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The Contributions of Religions to the Common Good:

Philosophical Perspectives[1]

Manfred L. Pirner

Abstract

The philosophical discourse on the question of "how citizens who remain deeply divided on religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines, can still maintain a just and stable democratic society" (John Rawls) corresponds with the discourse in educational science on the question of how a consensus on major objectives of public education in general and the role of religion in this context in particular can be reached. The author's contention is that public theology and Public Religious Pedagogy ("Öffentliche Religionspädagogik") can be conceptualized as a response to the challenges formulated by the two recently most influential social theories, those developed by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. At the centre of such a framework lies the competence of self-reflection that will lead to a modest epistemology, a self-critical hermeneutics, a positive valuation of religious plurality and a diaconical perspective on the world. Accordingly, public religious education will be located in the overlapping area of specific religious traditions, their dialogue with other religions and worldviews, and their relation to public reason and the basic democratic values such as human dignity or human rights values. On this basis, public religious education aims to be a benefit to all people, irrespective of their religious or nonreligious orientation, and in this way a contribution to the common good in pluralistic societies and in the world.

[1] This is the slightly modified part of an essay that was originally published in 2017 in the Special Issue 'Public Theology—Religion(s)—Education' of the *International Journal of Public Theology (IJPT), 11*(3).

1. Introduction

The perspective offered in this contribution is the result of my research over the past years on John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas and human rights discourse in the context of public theology and public religious education.[2] My academic background is the scholarly discipline of *Religionspädagogik* – which I will translate as "Religious Pedagogy" – that, as a theologically grounded discipline, reflects and researches on the various links between religion and education. In particular, Religious Pedagogy deals with (confessional) Religious Education (RE), which is a constitutionally enshrined school subject at nearly all German schools. Also, the following deliberations are connected to recent developments in Germany of a "Public Religious Pedagogy" that aims to take particular regard of the public dimension of religious education and to link Religious Pedagogy with the discourse around public theology.[3]

I am well aware that in the context of public theology as well as in the context of public religious education Rawls and Habermas have often been appreciated or critically discussed – and are so in other contributions in this volume.[4] In my own interpretation, that owes stimulations to a number of colleagues and especially to Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, I will underline the importance of seeing the close connections between Rawls' and Habermas' concepts and of concentrating on their most recent publications. The latter is especially crucial for Rawls, because he modified his views on religion in his last writings as a reaction to some of the criticism that had been levelled against his earlier writings. It seems to me that the critical discussion of the earlier Rawls has partly obstructed the reception of the later Rawls.[5] Habermas, too, has changed his perspective on religion significantly over the past 20 years, so

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[2] See Pirner, 2012a; 2012b; 2015a; 2015b; 2016; 2017.
[3] For a more detailed account on these developments in Germany see Schröder and Schlag, both in this volume, as well as Grümme, 2015; Könemann, 2016; Pirner, 2017; and several contributions in Pirner, Lähnemann, Haussmann & Schwarz, 2018. See also the website of our *Research Unit for Public Religion and Education (RUPRE)*: http://www.rupre.uni-erlangen.org/.
[4] See for example the contributions by Bedford-Strohm and Schröder.
[5] This also goes, in my view, for the otherwise intriguing and stimulating work of Hanan Alexander (2015).

that one could even speak of a “religious turn” or “theological turn” in Habermas’ thinking (Calhoun, Medieta & VanAntwerpen, 2013; Harrington, 2007) – although he has remained the “religiously unmusical” agnostic he has repeatedly called himself. Certainly it is highly interesting that the two probably most influential political philosophers of our time, Rawls and Habermas, have, in the later part of their academic lives, come to positively revalue the contributions religions can make to modern societies and the global community. I will also attempt, with some claim to originality, to elaborate the significance of Rawls’ and Habermas’ political theories for the field of public (religious) education. When in the following I start with John Rawls’ answer to the question of “how citizens who remain deeply divided on religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines, can still maintain a just and stable democratic society” (Rawls, 2005, p. 10), my hypothesis is that this question from social philosophy is closely linked to the question of educational philosophy of how a consensus over the task and major objectives of public education, and the role of religion in it, can be found. Thus – as I will contend despite remaining points of criticism that might be raised against them – Rawls’ and Habermas’ theories can serve as a helpful overarching framework not only for the public theologies of diverse religions but also for linking public theology and public education.

2. Public reason, overlapping consensus and complementary learning processes

According to John Rawls (2005, p. 10), coherence and solidarity in pluralistic societies cannot be reached by searching for a common “comprehensive doctrine” of the good life, because the very characteristic of such societies is that they include citizens with different and sometimes conflicting comprehensive doctrines. Rather it is sufficient to find a consensus on fundamental “political conceptions” or “political values”, such as, we might say, the values of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Rawls offers two answers to the question of how such a consensus can come about. The first rests on the assumption that almost all citizens have the

capacity for reason and therefore of "reasoning in the public forum about constitutional essentials and basic questions of justice" in terms of what Rawls (2005, p. 10) calls "public reason". In this line, the political conception "is worked out first as a freestanding view that can be justified *pro tanto* without looking to, or trying to fit, or even knowing what are, the existing comprehensive doctrines" (Rawls, 2005, p. 389). As an example, Rawls (2005, p. 160) points to the fact that many citizens come to endorse the basic political values incorporated into their respective national constitutions without seeing any particular link between those principles and their comprehensive worldviews.

In face of many critical responses Rawls' concept of public reason has received especially among communitarian and theological thinkers, it is vital to note that he rejected to equate public reason with secular reason. In his essay "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited" (1999) he explains how he imagines 'public reason' to evolve.

> Citizens realize that they cannot reach agreement or even approach mutual understanding on the basis of their irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines. In view of this, they need to consider what kinds of reason they may reasonably give one another when fundamental political questions are at stake. I propose that in public reason comprehensive doctrines of truth or right be replaced by an idea of the politically reasonable addressed to citizens as citizens. Central to the idea of public reason is that it neither criticizes nor attacks any comprehensive doctrine, religious or nonreligious, except insofar as that doctrine is incompatible with the essentials of public reason and a democratic polity. (Rawls, 1999, p. 547)

Rawls (1999, p. 582) also underlines that political liberalism "does not try to fix public reason once and for all in the form of one favored political conception of justice". Rather, he understands public reason to be dynamic and open to development. And he explicates that public reason is different "from what is sometimes referred to as secular reason or secular

values.” His definition of secular reason is “reasoning in terms of comprehensive nonreligious doctrines” while public reason restricts itself to the sphere of political values and is in itself neither religious nor nonreligious (Rawls, 1999, p. 583). Therefore, as Rawls emphasizes, concepts derived from religious traditions such as “Catholic views of the common good and solidarity” are also admitted to make contributions to the discourse of public reason, as long as “they are expressed in terms of political values” (Rawls, 1999, p. 583).

So, the first mode of justifying common political concepts and values that Rawls proposes is developing them as “freestanding concept[s]” on the basis of public reason. In his view, this principally suffices to lay a common ground in a pluralist society.

However, in a second line of arguments Rawls contends that this common ground significantly gains breadth, depth and stability, if the political conceptions and values can additionally be linked to diverse comprehensive doctrines and demonstrated to be compatible with them: “[…] even though a political conception of justice is freestanding, that does not mean that it cannot be embedded in various ways – or mapped, or inserted as a module – into the different doctrines citizens affirm” (Rawls, 2005, p. 387). In this way an “overlapping consensus” between citizens with diverse religions and worldviews can develop that has the potential of being deeper and more durable, because the political conceptions or values are now linked with the deepest convictions that guide people’s lives. And religious or worldview communities can play an important role in supporting political conceptions or values, if they have succeeded in elaborating the links or overlaps between them and their own traditions.

It is important to realize here that in Rawls’ understanding the overlapping consensus is not just the result of an empirical stocktaking of diverse religions and worldviews in order to find similarities. As Heiner Bielefeldt (1998, p. 146) has emphasized, it is rather a normative idea, which, it is true, “allows for a variety of religious or ideological views, but at the same time marks the boundaries of tolerance”. Because the underlying normative premise is that

individuals – and also religions – “acknowledge each other in their difference through granting each other equal freedom and equal participation” (Bielefeldt, 1998, p. 147). Consequently, for Rawls (1999, pp. 581–582), the “basic rights, liberties and opportunities” enshrined in a freestanding political conception are assigned a normative priority over against the norms of comprehensive doctrines – at least in the public sphere. Rawls (2005, p. 389) expresses his hope that a freestanding political conception, whose justification does not depend on a specific comprehensive doctrine, will be able to challenge diverse comprehensive doctrines to affirm it and that it “will have the capacity to shape those doctrines toward itself”. Evidence that this can really happen can be taken from the development of human rights culture. The international human rights have over the decades gained increasing approval not only from governments but also from religious communities. In a recent estimation human rights expert Jack Donnelly (2013, p. 59) has contended that “[F]or their own varied reasons, most leading comprehensive doctrines now see human rights as the political expression of their deepest values”. By this acknowledgment and integration of human rights into diverse religions, these religions have been and still are challenged and stimulated in their own internal development towards a more humane and inclusive ethic, for instance to grant women, disabled people or homosexuals equal rights within their communities.

There is, to put it in Rawlsian terms, a substantial overlapping consensus between the political theories of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, but also some disagreement and especially some further development of thoughts by the latter after Rawls’ death. Habermas (2012, p. 324) agrees with Rawls that a pragmatic *modus vivendi*-consensus alone is not the ideal basis for cohesion in pluralistic societies. He also thinks that for a more substantial consensus “religious citizens have to acquire the secular legitimation of the community on the premises of their own faith”. As examples of a successful such acquisition Habermas points to the two big churches in Germany, the Roman-Catholic and the Protestant Church, which in the course of the

twentieth century have come to endorse and support liberalism, democracy and human rights that they formerly rejected. Such a change of opinion, Habermas (2012, p. 325) argues, cannot be commanded or legally enforced, but "is at best the consequence of a learning process".

Yet, Habermas concludes that it would be unfair to only expect such learning processes from religious citizens. In his view (Habermas, 2012, p. 326), nonreligious citizens also have a lesson to learn. "Do not", he asks, "the same normative expectations that we direct towards an inclusive civic society prohibit a secularist denigration of religion just as much as, for instance, the religious rejection of equal rights for men and women?" Habermas thus arrives at the concept of a *"complementary learning process"* of religious and non-religious citizens. Its basis is that both sides, secular reason and religion, should become *self-reflective* and aware of their limitations, so that they become open to listening to each other, can take each other's contributions to public discourse seriously and eventually also learn from one other (Habermas, 2008, pp. 111–112).

As a secular and agnostic philosopher Habermas himself has repeatedly demonstrated his openness to learning from religious traditions and positions. He expressed his conviction that the "special articulative power" and "semantic potential" of those traditions when it comes to vulnerable forms of humane coexistence have not yet been exhausted (Habermas, 2001, p. 25). In his view, such learning processes are also beneficial from the perspective of the constitutional state, because it must be in the state's interest "to conserve all cultural sources that nurture citizens' solidarity and their normative awareness" (Habermas, 2008, p. 111).

As to the hermeneutical question of how such learning processes can be possible, the concept of "translation" plays a crucial role for Habermas. He points to the fact that in the history of philosophy contents from the Christian tradition have repeatedly been transformed into a generally accessible language by "conserving translations". Habermas' classic example is Immanuel Kant's translation of the Christian topic of God creating humans in his image into

the secular concept of human dignity (Habermas, 2008, p. 110). For Habermas, translation is the mode of a "secularization that does not destroy", that values and preserves the semantic potential of religions instead of declaring it as outdated. However, he also concedes that a perfect translation is not possible. "When sin turned into guilt, the trespassing against divine commandments into the violation of human laws, something got lost." (Habermas, 2001, p. 24).

3. The "translation" of religious language as a political issue

The idea of translating religious language into generally accessible language already appears in John Rawls' philosophy and has been the object of controversial debates. In view of the public discourse between religious and non-religious citizens one central question is whether religious citizens should be allowed to make their contributions to this discourse in their religious language and based on their religious convictions, although these cannot be shared by their non-religious fellow citizens. Rawls initially had quite a restrictive opinion on this issue. He demanded as a *proviso* that religious citizens were only allowed to contribute, if they translated their religious views into the generally accessible language of public reason. However, already in the "Introduction to the paperback edition" of his book *Political Liberalism*, published in 1995, he changed his position:

> I now believe, and hereby I revise VI:8 [the corresponding chapter in *Political Liberalism*, M.P.], that reasonable such doctrines may be introduced in public reason at any time, provided that in due course public reasons, given by a reasonable political conception, are presented sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are introduced to support. (Rawls, 2005, pp. xlix–l)[6]

[6] See also Rawls, 1999, p. 591–593.

Rawls further elaborated this modified perspective in his later essay "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited". Here, he provides a number of examples, in which for him it makes good sense that people explicitly introduce their comprehensive doctrines into public discussion.

> Consider, for example, a highly contested political issue – the issue of public support for church schools. Those on different sides are likely to come to doubt one another's allegiance to basic constitutional and political values. It is wise, then, for all sides to introduce their comprehensive doctrines, whether religious or secular, so as to open the way for them to explain to one another how their views do indeed support those basic political values. (Rawls, 1999, p. 593)

Rawls also offers positive historical examples of how religious perspectives were introduced into public life and thus promoted political justice. He mentions, for instance, the religiously motivated Abolitionists in the nineteenth century and Martin Luther King's Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth century. He even endorses a form of religious argument as legitimate that he calls "witnessing", in which citizens express their religiously motivated dissent in specific points (e.g. the Quakers' strict pacifism or the Catholic opposition to abortion) – without principally calling into question constitutional democracy and its majority decisions (Rawls, 1999, p. 595).

Again similarly to Rawls, Habermas draws a distinction between the *informal* public discourse into which religious perspectives can be entered at any time, and the "political process of decision making in the context of parliaments, courts and governments" where religious arguments can "only count, if their relevant substance has been translated into a publicly accessible language" (Habermas, 2007, p. 412). Habermas clearly goes beyond Rawls when he conceptualizes the task of translation as a *dialogical cooperative endeavour of religious and non-religious citizens.* He argues that it would be unfair to burden only religious citizens with the obligation to kind of split up their identity and translate their religious convictions into a

secular language in the public square. To be fair, it should be *vice versa* expected from the non-religious citizens to "preserve a sense for the articulative power of religious languages" (Habermas, 2001, p. 21). Habermas further elaborated this argument a few years later:

> The neutrality of state power vis-à-vis different worldviews, which guarantees equal individual liberties for all citizens, is incompatible with the political generalization of a secularized worldview. Secular citizens, in their role as citizens, may neither deny that religious worldviews are in principle capable of truth nor question the right of their devout fellow-citizens to couch their contributions to public discussions in religious language. A liberal political culture can even expect its secular citizens to take part in the efforts to translate relevant contributions from religious language into a publicly intelligible language. (Habermas, 2008, p. 113)

This is precisely what Habermas has repeatedly done. Again he points to the interest of the liberal state in this context. He argues that the state should not discourage religious persons and communities from expressing themselves in a religious language in public discourse, "for it cannot be sure that secular society would not otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity" (Habermas, 2008, p. 131).

4. Conclusion: consequences for public theology and public education

As initially indicated, Rawls' and Habermas' social theories, in my view, offer a useful framework in which public theology and Public Religious Pedagogy can locate themselves. Public theology understands itself as academic reflection of a Christianity that has become aware of its limitations and its particularity in the context of a pluralistic society and world and on this basis aims to contribute to the common good in dialogue and collaboration with others. Public theology can thus be regarded as the counterpart of Habermas' self-reflective and self-

critical philosophy of a secular modernity that has become aware of its limitations and open to a renewed dialogue with religious perspectives. It is a consensus among public theologians as well as philosophers that in order to make this dialogue and co-operation between religious and secular people possible diverse endeavours of translation must be undertaken. Public theology must be bilingual, as several authors have emphasized (e.g. Bedford-Strohm, 2008, p. 151; Graham, 2017, p. 121). The notions of 'bilinguality' and 'translation' both imply mutual understanding under the condition of remaining alienness and independence – this is why translation has been considered to be a key concept in pluralistic liberal societies (Renn, Straub & Shimada, 2002; Bachmann-Medick, 2009; Pirner, 2012b).

Rawls' and Habermas' theories also have far reaching implications for public education in general and the role of religion in public education as they are brought into dialogue with Public Religious Pedagogy and public theology. I will concentrate on five of these implications.

1. Habermas' idea that the decisive aspect of the modernization process lies in the increasing self-reflexivity that affects secular reason and religion alike already indicates that education is an important factor in this process. As both Rawls and Habermas emphasize, political culture in liberal democratic societies is based on the consent of their free and equal citizens to basic political values and rights. Habermas has rightly pointed out that in this respect there can be no coercion, but this consent can only be the consequence of a learning process – which cannot be guaranteed. Because citizens in democratic societies are deemed free and equal, the importance of a liberal, non-manipulatory education that stimulates such learning processes cannot be overestimated. In almost all parts of the political theories outlined here the task of education and learning is implicitly present. It becomes even more obvious and explicit in Habermas' concept of complementary learning processes of (diverse) religious and (diverse) non-religious citizens. Just as citizens with different religious and non-religious views are expected to communicate and co-operate for the common good of society in general, they should

communicate and co-operate for the benefit of good and humane public education. As in society in general, religious perspectives should not be excluded from schools and other public educational institutions but rather should religious and secular parents as well as pupils be encouraged to bring in their diverse views and ideas into school culture and to engage in public discourse on the tasks and objectives of school education.

2. Public school education is to be regarded as a highly significant part of the public sphere as it provides the young generation with a learning model of how diversity in society is dealt with and on which basis living together is possible. Philosophers like Rawls and Habermas, but also, for instance, Michael Sandel (2006; 2009), Hans Joas (2013), or Hanan Alexander (2015), contend that strong truth claims and particularistic views do have their place in democratic pluralist societies, and that consensus should be sought not by evading or excluding them but by engaging them in public debate. In this respect, the issue of religious and worldview diversity can be seen as a test case. In his "public philosophy" Michael Sandel has repeatedly warned that public discourse, which is so vital for pluralist societies, may become hollow and superficial, if people's fundamental moral, religious and worldview convictions are not included and addressed. This could lead to increasing disappointment and frustration which may make people susceptible to the strong truth claims of fundamentalist and extremist groups or authoritarian leaders (Sandel, 2006; 2009). The same, I believe, can be said for the public sphere of school education. Schools that primarily concentrate on the acquisition of instrumental competencies and neglect the engagement with questions of meaning and morality risk to offer a hollow and superficial kind of education that leaves pupils incompetent in dealing with diversity and otherness.

3. One particular consequence of Habermas' concept of complementary learning processes is to assign academically grounded education on religion(s) a central role in public education: Such religious education can on the one hand address the task of disclosing to religious students

religious approaches to democratic institutions and liberal values in terms of Rawls' overlapping consensus. On the other hand, it can also serve the aim of "preserving a sense for the articulative power of religious languages" in secular, non-religious students, as Habermas demands. To this end, an introduction into religious language(s) and religious insider perspectives seems just as necessary as an introduction into possibilities – and successful models – of translating (a specific) religious language in such a way that it becomes accessible to students with secular worldviews or other religious backgrounds.

4. Such a concept for religion in public education of course challenges all those approaches of religious education or courses of religious studies that confine themselves to teaching *about* religion in terms of an informational approach. To be sure, learning about various religions and worldviews can certainly support tolerance and understanding and thus facilitate a peaceful coexistence in a pluralistic society. However, in analogy to Rawls' concept of the overlapping consensus, the basis for such a coexistence can be expected to become broader, deeper and more endurable, if students realize that different religions and worldviews deserve respect and appreciation because they have in the past contributed and are still contributing to the common good in society and yet also need critical engagement in order to distinguish between life-supporting and life-obstructing aspects. In this way, students may find out, the diverse religions and worldviews also provide opportunities for learning *from* them. This necessitates an important role for insider perspectives, i.e. theological perspectives in the context of religious education. Public theologies recommend themselves as academic reference disciplines for RE beside and in co-operation with religious studies. A concept of public religious education that takes insider perspectives seriously is likely to foster not only tolerance between people with different religious and non-religious worldviews, but mutual acceptance and the openness to co-operate for the sake of a better life for all – despite remaining strangeness and otherness. This implies a concept of pluralism that is not harmonistic and superficial, but takes into

account and endures differences in terms of what the late German professor of religious education Karl Ernst Nipkow (1994, p. 205) called “hard pluralism”.

5. However, it should be remembered that Rawls’ idea of the overlapping consensus is not conceptualized as an empirical description but as a normative challenge. As outlined above, its starting point is the “freestanding *pro tanto* justification” of fundamental constitutional norms and political values. Therefore, it is not enough to just look for existing communalities – empirical overlaps, so to speak – between the different denominations, religions and worldviews in dialogical learning processes. Rather what is required is to integrate and refer to consensual norms and ethical standards. In view of public religious education and its important dimension of interreligious learning this implies a trialogical rather than a dialogical structure:

> The complementary learning processes of religious and non-religious people (Habermas) are not just about learning from each other, but are always directed towards and informed by public reason, in its consolidated form of basic constitutional and political values, and in its fluid form of public discourse. Consequently, in addition to the above-mentioned two major tasks of public religious education – introduction into religious language(s) and introduction into ways of translating them into publicly accessible language – a third fundamental task consists in providing an introduction to the language and basic concepts of public reason and the public sphere. (Pirner, 2016, p. 24)

6. Beyond the school subject of Religious Education, religious and worldview perspectives should be integrated into concepts of civic and human rights education as well as in other school subjects and in school culture. In these fields of public education secular views and arguments mostly dominate teaching and learning while religious aspects tend to be neglected. For example, in several analyses, published in an edited book, we have been able to show that in German school subjects such as history, geography, social studies, economy or English

language, religion tends to be either marginalized or presented with a negative bias (Pirner & Schulte 2010). In the extremely well written and highly reflective book "Teachers and Human Rights Education" by Audrey Osler and Hugh Starkey (2010) the reader looks in vain for Rawls' and Habermas' idea that human rights can and should be contextualized not only by different nations and cultures, but also by different religions and worldviews, and that religious communities can contribute to the development of a culture of human rights by interpreting them from their respective comprehensive doctrines. In an interesting analogy to Habermas' concept of complementary learning processes my colleague and former UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Heiner Bielefeldt has suggested to view the history of human rights as a common open learning process of various religious and non-religious people. In the historical learning process that led to the development of human rights, according to Bielefeldt, individuals from different cultures, worldviews and religions all made their contributions. This learning process, Bielefeldt (2009) emphasizes, remains incomplete and open and thus continues to thrive through further participation of different cultures, worldviews and religions. This is a perspective for human rights education that, complementary to the public reason perspective, could foster mutual learning and cooperation of students with diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds – in terms of a developing overlapping consensus (Pirner, Lähnemann & Bielefeldt, 2016).

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