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JURGEN HABERMAS AND RUSSIAN PHILOSOPHER-THEOLOGIAN DIALOGUE THROUGH THE CENTURY

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Abstract

During the era of the emergence of Sociology as a science of the early 20th century, the so-called Russian philosopher-theologians subjected the foundations of the Sociology of religion to powerful criticism. In opposing the idea of socialism, their counter-arguments turned out to be prophetic since the failure of the socialist society took place largely according to their predictions. However, at the time, the platform of scientific atheism emerged as dominant, thus forming the methodological atheism of the Sociology of religion. A century later, Jürgen Habermas was compelled to take cognisance of these two opposing worldviews of secular and religious societies. In this article, while the authors do not examine the reasons that prompted the pre-eminent contemporary sociologist of religion to return to this analysis, an attempt is made to compare the arguments of Russian philosopher-theologians of the early 20th century with those of the respected contemporary scholar. The aim of providing such a comparative analysis is to try to understand to what extent the 21st century views are consonant with the theological platform of the vision of social reality proposed by the Russian theological position of the early 20th century.

Keywords: methodological, atheism, agnosticism, theological, paradigm

1. Introduction

The historical context of the debate between Russian philosopher-theologians was formed during an era when communist ideas appeared to have triumphed. By the beginning of the 20th century, the long-running dispute between Slavophiles and Westernisers concerning the choice of Russia's development path had come to a head. The outcome of this process was the predominance of secularist ideas expressed by Westernisers; as a consequence, the country leapt headlong into the course of radical reform to the existing system. Although difficult to disentangle from the complex of social, political and economic problems appearing in the wake of the 1917 revolution, it can be noted that one of

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the immediate consequences was the violent destruction of the institution of religion. As Vladimir Solovyov wrote at the end of the 19th century: “It can indeed be seen that, having rejected the religious basis as subjective and powerless in its present form, modern Western civilisation nevertheless seeks some binding elements for life and consciousness outside the religious sphere, striving to replace rejected gods with something else” [1]. In adopting this formula, the new Soviet state took drastic steps to destroy the traditional institution of religion, creating a new social religion in its place, which system of thought was essentially to be mandatory for all citizens. According to Nikolay Berdyaev: “The prevailing consciousness of the 19th century, which considered itself ‘advanced’ and ‘progressive’, replaced Theology with Sociology. Sociology thus became the gospel of ‘progressive’ people in the 20th century, who began to search for God in sociality, in the public sphere.” [2]

In this context, the work of the contemporary German philosopher Jürgen Habermas is of particular interest due to his unique synthesis of Marxist approaches with American pragmatism. Through his commitment to socialist ideas, Habermas thought retains an affinity with historical developments in Russian society; at the same time, in his continuation of the Enlightenment tradition, whose leading light is Immanuel Kant, he embodies that strand of German philosophy that has long been an important reference point for Russian philosophers.

The discourse of the secularisation of society is highly characteristic of the contemporaneous situation, in which the basis for Habermasian discourses is formed. For Habermas, the functional differentiation of social systems includes the increasing self-limitation of Church and religious communities to the primary function of providing spiritual nourishment to their flocks, implying a concomitant renunciation of claims to active participation in other spheres of public life. In accordance with this trend, religious practices have ‘decamped’ into more personal, or subjective, spheres of life. Thus, according to Habermas, there is an obvious correlation between the functional specification of a religious system and the individualisation of religious practice [J. Habermas, *Against ‘militant atheism’* (*‘Post-secular’ society - what is it?*), Russian Journal, 23.07.2008, <http://www.russ.ru/pole/Protiv-voinstvuyuschego-ateizma>].

Furseth Inger and Repstad Ral note that Habermas theory of religion is “related to his understanding of the dual structure of society, which comprises both system and life-world”. Because Habermas sees the life-world as a “finite province of meaning” and as a public sphere of communicative action, his premise is that “individuals need personal integration, identity, or meaning, and that meaning is dependent upon integrating cultural norms created by society”. For Habermas, then, traditions, values and religion are constitutive of the life-world on which communicative competence itself is based [3]. In observing Habermas claims that the social sciences have influenced the function of modern religion, Inger and Repstad partially confirm the cited earlier thesis of Nikolay Berdyaev. Hence, in an attempt to solve a number of problems entailed by advanced capitalism through the production of technical knowledge, the social

sciences have invaded the sphere of religion, whose purview has to do with values underpinning social integration. Consequently, the Social sciences have “undermined faith in traditional religion” by “pointing out the relative character of all cultural phenomena”, thus subverting “religions claim to absolute truth” [3, p. 50-51].

The dual position of the Habermasian agnostic is manifested in an implicit recognition of God: “The concept of God symbolises the process that binds a community of individuals together in striving for emancipation” [4]. This statement may be considered in the context of the definition of communication between God and the individual offered by the Russian philosopher and theologian Semyon Frank: “The unity of separateness and interpenetration that defines the person as incomprehensible, however, has a very special character: it is the unity of the supreme and subordinate agency, the self-sufficing unity of meaningful grounds that in itself is unsupported and subject to justification. This is the unity of two modally completely different layers of being, of which the deeper and the main has immeasurable and infinite depth.” [5]

Thus, such a comparison leads not so much to a confluence of ideas as to a widening of the theological schism between two Churches: Catholic and the Orthodox. As Vladimir Solovyov notes: “In Catholicism [...] external unity consists not as a result, but rather as a basis and a unified goal. However, for external unity as a goal, there is only one means – external force. Catholicism assimilates this to itself along with other external – that is, worldly – forces.” [1, p. 48] For Orthodoxy, such communication, which occurs in prayer, repentance or communion, frees a person from the pangs of conscience, from oppressive worries or inner turmoil and excitement, lifting the individual to otherwise inexplicable heights, where it is possible to find peace of mind – “we feel a rush of some incomprehensible, suprarational, fertile forces, a blissful touching of other worlds, whose forces mysteriously dominate our earthly existence, over the local world and penetrate into our sober, everyday life” [5, p. 192]. The result of such communication cannot be thought of in terms of a ‘sober’ (i.e. rational) correspondence between attitudes of the spirit and Divine Revelation, since the descent of the Divine is an objective process.

According to Habermas, under the conditions of modernity, the faithful must “endure the secularisation of knowledge and the pluralism of world pictures regardless of the religious truths they hold” [6]. Habermas sees the process of cultural and social secularisation in terms of a “twofold educational process”, which forces “both educational traditions and those of religious teachings to comprehend the respective limits of each of these views” [7]. Conversely, Berdyaev notes that “for the Orthodox consciousness, Thomas Aquinas teaching on the natural world, which posits it in opposition to the supernatural world, is already a form of secularisation of the world” [8, p. 5].

As can be seen, the historical context of early 20th century Russia is not entirely dissimilar from the contemporary context described by Habermas: in both cases we observe the decline of religion in society and its replacement by secularism, irrespective of whether this appears in the form of a strict ban, or

rather in democratised forms expressing the non-obligation to observe religious customs. The similarity is manifested in the assessment of the loss of the dominant role played by religion in society.

While the distinction revealed by this comparison consists in the fact that the Russian experience was a local process taking place within a single territory, when the global experience of modernity is one that has been prolonged over the centuries, affecting all countries and now exacerbated by globalisation, nevertheless, in formulating such a question, the problem of the existence of religion in society is equally acute in both considered cases.

The third constitutive aspect of our comparison consists in the fundamental differences between the Catholic and Orthodox faiths, which underlie the respective worldviews of Habermas and the Russian philosopher-theologians.

According to the sociological principles expressed by the Russian philosopher-theologians, Christian sociology is to be developed on the basis of particular theological premises. For them, the study of social life is only possible in the context of Orthodox Christian understanding. This position can be seen to have parallels in other parts of the world where the assumptions underlying western sociological principles do not necessarily apply. In the context of cultural and historical perspectives on African Christian identity, James L. Cox notes: "The primary aim of such scholarship in its earliest days was to provide an objective description, largely for the Western academic community, of various aspects of religious life throughout the world, usually to make comparisons which would demonstrate the superiority of Western culture and religion over that found in other parts of the world" [9, p. 25].

Similarly, modern secularisation in Russia implies the destruction of the foundations of Orthodoxy as the historically dominant faith in the country, which is capable of providing a cohesive national force, as well as guaranteeing the continuation of harmonious relationships between the officially recognised faiths. For Western society, conversely, secularisation implies the transfer of religion from the plane of socially regulatory institutions to that of personal perception and individual choice. Although this is accompanied by a recognition of the right to freedom of belief, religion itself no longer matters. Thus, secularisation applies to the phenomenon of religion itself.

2. Methodology

As an adherent of the ideas of the Enlightenment, who cites the work of Émile Durkheim and Peter L. Berger, Jürgen Habermas' reasoning is characterised by agnosticism. As such, in the representations of such thinkers, God's intervention in history is excluded from the category of reality. In their opinion, objective reality consists in individual practices that coalesce into a collective consciousness, forming collective values and norms.

In contrast to the essentially atheistic position taken by Sociology, the Russian philosopher-theologians defended theological principles in their study of empiricism. God's participation in social life forms a three-dimensional space of

reality, in which a person draws his or her values and norms from religious dogma and faith in God [10, 11]. According to Vladimir Solovyov, “religion, speaking generally and abstractly, is the connection of man and the world with the unconditional principle and focus of everything that exists. Obviously, if recognising the reality of such an unconditional principle, then such a principle should determine all interests, all the content of human life and consciousness, everything should depend on it and everything essential in what a person does, cognises and produces.” [1, p. 33]

3. Findings

In continuation of our reasoning process, let us try to develop an understanding of the main religious terms within the framework of the two approaches.

3.1. Relationship between Church and state

The fundamental position of Habermas is the ideological neutrality of the exercise of domination, whether by the state or a particular religion [12]. Defining this form of democracy, Habermas relies on the statement of R. Audi and N. Wolterstorff, that “reasonable comprehensive doctrines”, whether “religious or non-religious”, may be “introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons - and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines - are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support” [13].

At the end of the 19th century, Vladimir Soloviev predicted that Western civilisation would take this development path, arguing that “the purpose of Western development, of western non-religious civilisation, is to serve as a necessary transition for mankind from the religious past to a religious future” [1, p. 45]. In this sense, if following the position of Habermas, religion, in the process of mutual influence of society and religion, loses its orthodoxy, leading to the freedom of existence of new religions. As Habermas notes, “Religious citizens no longer live as representatives of a religiously homogeneous population under a religiously legitimised state system” [12, p. 156]. The experience of membership of a religious community, then, is necessarily distinct from that of citizenship.

For the conservative Russian theorist, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, the main source of misunderstanding between people and governments that “have arisen and are threatening to intensify” consists in the “artificially created” theory of relations between Church and State [14]. Thus Pobedonostsev interprets the fading political relevance of the Church in the consciousness of citizens as being due to the historical course of events in the west of Europe, inseparably connected with the development of the Roman Catholic Church, in which “the concept of the Church as an institution was incorporated into the spiritually-political governmental system”; having thus come into opposition with the state, it “took the political struggle with it” [14]. In relying on Orthodox traditions,

Pobedonostsev's position is opposed to that of Habermas, seeing "the true, natural concept of the Church as a meeting of Christians, organically linked by the unity of belief in the union established by God". In this sense, "the Church as a society of believers does not separate and cannot separate itself from the state, consisting of society united in a civil union" [14]. Conversely, defending his position of reflection on the "immutability of faith in the differentiated layers of modern societies", Habermas concludes that religious doctrines "avoid unconditional discursive explanation to which other ethical life orientations and worldviews are subjected; that is, secular concepts of good" [12, p. 158].

The position of the Russian philosopher-theologians was expressed by Pobedonostsev as follows: "The state cannot limit itself to solely representing society's material interests; in this case, it would deprive itself of spiritual power and forfeit its spiritual unity with the people" [14, p. 312]. In this respect, it would be meaningless to reflect on religious dogmas, since, as argued by Solovyev, "the best aspirations of the human soul and highest dictates of Christian conscience are *attached* to political matters and questions, not opposed to them" [15].

3.2. Faith

By the term 'faith', Jürgen Habermas refers to "a normative edge to the central objection, as it relates to the integral role that religion plays in the life of a person of faith, in other words to religion's 'seat' in everyday life. A devout person pursues her daily rounds by drawing on belief. Put differently, true belief is not only a doctrine, i.e. believed content, but a source of energy that the person who has a faith taps performatively and thus nurtures his or her entire life" [12, p. 151]. In justification of this statement, Habermas cites the comparative analysis by Rudolf Bultmann of two sayings *fides quae creditur* (faith which is believed) and *fides qua creditur* (faith by which it is believed) [16]. Relying on the understanding of faith "as a starting point for a mode of living", Habermas concludes that the social integration of the Church and the privatisation of faith deprive the religious attitude to transcendence of its internal world explosive power [12].

Habermas explains this in terms of changes in the form of religious consciousness that have been observed since the periods of Reformation and Enlightenment. This "modernisation of religious consciousness" is described by sociologists in terms of a response to three challenges faced by religious traditions: "the fact of pluralism", the "emergence of modern science" and the "spread of positive law and a profane morality" [6, p. 5].

The Russian philosopher-theologian Pavel Florensky argued that, since "faith transports us to another reality", "what is an assertion from there will be a negation here, while what is a negation here will take the form of an assertion from there". In other words, it is by means of faith that "we see the local world not from here, but from there; we look at it with the eyes of eternity; stated otherwise, we see not the world, more precisely, not ourselves along with the world, but its own mirror reflection". Consequently, in the matter of faith, "the

reality of this world is first denied (antithesis), in order to confirm (thesis) the reality of that by pointing to a different reality, which in this world is revealed as a predetermined outcome” [17]. Concerning the “explosive force of the internal world”, Florensky, considering the subjectivity and objectivity of faith, reveals the formula of this *force of the original faith of any religion* – “... the worldwide significance of the sacrament is determined by the objective performance of its *ex opera operatum*” [17, p. 404].

3.3. *God-man*

According to Habermas, western philosophy is based around *essentially Christian postulates*. Moreover, while Philosophy ‘transformed the original religious meaning’, it didn’t ‘eliminate or erase it’ from these adopted concepts. This phenomenon can be seen in the ‘translation’ of the idea of man being made in the image of God onto a similar idea of human dignity, for which notion respect is compulsory. Thus, the content of biblical concepts is applied “beyond the confines of the religious community and becomes the property of people of other faiths and non-believers” [7, p. 67-68]. Here, however, the transformation of the *God-man* postulate from the theological to the secular leads to a justification of human pride, contrary to the theological interpretation stated by S.N. Bulgakov: “One thing is beyond doubt: as a relative and created being, the human spirit is incomprehensible from and to itself. In all his contradictions, he bears within himself both the seal of his finitude and the task of his prototype.” [18]

In opposition to Habermas’s conclusion that the *God-man* is the result of ordinary empirical reality, Bulgakov argues that the human spirit cannot be so different in its nature from the spirit of the Absolute that it becomes impossible to compare and comprehend them in some respects on the basis of such a comparison. Since the human spirit is finite, however, it is at the same time different from the Absolute Spirit and can therefore be comprehended in this difference [18, p. 418].

3.4. *Freedom*

Habermas considers the concept of *freedom* from the positions of *objective* and *subjective spirit*. Within the dimension of objective spirit, seen in the dimension of freedom of action, conscious participation in the symbolically structured ‘foundational space’ is reflected in the performatively accompanying consciousness of freedom where socialised minds move together in linguistic relation. Here, “the rational motivation of beliefs and actions is carried out according to logical, linguistic and pragmatic rules that cannot be reduced to the laws of nature” [12, p. 43]. Conversely, by subjective spirit, Habermas understands “the self-understanding of subjects acting in the public sphere of a common culture” [12, p. 43]. It is as a consequence of being faced with “significance claims in the foundational public sphere, which force them to take a position” that subjects develops the ability to act in one way or another [12, p.

43]. Thus Habermas' attempt to separate the objective and subjective basis of freedom is reduced to a single idea of a rational choice of action.

In opposition to the sociological views that arose in the 19th century, Solovyov asserts that "modern man is conscious of himself as internally free and as above all external principles beyond his direct control, affirming himself as a single, infinitely small and evanescent point on the world circle". Thus, while recognising the divine rights of a human person, modern consciousness acknowledges "neither divine powers nor divine content, for modern man, in life and in knowledge, admits only limited conditional reality, i.e. the reality of particular facts and phenomena, and from this point of view of man himself there is only one of these particular facts" [1, p. 50].

Berdyayev concurs that "genuine freedom of religious conscience, freedom of spirit is revealed not in an isolated, autonomous personality, self-affirming in individualism, but in a personality conscious of itself as a hypersubjective spiritual unity, within the oneness of the spiritual organism, in the Body of Christ - that is, in the Church" [8].

Thus, while the freedom of a person as a private phenomenon of the universe is the result of a multitude of external restrictions, the freedom of a believer is not restricted in the same way since he is not immersed into the chaos of surrounding opinions, values, and ideas, but rather elevated in the pursuit of unity with God.

However, there were also adherents of social philosophy among Russian philosophers and theologians. For example, in focusing on the functional value of personal freedom as the beginning of *service*, Frank noted that the freedom of an individual is "not its natural and primary right, but its public duty" [19]. Thus, like any subjective right, having not a self-sufficient, but rather a functional value, freedom is a "reflex of duty, a form of being conditioned and justified by the beginning of service" [19]. Here it can be seen that the concept of *service* is simultaneously interpreted by the Russian philosopher-theologians as service to God and the Fatherland. Moreover, it is assumed that the divine principle transcends the social.

4. Discussion

Beginning with Durkheim and culminating with Berger and Habermas, sociologists who try to maintain an atheistic or agnostic position in the study of religion are constantly forced to balance between theological and secular conceptions of the religious phenomenon. Thus, Pavel Florensky was happy to cite Durkheim's definition of the social phenomenon of religious worship: "Anyone who has truly practiced a religion knows very well that it is the cult that stimulates the feelings of joy, inner peace, serenity and enthusiasm that, for the faithful, stand as experimental proof of their beliefs". As such, for Durkheim, the cult of religion is not merely "a system of signs by which faith is outwardly expressed"; rather, it is the "sum total of means by which that faith is created and recreated periodically" [20]. As Florensky approvingly notes: "these are the

golden words of Durkheim. More than this, there's nothing to talk about." [17, p. 73]

According to Florensky, since religion is essentially alien to modernity, it is axiomatic that modernity is alien to religion. As such, he was happy for war to be declared between modernity and religion: "Let's see who will win this war, whether religion, alien to the world, alien to any modernity and as ancient as humanity itself, or forever-current modernity, capable of abandoning its goals even before they begin to be implemented" [17, p. 72].

The discussion continues right up to the present day, with contemporary reality providing vivid examples both of the general dying out of religion as part of secularising processes, as well as religion's continuing relevance, due to its fulfilment of acute social needs, just as was the case in antiquity. Moreover, in contemporary academia, criticism of methodological atheism continues to burgeon. For example, Douglas Porpora recently argued that "in application to religious experience, methodological atheism is both untenable and injurious to sociology's aims. Even worse, consistently applied, methodological atheism ultimately dissolves the very category of experience." [21]

5. Conclusions

In comparing the works of Russian scholars from the last century and those of Habermas - perhaps the most prominent figure in the sociological study of religion today - we do not just compare opinions, but rather see the distinctive features of two schools of thought that appear to have developed independently from each other. This parallel development has nevertheless resulted in periodical collisions due to opposing assessments of social phenomena in the field of religion. Thus, while Durkheim's agnosticism permits a certain neutrality to be steered between the two ostensibly opposing scholarly approaches, the contemporary sociological views expressed by Habermas necessitate reflection on the part of the Church concerning its dogmas and their concomitant adjustment to present-day social needs.

According to the authors of *Sociology: A Catholic Critique*, published in 'The Encyclopaedia of Catholic Social Thought, Social Science and Social Policy', due to their proceeding by "methodological atheism", which rules out the intervention of God in history, "sociologists have been blind to even the empirical effects of religious belief. And lacking any clear vision of human society, much less that presented in the Church's social teachings, Sociology has become captive to a variety of limited, self-serving social agendas." [22]

At the same time, the Russian philosopher-theologians insisted on maintaining the active relevance of religious values in all spheres of social life. However, here they should not be understood to have been arguing in terms of a resurgence of a primitive form of the medieval hegemony of the Church. Rather they were articulating a position from which a vision of a heterogeneous society, articulated from a religious position, is one in which the lives of individuals and wider society are permeated by religious traditions. Russia's centuries-old

experience as a multi-confessional state shows that the traditions and values of the historically established dominant religion - in this case Orthodoxy - remains dominant.

In the notional dialogue between Habermas and the Russian philosopher-theologians referred to in this article, Habermas strives to stay within an agnostic framework. Thus, in his account of the sociological phenomenon of religion, he is forced to balance between Theology and secular science. In empirical terms, this position allows approaches to the study of a religiously plural society us to be unified in order to arrive at a common outline of those trends and processes taking place in the world community that are, in one way or another, connected with religion. From this neutral position, Habermas and his followers are able to create a picture of the existence of religion in society that is capable of universal application.

Conversely, the Russian philosopher-theologians, who place their reliance on the example of Orthodoxy, are convinced that the religious community should be studied on the basis of the theological foundations of the dominant religion. As a consequence, their research is founded on the underlying processes and tendencies of a religious community that adheres to a particular religion. While this may seem to imply a diametrically opposite approach to that taken by Habermas, in empirical terms, this position allows researchers to focus on deep underlying processes and phenomena occurring in a particular society, whose members profess a particular religion. Due to this approach being carried out in the context of the theological paradigm, it may be referred to as a theological approach.

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