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Rational Theology within Postmetaphysical Thinking? A Catholic Assessment of Habermas' View of Religious Belief

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Jürgen Habermas' assessment of the rationality of religious convictions is ambivalent, as it oscillates between a postsecular appropriation of their semantic potentials and a fideistic insistence on their "discursive extraterritoriality." In this article, I argue that Habermas' fideistic portrayal of religious convictions is neither compatible with the overall argumentative architecture of his postsecular paradigm nor a logical consequence of Habermas' philosophical framework in general. Instead, once his fideism is overcome, Habermas' postmetaphysical discourse theory provides valuable resources for contemporary Catholic theology. This article thus offers both a theological assessment of Habermas' view of religious belief and an argument for a Catholic appropriation of Habermas' postmetaphysical thinking.

Keywords: religious epistemology, postsecularism, Jürgen Habermas, postmetaphysical thinking

1. Introduction

In his *Philosophical Introductions*, Jürgen Habermas is quite stern on the possibility of a discursive evaluation of the rationality of the belief in God: "Postmetaphysical thinking, for which religious experience and the religious mode of faith retain an opaque core, must dispense with philosophy of religion."[1] According to Habermas, religious convictions are not capable of being rationally assessed in any discourse that is oriented at reaching understanding—their "discursive extraterritoriality" exempts them from validity claims that may be negotiated intersubjectively.

[1] Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Introductions: Five Approaches to Communicative Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2018), 168.

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Hence, Habermas' view of religious convictions seems to come down to a form of *fideism*—his postmetaphysical understanding of religious faith is mainly based on Kierkegaard's prompting to jump into faith against all reason.[2] This has rather sinister consequences for philosophy of religion, let alone philosophical theology: "Providing an apology for faith employing philosophical means is not a task for philosophy proper."[3]

In the following, I will investigate whether Habermas' fideism is a consistent and argumentatively sound assumption within the overall theoretical architecture of his philosophical approach. I will argue that this is not the case: In an internal perspective, a strict boundary between faith and reason is compatible neither with a postsecular appropriation of the semantic potentials of religious traditions nor with the idea of a translation proviso. In an external perspective, it can be shown that the structural features Habermas lists in order to substantiate his claim of the opacity of religion do not follow from his philosophical commitments, but are theologically ill-founded ad hoc assumptions. However, as soon as Habermas' fideism is unmasked as a contingent imposition of a rather radical standpoint in religious epistemology on his discourse theory, his philosophical approach in general provides contemporary systematic theology with a promising theoretical framework. This framework allows for both a much more differentiated view of the epistemic structure of religious convictions and of the possibility of justifying religious belief within a postmetaphysical paradigm.

In order to defend these rather thetic statements, I will briefly illuminate the reasons that lead Habermas to his harsh dismissal of the possibility of a philosophy of religion (2). I will then criticize these reasons from an internal perspective regarding the consistency of the postsecular paradigm (3A) as well as from an external perspective regarding the cogency of Habermas' account of the epistemic structure of religious convictions (3B). In a final step, I will briefly outline the potentials of Habermas' philosophical approach for contemporary systematic theology and critically assess its limitations at the same time (4).[4]

[2] See Habermas' reading of Kierkegaard in Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2008), 235–38.

[3] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 143.

[4] Habermas has received quite a lot of attention for his writings on religion since 2001. However, most scholarship came from political science and philosophy; see, for example, the lack of any genuinely theological contributions in Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan van Antwerpen, eds., *Habermas and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

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2. The Opaque Core of Religion

In the preface to *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, Habermas argues that instead of a rehabilitation of metaphysical forms of thinking which prompted his concept of postmetaphysical thinking in the 1980s in the first place, there is an urgent need of addressing religious issues as:

> Political and historical developments over the past decades have lent topicality to a completely different theme. In the wake of globalization and digitalized communication, the largely secularized societies of Europe are confronted with religious movements and forms of fundamentalism of undiminished vitality both at home and throughout the world.[5]

Although he values the vital functions of religious communities for civil societies and claims that our current concept of secular reason cannot be understood without taking into account its religious origins, he very clearly states that faith and reason must be kept separated. It is impossible to discursively negotiate the rationality of religious validity claims as there must be a "strict demarcation between faith and knowledge."[6]

Habermas justifies this rather radical thesis alongside two lines of argumentation: On the one hand, Habermas reconstructs a genealogy of the relationship of faith and reason from Kant and Hegel to Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard. This path is characterized by an increasing polarization between faith and reason. With reference to Kierkegaard, Habermas argues for a systematic radicalization of Kant's philosophy of religion toward an incommensurability of faith and reason. At the same time, he is critical of Kierkegaard's neo-orthodox demand to jump into faith. Instead of jumping into an absolute otherness while sacrificing reason, it is only "this weak proceduralist reading of the 'Other' [which] preserves the fallibilist as well as the anti-skeptical meaning of the 'unconditioned.'"[7] Habermas shares with Kierkegaard the rigorous fission between faith and knowledge, but he at the same time dispenses with Kierkegaard's religious orthodoxy and his existentialist approach to philosophy of religion.[8]

Apart from this sketch of the history of thought that led to the fission between faith and reason, Habermas also develops a systematic argument in favor of the radical alterity of religious convictions and discursive

[5] Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2017), x.
[6] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 140.
[7] Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2003), 11.
[8] Habermas' reading of Kierkegaard's as a fideistic position is quite contentious, cf. Klaus Viertbauer, "Jürgen Habermas on the Way to a Postmetaphysical Reading of Kierkegaard," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11 (2019): 137–62.

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speech. The argument mainly consists in attributing certain structural features to religious convictions that obstruct their rational discursive assessment. Habermas has not explicated this argument in a sustained manner, but has rather hinted at it in dispersed remarks on the epistemic status of religious convictions over numerous publications.[9] Which features of religious convictions speak in favor of Habermas' central thesis that their "opaque core … remains as profoundly alien to discursive thought as the hermetic core of aesthetic experience"?[10]

A first feature of religious convictions can be found in their "discursive extraterritoriality,"[11] which is founded in the nonpropositional character of religious utterances: "On my analysis, the kind of validity claimed for religious statements must not be assimilated to propositional truth."[12] However, validity claims can only be made by utterances with propositional content. Hence, religious convictions are necessarily particular and not capable of feeding rational discourse with propositional content matter. Any "commitment to a rigorous form of discursively justified discourse … forbids the surreptitious rhetorical import of theologoumena."[13] Religious convictions are "bound" by a standpoint within faith that cannot be worked around by philosophical analysis. Thus, any serious attempt to determine the rationality of religious beliefs leads to an "effusive philosophy" that only makes use of a religious language game in order to "exempt itself from the rigor of discursive thought."[14] According to Habermas, there is an asymmetrical relation between rigorous discursive thought and effusive existentialist pseudo-philosophy. For this reason, theological investigations can never be unbiased as they lack a persistent fallibility and open-endedness to the results of their endeavors: "But theology remains dependent on articles of faith such that, in contrast to philosophy, it cannot expose all validity claims to criticism without reservation."[15]

A second feature of religious convictions that is supposed to speak in favor of their radical alterity is the so-called "ratcheting effect"[16] of revelation. Religious convictions are in need of a certain backup by divinely revealed

[9] Maureen Junker-Kenny, *Religion and Public Reason: A Comparison of the positions of John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas and Paul Ricoeur* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 177: "No sustained theory is offered to unite these elements which remain external."

[10] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 143.

[11] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 130.

[12] See Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, 258.

[13] Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, 101.

[14] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 247.

[15] Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, 141.

[16] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 245.

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truths that cannot be doubted from a religious point of view because they, "by reference to the dogmatic authority of an inviolable core of infallible revealed truths, evade that kind of unreserved discursive examination."[17] The indispensability of resorting to revelation makes it impossible to classify religious convictions within the standard epistemic categories of assertoric, normative, and evaluative statements. Rather, there is a difference between "fallible public reasons … and infallible truths of faith."[18] Therefore, the "epistemic context of origin"[19] explains the particularistic ties of religious convictions—because they are intertwined with infallibly revealed truths, they cannot be generalized discursively.

A third feature of religious convictions that illuminates their discursive ineptitude consists in their necessary embeddedness in ritual and sacral practices. There is an uncircumventable connection between ritual practices and religious convictions, which leads to the problem that the meaning of religious convictions makes sense only within a certain religious community. Their meaning cannot be grasped by nonmembers of that community as it is "the unique distinguishing feature of religions" to be embedded within "the cultic practices of a congregation."[20] Thus, religious convictions are separated from discursively accessible convictions such as philosophical assumptions: "Religious traditions differ from philosophy in … the fact that the ritual practices of a religious community provide a stabilizing anchor for faith."[21]

In Habermas' most recent work, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, which was published in late 2019 and has not yet been translated into English, he develops a history of (Western) philosophy that centers around a genealogy of faith and reason.[22] Habermas claims that essential ideas of modernity—such as moral universalism, the idea of an autonomous subject, or a democratic form of government—cannot be fully grasped if their religious origins are not taken into account. However, this thesis does not lead him to transform his rather fideistic conception of religious convictions. Although he mainly focuses on the relationship between faith and knowledge, his epistemological interest does not consist in an assessment of the rationality of religious faith but rather in a reflection of the self-understanding of philosophy in postsecular and postmetaphysical

[17] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 129.
[18] Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, 106.
[19] Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, 107.
[20] Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, 65.
[21] Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1992), 78.
[22] See Jürgen Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019).

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times. Religion may prove to be functional for the self-understanding of philosophy, but its contents do not come into play as validity claims whose rationality can be assessed by philosophy. Albeit undertaking a closer focus on the relationship of faith and reason, Habermas does not renounce his fideistic understanding of religious convictions in his new book.

To conclude, Habermas justifies his thesis of the radical alterity of the spheres of faith and knowledge by three main features of religious convictions: (1) religious convictions are not propositionally constituted and therefore are unable to carry validity claims; (2) they are epistemically dependent on a divine revelation that obstructs their rational reconstruction; (3) they are inevitably anchored within the cultic practices of religious communities so that they cannot be accessed from a standpoint outside such communities. Therefore, religious language is never philosophically accessible or comprehensible, let alone rationally acceptable. Any philosophical engagement with the rationality of religious belief would endanger the very concept of reason: "Once this boundary between faith and knowledge becomes porous, and once religious motives force their way into philosophy under false pretenses, reason loses its foothold and succumbs to irrational effusion."[23] In short, Habermas does not argue that there are no good reasons for or against religious faith; he rather claims that it is methodologically precarious to exchange reasons regarding the rational plausibility of religious faith in the first place. This, however, is the very description of fideism.[24]

3. Objections against Habermas' Fideism

Habermas' fideism faces several obstacles considering both the internal architecture of his theory of the postsecular as well as the external features he attributes to religious convictions. In the following, I will present two main arguments against Habermas' assessment of the structure of religious convictions: First, Habermas cannot consistently argue for the necessity of a "saving appropriation" of the semantic potential of religious convictions while at the same time insisting on the radical alterity of faith and reason. Secondly, Habermas' fideistic characterization of religious beliefs is not convincing as each structural feature in favor of their special epistemic status can be debunked.

[23] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 242–43.

[24] See exemplarily Richard Amesbury, "Fideism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2017), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/fideism: Fideism claims: "that faith is in some sense independent of, if not outright adversarial toward, reason.... Fideism holds ... that reason is unnecessary and inappropriate for the exercise and justification of religious belief."

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A. Internal Objections: Saving a "Saving Appropriation"

Habermas' writings on religion are not always as fideistic as I pointed out above. When it comes to the public relevance of religious utterances, he insists that religious voices offer important resources for a liberal society facing "a modernization spinning out of control."[25] Over the decades, Habermas has become increasingly skeptical of the prospect of a satisfactory fulfillment of the unfinished project of modernity. Instead, he diagnoses escalating pathologies of modernity—be it within the field of bioethics, in which the normative self-conception of human beings is endangered by progress in biotechnology;[26] be it in the unleashed rise of finance capitalism that has built structures virtually incontrollable by political action of nation states;[27] or be it in the current crisis of democracy, which is dependent on the fading political commitment of its citizens.[28] Considering these developments, Habermas concedes that reason cannot tackle these challenges all by itself. He therefore turns to religious traditions in order to find "willing allies."[29] In Habermas' own words:

> Religious communities … can preserve intact something that has been lost elsewhere.... I have in mind sufficiently differentiated expressions of and sensitivity to squandered lives, social pathologies, failed existences, and deformed and distorted social relations.[30]

That is why it is Habermas' "intention not to 'write off' religious traditions overhastily as a palliative against the blunting of all normative sensibilities."[31] Habermas is quite outspoken about the fact that he is interested only in the potentials of religious convictions from the perspective of political philosophy. He wishes to examine religious convictions because he suspects that they might have *useful functions* in an increasingly dysfunctional society. He is not, however, interested in religious convictions from a perspective of philosophy of religion, as he dismisses the question of their rational status:

[25] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 211.
[26] See Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*.
[27] See Jürgen Habermas, *The Lure of Technocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2015).
[28] See Jürgen Habermas, "Equal Treatment of Cultures and the Limits of Postmodern Liberalism," in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, ed. Jürgen Habermas (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2008), 271–311.
[29] Norbert Brieskorn, "On the Attempt to Recall a Relationship," in Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 24–35, esp. 24.
[30] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 110.
[31] Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking II*, 153.

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"My motive for addressing the issue of faith and knowledge is to mobilize modern reason against the defeatism lurking within it."[32]

It is hence the "motive of a *saving* appropriation"[33] that drives Habermas toward transforming the moral intuitions, semantic potentials, and hermeneutic resources of religions that are encapsulated within particular communities of faith into reasons, which are equally accessible and therefore qualify to count as reasons in public political discourse. At the same time, Habermas insists that in a liberal and pluralist society, any justification for a political norm must not be based on the particular convictions of a certain religious community. It would endanger the constitutional state and its neutrality in religious matters if it were to impose laws on its citizens that could not be justified independently of a religious worldview. Thus, Habermas attempts at reconciling the secularity of the constitutional state and the public relevance of religious traditions by introducing a "translation proviso":

> Religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In corresponding political debates, this potential makes religious speech into a serious vehicle for possible truth contents, which can then be translated from the vocabulary of a particular religious community into a generally accessible language.[34]

In the informal public sphere of civil society, every citizen may utter religious statements, but when it comes to the formal public sphere such as parliaments or judiciary courts, religious utterances must be cooperatively translated into an equally accessible language. Otherwise, they would endanger the rational and deliberative process of law-making that confers political legitimacy in the first place.[35]

[32] Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing*, 18. I will not address the problem of Habermas' instrumentalization of religion in the remainder of this article, but it is worth noting that every major world religion would oppose a reduction to its functions as sources of morality. See Michael Reder, "How Far Can Faith and Reason Be Distinguished? Remarks on Ethics and the Philosophy of Religion," in Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing*, 36–50, esp. 39: "Habermas tends to instrumentalize religions for this kind of reflexive treatment of the moral problems of modernity.... Religions for him have in the first place the social function of a moral resource, when modern societies are no longer able to tap into a motivational source for their normative principles.... Many religions would resist such a reduction."

[33] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 211.

[34] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 131.

[35] For Habermas' sophisticated defense of a deliberative model of democracy, see Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1996). For a compelling contemporary

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The nub of the matter, however, is that it is not coherent to stipulate the necessity of public religion and at the same time deny religious convictions any discursive accessibility. Habermas cannot have his cake and eat it, too. At a closer look, there are two objections against the internal coherence of Habermas' postmetaphysical fideism in his philosophy of religion and his postsecular embracement of religious convictions in his political philosophy.

The *first* objection says that it is incoherent to stipulate a possible truth-content of religious convictions when they are looked at from the perspective of a postsecular political philosophy and at the same time maintain an impenetrable boundary between faith and reason from the perspective of philosophy of religion. Either religious convictions do really have something relevant to contribute to the public discourses of a liberal and pluralist society—then it would be imperative for philosophy to engage with religious traditions and attempt to approach their cognitive content. This step implies, however, that reason is, in principle, capable of assessing the contents of religious beliefs. Or religious convictions are as inaccessible for rational discourse as it is laid out by Habermas—then, however, it would be impossible to claim that they offer relevant input for public discourse at all as their cognitive content remains a hermetically closed epistemic black box. It is impossible to state that religious convictions may have something semantically meaningful to say and at the same time insist on their opacity and radical alterity to reason.[36]

The *second* objection says that in order for translation to work, religious convictions cannot be entirely extraterritorial to discursive rationality. Any translation requires a certain point of comparison in order to be able to fulfill the task of translating from one system into the other in the first place because a translation between *incommensurable* spheres is doomed to fail. Among others, Hilary Putnam has argued that if the incommensurability thesis

defense of deliberative democracy in line with Habermas' central insights, see Cristina Lafont, "Is the Ideal of a Deliberative Democracy Coherent?," in *Deliberative Democracy and its Discontents*, ed. Samantha Besson and Jose Luis Martí (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 3–26.

[36] This is not the first time that this objection to the coherence of the postsecular paradigm has been raised; cf. Martin Breul, "Religious Epistemology and the Problem of Public Justification: Towards a New Typology of Religious Convictions," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 58, no. 2 (2016): 176–89; Thomas M. Schmidt, "The Semantic Content of Religious Beliefs and Their Secular Translation: Jürgen Habermas' Concept of Religious Experience," in *Religion: Immediate Experience and the Mediacy of Research*, ed. Hans-Günther Heimbrock and Christopher Scholtz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 175–88.

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> were really true then we could not translate other languages—or even past stages of our own language—at all.... To tell us that Galileo had "incommensurable" notions and then go on to describe them at length is totally incoherent.[37]

There must be a minimal point of comparison if one really attempts at translating a proposition from one system into the other: "However different our images of knowledge and conceptions of rationality, we share a huge fund of assumptions and beliefs about what is reasonable with even the most bizarre culture we can succeed in interpreting at all."[38] It is therefore inevitable to have epistemic access to a certain system of beliefs in order to identify the propositions worth translating.

Applying these insights to the case of translating the semantic potentials of religious traditions into secular language, it has to be maintained that for translation to work, it is a necessary requirement to be able to reasonably access the concepts and propositions of religious traditions. Otherwise, proponents of faith could not expect anyone outside their respective community of faith to even comprehend anything from within the community of faith. Habermas' attempt to isolate the religious language-game and expel it from any rational assessment is hence incompatible with his translation proviso. If faith and reason really are incommensurable, secular reason cannot even claim that religious beliefs contain possibly meaningful semantic potentials, let alone try to translate these potentials into a secular language.

In her writings on the relationship among Habermas, theology, and public religion, Maureen Junker-Kenny has been an outspoken defender of this argument. She points out that the assumption of the radical alterity of religion and the pledge for a saving appropriation of the semantic potentials of religious convictions do not go well together:

> This insistence on the otherness of religion to reason makes translation, mediation and justification impossible tasks.... A more productive and less predictable route could be taken if the cooperative venture allowed each side to develop their integrity together with their capability for self-reflection.[39]

Thus, whenever religion is supposed to be more than a private matter, that is, whenever its public relevance is stressed, it is a necessary prerequisite to

[37] Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 114–15.

[38] Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, 119.

[39] See Maureen Junker-Kenny, *Habermas and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2011), 157.

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assume that it is not a-rational but rather displays a certain conceptual common ground with reason. Junker-Kenny therefore regards religious convictions primarily as practical convictions. In the vein of a Kantian philosophy of religion, she takes religious attitudes as postulates of practical reason rather than as metaphysically necessary truths. This practical faith of reason is, unfortunately, a road not taken in Habermas' otherwise quite Kantian approach to philosophy in general:

> The route of exploring the limit questions of practical reason is not taken.... Thus, the insight that religious faith is a practical option, not one that can be objectified or only accessed as a social fact, escapes the conceptual possibilities held by the [Habermas'] framework. Religious faith could be shown as a response to the antinomy opening up due to the two conflicting components of the highest good if analyses such as those of Kant were admitted.[40]

These two objections show that Habermas' fideistic understanding of religious beliefs is questionable as it renders the overall architecture of his postsecular paradigm problematic. There is an internal inconsistency with approximating religious traditions as functionally relevant for constitutional states in late modernity while at the same time insisting on the philosophical incapacity to analyze their rational status.

B. External Objections: The Epistemic Status of Religious Convictions

Apart from the internal incoherence of the postsecular demand to recognize the public relevance of religion while at the same time insisting on a rigorous boundary between faith and reason, Habermas' fideism faces the additional difficulty that the structural features he lists in favor of the discursive inaccessibility of religious convictions are unpersuasive. Habermas' first feature, the denial of propositional content of religious beliefs, seems to be inadequate regarding the ongoing discussions about the truth, rightness, and truthfulness of religious convictions. Although religious convictions are always embedded in a comprehensive practice of life, this does not mean that they do not have any propositional content—it is not a sound argument to infer from the fact that religions usually entail an entire way of life the fact that they do not have any propositional content at all. Rather, it seems plausible that religious convictions consist of both propositional and regulative elements—a distinction that can be traced back to St. Augustine, who distinguished between *fides qua* and *fides quae*, that is, the pre-propositional act of faith and the acknowledgment of certain propositional beliefs. It is fallacious

[40] See Junker-Kenny, *Religion and Public Reason*, 131.

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to infer a form of fideism from the fact that religious convictions have a pre-propositional element—most of our convictions do, and yet we do not regard it as impossible to talk about their rational status.

Secondly, it is implausible to assume that any reference to revelation must include a "ratcheting effect." Habermas neither provides us with a philosophical analysis of the concept of revelation nor gives an argument why this concept leads to nondiscursive paths. His understanding of revelation seems to imply an old-fashioned *concept of instruction*, as if God has dictated certain propositions that must not be questioned but blindly adhered to by believers.[41] This concept of revelation is, however, rather outdated. During the Second Vatican Council, this concept of instruction has been replaced by a *concept of communication*: it is the personal life and death of Jesus Christ that communicates to humans the nature of God as unconditional love. Again, it is Maureen Junker-Kenny who concisely points out the consequence of this seminal change in a theological concept of revelation:

> If the content of revelation is God's love, rather than divine propositions, then this can only be revealed in concrete human experience through the encounter with a fellow-human, in the person and history of Jesus Christ.[42]

In such a concept, revelation becomes a communicative self-revelation in a personal and dialogical process rather than the delivery of an ahistorical divine message. Moreover, even if a religious attitude does not originate in rational argument but rather in the experience of divine self-communication, it is an erroneous conclusion that religious faith and reason do not have anything in common. The genesis and the validity of a propositional attitude must be kept separate. Therefore, the suggestion that the concept of revelation obstructs the discursive assessment of the rationality of religious belief is not persuasive. Although God's self-communication cannot be transformed into reason, it still can be reconstructed and interpreted by it. Junker-Kenny therefore rightly proposes a different understanding of the Christian message, which is "not opaque, but given as a truth that can be reconstructed, yet not created by reason, through its origin in God's self-revelation it remains a counterpart with which reason continues to wrestle."[43] In other words: discursive rationality cannot fabricate a religious interpretation of one's

[41] Habermas' view of revelation says that religious believers are obliged to obey "the *dogmatic authority* of an inviolable core of *infallible revealed truths*" (Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 129; my emphasis).

[42] See Junker-Kenny, *Habermas and Theology*, 158.

[43] See Junker-Kenny, *Habermas and Theology*, 162.

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existence and the world as a whole. But it can help to justify the convictions included in this interpretation even to those who favor an alternative religious (or nonreligious) answer to the meaning of one's existence.

Thirdly, the rootedness of religious convictions in ritual practices does not lead to the conclusion that their rational plausibility cannot be argued for or against on the ground of reasons. Structurally, the objection to this claim is similar to the ones above: of course, it is the case that many religious convictions are embedded in ritual practices, among others. This does not, however, mean that they are devoid of any propositional content that may be assessed rationally. In a lot of other fields, being embedded in a certain practice does not result in an excommunication from discourse. For example, it holds true for probably the vast majority of moral convictions that they are embedded within a practice, but this feature does not make it impossible to have a rational debate on their validity claims. Habermas does not give further arguments regarding why religious convictions should differ from moral convictions in this respect, so his fideistic conclusion is unwarranted in this case as well.

In summary, Habermas attributes certain structural features to religious convictions that are supposed to substantiate his main thesis of the radical alterity of faith and reason. However, these features are not persuasive under close scrutiny because they disclose a rather outdated understanding of the epistemic structure of religious convictions. In addition, it is certainly relevant that Habermas does not develop his fideism within his discourse theory or within his approach to communicative reason. Rather, he makes common cause with a fideism that originates from outside his theory. Habermas' discourse theory does by no means necessarily imply the positioning that Habermas actually takes regarding the relationship between faith and reason. It is a contingent correlation that remains external to Habermas' very own philosophical approach.

To conclude, it must be stated that Habermas falls prey to the fallacy of inferring the categorical inaccessibility of *all* religious convictions from philosophical difficulties regarding *some* of their elements. Fully discrediting them as "discursively extraterritorial" faces severe difficulties, considering the internal structure of Habermas' postsecular paradigm as well as his external assumptions on the features of religious convictions. Besides, this view of religious convictions is by no means a necessary implication of Habermas' theory of communicative reason or his defense of a postmetaphysical approach to philosophy. Once this important discovery has been made, it becomes possible to unlock the potentials of Habermas' philosophical approach for contemporary philosophy of religion and philosophical theology.

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4. The Potential of Habermas' Philosophical Approach for Contemporary Systematic Theology

As soon as the fideism in Habermas' own philosophical standpoint is exposed as an implausible external assumption, huge potentials emerge as his discourse theory and his account of postmetaphysical thinking become interesting "partners in dialogue" for philosophical theology. In this final step, I will exemplarily illuminate these potentials by tentatively outlining an intersubjective model of justification for religious convictions that centers around core insights from discourse theory (4A) and by defending a postmetaphysical approach to the epistemology of religion and philosophy of religion in general (4B).

A. Communicative Reason and the Justification of Religious Convictions

Habermas' discourse theory promises to be a suitable framework for a theory of the justification of religious convictions. If religious convictions are not merely subjective expressions, but rather contain propositional content, they make validity claims whose rational plausibility may be discursively assessed. A prerequisite for this approach, however, is an alternative to Habermas' fideistic notion of faith. In recent scholarship on the epistemic structure of religious convictions, the distinction between *faith* and *belief* has become increasingly important.[44]

The concept of *faith* refers to the *practical dimension* of a religious view of the world: any such view does not seem to be exhausted in a merely theoretical commitment to the truth or adequacy of certain theistic or religious assumptions; it rather seems to provide a comprehensive practical perspective on how to view the world and one's own existence. Religious faith has a regulative structure in that it provides a performative guidance and a perspective of orientation. Thus, a religious view of the world is a comprehensive practical attitude as opposed to a merely theoretical set of convictions. Religious convictions may therefore, in Wittgensteinian terms, be labeled as "grammatical" because they seem to rule the way a religious citizen views the world.[45]

However, the practical dimension of faith is usually accompanied by a dimension of *belief*: religious convictions also display a *cognitive structure*

[44] See John Bishop, "Faith," *The Stanford Encylopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2016), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/faith.

[45] Klaus von Stosch, "Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy as Foundation of Comparative Theology," in *Interpreting Interreligious Situations with Wittgenstein*, ed. Andrejc Gorazd and Daniel H. Weiss (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019), 73–96.

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and have *propositional content*. Religious beliefs are not only a practical attitude of trust, but also contain certain substantive propositions regarding, for instance, the existence and the attributes of God, his revelation, and so on. It is therefore necessary to differentiate between the semantic content of religious convictions and their regulative function. Both elements are equally constitutive of religious convictions. Neither the merely cognitive acknowledgment of a religious conviction nor a practical approach without any substantive view on the world is a coherent notion.

In conclusion, religious convictions may fulfill the criterion of discursive accessibility: they consist of propositional beliefs that are not merely private and opaque, but are open for a rational reconstruction. If this analysis of the epistemic structure of religious convictions is correct, it is possible to sketch an intersubjective model of justification for religious beliefs that may be based on a Habermasian account of communicative reason. Intersubjective justification does not imply that it is possible to provide conclusive evidence for the objective truth of a religious statement. It rather claims that it is possible to rationally assess the reasons for and the reasons against the rational acceptability of a certain religious conviction. In that sense, communicative reason is indebted to American neopragmatism because it mainly focuses on the rational acceptability of a statement and closely ties the truth of an utterance to its justification within discourse.[46] Within the communicative reason approach, the Christian message is not opaque, but open for a rational reconstruction and a discursive justification of its contents.

Any intersubjective model of justification of religious beliefs requires cooperation among different religions and secular worldviews, and it requires a basis of argumentation that transcends the particular contexts of religious communities. It is possible to discursively share reasons on the rationality of monotheism, the nature of God, his attributes, and so on. Even from the particular standpoint of a certain religious community, it is possible to recognize the rational plausibility of certain religious convictions of another religious (or secular) community. Religious faith manifests itself, among many other things and practices, in convictions with material content whose cogency and soundness should be justified *within a discourse oriented at mutual understanding*.

Such a model of justification finds a middle way between *postmodern contextualism* and *cosmological metaphysics*: if religious beliefs aim to be justified

[46] The neopragmatist idea of a close connection between truth and rational acceptability can paradigmatically be found in Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*. Habermas clarifies his indebtedness to pragmatism in Jürgen Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, ed. and trans. Barbara Fultner (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press: 2003).

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not only within a certain community of faith but also in dialogue with other religions or secular atheists, it is a necessary prerequisite to assume that reason may transcend one's own particular context. Thus, if *contextualism* were true, the justification of religious beliefs could by no means transcend their very own context, so that any engagement with alternative interpretations of one's existence would become methodologically impossible. Conversely, if a *metaphysical unity of faith, reason, and nature* was the ultimate goal, the justification of religious beliefs could not take place in the differentiated discourses of the modern era. Thus, a demetaphysicalized yet universalistic concept of the validity claims of religious convictions seems to find some middle ground between a contextualist provincialization of the justification of religious belief and an understanding of religious beliefs as a comprehensive and speculative cosmology.

This model of justification may very well be integrated into the paradigm of comparative theology as it emphasizes the necessity to transcend one's own community and to micrologically compare one's religious convictions with those of members of other religious communities in order to "venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition."[47] It would go beyond the scope of this article to investigate whether Habermas' discourse theory could provide a philosophical framework for comparative theology. I am, however, optimistic that Habermas may offer certain insights that could prove to be of methodological value for comparative theology.[48]

B. Toward a Postmetaphysical Philosophical Theology?

The second exemplary field in which Habermas' philosophical framework is very productive for contemporary systematic theology is his notion of postmetaphysical thinking. Habermas denounces any strong metaphysical commitments of philosophy as it cannot be a super-science that takes a God's-eye point of view and is therefore able to conceptualize the structure of reality in itself. Rather than speculating about the basic structure of the cosmos or the furniture of reality, philosophy is set to tackle problems on the go; that is, as they arise from the everyday practice of human beings. Philosophy shall neither produce nor defend worldviews ("Weltbilder"), but

[47] Francis Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10.

[48] For an overview of different methodological approaches to comparative theology, cf. the contributions in Francis Clooney and Klaus von Stosch, eds., *How to Do Comparative Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

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rather aim to rationally reconstruct conflicts within the lifeworld. It is no longer an "usher" ("Platzanweiser") but rather a "stand-in" ("Platzhalter") for methodologically precarious speculative theories.[49] Metaphorically speaking, postmetaphysical thinking operates just like the "piecemeal engineering" on a ship that is at sea.[50] It is not possible to simultaneously sail with a ship and to land the ship in a safe haven and examine it from the outside. Just like a ship being in motion can only be repaired piece by piece, modern philosophy can only tackle its issues while being at sea. Modern philosophy must attempt to solve the problems that arise as rationally as possible while being in motion, but it cannot allow itself the luxury of assuming an epistemic God's-eye point of view and talk about the structure of reality as such—the receding horizon of the lifeworld cannot be objectified as a whole.

This brief outline of postmetaphysical thinking might prove to be fruitful for philosophy of religion as it helps to formulate a more nuanced distinction between *faith* and *knowledge*. Engaging in the Kantian turn toward the "practical faith of reason," a religious view of the world may be described as a practical option in the face of ordinary existential questions rather than extraordinary cosmological queries. As Kant pointed out in his book *Religion within the Boundary of Pure Reason*, religious convictions are not theoretical convictions in that they are part of metaphysical knowledge.[51] From a Kantian perspective, religious convictions are rather an *interpretation* of one's existence than a cosmological *worldview*. Interpretations of one's existence are usually open for rational critique, but there cannot be conclusive theoretical evidence for (a-)theism in the form of proofs (or refutations) of God's existence. Therefore, theology and metaphysics become a practical enterprise because metaphysical or religious convictions are no possible subjects of theoretical knowledge but performative utterances that give orientation in a complex world. In the words of Ingolf U. Dalferth:

> Metaphysics … is … the philosophical attempt to draw out a system of distinctions from the shared practices of orientation such as are met with in everyday life or in religious life and that help us to make sense of our life in this world.… Understood in this sense, metaphysics is not a theoretical or speculative enterprise but a practical one. Its task is not to offer ultimate explanations and to "explain the world" in terms of its fundamental

[49] See Jürgen Habermas, "Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter," in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, ed. Jürgen Habermas (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1990), 1–20.

[50] The metaphor is drawn from Herbert Schnädelbach, *Vernunft und Geschichte. Vorträge und Abhandlungen* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1987), 166f.

[51] See Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundary of Pure Reason*, trans. J. W. Semple (Edinburgh: Thomas Clark 1838).

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> structure, but rather to provide schemes of ultimate existential orientation in terms of which we seek to orient ourselves in the complex situations of our life.[52]

The shift toward practical reason is primarily relevant for the mode of justification of religious beliefs. If they are not supposed to be speculative cosmologies but rather existential interpretations of lifeworldly events, they do not only (and not even primarily) make a validity claim for the truth of their content, but mainly for the rightness and truthfulness of a certain practice that is inevitably connected to their content. Religious interpretations of one's existence do not address the question "What can I know?" but rather the questions "What should I do?" and "What may I hope?." The justification of religious belief in a postmetaphysical setting does not consist in a collection of theoretical evidence in favor of a cosmological *worldview*, but rather in a discursive evaluation of religious practices and convictions that originate in the *lifeworld*. Taking a religious stance toward the world does not merely mean to hold true a speculative cosmology, it rather refers to a certain form of existential coping with the contingencies of life. The task of a postmetaphysically framed philosophical theology would consist in the rational justification of the propositional architecture behind that practice instead of drafting and defending a cosmological worldview. Thus, it may be possible to embrace Habermas' call for a metaphysical disarmament of philosophy while at the same time insisting that, even within a postmetaphysical paradigm, it is possible to argue for or against the rationality of religious convictions.

From a Catholic perspective, however, the proposal of a postmetaphysical foundation of systematic theology is a two-edged sword: On the one hand, it goes too far to dispense with metaphysics once and for all. A certain optimism regarding the prospects of success of natural theology has been a major strand in Catholic theology. The *lumen naturale*, that is, the natural light of reason, is capable of rationally assessing arguments in favor of the existence of God. On the other hand, it is not a good idea to unwaveringly appraise a concept of metaphysics that takes this enterprise to be a static framework of cosmology. The compelling criticisms of metaphysics as a merely theoretical endeavor must be integrated into a theological concept of practical metaphysics. Therefore, it is essential not to confuse a *post*metaphysical approach with a *non*metaphysical approach to theology. Whereas the former calls for a

[52] Ingolf U. Dalferth, "A Relaxed View of Metaphysics. Neo-Aristotelian Thomism and the Theological Legacy of Thomas Aquinas," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 114 (2017): 49–81, esp. 79.

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transformation of metaphysics into a "practical science" and may very well suit the needs of contemporary systematic theology, the latter would deprive systematic theology of its core. If Habermas' postmetaphysical account is not read as a rejection of metaphysics, but as a call for a reconception of metaphysics, it may prove to be of theological value as well.

5. Conclusion

The overall result of this article is quite ironic: Habermas started approaching religious traditions with the interest of appropriating their semantic potentials facing a modernization spinning out of control. As it turns out, however, religious traditions may as well approach Habermas' philosophical framework with the interest of appropriating its core commitments in order to sketch a modern foundation for systematic theology. It can thus be concluded that religious convictions may be important critical voices in the public sphere precisely because they are *not* utterly opaque but intersubjectively accessible.

I began this article with a quotation from Habermas stating that postmetaphysical thinking must dispense with philosophy of religion, let alone systematic theology. As it turned out, however, Habermas' very own discourse theory and his postmetaphysical framework provide contemporary systematic theology with highly interesting tools. As soon as it becomes clear that Habermas' skepticism toward any analysis of the rationality of religious belief is a contingent standpoint that does not follow from his general philosophical theory, there are vast potentials for any philosophical theology. Therefore, the research question of this article can be negated: postmetaphysical thinking need not dispense with rational theology. In contrast, postmetaphysical thinking may even provide contemporary systematic theology with several powerful tools for the justification of religious convictions.

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