid phenomena. They draw on the exotic substance of a stratum of mythical images which is anchored in the symbolic constitution of human existence itself. The haunting of these satyr songs can only be dispelled by an enlightenment which is conscious of the dialectical nature of symbolization. Enlightenment must be able to acknowledge its own roots in the first phobic stirrings of the civilizing process.<sup>44</sup>

Further along the religious scale we find addresses and collegial discussions with friends and colleagues. In the essay “Metaphysics after Kant,” an essay written in honor of Dieter Henrich, Habermas remarks that it is possible to speak of metaphysical and religious questions in a synonymous manner.<sup>45</sup> Here he notes that metaphysical and religious systems of thought are typical of “a culture’s accomplishments of reaching self-understanding joined together in interpretive systems that preserve a structure homologous to the lifeworld’s entire structure of horizons.”<sup>46</sup> Although this means that religious thought is by and large undifferentiated, expressing a “totalizing unity of mythological narratives, religious doctrines, and metaphysical explanations,” Habermas states plainly that he does not “feel the slightest impulse to hinder” the pursuit of interpretations that take up the relevance and importance of a possible religious

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<sup>41</sup> Habermas, “Fundamentalism and Terror,” 11. See also “Faith and Knowledge,” 104.

<sup>42</sup> Habermas, “The Conflict of Beliefs,” 43; Habermas, “Communicative Rationality and the Theories of Meaning and Action,” 192.

<sup>43</sup> Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” 102.

<sup>44</sup> Habermas, “The Liberating Power of Symbols,” 25-26

<sup>45</sup> Habermas, “Metaphysics after Kant,” 15.

<sup>46</sup> Habermas, “Metaphysics after Kant,” 17.

dimension in human life.<sup>47</sup> However, if modern thought is defined by its differentiations between the spheres of art, politics and morality, and science, then religious thought expresses the fusion of all three, any orientation toward the religious seems to pay “the price of falling short of a level of differentiation and justification that has already been reached, i.e., at the price of surrendering its own plausibility.”<sup>48</sup> At the edge of the religious field, we find the transformative work of translators, such as Kant, “the first great example – after metaphysics – of a secularizing, but at the same time salvaging, deconstruction of religious truths.”<sup>49</sup> Such tasks, however, exceed the interest of the theologian or metaphysician who aims to preserve the unique and irreplaceable quality of their religious claims.<sup>50</sup>

In the twilight hours of religious thought, the challenge of postmetaphysical thinking to can be summarized as follows:

In modern societies, religious teachings must accustom themselves to the unavoidable competition with other forms of faith and claims to truth. They no longer move in a self-contained universe governed, so to speak, by their own absolute truth. Every religious teaching today encounters the pluralism of different forms of religious truth, as well as the skepticism of secular scientific knowledge which owes its social authority to its declared fallibility and a learning process based on unceasing revision. Religious dogmatics and the consciousness of believers must harmonize the illocutionary meaning of religious speech, the affirmation of the truth of a religious statement, with both facts. Each religious confession must adopt a relationship with the competing messages of other religions no less than with the objections of science and a secularized, semi-learned common sense.<sup>51</sup>

Religious faith must either become reflexive or it will oscillate ceaselessly between instability and disorientation. Religious adherents unable to engage with secular forms of knowledge or converse with competing cultural and religious traditions will no doubt experience ambiguities of detraditionalization as fatalistically experienced differentiation.<sup>52</sup>

### **Salvaging and Secularizing the Semantic Contents of Religion**

Maeve Cooke observes that if Habermas’s earlier view of religion appears to take a more dismissive attitude, this begins to change in the late 1980s, gravitating toward a

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<sup>47</sup> Habermas, “Metaphysics after Kant,” 17, 25.

<sup>48</sup> Habermas, “Metaphysics after Kant,” 17.

<sup>49</sup> Habermas, “Faith and Knowledge,” 110.

<sup>50</sup> For further details on this point, see “Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World,” 226-250.

<sup>51</sup> Habermas, “A Conversation about God and the World,” in *Time of Transitions*, 152.

<sup>52</sup> Habermas, “Individuation through Socialization,” 195.

more cautiously receptive position.<sup>53</sup> Habermas himself has indicated two factors for his reconsideration of religion in a more sustained way: recent developments in biotechnology that threaten to create conditions for the complete instrumentalization of human nature and, the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. Other factors may include the persistence of religion and the rise of global fundamentalisms, the working out in more detail of an undertheorized understanding of symbols, reflexive awareness about the fragility of lifeworlds, and an ever widening sensitivity to political inclusions and exclusions.

Cooke's essay "Salvaging and Secularizing the Semantic Contents of Religion: the Limitations of Habermas's Postmetaphysical Proposal" is a critical rejoinder to his recent writings on the relation between postmetaphysical philosophy and religion. After briefly summarizing her critique I propose a revision of Habermas's understanding of religion in a way that is complementary to Cooke's proposals yet also builds on of existing strength of Habermas's communicative-theoretic.

In her essay, Cooke makes two critical points. First, that Habermas's aim to salvage the semantic contents of religious traditions encumbers both religious adherents and secularists the task of translating religious language into secular language for the purposes of legislation and formal decision making. However, this task impairs the autonomy of metaphysically inclined citizens. To rectify this impairment, she suggests that a distinction between epistemologically authoritarian and non-authoritarian religious outlooks is necessary. Second, the salvage operation itself is not unproblematic in that it may not be possible to tap into the semantic power of religious traditions without relying on metaphysical assumptions. This is problematic for reasons internal to Habermas's understanding of the relation between validity claims and religious experience.<sup>54</sup>

Regarding the first conclusion: Cooke notes that Habermas consistently rules out the possibility that the truth of religious validity claims can be assessed.

[Habermas] endeavors to accommodate public discussion of religious validity claims within his existing conceptual apparatus by way of a distinction between validity claims, whose cognitive contents are open to critical *assessment* and validity claims, with whose cognitive contents postmetaphysical thinking must critically *engage*. This – implicit – distinction is evident, to begin with, in his restriction of public discussion of religious truth claims to *informal* processes of democratic deliberation.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Maeve Cooke, "Salvaging and Secularizing the Semantic Contents of Religion: The Limitations of Habermas's Postmetaphysical Approach," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60 (2006): 187-207.

<sup>54</sup> Summary adopted from the abstract (187).

<sup>55</sup> Cook, "Salvaging and Secularizing," 193.

As can be seen, Habermas wants to retain the inspiring and energizing elements of religious experience without having to accept it as *religious* experience.<sup>56</sup> Religious validity claims, so it would seem, form a special class of validity claims that require translation rather than adjudication. To explain, at times, Habermas has noted that religious validity claims are analogous to aesthetic validity claims. Like aesthetic validity claims, religious validity claims have a world-disclosing power with the potential to transform how we see aspects of everyday life. However, given the inevitable particularity of art and aesthetic criticism, since the lifeworld cannot be thematized as a whole, it is difficult to see how it is possible to do justice to both the universality of religious validity claims and their (particular) world-disclosing power. A similar incongruence emerges if we situate religious validity claims in relation to ethical (non-universal) and moral (universal) validity claims.<sup>57</sup> I agree with Cooke's assessment: Habermas's understanding of religious claims and his call for a project of translation creates a peculiar paradox leading one harrowingly to the rightful conclusion that "religious validity claims destabilize the very distinction between universal and non-universal claims."<sup>58</sup>

Continuing her overview of Habermas, she notes that the thematization of "religious validity claims" is to take place in the "weak publics" of civil society, spheres of opinion-formation, but not in the sphere of democratic legislation and decisions making (e.g. the parliament, judiciary). With regard to the legislature, judiciary, and executive branch, a publicly accessible and secular language must be taken up. It follows then that if religious validity claims are to have an impact on public life, the claims must be translated into non-religious language. Habermas argues that the inspiring elements of religion may be salvaged for use within secular discourse and that this task can be done only on the basis of translation: "Semantic contents count as cognitive if they can be translated into discourse in which only 'public' reasons count."<sup>59</sup> Given Habermas's discounting of the possible validity of religious claims, Cooke argues his position is "biased in favor of non-believers" (metaphysically inclined citizens).<sup>60</sup> While she lauds his attempt to "maintain a unity between religious identity and political identity" she remains skeptical about how Habermas claims to do this.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> While I cannot discuss the issue here, I think it wise to distinguish between different conceptions of religious experience. Religious experience can be understood as an experience of self-transcendence or as an encounter with the supernatural. If we adopt the former view, then there is no reason to discount religious experience as religious. The crucial distinction concerns whether experience is explained in humanist terms or with reference to the supernatural realm and its agencies. Hans Joas adopts the view that religion is best understood as self-transcendence and provides, in my view, an excellent starting point for further inquires in this direction. Hans Joas, *Do We Need Religion? On the Experience of Self-Transcendence* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2008).

<sup>57</sup> Cooke, "Salvaging and Secularizing," 191-192.

<sup>58</sup> Cooke, "Salvaging and Secularizing," 192.

<sup>59</sup> Cooke, "Salvaging and Secularizing," 195.

<sup>60</sup> Cooke, "Salvaging and Secularizing," 196. Cooke expresses a preference for the term "metaphysically inclined" to "believers and non-believers," a point discussed further below.

<sup>61</sup> As will be discussed in the next section, this issue appears differently if we characterize the split as an implication of secularism than if we understand the split to be the result of two

Due to the asymmetry between Habermas's theorization of religious and non-religious validity claims, Cooke contends that metaphysically inclined citizens will experience their autonomy as arbitrarily curtailed. This can be remedied, she argues, by making a distinction between "religious beliefs that are epistemologically authoritarian and those that are not."<sup>62</sup> This distinction is based on how we might best understand the claims to truth of religious teachings. Cooke's distinction rests on the criteria of critical challenge. Authoritarian religious claims are unshakeable, immune to critical challenge. Truth that is simply supported by religious experience is, however, fallible and subject to revision as well as critical scrutiny. The former is authoritarian, the latter is not.<sup>63</sup> Cooke argues that this consideration relieves the impairment created by the asymmetry without having to uncritically accept religious experience as such.

What strikes me most immediately about this paradox is what seems to be an unnecessary the inflation of the ordinary. Presumably a "religious validity claim," like any other validity claim, can readily be situated within Habermas's tripartite distinction between the three spheres of validity: the objective world (truth), the social world (rightness), and the subjective world (truthfulness). While Habermas rejects any consideration of such claims in the realm of truth, this does not hold equally for claims of rightness. But this claim appears to be muddled by discussions betwixt and between aesthetics, ethics, morality, particularity and universality. In my mind, however, the only reason a *religious* validity claim could be singled out as destabilizing the distinction between universal and non-universal when it comes to validity claims pertaining to the realm of norms, is if it the claim itself illicitly crosses the borders between these spheres. Importantly, however, we cannot fail to notice that the crossing of these borders occurs primarily in mythic forms of thought that are possessed by a syndrome of validity, an undifferentiated form of social interaction, caught in the crucible of congealed image and concept formation. If understood in this sense, a "religious validity claim" present us with no difficulty at all – because it becomes a contradiction in terms.

Let us take the example of Christian belief. The statement

A "I believe in Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior"

This statement can be read in a number of ways. From the first person perspective it could emphasize an individual orientation and be viewed as making a claim to truthfulness, e.g.

A<sup>1</sup> "I really do believe this."

From a third person perspective, the sentence could be reformulated without (apparent) loss of meaning as

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mutually exclusive ways of thinking. If the latter is the case, then the sought after unity between religious identity and political identity is neither possible nor desirable.

<sup>62</sup> Cooke, "Salvaging and Secularizing," 199.

<sup>63</sup> Cooke, "Salvaging and Secularizing," 199.

A<sup>2</sup> “She believes in Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior.”

In a more expansive sense we could derive a series of claims related to this position that would not be foreign to most branches of the Christian tradition:

B “Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior” (truth claim)

and

C “You ought to believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior” (normative claim).

While it may indeed seem that such variations on a validity claim are simply logical explications of its meaning in relation to the Christian milieu, a more contextual understanding of the nature of “belief” shows that A<sup>1</sup>, A<sup>2</sup>, B, and C are in fact inappropriate and distorting translations of the original claim because A cannot properly be construed as a validity claim at all. Despite the verbal appearance of propositional content, expressions of Christian belief are ritualistic, fusions of mythic and discursive thought, simultaneously non-illocutionary and non-propositional.

Today we can observe that in the ordinary use of the word “belief” there is a predominant idea that it is a theological claim or, at least, a statement concerning personal trust and the placement of one's sentiments. As Malcolm Ruel has shown, however, belief is a particular modality of thought, a nodal point of a particular kind of religious praxis. In the essay “Christians as Believers” Ruel selects four phases of Christian history each with their own particular understanding of belief: belief as initiation ritual (baptism), belief as the public acceptance of Christological teachings as handed down by ecclesiastical authorities (belief as ritual confession), belief as a form of spirit-possession (belief as a gift of Holy Spirit), and the more contemporary usage, the diffusion of belief and the declaration of the obsolescence of the concept, Robert Bellah's “beyond belief.”<sup>64</sup> Without working through his argument systematically, it should be apparent that “belief” in the first three examples has a distinct ritualized form and significance. From this we can readily see that belief is not central to all religions in the same way that it is central in Christianity.<sup>65</sup> The fallout of this insight requires a substantial revision how “religious validity claims” are understood. If one takes “belief” as a paradigmatic “religious validity claim” it becomes apparent, if we understand belief to be a ritual, that it is in fact not a validity claim at all, but a religious practice that takes discursive (albeit mythopoetic) form. I would tentatively submit that most “religious claims” have been misunderstood in this vein. What has been perceived as propositional, “I believe in God” (translated only by means of obfuscation as a propositional claim that

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<sup>64</sup> Malcolm Ruel, “Christians as Believers,” in *Belief, Ritual, and the Securing of Life: Essays on a Bantu Religion* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1997), 36-59. For further considerations of this view, see Malory Nye, “Belief,” in *Religion: The Basic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Routledge, 2004), 105-128 and Johannes C. Wolfart, “If I were a Lutheran, What Would I do?” *Religious Studies and Theology* 22, no. 2 (2003): 41-54.

<sup>65</sup> Ruel, “Christians as Believers,” 57.

“God exists”) is mythopoetic.<sup>66</sup> If one accepts this view then the phrase “religious validity claim” a contradiction in terms. What defines something as religious is precisely is undifferentiated character, at least one foot in the myth. The adjective “religious” refers to the syndrome of validity that accompanies mythopoetic thought that is not fully escaped in hybrid forms. Habermas’s comments about theology being bound by religious praxis must be read in this light, although I do not think he has the final word.

To be sure, I am wholly supportive of Cooke’s hesitancy regarding Habermas’s use of the term “believer” and “non-believer” to refer to religious adherents. She opts for the term “metaphysically inclined” which I think is fair, but it is also necessary to distinguish between those metaphysically inclined in a scientific or propositional manner and those metaphysically inclined in a mythopoetic manner. For this we must take up an important distinction found in the work of Donald Wiebe.

In *The Irony of Theology and the Nature of Religious Thought*, Wiebe supports the Levy-Bruhlian thesis that there exists within one mind two mutually exclusive ways of thinking: mythopoetic and scientific, modern. Whereas the former is largely symbolic and undifferentiated in nature, the latter is propositional and criticizable. It is highly advantageous to introduce this thesis here because Wiebe’s conclusions are almost identical to Habermas’s in terms of this distinction in modalities of thought.<sup>67</sup> Where Wiebe goes further, however, is in his careful analysis of the qualitative difference between theology and religious thought.

Wiebe, following Ernst Gellner, characterizes mythopoetic thought as follows: the use of idiosyncratic norms that is both cognitive and moral at the same time, an “enchanted” conflation of roles in the individual (undifferentiated understanding of functions), the diffused and persuasive quality of the entrenched clauses of the intellectual constitution (unquestionable or untouchable sacred claims), and “the diplomatic immunity of cognition” (indistinct conflation of truth and social obligation).<sup>68</sup> As is evident, Wiebe’s understanding of mythopoetic thought is quite similar Habermas’s understanding as outlined in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Scientific thought, on the other hand, is

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<sup>66</sup> I think this explains why the new atheists, Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, in particular, is so frustrated by the responses he gets from the religious adherents he speaks with. Dawkins is under the impression that religion is bad science, and that theologians are simply illogical or irrational. What he has not recognized is that religious belief is not bad science, it is a ritual performance. So, when he is arguing with believers about the existence of God Dawkins is under the impression that he is winning a scientific argument whereas the believer is engaging in religious ritual: confession, testimony, witness. If viewed in this way the “exchange” becomes almost comical. It is as if the scientist Dawkins is arguing with an actor in mid-performance who refuses to break with their role and script.

<sup>67</sup> It must be emphasized that the similarities between Wiebe’s position and Habermas’s pertain almost exclusively to the domain of truth, the sciences. As far as I can tell, Wiebe views all ethical considerations as predominantly mythopoetic in nature. While I accept his position on the nature of the sciences, especially his distinction between “religious thought” (as mythopoetic) and “theology” (as an academic discipline) I do not agree that questions concerning rightness are left simply to hybrid forms of discourse and myth.

<sup>68</sup> Wiebe, *The Irony of Theology and the Nature of Religious Thought*, 82-83.

characterized by creativity, critical examination, and experimentation. Theories are “open to criticism” and implicitly call for revision on the basis of new observations, empirical evidence, or contradiction. In other words, theory is subject to falsification, and can be understood as a procedure of “conjectures and refutations” (Popper).<sup>69</sup>

An example of mythopoetic thought at work can be discerned within fundamentalist language and politics in the United States. Susan Friend Harding, in her study of Jerry Falwell, observes and documents a peculiar trait of Protestant fundamentalism that is exemplary of mythopoetic thought. She observes that Falwell, one of the architects of the Religious Right, has a persistent tendency of thought to “backdate” and reinvent his personal narratives. For example, despite Falwell’s open and known support of racial segregation into the late 60s, he tells us that he ceased to be a racist in 1963. While it may appear that Falwell is simply falsifying his own history in order to protect himself from the charge of racism or of failing to hear the voices of the civil rights movement, Harding detects a more subtle mechanism at work.

Falwell’s speech is not like secular speech. He inhabits a world generated by Bible-based stories and, as a ‘man of God,’ his speech partakes of the generative quality of the bible itself. He incessantly frames his life, if only lightly, in biblical terms, and his faithful followers read him as they read the Bible – not as already true, but as always coming true.<sup>70</sup>

Which is to say, Falwell remembers his life not as it is, but as he wants it to be, as lived Biblically. It is as if in thinking about the past differently, the past truly changes. This kind of thinking has all of the characteristics of mythopoetic thought as outlined by Habermas and Wiebe – and there is no refuting the fact that Falwell and the rise of fundamentalism in the United States is a situated within a thoroughly modern society utilizing thoroughly modern means of communication and institutionalization. The two modalities of thought are simultaneous.

The congruence between Habermas and Wiebe here is no accident, both are relying on near identical sources for their analysis and have arrived, despite their widely disparate interests and theoretical backgrounds, at a near consensus concerning the dichotomous nature of human thought. The critical point that Wiebe makes that I would like to draw in here is his contention that there are two kinds of thinking that can be discerned within the field of theology: academic theology (theology) and mythopoetic theology (“theology”). For Wiebe, these two kinds of theology stem from two mutually exclusive forms of thought. Making this point explicit affirms my claim that the idea of a “religious (i.e. mythopoetic) validity claim” is a contradiction in terms. In this sense we ought not to distinguish between “light” and “heavy” metaphysical baggage, but between discourses about metaphysics or theology (talk about religion) and mythopoetic praxis (religious talk).

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<sup>69</sup> Wiebe, *The Irony of Theology and the Nature of Religious Thought*, 104-105.

<sup>70</sup> Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27.

Wiebe convincingly shows that we can make a legitimate distinction between academic theology, as a scientific project, and religious thought, as a mythopoetic activity with the caveat that “theology” is a hybrid discourse that ultimately must be categorized as mythopoetic in nature. Academic theology, in this view, as a discipline that has as its aim a scientific explanation and account of the activity of the divine or divinities without reference or fidelity to creeds, obligations, or communal identities. By extension, the kind of distinction that Wiebe makes between academic theology and “theology” also holds for fields including ontology and metaphysics. The definitive difference has to do with the criticizability of the claim with regard to its truth. In Habermasian terms, the distinction between a validity claim and a symbolic gesture.

With Wiebe’s distinction in mind, it becomes unnecessary to make a distinction between “authoritarian” and “non-authoritarian” forms of religious epistemology, although this distinction may be worth retaining for different reasons. As long as we can distinguish between ritual performance and discursive forms of argumentation, the question of validity concerning the activity of deities or norms that have a metaphysical grounding can be treated just as would any other validity claim. What we should not fail to notice is that theological claims, by which I mean scientific claims about the activity of the deities, seem to be highly contested. So much so that the possibility of the discipline itself is in question.<sup>71</sup>

The advantage of the position outlined above is that the onus of justification is placed where it belongs, the individual(s) raising the claim and the reasons they could potentially proffer in debate with others in support of its validity and acceptance. While Habermas’s position exerts a generous nature, stating that secular citizens have a obligation to assist in the translation work of religious claims, it places an overwhelmingly unfair burden on secular citizens who have to engage in discursive clarifications of their own claims that have nothing to do with religion (a difficult enough task as it is!) and, apparently, becomes scholars and experts in the discourses, rituals, and symbolic forms of exchange of countless religious traditions which – often enough, are oriented by and large by mythopoetic perspectives to which modern or scientific forms of thought are an anathema.

In conclusion with regard to Cooke’s first reservation, I agree. As formulated by Habermas there is a deep-seated problem with the treatment of “religious validity claims.” While Cooke’s solution has been to propose a differentiation between authoritarian and non-authoritarian religious epistemologies, I think an equally judicious route can be discerned by focusing on the distinction between mythopoetic and modern thought. This has the advantage of already being built into Habermas’s understanding of symbol formation and is at the heart of his theory of rationality and his understanding of individuation and socialization. It also has the advantage of being testable, in the sense that the distinction between mythopoetic thought and scientific thought can be made evident through careful observation and analysis. Another advantage is that making use of this insight restores cognitive symmetry between metaphysically inclined citizens and

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<sup>71</sup> In this sense, theology is a discipline that seems to have fallen on hard times in the wake of its own failure to produce results that have any kind of widespread cognitive legitimacy.

post-metaphysically inclined citizens. Where an asymmetry does appear concerns citizens who are dogmatically ritualistic in orientation, persistently refusing communicative means of problem solving in favor of the ecstasies of ritual. This, however, is separate issue.

Confusion about the nature of religious thoughts appears to be endemic throughout Habermas's work, despite the fact that he's working with an adequate understanding of communication and symbolic formation. The problem as I see it, comes from his reliance on the philosophy of religion, itself more often than not a hybrid "theology," the speculative articulation of the genealogy of the evolution of world religions as leaning more toward ethical cosmology than theological science. This apparent tendency toward the ethical in the major world religious traditions is the result of a serious misattribution and misunderstanding of religion; since religion is, according to Habermas's own self-understanding, a set of undifferentiated practices and perspectives. The syndrome of validity that Habermas speaks of pertains to the fusion of claims to truth and rightness, a confusion between the internal and external worlds. Understood in this way the advances made by religion in terms of ethical cosmology cannot be understood apart from this very undifferentiated perspective: religious worldviews are ethical and scientific simultaneously, without differentiation.<sup>72</sup> The task of translation, for Habermas, requires translation only in the broad field of rightness, and religious contributions in the domain of truth are to be discarded. The reason is obvious, Habermas clearly sees no possible contribution from religion in the domain of truth and he rejects, out of hand, the possibility of accepting religious experience as religious, thus eliminating the cornerstone of a theological science. Once a distinction is made between academic theology, which could be viewed as having distinct and analytically separate contributions to the spheres of truth and rightness, this asymmetrical and historically dubious reading of the history of world religions as predominantly ethical becomes innocuous.

The second issue for Cooke is Habermas's salvage operation. How does one translate mythopoetic thought into discourse, preserving the inspiring content of myth without the temptations of a return to ritual or the hybridization of illocutionary aims. If my conclusions above are correct, the entire project of translation is a red herring. What is necessary is not the translation of the semantic concepts of religious language into an equally inspiring secular language, but a recognition and renewed appreciation of the learning processes already undergone, wherein the imagistic forms of thought came to be freed from a stasis in congealed forms and dialecticized by means of concept formation. In other words, it is not that postmetaphysical thinking must look outside of itself for alternative sources of meaning, but must simply recall its own constitution as postmetaphysical. To require a complete reconsideration of religion underestimates the

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<sup>72</sup> For an explanation why philosophers of religion, such as Kant and Hegel, systematically misunderstand the nature of religion, see Hans G. Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, trans. Barbara Harshaw (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). For a study of the ideological interest that aims to preserve this distortion for its own privilege, see Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) and Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies* (add reference).

prevalence of mythopoetic thought and underestimates the constitutive vitality of postmetaphysical thinking. The issue is less that postmetaphysically inclined citizens need a boost of imagination, but that we live in a society that misrecognizes the ecstasies of living ritualistically, either in the form of fetishizing their pleasures (ritualism) or renouncing them altogether (asceticism and the privileging of pure contemplation). Both ritualism and a philosophy that privileges the realm of pure contemplation abnegate and deny the social and intersubjective constitution of symbolic action. However, this is not a conceptual problem for discourse ethics or a theory of deliberative democracy but a lived social problem – which is precisely what critical theory is designed to address: the transformation of reason into unreason.

The fact of the matter is, the lifeworld is rejuvenated by the simultaneous (and contradictory) presence of two fundamentally exclusive orientations in one mind: one toward the mythic, narrative, and imagistic, and the other toward the discursive. There is no translation between these two forms of thought, only sublimation which is a distortion and transformation of the image into discourse. The impoverishment of the lifeworld that Habermas is worried about is alleviated when we consider the extraordinary rich non-discursive media available to us on an everyday basis: religious rituals, music, television, and so on. These media are meaning-giving systems. It is not so much a problem of translation, the “salvaging of religion” that is the issue, but the societal balance between two modalities of thought as well as self-critical reflection on the balance with sensitivity to distortions or pathological ruptures.

Cooke has critically noted that Habermas’s “critical engagement with the contents of religion is intended to produce images, intuitions, and insights that enrich the purely secular vocabulary of postmetaphysical thinking: it is not intended to cast light on the validity of religious truth claims.”<sup>73</sup> The point is well taken, but it is not limited to religion. The content of any mythopoetic form can enrich the secular vocabulary of postmetaphysical thinking, indeed how could it not. Again, as I have suggested, if we understand “religious truth claims” here to be the claims of an academic theology, not the religious practices (however verbal) of believers, then this asymmetry does not exist. Theological claims about the activity of the deities are scientific insofar as they are not bound by religious doctrine or communal sanction or approval. Claims about the gods and goddesses can be formulated in a criticizable way. To claim otherwise is to abandon discursive forms of thought and side with myth.

## **Conclusion**

Following Cooke, we can observe that Habermas’s aim to be more inclusive of religious adherents in the political realm is laudable. However, that a postmetaphysical philosophy should “seek to salvage the semantic contents of religious traditions in order to supply the evocative images, exemplary figures, and inspirational narratives it needs for its social and political projects”<sup>74</sup> seems to express a confusion between engaged learning processes, constituted by the work of symbol formation, and the requirements of

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<sup>73</sup> Cooke, “Salvaging and Secularizing the Semantic Contents of Religion,” 195.

<sup>74</sup> Cooke, 187.

communicative action, which can only ever be based on successful accomplishments in the realm of cognitive development. The fact that poetry is inspiring does not mean that non-poetic utterances require poetry in order to sustain their vitality. A theory of communicative rationality needs to be satisfied with the fact that ritual, however invigorating, participates in a wholly different modality of thought than communication action. The limits of disenchantment are both nearer and farther than one might think. Closer because despite our modern identities, we still live in our dreams. One only need consider the symbolism of food to be aware of this.<sup>75</sup> Farther, because we have yet to reach or even conceive of a point where learning could come to an end.

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<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Klaus Eder's discussion of food and symbolism in *The Social Construction of Nature: A Sociology of Ecological Enlightenment*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: SAGE Publications, 1996).