The Coexistence of Faith and Reason: Habermas’ Theoretical Framework of the Post-Secular Society

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Gradasi Aktor, Tarik-Menarik Peran, Jangkauan Kerjasama, dan Komposisi dalam Keterlekatkan: Ide-ide Pelengkap untuk Teori Ranah Tindakan Strategis
# Table of Contents

- **The Coexistence of Faith and Reason: Habermas’ Theoretical Framework of the Post-Secular Society**  
  *Zainun Nur Hisyam Tahrus*  
  
  1

- **The Resilience of Persons with Disabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic**  
  *Astri Hanjarwati, Istiana Hermawati & Husein Avicenna Akil*  
  
  25

- **Educating Adolescent Reproductive Health and Sexuality through the Instagram Account @tabu.id**  
  *Akhriyadi Sofian, Nia Auliani, Naili Ni’matul Illiyun*  
  
  43

- **The Conflicts Surrounding Establishment of Places of Worship: A Structuration Analysis of GKI Yasmin Bogor**  
  *M. Syaeful Anam & Mukh. Imron Ali Mahmoudi*  
  
  71

- **Gradation of Actors, Interplay of Roles, Range of Cooperation, and Composition in Embeddedness: Complementary Ideas for Strategic Action Field Theory**  
  *Andi Rahman Alamsyah*  
  
  97

- **Gradasi Aktor, Tarik-Menarik Peran, Jangkauan Kerjasama, dan Komposisi dalam Keterlekatan: Ide-ide Pelengkap untuk Teori Ranah Tindakan Strategis**  
  *Andi Rahman Alamsyah*  
  
  121
The Coexistence of Faith and Reason: Habermas’ Theoretical Framework of the Post-Secular Society

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Abstrak
The Post-Secular Society is a project put forward by Habermas as a critique of modern secularism. Habermas envisions this project as a *via media*—a mediating force between religious fundamentalism and excessive secularism. He argues that religious citizens can translate their religious discourses into a generally-accessible language that would enable them to discuss and communicate with their secular counterparts. This theory provides itself as an alternative to the Secularization Thesis, which had been the predominant framework for sociologists to study the relationship between the religious and the secular, or between faith and reason. This article attempts to outline sociological and philosophical foundations of Habermas’ Post-Secular Society by reviewing his essays and public speeches. As a counterbalance, the article will also present criticisms against Habermas’ notion of Discursive Translation and the limits of translation itself, which will function as a theoretical yardstick in gauging to what extent the Post-Secular Society is achievable. In conclusion, I argue that Habermas’ concept on the Post-Secular Society, which he argues to require religious communities to carry out Discursive Translation, can be realized within the moral-practice component of religion. However, this concept requires further conceptualization, especially when applied to non-European societies and religious life at the micro-level.

Keywords: Post-Secular Society, Discursive Translation, Habermas, Religion, Secularism

INTRODUCTION: THE RESURGENCE OF RELIGION AND THE DECLINE OF SECULARISM

The idea of post-secularism was not borne simply as a theoretical response against “excessive secularism” or as the continuation of a variant of postmodern thought. Instead, it was a reflection on the rise of religious phenomena around the world—something Peter Berger (1992) even referred to as a “desecularization”. Berger argued that the secularization thesis that had been put forward by social scientists have now been proven to be invalid: across the globe, Europe seemed to be the only exception where the secularization project is still in effect, notwithstanding that some scholars have also pointed out to the resurgence of religious influence within European politics. Yves Lambert,
for instance, has indicated a turning point of the presence of religion in European public space (Ziebertz and Riegel, 2009). This resurgence is partially induced by the ability of religious groups in adapting to a modern environment, demonstrating their aptitude in taking advantage of technological developments and the flow of globalization. As secular state institutions continue to weaken, religious discourses have increasingly gained momentum in different parts of the world (Karpov, 2010; Reaves, 2012; Juergensmeyer, 2019).

Faced with this changing social landscape, it becomes pertinent for social scholars to reconsider the predictions of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim regarding the affinity between modernity and secularization. Talal Asad, for example, criticizes how the Theory of Secularization arbitrarily alludes to a concept of religion that was formed through the history of European colonial power relations (Asad, 2003). Furthermore, John Milibank raised serious criticisms against the sociological model utilized for studying secularization in modern society, namely its reliance on the dichotomy between the social and the individual instead of the complex hierarchy between social groups, including the hierarchy between religious values present in society. These reconsiderations have encouraged various streams within social science to formulate a new paradigm and theory for studying religion in the public sphere (Fordahl, 2017).

It is from this discourse that Jürgen Habermas develops his project on the Post-Secular Society, partially as a response against excessive secularism. As the de facto successor of the Frankfurt School, Habermas’ interrogation of the post-secular phenomena is situated as a critique of instrumental rationality as well as various elements of modernity. However, unlike Horkheimer and Adorno’s pessimistic view of religion as a mere outlet of escapism from the colonization of modern rationality, the Habermasian post-secular society is contrived as a connecting bridge for religious discourses so that they can fit in the secular public sphere. Such optimism echoes his larger theoretical edifice that reason can nonetheless be salvaged as an instrument for emancipation as the goal of Enlightenment—not unlike his Theory of Communicative Action (Brittain, 2012).

In this article, I argue that Habermas’ notion of the Post-Secular Society might serve as an appropriate framework in establishing religious life amidst the turbulent social changes brought by modern rationalization, especially in Indonesia. Habermas contends that religious com-
munities and their language remain relevant in the modern world—one in which acts of “Discursive Translation” could function as a mediating force between the secular and the sacred. I consider Habermas’ proposal as a potential solution in dealing with religious cultural diversity by uniting them within a universal language in the public sphere. Finally, I will also situate Habermas’ position within the broader academic discussion on secularism to find out aspects that still need to be refined in his theory of the Post-Secular Society.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article utilizes a literature review method. The texts being analyzed include Habermas’ speech scripts on the concept of Post-Secular Society, his essays and books that underlie the sociological and philosophical grounds for this concept, as well as several works of criticisms levied against it by other scholars. From these literature, I try to outline Habermas’ philosophical underpinnings that gave way to the Post-Secular Society concept; posit it in dialogue with several emerging streams of criticism; and finally assess the possibility of applying this concept in society. My exploration begins with mapping out Habermas’ stance on the recurring debates pertaining to the secularization thesis and how it leads to the concept of a Post-Secular Society, including its underlying sociological and philosophical assumptions, as well as how it could be accomplished through a project of Discursive Translation. Following this, I present a series of criticisms from other scholars to evaluate the extent in which a Post-Secular Society is relevant. I end the article by displaying the potential for implementing a Post-Secular Society in light of criticisms against it within the social context of the world in general, and Indonesia in particular.

HABERMAS ON THE SECULARIZATION THESIS

In a seminar held in Istanbul on September 16, 2008, entitled “A “Post-Secular” Society – What Does That Mean?”, Habermas laid out his post-secular argument by firstly engaging with the Secularization Thesis, which stated that modernization processes have strongly influenced the secularization of society. This thesis rests on three considerations. First, the development of science and technology has transformed the relationship between humans and nature, in which practical explanations proposed by science have led to the disenchantment of the latter. In other
words, modernization renders scientific thought to be un assimilable to any theocentric or metaphysical worldview. Second, modern society has developed a bureaucratic system and organic solidarity that differentiates various social subsystems. As a result, religious institutions such as churches are no longer in control of public affairs, but are specialized only in carrying out religious functions within the community. Third, the increasing welfare and social security since industrialization have made people no longer relying on faith to feel safe from uncontrollable contingencies.

However, the secularization thesis has since been put under scrutiny by different sociologists. Revisionists have pointed out that the secularization view contains an unmistakable Eurocentric bias (Habermas, 2008a). Against this, they argued that a revival of religious intrusion has taken place in the past few decades, reflected in: 1. Missionary expansion; 2. Fundamentalist radicalization, and; 3. The instrumentation of violence in multiple world religions. Early signs of this “religious revival” can be seen from the increasing number of groups in established religious organizations in various regions such as Africa, East, and Southeast Asia. It is argued that the rise of religious influence in modern times is determined by the flexibility of religious organizations in adapting to global trends, especially those who organize themselves through transnational and multicultural movements. Furthermore, some of these religious movements have increasingly taken a fundamentalist slant, such as Pentecostals and various radical Muslim groups openly declaring hostility against the currents of modernization. Finally, the Islamic Revolution in Iran and different factions of Islamic terrorist cell groups also demonstrated that religious-political power remains a significant force in creating conflict. These phenomena have led revisionists to declare the secularization thesis to be ultimately untenable.

Habermas, however, contends that the increasing significance of religion in the public sphere should only be attributed to fundamentalist Muslim movements, but also the influx of displaced Muslim immigrants arriving in Europe. The presence of Muslim communities in the daily life of European society, along with their religious identity and rituals in community space, have affected the public consciousness of Europeans towards religion. This mixing of both religious and secular citizens in their everyday lives evinces how religious communities can still survive and adapt to a secular environment (Habermas, 2008a).
Notwithstanding, Habermas does not arrive at the conclusion that the secularization thesis is over or obsolete. For him, the real problem lies in the inaccuracies in defining the relation between secularization and modernization. He argued:

“In my view, the weakness of the theory of secularization is due rather to rash inferences that betray an imprecise use of the concepts of “secularization” and “modernization”. What is true is that in the course of the differentiation of functional social systems, churches and religious communities increasingly confined themselves to their core function of pastoral care and had to renounce their competencies in other areas of society.” (Habermas, 2008a)

In other words, secularization does not completely eliminate the role of religion. In viewing secularization, Habermas agrees with Jose Casanova that although religion loses its public authority amid trends of individualization, this does not mean that it has lost its total influence and relevance in the political and cultural arena or within the personal lives of its adherents. Habermas’ critique of both the supporters and detractors of the secularization thesis then led him to propose the project of a Post-Secular Society.

THE ORIGINS OF HABERMAS’ POST-SECULAR SOCIETY

Habermas’ idea of the Post-Secular Society can be traced to his early works on the public sphere, most notably in *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), as well as his two-volume *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) which explores how individuals achieve cooperative action through mutual deliberation. Through these two major theoretical works, Habermas stresses the importance of building consensus and common understanding through “Communicative Action”—deliberations free from the domination of money and power—in which the public sphere functions as the locus where such norms take place (Walsh, 2012:45). Hence, communicative actions can only be realized by creating the ideal speech situation guided by principles of inclusion, non-coercion, and equality of participation.

Nonetheless, in this early period of his thinking, Habermas did not regard religion as a significant factor in the process of communicative action (Dillon, 2012: 250). More precisely, he considered religion as irrelevant for improving the public sphere as Communicative Action relies
on the criteria of rational discussion, while religion is bound to contain emotionally-charged discourses.

In the past two decades, Habermas began to change his dismissive attitude against religion and locate its significance to the social fabric. According to Austin Harrington, Habermas’ thoughts on religion can be categorized into three phases (2007:543-544). The first phase took place in the 1970s, in which Habermas’ writings espoused a view of religion through a Marxist framework—that is, as a barrier constraining human emancipation. The second phase pertains to the “Linguistication of the Sacred” written in Volume II of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, and assumes that what is sacred in religion have been rationalized in secular societies. Finally, the third phase is epitomized through Habermas’ 1988 essay *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, in which he began to acknowledge the debt rationality owes to religion in creating a modern, secular society.

In *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, however, Habermas has not yet mentioned anything of a “Post-Secular Society”. The term was first declared much later—namely in a scientific speech entitled *Faith and Knowledge* that took place on October 14, 2001, not long after 9/11. In this speech (that was awarded the Peace Prize from the German Publishers and Booksellers Association), Habermas argued that the emergence of the phenomena of terrorism should be seen as one of the excesses of modern secularism (Habermas, 2001; Harrington, 2007). He criticized how secularization has deprived religious people from their freedom of expression in the public sphere. The forced silencing of religious citizens could only be a flawed form of democracy, as it had failed to provide equal rights for different groups in society.

In his essay *Religion in the Public Sphere*, Harbermas problematized John Rawls’ brand of argument that religious views cannot take place in the political discourse of a secular state, thereby excluding religious communities from the public sphere (Habermas, 2006). The Rawlsian point of view, Habermas concludes, actually reduces the democratic value of a liberal state that should have been able to guarantee the participation of all citizens—including religious communities and individuals. As such, an interpretation of secularism that rested on the exclusion of religious communities from expressing their political opinions is an inarguably narrow one.

But Habermas went even further. He also examines how religious communities do not have to forsake their religious identities and views
in politics, as the language of secularism is also rooted in religious discourses—something that secular naturalism tends to ignore. The weakness of the “naturalist” strand of argument, Habermas pointed out, lies in how secular rationalism entails a process of objectification to nature and self-description. Following modernization, the disenchantment of the world entails the reduction of nature as a mere object of scientific analysis—and what follows this modern scientific reasoning, for Habermas, is the eventual elimination of any intuitive sense regarding responsibility and accountability of oneself.

The solution to these modern problems cannot be found in mere common sense, but requires more fundamentally-rooted normative values embedded within religious traditions. One example Habermas provided is the value of egalitarian law, a primary component in building democratic societies, which nonetheless remains rooted in religion. The American Civil Rights Movement as well as one of its most prominent figures, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., are proof of how religious groups were able to utilize their values in promoting equal rights for minorities—and that they did so by employing a universal language acceptable to the secular public sphere (Habermas, 2006).

In these texts, Habermas mentions the need to strive for a post-secular society where religious communities can continue to exist and contribute. His view on the role of religion in the public sphere was further transformed after engaging in dialogue with Cardinal Ratzinger—who would later be ordained as Pope Benedict XVI—in 2004 (Walsh, 2012; Areshidze, 2017). Habermas reflects how secular modernity has led members of society to prioritize their own egoistic self-interest (Areshidze, 2017:727). As such, there are no guarantees that secular citizens, along with their capacity for rational thinking, will ever sacrifice their self-interests for the common good. The motivational weakness that plagues secular society, then, can find its cure in religious traditions. Habermas concludes that the ideal Post-Secular society will be found through a continuous process of interpretation between religious values and rationality; of a complementary learning between the religious and the secular (Walsh, 2012:47; Fordahl, 2017:557). This view is echoed by Ratzinger, who believes that religion needs to continue opening itself “to be purified and structured by reason”, while reason must maintain its boundaries and remain willing to the values pertaining to humanity that are voiced by religion. Ratzinger describes this dialogue as a “universal process of purifications” (Walsh, 2012:48).
HOW DOES THE POST-SECULAR SOCIETY WORK?

In *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1992), Habermas announces his commitment to take religion seriously by designating it as an “unavoidable semantic carrier”—namely a force that mediates the encounter between ordinary life, which has become entirely profane, and extraordinary things that convey the divine and sublime. For Habermas, democratic society may always need instructions that “only religion can provide” (Areshidze, 2017:726). He also expressed his conviction against the excessive supremacy of rationalism that he once adhered to. Both rationalism and philosophy, refutes Habermas, cannot completely replace the role occupied by religion as a source of social solidarity quintessential to the psychological and spiritual well-being of individuals. Religion provides a way for human beings to endure “the unavoidable suffering and unrecompensed injustice” of living that is not offered by secular rationalism. In addition, Habermas also admits that there is the power to communicate truth in religion (Areshidze, 2017).

The Habermasian notion of religion possessing semantic capacities that help humans to overcome suffering can be understood through the concept of “Existential Crisis” proposed by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2004). According to both, the social need for religion is much higher in societies where any form of security against possible crises is scarce. In countries considered to be developed and rich, the social primacy of religion seems to be declining, as evidenced by the decreasing attendance and participation in religious rituals. As the global population that live in poor developing countries outnumber those in rich, developed ones, this implies that the majority of people living on earth might be religious rather than secular. Furthermore, Norris and Inglehart surmise that religious influence will not disappear even if secularism has become the majority of state ideologies across the globe.

In spite of their similarities, I contend that Habermas’ perspective also contains fundamental differences to Norris and Inglehart. For Habermas, religious semantics do not only help to reduce stress during a crisis, but also provide a transcendental resource to generate social solidarity and altruism. It is this transcendental language that secular institutions find themselves lacking: according to Asad (2003: 48), the secularization of the grammar of pain in biomedical languages did not necessarily obliterate “religious” obsession within the discourse of pain. While biomedical language is confined to the discursive domain of
physicians, patients will always find room for religious semantics in their process of healing.

Another divergence from Norris and Inglehart lies in how Habermas extended the role of religion in post-secular societies from \textit{just} being a widespread response to existential crises. Instead, Habermas saw that the presence of religion in the public sphere has also generated a change in awareness regarding the project of secular modernization, which also signifies the beginning of the formation of a Post-Secular Society (Habermas, 2008). He mentions three phenomena that marked this transformation, particularly in Europe. \textit{First}, the emergence of transnational religious movements of different stripes had awakened European citizens to the reality of our modern global society. Modernization, contrary to how it was once promised, has failed to completely secularize the world and relegate religion to the private sphere without any public relevance. \textit{Second}, the influence of religion itself has remained entrenched in the national public sphere. This is clearly seen through the resistance of religious communities against policies of legalizing abortion, voluntary euthanasia, to various moral conundrums in biotechnological developments such as cloning and organ transplants. \textit{Third}, the arrival of immigrants from countries with a solid religious-cultural background in Europe had heightened the visibility of religious elements (such as religious people and symbolism) in secular public settings.

It is important to mention that his reconception of the role of religion did not lead Habermas to alter his commitment to Communicative Action. While Habermas previously stated that Communicative Action is pivotal in replacing religious authority with a form of authority obtained through consensus, he came to abandon the push for a “total” secular modernity that defined his early philosophical project. In the most recent phase of his thought, Habermas affirmed that Communicative Action “should not be against or in support of religion, but to coexist abstemiously” (Areshidze, 2017). As such, the project of a Post-Secular Society functions \textit{via media}—a mediating force between excessive secular modernization on one hand and religious fundamentalism on the other (Habermas, 2001; Harrington, 2007).

At the root of Habermas’ thought is the conviction that secular modernization remains an \textit{unfinished project}: it has failed, thus far, due to its singular reliance on reason to form an equal and democratic society. Secular reasoning does not provide a sufficient moral order that could bring people to communicate in a public space free from
domination. This injunction to abolish domination as a prerequisite of Communicative Action requires the reintroduction of morality, which Habermas sees is contained within religious discourses as its source. Religion should no longer be seen as private beliefs, but as a social force that binds community members to prioritize common interests instead of their own self-serving agendas (Tirosh-Samuelson, 2018:20).

How, then, would the concept of Communicative Action fit into the project of Post-Secular Society? Habermas outlines their link in his essay *Between Naturalism and Religion* (2008), which explores the possibility of religion playing a role within John Rawls’ concept of “The Public Use of Reason”. Habermas begins by seeking to broaden how we understand the separation between state and church. In principle, Habermas contends, the two should only be separated on an institutional level. This means that secularization should not automatically exempt arguments or perspectives that come from religious teachings and espoused by religious communities—as long as they are conveyed through legitimate (secular) political channels.

Moreover, any democratic society ought to guarantee its religious citizens their political rights: to do otherwise would contradict freedom of religion as a democratic value, in which the rights to adhere to a certain religion necessitates the possible curtailing of several other fundamental rights. The middle way here is that for religious citizens to meaningfully engage in the political arena, they must fulfill the proviso of conveying their religious statements using a universally-accessible language. Nonetheless, Habermas also emphasized that this necessity for translation do not mean that religious citizens need to eliminate their religious identity and expression:

Religious citizens can certainly acknowledge this “institutional translation proviso” without having to split their identity into public and private parts the moment they participate in public discourses. (Habermas, 2008b:130)

For Habermas, the crucial process that religious communities need to undergo is that of a continuous self-reflection of their beliefs, and to attempt to connect their faith with secular views. There will understandably be moments in which a religious community is unable to find the right “secular translation” of their beliefs; nonetheless, their position in the public sphere still needs to be recognized as long as they are aware of
the requirement to carry out this task of translation. Furthermore, such guarantee of participation would also require secular citizens to cooperate in producing their own appropriate forms of translations throughout the legislative process.

The challenge that befalls religious communities, then, is to reflect on three aspects of modernism: the idea of religious pluralism, the emergence of modern science, as well as the institutionalization of positive law and secular morality (Habermas, 2008b:136). On one hand, this implies that religious communities nonetheless still need to “modernize” their own consciousness in order to overcome cognitive dissonance in a Post-Secular Society. On the other hand, Habermas also insists that a secular society must not impose the forced alignment of religious communities as an attempt to get rid of this cognitive dissonance, and nor should secular reasoning be wielded in a dogmatic manner.

Habermas provides three advices for religious communities in carrying out hermeneutic self-reflection that nonetheless remain under the umbrella of their articles of faith:

1. Religious communities must reflect their religious views, their doctrine of salvation, and their truth-claims by being cognizant of other religious beliefs and worldviews. This self-reflexivity is required so that religious communities can build their epistemic stance in a Universal Discourse without having to abandon their religious traditions.

2. Religious communities need to prove that their doctrine does not contradict the secular knowledge that gave birth to modern science. As such, their religions are required to build an epistemic stance on scientific logic through the doctrines of their faith.

3. Finally, religious communities need to establish an epistemic stance that believes in the equality of individualism and universal morals, so those religious citizens can coexist with secular citizens in the political arena.

While religious communities are required to work on these three epistemic duties, Habermas also contends that secular citizens also need to play their role as a counterpart to their religious neighbors. He describes an interaction model that can be offered by secular citizens to religious communities, that have demonstrated their process of self-reflection, is an “agnostic approach”—one that will, at the same time, promise itself to be non-reductionist (Habermas, 2008b: 140). In other words,
secular citizens do not need to judge the truth of religious claims, which is resulted by separating the realm of faith from knowledge that arises from scientific reasoning.

**THE DISCURSIVE TRANSLATION PROJECT**

In a Post-Secular Society, the possibility for religious traditions to participate in the public sphere lies in the efficacy to communicate the truths they believe under a universal language. As such, Habermas builds on Rawls’ theory on the Public Use of Reason by recommending religious citizens to carry out the project of “Discursive Translation” so that their language can be understood by both secular citizens as well as those of a different faith (Arfi, 2015). As such, the act of translation is expected to function as an epistemological bridge between the religious and the secular; between faith and reason (Areshidze, 2017:731). The translation of religious discourse into a secular public sphere requires religious communities to “screen” the theological presuppositions inherent in their vocabularies and epistemology (Byrd, 2016:116). Yet unlike the total-secularist view that dictates religious individuals to discard their religious identity outside of private settings, Habermas advocates for religious citizens to be given autonomy in finding the most appropriate way for themselves to participate in the public sphere. Only then will unique perspectives that emerge from the religious community finally contribute to forming an ideal democratic society.

Across various lectures and texts, Habermas has mentioned up to three prerequisites that religious communities have to meet so that they can carry out the act of Discursive Translation. These can be summarized as: 1. An acceptance of plurality; 2. To communicate with reason, and; 3. A recognition of fundamental rights (Ziebertz and Riegel, 2009). In outlining the acceptance of plurality and recognizing fundamental rights, Habermas implies that the value of tolerance is the starting point for his project of Discursive Translation in particular and the Post-Secular Society in general. He further distinguishes between tolerance, which takes form as an attitude/predisposition of individuals, and toleration, which refers to the universal guarantee of religious freedom by the government (Habermas, 2008b:252). Consequently, both the Post-Secular Society and the project of Discursive Translation cannot be realized before religious freedom is already fully guaranteed, and that
a practice of mutual tolerance between religious communities—as well as between religious and secular citizens—have already taken place.

Furthermore, Habermas connects the concept of tolerance with two types of interrelated reasoning, namely the reason in rejecting the convictions/faiths of other groups, but also the reason for continuing to accept these groups as “members of the same political community” (Habermas, 2008b:257). By adapting the concept of Tolerance proposed by fellow-German philosopher Rainer Frost, Habermas breaks down the aforementioned two types of reasoning into three distinct “moments”: rejection, acceptance, and repudiation (Habermas, 2008b). In the “rejection stage”, tolerance is needed precisely after the differences of what different groups believe is understood to be irreconcilable at a cognitive level. Nonetheless, a tolerant predisposition will then help these different groups—who have recognized their disagreement with one another—to move on by accepting a mutually-agreed foundation for living together without eliminating existing differences. In the final stage of repudiation, each group is able to demarcate the things that they can tolerate, as well as things that fall beyond their limits of tolerance. According to Habermas, these processes will eventually enable different groups of varying beliefs and religious/secular backgrounds to respect each other—while at the same time learn of each other’s perspectives in a democratic public space.

The other prerequisite, namely the ability to communicate with reason, assumes a crucial role after a society manages to achieve religious tolerance and toleration. Without ever needing to erase their faith, religious communities in a Post-Secular Society must nonetheless agree that reason is the primary language for communicating in a democratic public sphere (Ziebertz and Riegel, 2009). In other words, faith needs to draw clear boundaries with knowledge, and vice-versa.

Habermas envisioned this boundary based on Kant’s philosophical system of dividing reason into separate faculties of theoretical and practical reasoning, which forms the basis of his criticism against the tradition of metaphysics as well as religious doctrines, especially Christianity (Habermas, 2008b: 210). For Kant, theoretical reasoning cannot be used to capture the metaphysical reality as the domain of religious faith. He asserts that theoretical reasoning can only be applied to empirical truths, while exploration in the realm of metaphysics is purely speculative by limiting theoretical reasoning to the arena of metaphysics. Kant argued that any moral edifice could only be founded on the Practical
Use of Reason—meaning that reason must be willing to presuppose the metaphysical truths of religious beliefs as an acceptable basis of morality. On the other hand, Kant’s criticism also extends to orthodox religions that are adamant in using any reason in formulating their moral implications.

To demonstrate the philosophical relevance of his system, Kant provided the example of how Christians endeavor to realize “The Kingdom of God” in which every believer shall be graced with a sense to perform unconditional moral actions (Habermas, 2008b: 216-217). As a concept, the Kingdom of God cannot be judged solely by reason, as the nature of reason is exactly to determine the ultimate goal of all kinds of actions. When one juxtaposes the two, moral actions become unconditional, but are carried out solely for rational purposes:

As rational beings, we take an interest in promoting a final end, even though we can conceive of its fulfillment only as the result of a fortunate summation of the unforeseeable side-effect of unconditional moral actions brought about by a higher power. Morally right action does not need an end. Any idea of an end would distract moral actors from the unconditionality of what is categorically enjoined in any given situation. (Habermas, 2008b:217)

Nonetheless, it is also reason that enables one to develop moral concepts from the concept of the Kingdom of God as well as the “unconditionality” of moral actions within it. This is what led Kant to criticize the attitude displayed by adherents of orthodox religions: their “passive surrender” had justified them to steer away from developing moral concepts that are in accordance with humanity. Kant refers to communities that are able to carry out a practical use of reason as “ethical communities”. In a Post-Secular Society, a community becomes ethical exactly when they can produce appropriate forms of Discursive Translation.

Habermas’ own example of a successful translation project is almost similar to Kant’s recourse to the Kingdom of God. According to him, one religious idea that had been successfully translated into secular discourse is the Biblical notion pertaining to the creation of man “in the image of God” (Areshidze, 2017; Dillon, 2012). This idea, Habermas argues, has provided the foundation for secularism to develop an understanding of individual rights and human equality, which nonetheless stemmed from a religious notion of human beings as images of the Di-
These values, in turn, might also empower religious communities to redirect the orientation of society that has been under the control of capitalist interests and immoral power (Dillon, 2012:255). The link between religious faith and the principles of social and economic justice was exemplified in June 2009, when a hundred different religious leaders gathered at the G-Summit in Rome. Throughout the convention, they all agreed that each of the religious values they profess contains great relevance in criticizing economic and political decisions that ignore moral consequences and neglect common good (Dillon, 2012).

Finally, Habermas asserted that these translation processes should be considered a form of cognitive content of religiosity—one that is nonetheless separate from any notions of the truth of religious revelations (Areshidze, 2017:733). Nonetheless, the religious symbols contained within the translated discourse do not need to be stripped away as they convey inspirational power. One example of the useful inclusion of religious symbols provided by Habermas is the rejection of genetic engineering on ethical grounds. As humans are created in the Image of God, every last bit of what shapes the human being needs to be respected and treated with dignity—including every gene that makes the individual. A similar idea can also be found in the ideas of Muslim scholar and philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr who employed religious-moral sources to criticize the destructive power of capitalism and modern science against nature (Sayem, 2019). For Nasr, the ongoing natural crisis befalling humans and other species across the planet is the result of a “spiritual crisis” that has plagued human beings, engendering the relationship between humans and nature to revolve around exploitation.

THE LIMITS OF TRANSLATION AND OTHER CRITICISMS

One of the sharpest critiques that can be levied against Habermas’ concept of the Post-Secular Society pertains to the possible limits of translation (Harrington, 2017). After all, there will be some elements of religion that remain untranslatable to a universal language, while the “requirement” to incorporate marginal and often too vague religious language into the modern public sphere might actually be a coercive injunction that will only lead to a failure in translation (Harrington, 2017:551). Finally, various factors inevitably play a part in the end-result
of a translation process, meaning there is no guarantee that a translation will work out the way Habermas envisioned it to be.

Badredine Arfi (2015:491) mentions at least three considerations to help gauge the success or failure of a Discursive Translation project. The first relates to the type of translation that Habermas actually proposes. According to Arfi (2015), the Habermasian Discursive Translation does not really follow a conventional translation model—instead, it is more akin to what psychoanalytic linguists refer to as an “Anasemic Translation”. In a conventional translation process, different words can be exchanged with new ones, but they nonetheless retain the same meaning; in an Anasemic Translation, the words being written or spoken remain the same, but they are subject to radical semantic change. A Discursive Translation involves a simultaneous attempt to de-signify a religious content of any traces of metaphysical revelation, while re-signifying that exact content into a language that is universally-accessible. However, being an Anasemic Translation, Habermas’ project contains its own unavowed problem by requiring religion to construct new meanings and abandon previous ones in the translated language (Arfi, 2015:495).

The second consideration pertains to the Aporia, or radical uncertainty, of translation (Arfi, 2015). Implicitly, Habermas assumes that his translation project is feasible as the truth-content of religion is entirely a collection of ideas. Yet the religious experience and being are certainly far more complex than its cognitive content—encompassing different facets of spirituality, emotions, and traditions that have entirely escaped Habermas’ consideration (Dillon, 2012: 250). Such complexity means that several aspects of religion are immanently untranslatable into a universal language.

Finally, the third consideration pertains to the political legitimacy of Discursive Translation. If some elements of religion are indeed untranslatable, does this imply that secular citizens are required to continue to accept the contribution of religion along with the elements that remain untranslatable within it? In this case, political legitimacy in a Post-Secular Society is not the result of a successful act of Discursive Translation, but rather due to the fact that the universal language being used is already hospitable to the untranslatable elements of religion.

One way to mediate these criticisms is by addressing the three components of religion as outlined by Dustin J. Byrd (2012). Citing concepts in the critical theory of religion, Byrd (2012: 116) discerns religion to consist of: 1. Cognitive-instrumental components in the form of theolo-
gy, values, and basic religious principles; 2. Moral-practical components, namely the motivational aspects of religion and its underlying moral norms, as well as; 3. Aesthetic-expressive components, which encompass the articulation of religious rituals and some expressions of religious art.

Out of these three components, the moral-practical is the most translatable as it contains moral and ethical codes, which, according to Habermas, can only be provided by religion (Byrd, 2012:118). Religious communities are able to translate their ethical sources and use this to participate in debates pertaining to the moral dimension of socio-political issues in the public sphere. On the other hand, the cognitive-instrumental component of religion will find itself inadequately translated into secular discourse, as it will likely be unable to stand against the scrutiny of rigid logic and cold rationality. Finally, the aesthetic-expressive component will certainly be the most challenging to translate—perhaps even impossible, as every religious expression, whether in the form of rituals or art, cannot be separated from their accompanying religious sensibilities.

By breaking down religion into different components, the theoretical criticisms against Discursive Translation can be mitigated by narrowing down the practice into the more feasible moral-practical aspects of religion. Religious citizens need to curate the specific contents of their ethical and moral teachings which can be translated by suspending any traces regarding metaphysical revelations, and instead focus on the kernel of truth they contain. Again, this does not mean that one has to completely eliminate/suppress the underlying religious motivation and teachings of the specific moral content, as long as it is conveyed in a language that does not seek to justify a particular religious revelation.

In their capacity to contribute to a universal moral and ethical code, religious languages possess a clear source of content that no secular institution can provide. Yet in order to do this, the Post-Secular Society also needs to acknowledge the untranslatable cognitive-instrumental and aesthetic-expressive components of any religion. Citing Arfi’s third consideration on the possibility of Discursive Translation (2015: 504), it is not enough to translate religious teachings into a generally-accessible language: instead, the availability of a “generalizable language” that all citizens can use in the first place is quintessential, as it is the only way religious citizens will be able to assert some of their contents as indeed being untranslatable.
There are examples of efforts in creating such a generally-accessible language, such as the Human Fraternity Document which was agreed upon in Abu Dhabi on February 4, 2019, by the Grand Shaykh of Al-Azhar Al-Sharif, Ahmed El-Tayyeb, as well as Pope Francis of the Catholic Church. This document stands out as a monumental effort to conduct Discursive Translation by two of the largest religious institutions in the world, particularly in voicing out the idea of a universal brotherhood rooted in the belief in God’s love and justice. The introduction explicitly states that:

Proceeding from this transcendental sense, and through several meetings brimming with a sense of fraternity and friendship, we exchanged views on the modern world’s joys, sorrows and crises. This is done at the level of scientific and technical progress, therapeutic achievements, digital era, modern media, as well as at the level of poverty, wars, and the sufferings of our fellow brothers and sisters in different parts of the world. Such sufferings are the result of the arms race, social injustice, corruption, inequality, moral decay, terrorism, racism, extremism, etc. (the Human Fraternity Document for World Peace and Coexistence, 2019).

In the introduction, it becomes clear that both religious institutions promote efforts to overcome social issues in the modern era using their own religious sources as the basis of such support, namely the creation of human beings as equals based on God’s love. The presentation of this document fulfills the prerequisite of a post-secular discourse outlined by Ziebertz and Riegel (2008), namely through its acknowledgement on the equality of all human beings—in other words, an acceptance of pluralism; the exchange of views pertaining to the crises befalling the modern world, which demonstrates the ability to communicate with reason; as well as a strong recognition of issues surrounding Human Rights. Most importantly, this document does not aim to justify the truth of revelations of each religion, but to use the symbols of revelation in Islam and Christianity as an inspirational power with hopes of improving the condition of humanity. Thus, the term “Human Fraternity” functions as an accessible and generalizable language—a vision produced by religious institutions that non-religious citizens can access.
WHAT IS MISSING?

In general, I agree with Bryan Turner’s assessment (2010) on the two main shortcomings of the Post-Secular Society theory proposed by Habermas. First, much like other Western social philosophers, Habermas’ inquiry on the “secular problem” still seems to retain a Eurocentric bias that might not strictly apply elsewhere. If we look at the existing trajectory, traditional religions are becoming far more prominent in the public life of many Asian countries, such as spiritual movements in Vietnam; Islamism in Southeast Asia; and the Shinto community in Japan (Turner, 2010; 653). Second, Habermas’s exploration might have paid too much attention to the aspects of “political” secularization instead of the more micro aspects of “social” secularization, such as matters of corporeal experiences and sensibilities (Turner, 2010; 650).

Habermas’ Eurocentric-bias is clearly seen when he limits his proposal of the Post-Secular Society by putting forward analyses of fundamentalism, Muslim immigrants, and evangelical movements in Western countries. Not only did this limited geographic scope of analysis prevent Habermas from studying religious movements in other parts of the world such Asia, Africa, or Latin America; Habermas himself even stated that a Post-Secular Society is only possible in countries that have experienced “full secularization”, namely those in Europe. This latter statement by Habermas warrants some critical scrutiny. Due to globalization, religious identity can no longer be defined based on state boundaries alone, as religious discourses do not only operate within the internal confines of a state, but also in global discourses as well. As such, it is possible that post-secularism can be found in various, localized forms beyond Habermas’ own understanding—even in dominantly religious countries.

One recent example of a post-secular movement beyond Europe that I would espouse is the Muslim World League conference entitled “The Forum on Common Values among Religious Followers” that took place in Riyadh in May 2022. In this summit, various religious institutions convened to discuss common values among world religions to offer a peaceful solution for the global community. Among those present was Indonesian representative Yahya Cholil Staquf, Executive Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama, who asserted that values emphasizing harmony, equality, and peaceful coexistence ought to be internalized among diverse religious communities to counter radical religious narratives...
As one of the largest traditional religious institutions in Indonesia, the discourse of tolerance conveyed by Nahdatul Ulama should be considered as an act of laying the groundwork to establish a Post-Secular Society in a predominantly religious country. Moreover, the study of Post-Secular Society must also not stop at the level of institutions and elites. In this case, analyses pertaining the Sensorium, or the entirety of perception within a (social) body, as well as secular institutions by Hirschkind (2011) also requires consideration as both secular and religious elements do not only “float around” in public discourse, but are also processed by emotional attachments. Quoting the assertion made by Connoly (1992:6) that both secular and religious discourses are influenced by the “visceral register of intersubjectivity”, Hirschkind (2016:632) argues that religion has the ability to touch human sensibilities that secular institutions are almost completely devoid of. As a result, this propensity enables religion to make its presence felt even in closed-off environments.

CONCLUSION

Habermas’ proposal on the Post-Secular Society attempts to posit religion as a necessary force even in a secular, liberal-democratic political system. The concept itself emerged as a critique towards secularization theory, which was deemed to be no longer adequate as religion continued to assert a significant presence in public life in the modern era. Nonetheless, unlike revisionists who claim that the secularization project had largely ended in failure, Habermas argues that secularization remains dominant in the public sphere, but it can never eliminate the influence of religion. In fact, he even sees the universal ideals that are espoused in the public sphere are irrevocably tied to religious tradition. This perspective stands in sharp contrast to that of John Rawls’, who posited that religious citizens must completely get rid of their religious language in order to participate in public discourse. Instead, Habermas argues that a form of religious language is necessary as they contain moral resources inherently unavailable in secular knowledge. Religious traditions contribute to the public sphere by fostering a complementary learning process and shared perspectives between both religious and secular citizens. On the other hand, these contributions require religious communities to “neutralize” their religious language through a proviso.
of institutional translation in order to allow secular citizens to accept the discourse they conveyed.

Habermas refers to the process of translating religious truths into a generally-accessible language as a “Discursive Translation”. Referring to Kant’s Critique of Reason, Habermas concludes that religions can contribute their own concepts of morality to the public sphere by positing them in terms of a practical reason, providing his own example of how the Christian concept of humans being created in the Image of God can successfully be translated into a universal moral value of equality and human dignity. Nonetheless, he contends that this translation effort can only be successful if religious citizens are able to separate their belief of divine metaphysical truth—the “moment of revelation”—from the very content of truth they want to express.

This Habermasian model has since been criticized for eventually stumbling upon the limits of translation. Linguists of the psychoanalytic tradition point out that Habermas’ proposal does not imply a translation process in the conventional sense, but rather an “Anasemic Translation” which requires religious communities to reconstruct the old meanings into new ones. This demand for radical semantic change results in setting aside the untranslatable components of religious language. Here, I argue that the project of Discursive Translation, which aims to convey religious moral truths in a generally accessible language, can be applied to one component of religion, namely its moral-practical dimension. Conversely, the cognitive-instrumental and aesthetic-expressive components of religion must be accepted as being part of what is untranslatable. Thus, in order for the public sphere to accept that some components of religion are indeed beyond any translation efforts, a generally-accessible language becomes crucial in helping to set the limits to practical human reasoning. Aside from this, the Post-Secular Society project still warrants further review and contextualization, especially considering the multitude of non-European phenomena. It needs to be acknowledged that Habermas’ Euro-centric approach and focus on the macro socio-political level have left some elements in his discourse of post-secularism to be less-than-convincing.

I conclude that Habermas’ concept on the Post-Secular Society can be a useful analytical tool in dissecting the latest developments of secularism at the macro-level, as well as a project that can apply to any religious institution to go hand-in-hand with secular reason without having to abandon their religious roots. However, I also contend that
this concept needs to be further adapted to the socio-cultural relations of a particular society or community—especially those of non-European societies that had eluded Habermas’ attention.

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