

Habermas on ethics and the philosophy of religion

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Introduction

After the gradual loss of significance as the result of modernization and individualization, the West has experienced a growing influence of religions on the public sphere. Not only Christianity, but also Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism play a role in the public debates in general and in political decisions in particular. The turning point on the global scene was, of course, September 11, 2001, which marked the entrance of religious fundamentalism in both politics and rhetorics, but Huntington's *Clash of Civilisations* (1996) had already marked a shift with the hypothesis that the coming conflicts of world society would no longer be based on ideological antagonisms but on worldviews of civilisations, i.e. on the value systems of the world religions. These gloomy predictions notwithstanding, 'multiculturalism' has become the key word in many public debates on the (il-)legitimacy of religious convictions exerting their influence on legislation, but it has also become an issue in social research into the co-existence of religious groups in civil societies. As a consequence, the debate about secularization has taken an unexpected turn, since religion is no longer separated from politics as a private matter.

Whereas the recognition of specific views of religious minorities in legislation is an issue that belongs to the current public debate, one task of philosophical discourse is to analyse the religious worldviews informing people's self-understanding and their attitudes to morals and law, and to estimate their validity from a rational point of view. An understanding of the central religious concepts that construct religious worldviews is a precondition for the answer to the question of whether the articles of faith contain some kind of rational content that could prove fruitful to the public debate, i.e. about minority rights. In other words: How should we conceive of the relation between faith and knowledge in post-secular societies? Does religion contain truths about human nature and the world that could support or correct reason

in matters of natural and historical cognition and of ethics and politics. Or should religion be regarded as a private matter of faith incompatible with reason?

Habermas and the return of religion

As a representative of critical theory in the tradition from Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas's analyses constantly focus on society as a totality. Consequently the idea of a '*Sozialforschung*' of the totality of the common life of institutions has been inter-disciplinary. Integrating social, cultural, psychological, economical and historical research, critical theory aims at conceptualizing and explaining the social developments, differences and tensions in the society as a whole. Not surprisingly religion has taken a certain position in Habermas' research as a consequence of its increasingly growing significance for the development and tensions of modern western societies.

Originally Habermas considered religion a closed chapter in modern secular society. In *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1981) he argues that the socially integrative power of the ritual practice of the religions in pre-modern times has been replaced by communicative rationality in modern secularised societies¹. The sacred aspect of religions has been transformed into the authority that is the result of a practical discourse in which all involved participants have had their claims tested through rational argumentation. As a contrast to the discourse ethics that Habermas has developed, religion does not allow for independent rational discussion but binds its convictions to ideas and moral dogmas from sacred texts and traditions. In his theory of communicative reason Habermas attempts to liberate communicative action from the blind authority of the sacred to arguments that can be tried in a discourse. Indeed morality can have its religious origins in some revelation, but its prescriptions depend exclusively on the social interaction of those whom it concerns and they are only binding according to the rules of discourse ethics. The step from the dogmatism of the sacred to the authority of communicative reason was a part of Habermas' contribution to the theory of modern secular society.

¹ *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. Suhrkamp. Frankfurt am Main 1981. Eng. Transl.: *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Vol. 2: p.77. 1987.

Since then there has been a volteface in Habermas' view of the significance of religion. The secularisation hypothesis has been superseded by an increasing focus on the religious origin of and importance for the advancement of 'das Humane' in society. Thus he argues that the preservation of the human in intersubjective relations depends on the ability of societies to apply to the secular domain 'the essential contents of the *religious* traditions which point beyond the merely human realm'². In *Nachmetaphysisches Denken* (1988) he states that a reflection on the history of ideas is necessary to understand the epistemic, moral and legal convictions of modern society. These convictions do not just rest on the immanent rationality of their domains but also depend on certain traditions. Though religious ideas cannot claim universal validity as such, they contain contents of meaning that have something to say to a post-metaphysical age. As Habermas states in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*: "Thus I do not believe that we, as Europeans, can seriously understand concepts like morality and ethical life, person and individuality, or freedom and emancipation without appropriating the substance of the Judeo-Christian understanding of history in terms of salvation"³. The semantic elements of one of the world religions must be made available in intersubjective relations that will call themselves human: 'Each must be able recognize him- or herself in all that wears a human face [German: "Menschenantlitz"]'⁴. Without this understanding of oneself and the other person, the human dimension of all social life will eventually decline.

Since 2001 Habermas has been particularly engaged in debates about the role of religion as regards ethics and politics. His thought is motivated by various urgent questions in the public debate, where groups have maintained their distinctively religious views. But his subsequent attempt to explore the possible significance of religious ideas in moral and political philosophy is occasioned by the conversation that he had with Joseph Ratzinger about the

² Habermas (1978), cit. from Reder M. and Schmidt, J.: "Habermas and Religion", in *The Awareness of What is Missing. Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*. Polity Press 2010. p. 1 ff. (Germ. original: *Ein Bewusstsein von dem was fehlt*. Suhrkamp Verlag. Frankfurt am Main 2008).

³ *Nachmetaphysisches Denken* (1988). English translation. Polity Press 1992 (Hohengarten). *Postmetaphysical Thinking*. p. 15.

⁴ Ibid.

moral foundations of modern societies⁵. In short, whereas Ratzinger defends a synthesis between Greek metaphysics and biblical faith⁶ on the basis of the tradition extending from Augustine to Thomas, Habermas takes a Kantian position. Kant rejected ancient metaphysical cosmology and left natural cognition to modern science but he connected the philosophy of religion to ethics in a way that, according to Habermas, conceptualizes the human condition and the moral possibilities in the 21st century world better than Catholic theology is able to. Therefore Habermas sees the possibility for a mutual rapprochement between religion and rationality in the philosophy of Kant. Even though faith and knowledge are distinct areas, articles of faith still contain an image of man that is in some way significant to ethics, even though moral philosophy does not allow any authority but reason. And Habermas is interested in investigating what kind of significance this is. In this respect, too, Kant is relevant.

Moral philosophy and religious concepts. Habermas and Kant

Habermas's conversation with Ratzinger became the starting point of his elaboration on the significance of religious ideas to ethical and political issues. In what way and to what extent are articles of faith valid or relevant in the era of post-metaphysical thinking? As a consequence of the attack on the World Trade Center and the generally growing multicultural complexity of western societies, Habermas now (2001) speaks about the 'post-secular' society. This marks a new condition for the public debate, since western societies cover several religious communities with worldviews that should be taken seriously in the public debate⁷. Not only should the semantic content be translated into a secular language and find justification on secular premises, but religion, according to Habermas, may even play a significant role in the normative foundation of the liberal state. Democratic decisions depend on the moral convictions of citizens, i.e. on pre-political ideas, which have their origin in religion. Though these should not interfere with the procedures of democratic institu-

⁵ Habermas and Ratzinger in, Schuller, F. (ed.): *Dialektik der Säkularisierung*. Freiburg 2005.

⁶ Cf. Ratzinger's speech and Habermas. 2010. p. 22.

⁷ "Faith and Knowledge" in: *The Future of Human Nature*. Polity Press 2003. p. 103. (German original: *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur*. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main. 2001).

tions, they still motivate ethical and political attitudes of an increasing proportion of citizens.

But what does the rational core of religious faith in these practical contexts consist of? This question is important for a modern enlightened society whose debates are – or should be – dedicated to arguments of reason. Which religious ideas have validity? The idea most central to religion, namely God’s existence has no – or should have no – significance for secular issues. Habermas here accuses Kant of holding too broad a concept of moral reason in that he integrates religious postulates in his analysis of practical reason. The postulate of the existence of God as a precondition for the possibility of a ‘Kingdom of God on earth’, i.e. for the fulfilment of the collective human moral endeavour that no man can accomplish by himself, is a content of faith that cannot be rationally justified⁸. Consequently, it should not confuse the moral debate. Still Kant himself tries to balance between a morality strictly based on reason and a philosophy of (Protestant) religion that argues for the illustrative effect of the religious image. The idea of God’s dominion on earth can be translated into the idea of a ‘republic based on virtues’⁹ and thus be understandable on secular premises.

Habermas’s rejection of theism and the cosmocentric metaphysics of Catholic Christianity becomes apparent in his discussion with Ratzinger. He accuses Ratzinger of putting the clock back to the time before the Enlightenment, when he defends the old Hellenistic Christianity and thinks that he can trace reason back to a divine origin. To maintain the validity of ancient Greek metaphysics in the age of the scientific image, according to Habermas, means defending an intellectualism in matters of faith that has been superseded not only by the voluntarism and nominalism of late medieval philosophy but also by the following turn to empiricism that introduced the modern age¹⁰. Still, the separation of faith and knowledge as regards the ethical reflection of the foundations of a world community is not so easily made, even on Habermas’s

⁸ Habermas: *Zwischen Religion und Naturalismus* (2005). Eng. trans.: “On the Reception and Contemporary Importance of Kant’s Philosophy of Religion”, in: *Between Naturalism and Religion*. Polity Press (2008).

⁹ Ibid. p. 223; 236

¹⁰ Habermas 2010. p. 22.

own premises. In his own words, he himself has partly developed his concept of communicative rationality on the basis of ‘older ideas of *logos*’, which can be traced back to the central experience of the unifying power of argument in speech¹¹. And Ratzinger’s point is precisely that it is the concept of *logos* that makes the common denominator for a comparison of a Christian religious worldview with secular philosophical thinking. According to Ratzinger’s interpretation of the first line of the prologue of St. Paul, the concept of *logos* as revelation means God’s self-communication to man. ‘*Logos* means both reason and word – a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason’¹². So, not only does the word *logos* remind us of the divine origin of reason, it also contains the potential to unite human beings through language. Since *logos* means unity in the sense of the inner coherence of everything in God, the truth for men is their unity, i.e. their community in God. Thus the original metaphysical unity of the world order shall now become a social unity in the form of a global community based on the reason that lives in communication.

Habermas agrees that reason is inherent in communication as a socially unifying power; it has been the central issue for him to work out a conception of rationality that could reformulate the traditional idea of reason within a modern theory of communication. Still, Ratzinger’s theological concept of *logos* involves some difficulties, though in a sense it identifies reason with communication. Ratzinger presupposes the authority of the bible and connects *logos* with its divine origin. But a modern post-metaphysical age cannot base its rationality on dogmatic presuppositions, so the idea of reason as an order created by God must be left to the domain of faith. Especially in the modern age, the concept of a natural order must be formed on the basis of empirical scientific practise conducted according to rational methods. The religious attitude must, says Habermas, accept the authority of natural reason as the fallible result of institutionalised science.

¹¹ Cf. “Erläuterungen zum Begriff des kommunikativen Handelns”, in: Habermas: *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1984, p. 605.

¹² Cf. Ratzinger’s speech at the University of Regensburg.

Though Habermas separates *logos* from its biblical meaning and keeps its ancient Greek meaning, he tries to balance between a negative, critical and a positive assimilation of Christian thought. In *An Awareness of what is missing*¹³ he points to an important aspect of moral practice found in religion but not in reason, namely the emphasis on the *realization* of the moral ideals of, for example, freedom and equality, which ethical theory provides us with. Religion disposes of concepts for aspects of engagement which rational arguments are missing. Habermas states that ‘the decision to engage in action based on solidarity when faced with threats which can be averted only by collective efforts calls for more than insights into good reasons’¹⁴. What he means is that, whereas philosophy focuses on the theoretical foundation of morality, religion stresses the importance of practice and calls attention to the moral limitations of human nature.

But the recognition that there is some significance in religion to the modern world faces the problem of how a world of different, often antagonistic religious convictions based on fundamentalist interpretations of their respective sacred texts can form a stable and peaceful global community, not to speak of avoiding the antagonism of atheist and religious views as such. If the will to mutual rapprochement in a global dialogue is to be possible – *pace* Huntington’s vision of a “Clash of Civilisation” – different worldviews must find agreement in a common moral language, and this presupposes an idea of a universal reason. Habermas bases his contribution to this idea on Kant’s ethics and philosophy of religion since he finds it easy to connect with a Protestant Christian theology. Kant stood on modern ground in settling accounts with Greek metaphysics. He left knowledge of nature to the empirical sciences; he prepared the way for the autonomy of reason and formed the basis for modern concepts of ethics, law and democracy.

But what interests Habermas in this is that Kant in his analysis of practical (moral) reason leaves a door ajar to a kind of metaphysics with religious affinities. Habermas follows him and seems to think that, if reason in some way is to be brought into contact with religion, it must be through ethics, i.e.

¹³ Polity Press, 2010.

¹⁴ Habermas (2010): p. 18-19.

through an elaboration of the ultimate basic concepts of morality that might end in philosophy of religion. It is in the image of man in Kant's ethics that Habermas sees a point of contact between secular reason and Christian religion. As is well known, Kant defended a universalism in ethics based on self-evident principles of practical reason. He argued that moral imperatives can be derived from reason itself and have the form: 'Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law'¹⁵. However in a second version of this categorical imperative Kant supplies this principle of universality with a motivation for the moral action: 'Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end'¹⁶. Kant justifies this version in his *Critique of Judgement* by using the concept of man as a being which is capable of acting on the basis of pure practical reason¹⁷. Defining man as the only being in nature that transcends nature through its moral consciousness and takes part in an intelligible world of ideas, Kant thinks that man possesses a dignity that makes him worthy of a respect which no other being in nature deserves. Thus the moral imperative that demands respect for the 'humanity' in every person has its basis in Kant's the image of man as a rational being regardless of social or biological or cultural differences.

The insufficiency of moral philosophy

This image – or notion – of man as free and morally responsible makes the basis of the egalitarianism in law and morality that characterizes the modern liberal state¹⁸. However, as has been noted, there seems to be a leap from theory to practice, namely from the recognition of the validity of moral principles to the actual engagement in advancing the common good. This applies in particular to the violations of solidarity and the burdens of guilt that weigh heavily on nations as the heritage of the 20th century wars continue to echo into

¹⁵Kant: *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Eng. transl. Ellington, 1993). (German original: *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*. (1785)).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Kant: *The Critique of Judgement*. (trans. Meredith). Oxford 1952. § 84. (German original: *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. 1790.

¹⁸ Cf. Habermas (2010). p. 16.

the present time. It attracts Habermas's particular interest because it seems to call for a religious interpretation. Experience has taught us that 'good reasons' in moral and political practice do not have the power to repair these violations or to strengthen the 'awareness of what is missing'. The violated reality 'cries to heaven'¹⁹ and throws a gloomy light on the moral consciousness that lacks both motivation and the power of engagement. The shift in perspective from the moral *view* of the world to the failures in the social reality of nations, of people, of religious groups etc. confronts ethics with the problem of addressing evil and forgiveness. Since the world's common interest must be a free, stable and peaceful community, because this is the ultimate condition for a successful life (happiness) for everybody, the mere understanding of the moral law turns out insufficient in the face of the cruelties of the past and their continuation in the present. According to Habermas, it is in this respect that religion becomes significant for ethics. When it comes to the issue of making the world good again, concepts like the kingdom of ends, good and evil, sin and forgiveness can supply moral philosophy with an understanding of ethics and of the relation between the moral ideal and the historical reality.

For Habermas this change in perspective from practical reason to philosophy of religion on the theoretical level results from his preoccupation with the moral aspect of the world historical conflicts. The holocaust and similar atrocities are among the events that the moral practice of mankind must deal with. And the difficulties for mankind of expiating these crimes seem to question the ability of reason to realize its moral ideals in the world. In other words: There are limits to the power of the moral will. Habermas suggests that the apparently insurmountable difficulties to forgive and forget Holocaust point towards a religious view, especially towards the idea of a depraved reality whose origin Christians trace back to sin. The ethical and legal concepts seem insufficient for an understanding of cruelties such as the holocaust, which no punishment can make good again. Habermas hesitates to take that step, but still he speaks about the irreversibility of human sufferings that force us to describe such action and retaliation in words that disappeared during secularisation, when guilt that can be punished by 'human laws' replaced sins against

¹⁹ Habermas (2010). p. 19.

‘divine laws’. In the continuing reverberations of the holocaust, a new beginning – in a globalised world – seems to presuppose a forgiveness that surpasses every human ability. The talk about sin and divine law seems to return.

Habermas will not take the step to claim the existence of a god who can accomplish what mankind cannot. The responsibility belongs to mankind. But he suggests a specifically religious interpretation of human conflict when he states that the concepts we need to understand these conflicts with cannot be translated into concepts of secular ethical theories: ‘We still lack an adequate concept for the semantic difference between what is morally wrong and what is profoundly evil’²⁰. And here he corrects Kantian ethics. Evil is not just the morally wrong, i.e. a privation of the good in a person who is ignorant of the moral law or is caught in the power of his passions. Some actions are consciously evil. For instance, when offences and their unrestrained retaliations result in a spiral of violence, the agents of these escalating conflicts seem to have lost control of themselves and surrender to powers that they really cannot approve of as rational human beings. Though Habermas says that the devil does not exist, in these examples he seems to suggest that evil exists as more than just a lack (privation) of the good. ‘There is no devil but the fallen archangel still wreaks havoc – in the perverted good of the monstrous deed, but also in the unrestrained urge for retaliation that promptly follows,’²¹ he states. Entangling themselves in the conflict, the agents seem to lose again and again the freedom that in the first place qualified them as morally responsible subjects. Thus they catch themselves in endless destructions that they cannot find their way out of.

The religious image of man as a corrective to moral philosophy

As we have seen, Habermas’s writings on religious issues over the latest years clearly document a growing recognition of the significance of religion when it comes to an understanding of the moral aspects of many issues in the history of the 20th century. But in what way can religion influence moral philosophy, according to Habermas? I will propose two answers. The first is that Haber-

²⁰ Habermas (2003). p. 110.

²¹ Ibid.

mas does not give up the autonomy of ethics. In modern post-secular societies pluralism of worldviews must be respected, so a common ethics must be based on what all citizens can be expected to agree upon as regards the norms for their co-existence in society. Fundamentally, then, reason is the only authority here. And when it comes to the influence of religion it is interesting to notice that Habermas – though recognizing ‘*das Humane*’ in all world religions – focuses on Protestant Christianity, surely because it is the theological origin of the ethics of Kant, to whom moral philosophy in general and his own discourse ethics in particular owe a great deal. As we have seen, Protestant ethics can be transformed to moral philosophy (Kant’s deontology) in secular societies, because both share the same image of man. It remains to be seen what semantic content of the other world religions would be equally useful.

The second answer is that I do not think that Habermas pays enough attention to another aspect of religion’s influence on ethics, namely in relation to concepts such as freedom and sin, guilt and forgiveness, good and evil. He introduces them in his moral diagnosis of the present post-secular age but he still does not integrate them in a systematic revision of philosophic ethics. However, indications are certainly there, for example when he demonstrates how the concept of sin can throw light on both the gloomy reality of man and the metaphysical counterpart, the good, without which sin would not be comprehensible. Thus he speaks about evil as the result of the agent deliberately catching himself in a spiral of violence; about crimes against humanity that are difficult to forgive since they are violations against divine rather than human laws. Unlike moral philosophy’s notion of man as a conscious, rational and free agent, these religious concepts imply a powerlessness of man in relation to the moral demands which he, as a rational being, must inevitably make of himself in his individual and social life.

Habermas clearly acknowledges the significance of religious concepts when it comes to tracing the evil of the history of the last century back to a black spot in human nature. But neither in this respect, nor in his account for his own theory of discourse ethics does he deal with the concept on which ethics in general, and this dark side of it in particular, rests, namely freedom. Freedom is altogether remarkably absent in Habermas’ theories of ethics and

politics, though his predecessor Kant introduced the idea of transcendental freedom to account for the moral concepts of responsibility and guilt²². In Kant's ethics, freedom means man's ability to determine his actions by principles of moral reason. Freedom is connected to morality. But in Kant's philosophy of religion – which has no constitutive significance for his ethics – he discusses the concept of evil, which also originates in freedom. Thus in Kant freedom is both connected to morality and to evil.

But Habermas could have proceeded to Schelling and Kierkegaard, who actually took up this paradox of freedom which Kant points at and made it the foundation of the view that integrates ethics in a religious worldview. They reach the pessimistic conclusion that freedom is not simply connected to the good will; it is rather an ability to choose between good and evil, and even an inclination to choose wrong²³. Despite his moral consciousness, man has a tendency to abuse freedom for evil purposes, to destroy life for a good cause and to entangle in conflicts that keep repeating themselves. Neither the deontology of Kant, nor the discourse ethics of Habermas can account for the paradox that Habermas calls 'the perverted good of the monstrous deed'²⁴; both retain the confidence that reason (moral principles) alone are what we need to distinguish and separate right from wrong and to *do* what we understand is right. Moral philosophy generally overlooks this paradox in the human will, since it does not have a clear distinction between morally wrong and evil at its disposal. As if evil were just a matter of having done wrong because of ignorance.

As mentioned, though Habermas speaks about evil, he does not relate it to the concept of freedom, though freedom in some way must be contained in the concept of evil. He seems to share the premises of Kant's ethics that freedom consists in man's capability to escape the bondage of his passions (his nature) by means of his moral reason. Nevertheless, he is on the track of the insight found in post-Kantian idealism (Schelling and Kierkegaard) when he realizes that moral reason itself does not contain the motivation to advance the good in the world. He stat: 'Deontological theories after Kant can try to

²² Kant: *Critique of pure Reason*, third antinomy.

²³ Schelling: *Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*. 1809. Kierkegaard: *The Concept of Anxiety*. 1844.

²⁴ Habermas (2010). p. 110.

give a good explanation of how to justify and apply moral norms but they cannot answer the question why we should be moral at all²⁵. Against this background he argues that the emergence of existentialism meant that the engagement that previously unfolded within the context of ethical life in a particular state has now become the individual's responsibility to his own life. Especially after World War II, when existentialism became one of the main philosophical currents, the belief in ideologies and in civilisation had disappeared and the individual was left with its own history as the outermost horizon of its life, and moral engagement itself became just one of several possible objects of an existential choice.

It is Habermas's view that the existentialist current showed that the understanding of what is right and wrong by means of reason needed voluntary support, in other words a personal motivation, in order to be transformed into an authentic moral practice. Since freedom – in existentialism – no longer meant the moral action of the conscious rational subject, as it did in Kant, but was based on a more fundamental personal self-choice, from which moral norms gain their validity, morality has been challenged by all kinds of possible irrational projections, some, for example, extremist and fantastic, of value systems that threatens the community of the established society. Neither 'reason' nor language nor the invoking of common traditions of values and norms is capable of binding the individual will to the moral life. It might be claimed that the utterance "Why should I be moral at all?" is an expression of radical freedom, or of the individual's free relation even to the demands of reason. Or a freedom to choose between good and evil.

Though being aware of the existentialist challenge to moral reason, Habermas does not seem to recognize the connection between the emergence of existentialism and a change in the concept of freedom in the direction of a concept of evil. He retains a modest confidence that 'processes of socialization' and political life forms can motivate citizens to contribute to the common good²⁶. Because a distinct concept of evil is absent in moral philosophy, including Habermas'. Both share the ethical optimism of the heritage from

²⁵ "Are there Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: "What is the Good Life?" in: Habermas (2003). p. 4.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 16.

ancient Greek thought in the Enlightenment, according to which the will simply follows the agent's understanding of the right or the good. But the view that Enlightenment, education to reason, is a direct path to a better world is a prejudice that lacks an adequate concept of human freedom, according to the religious philosophers. In the words of Kierkegaard (and in the spirit of St. Paul and Schelling), ethics' failure is due to the sin of man²⁷. Freedom and selfish orientation go hand in hand, though the agent creates the illusion of acting from good will, for the agent's clear awareness of right and wrong in his moral striving does not always include true self-knowledge.

The religious concept of sin expresses an insight into this problem, since it contains an original division of human nature, of which the moral subject is not aware, though he acts – or thinks he acts – from purely moral motives. Therefore in a conflict a true orientation towards the good must include a confession of one's own human imperfection, a self-criticism and consequently forgiveness in relation to the other. The good is not on exclusively on the side of either; both are in need of it and should strive and hope for its appearance in the common life grounded in knowledge of the good and in a will to make a new beginning. As regards, allegedly, religiously motivated conflicts after 2001, the struggle between good and evil should not be considered to be between 'us' and 'them'. We should not say "we, the good, shall defeat the other, evil." Instead we should strive to defeat evil itself, both in the other and in ourselves, by winning the other for the common cause (a shared good life) by means of the good. Then the good would not be a metaphysical or transcendent entity as it is in theism. It is situated in social interaction and emerges here in the will to solve problems through dialogue. Nevertheless, it transcends social relations in the sense that it is opposed to the depraved or wounded reality that we have caused. As an ideal, it is the object of the moral endeavour of the agent who has decided to make himself and the world better. It is the power that appears and unites where overly self-conscious antagonists have falsely believed that they have the good entirely on their side.

Habermas' theory of communicative reason comes close to this conception of the *living* good, since it situates morality in inter-subjective relations as

²⁷ Kierkegaard: Introduction to: *The Concept of Anxiety*. 1844.

norms that are binding because of the consent of the members of the community. But he lacks a substantial concept of the good *life*. The moral principle of a general agreement on respect for the autonomy of the individual is only *formal*. It might therefore turn out to be inadequate to solve the problem of how individuals, groups, religions with different worldviews come to share a common life. A living community at least implies a mutual recognition, which presupposes an understanding of the worldviews of its members. The morality of reason and the institutionalization of human rights are integrated in a substantial life form with competing worldviews, which threaten to turn social life into conflict unless these worldviews are formulated and discussed in a public debate²⁸. It might then be added: Conflicts between religions and between religious and secular worldviews are not just questions about rights, political power and economy; a precondition for their solution also implies an understanding of their spiritual aspect. Thus the entrance of religions into the social and political spheres and their influence on the public debates challenges researchers to investigate the role of this spiritual aspect, which is contained in the ‘semantic potential’²⁹ of the religious worldviews.

In his latest writings Habermas takes up an elaboration of concepts such as freedom, good, evil, sin, guilt in order to understand the moral dimension of world political conflict, war and terror. His analyses suggest, for example, that the dogma of sin contains an insight into human nature that can throw a new light on the anthropological foundation of moral philosophy. He tends to suggest that the world, with the Holocaust and the conflict arising from the events of September 11, 2001 in mind, needs a new moral attitude: A human self-understanding that recognizes that man’s freedom designates both the possibility of the good and an inner abyss that creates an anxiety that tempts the moral subject’s moral self-confidence when it is engaged in social conflicts. However Habermas is aware of the difficulties mankind has in liberating itself from the cruelties of the past through forgiveness. But a cure for healing wounds and making a new beginning would imply a new moral self-awareness that took into account both the individual’s and the other’s imperfection. Not

²⁸ Habermas (2005/2008). p. 249.

²⁹ Cf. Habermas: *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1992). p. 15.

just acting or judging reality from the demands of moral ideas but also acknowledging the imperfections of reality and encouraging to common deeds are necessary in order to improve the common good in a constructive way.

Concluding remarks

What role could religion play in post-secular societies according to Habermas? Can it provide views and arguments of importance to the political processes? Or is its significance restricted to the philosophical domain, where it might supplement ethics with insights that throw new light on the foundation of moral philosophy in philosophical anthropology? With the global political conflicts since September 11, 2001 in mind, Habermas aims at a balance between a growing recognition of the ethical, social and political significance of religious communities and an uncompromising insistence on keeping the liberal state neutral towards competing worldviews. The state has normative foundations that are justified rationally and totally independently of religious dogmas in order to secure freedom and legal rights for all citizens. Only on this condition can the liberal state include the diversity of religious and non-religious citizens.

But this pluralistic attitude of the liberal state does not imply that religious convictions be left to the private sphere. Religious utterances can complement important arguments in the public debate about political decisions that touch upon fundamental legal and moral aspects. Far from being irrational – *merely* faith – they contain significant potential both in their image of man and in the moral and political engagement which characterizes religious groups. According to Habermas, the dogmatic content of the religions might resist total translation into a philosophical language, as found in religious concepts like sin, guilt, forgiveness, which limits the reach of practical reason. But religious ideas are still an aspect of religion that has ethical relevance and therefore has something to say to a post-metaphysical age.

So even though Habermas in his discussion with Ratzinger repeatedly stresses the fact that in modernity no synthesis between faith and knowledge is possible he still discerns important religious knowledge in Kant's philosophy of religion. For epistemological and scientific reasons Kant rejected scho-

lastic cosmology. But his defence of the moral autonomy of the individual as a rational being has a metaphysical foundation that borders on the philosophy of religion. The ethical concept of autonomy in the sense of man's ability to moral action has presuppositions in the philosophy of religion. Or at least moral philosophy in this respect shares basic concepts with corresponding ideas in Protestant Christianity, namely knowledge about good and evil, freedom, man as an end in itself, as the image of God possessing dignity. While leaving the understanding of nature to the empirical sciences, philosophical ethics retains the analysis of the foundation of morality and its metaphysical presuppositions. Thus one of the answers to the question of the possible role for religion in the public debate about political decisions can be found in philosophical explorations of '*das Humane*' in religion, i.e. of what it has to say about ethics and maybe also about the limits of – or challenges to – ethics in how we understand and deal with moral problems in connection with the severe violations of solidarity that mankind has experienced in late modernity.