Religion in the Public Sphere: The Limits of Habermas's Proposal and the Discourse of "World Religions"
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Abstract
Since 2001, Jürgen Habermas has turned increasingly toward questions on the role of religion in the public sphere. Modifying his earlier position, Habermas now argues for the equal inclusion of religious voices in the political public sphere and urges for the recognition among secular citizens that we are living in a "post-secular" world that must become adjusted to the continued existence of religious communities. Such a process requires that secular citizens undergo a "cognitive dissonance" when confronting religious claims and attempt a "translation program" to discover the profane truth content contained within. While there is much to commend this position, I argue that Habermas’s model is unnecessarily constrained by his narrow understanding of "religion" as a normative category, and that he privileges a Euro-hegemonic conception of "world religions" while circumscribing the parameters for how discourse on religion—both in philosophy and in the public sphere—ought to proceed.

Full Text:
PDF
DOI: https://doi.org/10.18357/illumine8120092943

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ISSN (Print): 1705-2947
ISSN (Online): 1712-5634

Under feudalism, Habermas reports, the ‘public realm’ existed not as a sphere of interaction and debate but merely of representation: aristocracy and nobility played out the symbolic dramas of majesty and highness before their subjects. To talk of a public realm is even misleading insofar as ‘publicness’, as a status attribute or performative mode, was more significant than spatial location. 1 The links between this ‘representative publicness’ and today’s mass-mediated spectacles of public life are thin: it was simply staged performance before the people, not on behalf of a public. For this reason, Habermas identifies a bourgeois public sphere in the ‘world of letters’ as the precursor to a more directly political public sphere. 9 Religion, Science, and Printing in the Public Spheres in Seventeenth-Century England David Zaret. 212. glish, has been one of Habermas’s most important and directly relevant early works, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. Though this work has been among Habermas’s most influential in German, and though it has been translated into. 15 The Mass Public and the Mass Subject J1'Iichael Warner. Of course, this engagement also revealed some of the limits of that public sphere: at dinner one night the rational-critical discourse of twenty-some conferees rose to such a pitch that the proprietor of a local Polish restaurant felt compelled to bang on a glass and assert that the purpose of his establishment was peaceful dining, not loud conversation.