HABERMAS, RAWLS, AND THE PUBLIC "TRANSLATION" OF RELIGIOUS CLAIMS[1]

BRANDON MORGAN-OLSEN | Queen's University and The University of Washington

"I am proud of my Christian faith. And it informs what I do. And I don't think that people of any faith background should be prohibited from debating in the public square . . . But what I also think is that we are under obligation in public life to translate our religious values into moral terms that all people can share, including those who are not believers. And that is how our democracy's functioning, will continue to function. That's what the founding fathers intended."

Barack Obama, in response to question 36 of the CNN/YouTube Democratic presidential debate, July 23rd, 2007

In October of 2008, the group "Adventists for Proposition 8" posted the following statement on their website, urging California voters to restrict marriage rights to heterosexual couples:

We should Vote Yes on Proposition 8 because we love God and our fellow man. If we love Jesus we will not vote in support of sin. Sin is what nailed Jesus to the cross. If we love our fellow man we will not cast a vote that will directly widen the road to destruction.

This religiously charged justification is exactly the sort of thing that is guaranteed to cause anxiety in a modern democracy, especially when it is explicitly offered in support of political policy.[2] Not only will a majority of non-religious citizens find this line of argument off-putting, but, more importantly, they are also bound to be nervous about the extent to which it will be found persuasive by their fellow citizens. One can also imagine that non-Christian religious citizens will be similarly tense in the face of these claims, worried that government responsiveness to arguments of this nature would be tantamount to Christian establishment. Nor, of course, are all Christians or (all Adventists) going to find the slogans of Adventists for 8 unproblematic, since it is hard to predict how religious contributions to political life are going to be received by the public at large, and how such contributions will reflect on religious citizens as a whole.

This is all just to say that we live in a time that is still very much uncertain about the proper place of religious reasoning in the public square. Citizens disagree about what obligations political officials have to distance themselves from or respond to religiously motivated views expressed by their constituents. Citizens also disagree, perhaps even

[2] The policy proposed by Proposition 8 only has effect at the state level, since it was only on the ballot in California. However, I imagine that Adventists for Proposition 8 would give the same justification for institution of a similar policy at the federal level.

more vehemently, about the obligations they themselves have when engaged in public deliberation about political matters.

This societal anxiety is reflected within political theory; the question of what role religious values should play in politics is a prominent one, as are similar questions about the role of other deep-seated ethical commitments. And it is clear that many influential political theorists would assert that Adventists for 8's statement is a paradigmatic example of a problematic justification for citizens' political acts, but – and this is important – not necessarily because they disagree with the statement or the position it is meant to support. Rather, these theorists suggest that religious beliefs and commitments are members of a class of "nonpublic", or "non-sharable", reasons to which we must not appeal in public deliberation, regardless of our assessment of their value.[3] As an implication of this view, and in agreement with Barack Obama's response to a difficult debate question,[4] some theorists suggest that citizens must "translate" their religious reasons into public reasons in order to enter political discussions in the public sphere. Others, in contrast, argue that such duties would be unfair to people with deeply held religious or ethical beliefs. Why, they argue, should citizens of faith be unable to ground their political arguments directly in their religious convictions? Why should they be obligated to restrict themselves to "public" ideas and arguments?

There is an apparent tension here between the fair inclusion of citizens in the democratic process and an assurance that this process will produce legitimate justifications for laws and policies; if we think that the use of religious reasons is illegitimate in the halls of parliament, it seems that we must at some point filter religious arguments out of public deliberation, but such filtering also seems to exclude religious citizens from political life. My aim in this paper is not to address this tension, at least not directly. Rather, my target is a different question: What might it mean to "translate" religious claims into secular or public equivalents?

In addressing this question, I begin with appeal to Jürgen Habermas's recent work on the role of religion in the public sphere, where he places significant weight on a process he identifies as translation – a process in which secular equivalents are sought for religious arguments (Habermas 2003, 2006, 2008). Interestingly, something like an account of "translation" is also necessary to give a charitable and informative reading of John Rawls's "duty of civility"; making sense of how religious citizens are included on Rawls's view requires understanding what the proper relationship is between a nonpublic claim and

---

[3] In what follows, I will use 'nonpublic' and 'non-sharable' as synonyms.

[4] The question, in its entirety: "Good evening. My name is Stephen Marsh of Thousand Oaks, California, proud citizen of the United States of America that does not believe in God. However, the former President Bush said this statement was an oxymoron. Now, I am worried about the amount of time given to evangelical concerns while secular voters are more or less getting snubbed -- the faith and politics forum. So my question is this: Am I wrong in fearing a Democratic administration that may be lip service to the extremely religious as much as the current one? And if so, why? Thank you for your time."

the public claim that is forwarded alongside it as an equivalent. Indeed, many believe that similarities between Rawls's and Habermas's mature accounts of public reason entail that both theorists illegitimately exclude religious citizens from political discourse, and on similar grounds (e.g., Yates (2007), Lafont (2009), Chambers (2010)). However, neither Rawls nor Habermas ever explicitly describe the process that has fallen under criticism, and whether or not these worries about political exclusion are justified depends on how one spells out the details of this process.

Thus, in what follows I investigate what a suitable account of the "translation" of religious claims might look like, particularly focused on how such a process can serve the purpose of what I will call *justificatory inclusion*, by which I mean the political inclusion of citizens in virtue of considering their political claims as potential justifications for governmental policy. My suggestion is that conceiving of this process literally in terms of translation – as the full transmission of the semantic content of religious claims – is misleading for this purpose. Rather, it is more fruitful to think of "translation" as a generative political process with two primary features. The first feature – the filtering aspect of "translation" – involves disambiguating public content from nonpublic content. The second feature – the functional aspect of "translation" – involves an attempt to create and match claims of equivalent political effectiveness. I argue that both of these features are relevant to the political inclusion of religious citizens, though we might better identify the process they constitute as one of *recasting* religious arguments rather than translating them.[5]

1. HABERMAS AND THE DELIBERATIVE OBLIGATIONS OF CITIZENS

The place to begin in discussing the role of religious reasoning in politics is with the view that religious reasoning ought to have no role at all within the decision-making bodies of government. This is the stereotypical liberal democratic position, which operates under a strict principle of secular justification wherein only secular reasoning is allowed to justify governmental policy.[6] This strict principle remains significant in the current debate and serves as a starting point for both Habermas and Rawls in thinking about the standards of political legitimacy.[7] And, while neither Habermas nor Rawls move to restrict freedom of speech, expression, or conscience, they both argue that accepting such a standard of legitimacy implies civic obligations on the part of citizens when engaged in certain kinds of political discussion. However, both theorists have also expressed dissatisfaction about the impact the principle will have on the reason-giving practices of citizens, and have in

---

[5] Thanks to Stephen Leighton for the suggestion of the term 'recasting'.

[6] For discussion of this principle, *cf.*, e.g., Habermas (2008, 126-127), Audi (1993), and Wolterstorff and Audi (1996, 24-33).

[7] Rawls's version of the principle is the liberal principle of legitimacy.

their own ways moved to make public political deliberation more inclusive and accommodating for religious citizens.

Habermas, for one, believes that it is too much to ask of the devout religious citizen that she abides by the strict principle of secular justification – that it is too much to ask of an individual who lives a life deeply rooted in faith to split herself into two selves, one faithful and one public, in order to search for secular justifications of political claims she believes require no such thing.[8] Thus Habermas demonstrates his sensitivity and accommodation to what has been called the "split-identity"[9] – or "cognitive"[10] – objection. In response to this objection, Habermas suggests that there needs to be a fairly acute division between the more stringent obligations of formal officials in formal contexts and the less stringent obligations of average citizens with respect to the requirements of public reason.[11] In other words, the principle of secular justification should not apply directly to deliberations in the informal public sphere, where citizens deliberate amongst themselves.

This might seem to be a concession to devout religious citizens, and it is, in a sense; it absolves them of some considerably cognitively demanding – perhaps identity-threatening – obligations. However, this concession comes at a cost, because Habermas simultaneously argues for a proviso to govern the use of religious reasons in the *formal* public sphere of discourse within governmental institutions. This "institutional translation proviso" asks citizens to accept that institutional justifications have to be in secular terms, and thus that any religious reasons put forward will not have justificatory weight in shaping official policy decisions (2008, 130-131). In other words, devout religious citizens are still asked to respect the fact that official justifications – in formal contexts – must still be only in the form of secular reasons. Therefore, although these citizens are free to give political arguments without restraint, they also have to recognize that their arguments will not be considered justificatory in formal contexts unless they are given secular grounding.

This cost, then, reveals the concession to be cold comfort, since it essentially just reinstates the secular filter, fully intact, at some point further along in the political process. The principle now facing religious citizens seems to be the not effectively different principle of "if you want your arguments to count in formal contexts, they must be supported by secular reasons." It is safe to assume that most religious citizens active in political deliberation affirm the antecedent of this conditional.[12] Thus, religious citizens

---

[8] ". . . the liberal state, which protects all religious forms of life equally, must release religious citizens from the burden of having to make a strict separation between secular and religious reasons in the political public arena when they experience this as an attack on their personal identity" (Habermas 2008, 130).
[9] *Cf.* Yates (2007). Yates argues, in part, that Habermas has not adequately responded to this objection.
[10] *Cf.* Lafont (2009).
[11] Boettcher (2009) argues that this division of obligations in Habermas's account is problematic.
[12] *Cf.* Lafont (2009, 134-135): "For all its virtues, however, I am not sure whether Habermas' proposal actually provides a solution to the objection that it is meant to address. My impression is that what fuels

still apparently face justificatory exclusion within the political system in virtue of the existence of a secular filter between the formal and informal public spheres.

Another way to frame the issue is in terms of the proper functioning of the public sphere. One of the primary functions of the public sphere is to enable citizens to exert continuous pressure on their nation's political institutions.[13] Given the existence of the secular filter between the informal and formal public spheres, there is a way in which the public sphere could fail to serve this function for devout religious citizens as a group; in this light, religious citizens could justifiably object that they do not have an appropriate avenue for applying political pressure beyond the informal public sphere.

All of this just highlights the need for a mechanism of inclusion for religious citizens into formal contexts if one is going to hold the following assumptions:

(1) that religious citizens have a *prima facie* right of justificatory inclusion,
(2) that religious citizens cannot be required to offer secular justifications for their political arguments,[14] and
(3) the principle of secular justification.

Habermas recognizes this need,[15] and suggests procedures of mutual translation as appropriate mechanisms for extending the influence of relevant, religiously grounded claims across the secular filter. Religious citizens are required to acknowledge and accept the principle of secular justification in the form of the "institutional translation proviso," but this proviso is also supposed to foster the political inclusion of religious citizens:

> Even if the religious language is the only one they can speak in public, and if religiously justified opinions are the only ones they can or wish to contribute to political controversies, [citizens who field religious reasons] nevertheless understand themselves as members of a *civitas terrena*, which empowers them to be the authors of laws to which they are subject as addressees. They may express themselves in a religious idiom only on the condition that they recognize the institutional translation proviso. Thus the citizens, confident that their fellow-citizens will cooperate in producing a translation, can understand themselves as participants in the legislative process, although only secular reasons count therein. (Habermas 2008, 130)

---

this objection runs deeper and cannot be solved by simply moving Rawls' proviso up one step, so to speak, from the informal public sphere to the institutional framework of the formal public sphere . . . Adding that the exclusion only operates 'beyond the institutional threshold' can hardly silence the objection, given that this is precisely *when it matters most*."

[13] The other primary function of the public sphere is to enable the flow of relevant information, policy justifications, and the like from formal deliberative contexts back to citizens. Thanks to Professor Habermas – in comments on a presented version of this paper – for explicating this "double function" conception of the public sphere.

[14] In fact, I think that there are still problems even if we reject this second assumption as stated, depending on how exactly one characterizes the obligations of translation. But I will stick to this cleaner case for present purposes.

[15] Partly in response to an objection from Rainer Forst (Habermas 2008, 130f).

This is an intriguing suggestion whose worth – as Habermas acknowledges – hangs on how much we can expect the average citizen to possess the requisite abilities and attitudes to engage effectively in the process of translation. And many theorists have recently expressed skepticism that such "translation" can be an effective avenue for guaranteeing religious citizens the right sort of representation in the public sphere (e.g., Yates (2007), Lafont (2007, 2009), Boettcher (2009), Chambers (2010), Walhof (2011)). Overall, one has to wonder if this is a reasonable thing to ask of members of a civil society, and thus whether Habermas has formulated an adequate picture of the ethics of democratic citizenship. I take it, though, that the answer to this question depends importantly on what exactly it means to "translate" religious reasons into secular equivalents in a relevant political context, so it seems worthwhile to spend some time analyzing this notion of translation in more depth.

2. THE FILTERING ASPECT OF "TRANSLATION"

As I intimated earlier, I believe that defining this process in literal terms is something of a non-starter. For the purposes of political inclusion, thinking of Habermas's "translation" as the full conversion of the semantic content of religious claims into equivalent secular content is not going to be particularly helpful. This is the most natural way to conceive of a translation, but it is misleading primarily because it goes exactly against the reasoning behind the principle of secular justification in the first place.

Habermas's justification for limiting religious reasoning in formal contexts is based on the familiar grounds of ensuring state neutrality "toward competing worldviews" and a concern for restricting state's justifications to those stemming from "generally accessible arguments" (Habermas 2008). In this light, Habermas very much seems to be operating under the standard assumption that religious arguments are paradigmatic examples of arguments that are not generally accessible, which is to say that religious reasons are not sharable reasons. If this is true, and we also work under the assumption that secular reasons are those that are paradigmatically sharable, the semantic content of religious reasons cannot be made secular. That is just what it means for a reason to be non-sharable, or nonpublic: that the semantic content of the reason cannot be expressed and evaluated on ground shared by a variety of worldviews. The justificatory force of a religious argument, on this view, is dependent on its being embedded in the framework of a religious worldview. So, conceiving of religious reasons as unequivocally non-sharable in this way undercuts the possibility of literal translation. The semantic content in question is essentially defined as that which cannot be removed from its religious worldview and placed within a secular context.

Thinking back to the Adventists for 8 appeal is informative here, because it makes use of religious reasons that appear straightforwardly nonpublic. The argument makes direct reference to concepts central to Adventist doctrine, such as 'sin', 'love of God', and,

arguably, 'destruction', which are difficult to conceive of as widely shared, sharable, or generally accessible. While an atheist can understand what these concepts mean, there is no way for an atheist to view the argument as having significant justificatory weight without themselves adopting Christian tenets. This is not to say we cannot find secular reasons to put in place of the Adventists' appeal. For example, we might offer the claim that same-sex marriage supports homosexual lifestyles, along with the suggestion that such lifestyles are wrong. Or we might glean from their proposal that the legalization of same-sex marriage will have destructive social consequences. But these secular reasons do not capture the semantic content of the argument; they do not mean the same thing.[16]

Given this pessimistic starting point, what are we to make of Habermas's claim that acts of translation help to ensure secular society is not cut off from "key resources for the creation of meaning and identity" (2006, 10)? First of all, it is important to acknowledge that Habermas believes religious reasoning can serve a range of purposes, not all of which are directly relevant to engagement in political activity. But, the key is that Habermas implicitly deviates from the standard assumption that all religions reasons are not sharable in describing some of these purposes.

As Thomas Schmidt (2007) articulates well, Habermas appeals to a whole host of ways that religious reasoning can serve a positive function in public life, generally construed. For example, he believes that being grounded in a religious framework is one way in which humans can develop the capacity to make moral judgments and develop ethical ways of life. Religion, Habermas asserts, can also provide the motivation to live a moral life, can serve as a source of inspiration for secular ways of thought, and can articulate both new social problems and perspectives of criticism.

It is significant that many of these functions can be undertaken in the informal public sphere, where religious reasoning is unfettered, as they only require having access to – as opposed to transmission of – religious reasons. And it is important to note that Habermas's position spells out a democratic ethos of engagement in a "mutual learning process" that applies to religious and secular citizens alike, and that this engagement can occur in the informal public sphere. But I want to draw attention to where Habermas emphasizes the possibility of uncovering hidden intuitions in one's secular reasoning through engagement with religious thought and argumentation:

> Secular citizens or those of other religious persuasions can also learn something from religious contributions under certain circumstances, for example, when they recognize buried intuitions of their own in the normative truth contents of a religious utterance.
>
> Religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In corresponding political debates, this

---

[16] Darren Walhof registers this concern, stating that "'translation' does not seem like the right concept for describing these contributions to the public debate about same-sex marriage. Translation implies an equivalence of some sort. When we attempt to translate a statement from one language into another, for example, the task is oriented toward conveying the same meaning in the second language, even though there is, of course, an interpretive dimension to any translation" (2011, 15).

> potential makes religious speech into a serious vehicle for possible truth contents . . .
> (Habermas 2008, 131)

In other words, Habermas sees interaction with religious arguments as a valuable tool for guiding investigation into the bases of secular claim-making and argumentation, and thus as a route towards uncovering beliefs and principles about which citizens are often unreflective.[17] But what is most interesting is that Habermas points here toward a "special power" of religious reasoning to express moral content, ostensibly even to the non-religious. This line seems to indicate, contrary to the standard assumption discussed above, that some religious claims can express generally accessible content – content which might not be brought to light otherwise. Thus, Habermas's statements imply that it is possible, indeed common, for religious claims to contain significant public content.[18]

Following this line of thought means that citizens must take care not to quickly identify religious arguments as not sharable; insufficient attention to the semantic content of religious claims can result in the exclusion of public content. One must not overlook the possibility of filtering out publicly available content that is already present within claims presented in religious language. It is in this sense that I suggest the process of "translation" to be a process of disambiguating public from nonpublic content.

3. RAWLS AND FUNCTIONALIST "TRANSLATION"

There are at least four reasons, though, why interpreting "translation" as filtering is not alone sufficient for supporting the political inclusion of religious citizens. First of all, it is difficult to imagine a way in which discourse aimed at filtering will be effective, in itself, for generating political pressure on the behalf of religious citizens. Discourse about which claims are sharable is at least conceptually distinct from deliberation aimed at shepherding political claims into the formal public sphere. Secondly, we can suppose that most secular citizens are not experts with religious modes of discourse and expression, meaning that – although they will be in a better position than religious citizens themselves – they will by no means be experts at picking out public content in religious clothing. Third, although the idea of other citizens pulling public content from

---

[17] Thanks to Professor Habermas for emphasizing this role of interaction with religious claims, and for stressing the fact that we are constantly operating on the basis of buried intuitions.

[18] Schmidt helps us to draw out this possibility in more detail, as he is worried that Habermas's explicit description of religious experience is misleading. Habermas at times describes religious experience as consisting of an "opaque core" that "remains as profoundly alien to discursive thought as the hermetic core of aesthetic experience, which can likewise can be at best circumscribed, but not penetrated, by philosophical reflection" (Habermas 2008, 143). Schmidt argues, in contrast, that we can conceive of secular and religious knowledge as fallible while viewing religious *belief* as certain from within the standpoint of a religious worldview (Schmidt 2007, 183-186). In other words, we can recognize a distinction between faith and knowledge, and address only the latter within the purview of public deliberation.

religious utterances is not itself identity-threatening for the devout, the natural follow up conversation – in which the secular citizen checks in with the religious citizen to see if the "pulled-out" claims ring true – seems very much like it might create a situation of identity-threat. Lastly, the filtering aspect leaves the religious citizen in a very passive role with respect to the process of translation; it would be more satisfactory if we had a sense of what obligations religious citizens have, politically, beyond just forwarding whatever arguments they have in mind and awaiting translation.

Thinking about Rawls's account can be helpful in responding to these issues. And we should address it in in any case, since one might think that the complications associated with developing an account of "translation" would count against Habermas's version of the requirements of public deliberation and thus in favor of, say, Rawls' version. So, it is important to stress that something similar is required to interpret Rawls' famous proviso favorably. The proviso allows for nonpublic reasons – religious reasons being a paradigmatic example for Rawls – to enter discussion "provided that in due course public reasons, given by a reasonable political conception, are presented sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are introduced to support,"[19] and meeting this requirement means that a citizen has at least partially fulfilled the Rawlsian "duty of civility."[20] This is Rawls's wide view of public reason, which he takes to be more inclusive of religious citizens. However, if Rawls's account is going to withstand the myriad criticisms that it invites disingenuousness,[21] insincerity[22], ad hoc justifications,[23] and or encourages – perhaps requires – citizens to give arguments in "bad faith"[24] it needs to be accompanied by a story about the appropriate relation between reasons given when the proviso is fulfilled.[25]

That is, on a flatfooted reading of the proviso, one might say that the proviso could be fulfilled by accompanying a religious or nonpublic reason with any public reason at all. For example, a clever deliberator might claim that she has fulfilled her duty by

---

[19] "Introduction to the Paperback Edition" of (Rawls 1993, li-lii). The passive voice of this quote ("are presented") makes ambiguous who is responsible for the future introduction of the necessary, accompanying public reasons. Rawls generally presumes the citizen who presented the nonpublic reason initially will be the one to provide the public reason as well, but he leaves open other options. (See Rawls (2005, 462).) We will discuss possible meanings of the important "sufficient to support" clause below.

[20] The caveat is that such nonpublic reasons will not be treated as justificatory, although Rawls asserts that they will likely play other valuable roles in the discussion. For example, "[c]itizens' mutual knowledge of one another's religious and nonreligious doctrines expressed in the wide view of public political culture recognizes that the roots of democratic citizens' allegiance to their political conceptions lie in their respective comprehensive doctrines . . . In this way citizens' allegiance to the democratic ideal of public reason is strengthened for the right reasons" (Rawls 2005, 463).

[21] *Cf.*, e.g., Lafont (2009).

[22] *Cf.*, e.g., Boettcher (2009).

[23] *Cf.*, e.g., Boettcher (2009).

[24] For discussion of this argument *cf.*, e.g., Eberle (2002), Audi (1993, 2000).

[25] This is true even if one assumes that there need be no semantic connection between reasons given in the proviso's fulfillment.

accompanying a biblically-grounded appeal to observe the Sabbath with the public claim that all citizens deserve fair equality of opportunity. This is an uncharitable, rather clearly mistaken reading of Rawls – as it should be straightforward to discount public reasons as equivalents if they are entirely unrelated to the discussion at hand – but being explicit about *why* this interpretation is mistaken requires getting clearer about exactly how relevant or supportive a public equivalent needs to be in order to satisfy the proviso.

In this light, Habermas's characteristic dialogical approach to the problem simply highlights a need that Rawls' more individualistic approach obscures. It is all too easy to assume that an individual searching for a public reason to support a claim *she herself holds* on the basis of nonpublic reasons will inevitably find a public reason that has something of a justificatory or semantic connection to the already held reasons. Call this the *availability assumption.* It is less intuitively plausible in the interpersonal case that matching a public reason to a nonpublic reason will ensure any sort of justificatory connection between the two reasons. So, realizing the similarity of Habermas's and Rawls' aims in this context – and thus that the criteria of success for "translation" must not be substantially different whether the process is interpersonal or intrapersonal – calls the availability assumption into question. As a result, it is clear that both approaches require an attempt to make sense of what sort of connection between two reasons would be sufficient for us to consider one a political translation of the other.

Habermas's position is in fact more plausible than Rawls's, because it does not make inclusion contingent on any particular agent's fulfillment of her deliberative obligations. On Habermas's account, an agent can be politically included in virtue of the fact that another individual has provided an appropriate translation of her claim. Or, more to the point, one can consider the political system appropriately inclusive with reference to the existence of a well-supported process of translation embedded in citizens' deliberative practices on the whole. In short, Habermas's view encourages a systematic approach to a systematic problem, rather than constraining possible solutions along individual – agent-centric – lines.

However, even if – as I suggest – there is a way in which Rawls' account obscures the need to look further into the details of an acceptable translation, it also offers a starting place for filling in these details. His proviso gets us started in thinking about a functionalist account of translation, since its criterion of fulfillment references the justificatory weight of an equivalent reason with respect to a given political decision. In short, on my reading of the proviso it is appropriate to forward a given public reason as an equivalent to a nonpublic reason if the public reason can play the same functional role in a particular political claim – or argument – as the nonpublic reason.[26] Let us take up

---

[26] This is the process Thomas Schmidt refers to as "translation as equivalence" (Schmidt 2007, 180-181). Some seem to read the "sufficiency" of Rawls's proviso as referring to reasons sufficient to motivate one's advocacy of a particular policy (e.g., Boettcher (2009, 230)), rather than interpreting sufficiency with respect to the reason's justificatory weight. Clearly, I find the functionalist reading more fruitful.

this suggestion and examine to what extent a functionalist account of public translation could fulfill our inclusive aims.

In general, a functionalist account can be seen to support religious citizens' political inclusion by working to approximate the impact of religious reasons on political decisions. Imagine, for example, a religious citizen concerned with exerting political pressure in favor of a particular proposed policy. Even though she is advocating for the policy on religious grounds, she should not be dissatisfied if her religious reason is replaced by a public *equivalent* once formal deliberations begin, because the same amount of pressure will still be applied in favor of the policy. Or, at least, this pragmatic intuition – that the multiple realizability of political reasons can be used to good effect – underlies the intuitive appeal of the functionalist account; if you have two reasons for a law that are "as good" as one another, there is no political loss in only forwarding one of them. Moreover, the functionalist account allows for religious reasons to play an important, non-redundant role in the political process. There is no guarantee that the equivalent public reasons will already be at play in the public debate; so, engagement with religious reasons with an eye towards functional translation can activate hitherto unnoticed or disregarded public claims. In this sense, the introduction of religious reasons can have a substantive impact on political deliberation even if they are not themselves playing a justificatory role in the formal public sphere, *qua* religious reasons.

4. JUSTIFICATORY SUFFICIENCY

Filling out this general picture requires a more detailed treatment of the qualities of a successful translation. In absence of a detailed account, we can at least attempt to articulate the aims of an attempt to find a functional translation. Towards this end, I want to explore one primary characteristic of a plausible functional translation: justificatory sufficiency.

Justificatory sufficiency is meant simply to signal the fact that a public translation ought to carry a similar justificatory weight as its religious equivalent in order to be satisfactory. Thus, I appropriate the term from Rawls' proviso, even though it might be somewhat misleading.[27] We have seen above that the equivalence of justificatory weight helps enable religious citizens to exert pressure on political decisions. It is important to add to this account that the secular translation ought to be not just of similar justificatory weight to the religious claim, but of similar *overlapping* justificatory weight. This addition is necessary in order to acknowledge that two claims can be of similar justificatory weight yet can each provide independent support for a particular policy.

---

[27] 'Sufficiency' might be misleading because rarely is a reason sufficient to support a political decision entirely on its own; political decisions are supported only after adjudication among competing reasons, deliberation about countervailing evidence, etc. Regardless, the term will serve well enough for present purposes.

Therefore, sameness of justificatory weight alone will not describe the ideal functional translation, because a claim can be similarly weighty yet play a different logical role in the argument at hand. It might be that, for example, a theological argument in favor of marriage equality – perhaps based on the fact that marriage is a sacrament only because of its connection to the primary sacrament of baptism, which is fundamentally open to all as a free gift of God[28] – is of similar weight to an argument emphasizing the health benefits of marriage.[29] However, considering the latter a functional translation of the former would fail to capture the fact that the theological argument is offering altogether independent support for marriage equality.

The obvious concern with articulating a criterion of sufficiency is the epistemological problem of how one is to compare the weight of various proposed translations. However, there is much to be said even as we acknowledge the epistemological issues at hand. First of all, public translations *are* going to be accessible in nature by definition, so at least religious and secular citizens alike can deliberate over the relative weights of proposed translations. Secondly, the reason-giver's estimation of the comparative weights of her offered religious reason and a potential public equivalent is relevant and useful information in this process of functional translation. At the least, a religious citizen will be driven to find what she considers to be a similarly weighty public equivalent. Further, although a reason-giver's estimation will clearly not be decisive, it is something about which religious and secular citizens can enter into dialogue. Religious citizens who feel that they are insufficiently included in political deliberation must then justify to others why the secular equivalents on the table are unsatisfactory, and secular citizens must reciprocally engage in such deliberation.

It is important to stress that the act of assigning justificatory weight is itself politically imbued. When religious citizens make public judgments about the weight of public reasons, these acts function to introduce concrete, actionable manifestations of the religious perspective into political discourse. And when the public reasons under consideration are purported equivalents of religious reasons, evaluating these equivalents offers religious citizens an avenue for guiding political deliberation towards their desired ends, or for expressing the fact that their positions are not yet adequately represented. In the case of the latter, religious citizens are *prima facie* justified in asking for the process of translation to continue further.

The picture of the religious citizen that I am developing is one in which what is crucial for the political inclusion of religious citizens is that they engage with proposed public equivalents, at least by assigning justificatory weights to them. More explicitly, there is an obligation on the part of religious citizens who want to take part in political

---

[28]*Cf.*, Shirilau, "Theological Arguments for Equality of Marriage"
(http://www.ecchurch.org/marriageequality.htm).

[29] *Cf.*, e.g., Herdt and Kertzner (2006).

deliberation to participate in the translation process by engaging with – by affirming, denying, accepting for given ends, tweaking, refuting, and the like – proposed public equivalents of their claims.

Importantly, this process is not identity-threatening for religious citizens, because there is no presumption that a citizen identifies with a particular public translation. This allows for the possibility of the citizen endorsing the claim without suggesting that it is an expression of her view. Indeed, even if a translation fulfills the appropriate role in justifying a policy, a religious citizen might explicitly deny that it is representative of her view. And yet, that citizen is involved in the process that produced the translation, providing some connection between her and the relevant public claim. Further, the claim will still exist to militate towards the policy that the religious citizen feels should be championed. So, even if a religious citizen disowns a particular public translation, it might still be able to fulfill an appropriate functional role, and that citizen might still be able to endorse the process of translation that, on the whole, provides a mechanism for generating political pressure in the desired direction, with the desired force.[30]

As expressed above, this characteristic is not intended to address directly the epistemological problem of when a functional translation will count as adequate, but rather to suggest one characteristic of a process of functional translation able to adequately include religious citizens in political deliberation – given the acceptance of the principle of secular justification and something akin to Habermas's institutional translation proviso.

CONCLUSION

In what has come before, I have aimed to shed further light on an often invoked but rarely analyzed notion – the idea that religious claims can (and ought) to be "translated" for the purposes of public discussion. I have offered an account of such public "translation" in which religious and secular citizens alike can engage in a mutual process of finding functional equivalents of religious claims, remaining mindful of the fact that religious claims can contain public content and do positive justificatory work in public political discourse. I have argued that this process allows those who might have issues with forwarding public reasons – such as devout religious citizens – to be substantively included in political deliberation. This political inclusion can take place without devout religious citizens having to worry about assaults on their identity, expressly because they are not required to identify with the reasons generated out of the process.

---

[30] The (perhaps overly idealistic) hope is that such conversations among religious and secular citizens will of necessity lead towards a discussion of shared standards, which will – at least – further public recognition of the boundaries between the secular and the religious, and – at best – trend towards the creation of something like a Rawlsian overlapping consensus.

As the liberal use of the scare-quoted "translation" should indicate, I am sympathetic with those who will question whether the process I describe provides anything that might be properly called a translation. Indeed, it should be clear that I am not concerned with faithfully extracting the semantic content of religious claims for political purposes. Rather, I want to ensure that the political presence and participation of devout religious citizens is not endangered simply by the fact that they present their positions in religious language. The hope is that religious and secular citizens working together to recast such positions in public terms alleviates some of the anxious tension that surrounds religious contributions to public discourse.

References

Audi, Robert. 1993. "The Place of Religious Argument in a Free and Democratic Society." *San Diego Law Review* 30: 677.

———. 2000. *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason.* Cambridge University Press, March 13.

Audi, Robert, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. 1996. *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Boettcher, James W. 2009. "Habermas, Religion and the Ethics of Citizenship." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 35 (1-2) (January 1): 215-238.

Chambers, Simone. 2010. "Secularism Minus Exclusion: Developing a Religious-Friendly Idea of Public Reason." *The Good Society* 19 (2): 16-21.

Eberle, Christopher J. 2002. *Religious Conviction in Liberal Politics.* Cambridge University Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 2003. "Faith and Knowledge." In *The Future of Human Nature.* Polity.

———. 2006. "Religion in the Public Sphere." *European Journal of Philosophy* 14 (1): 1-25.

———. 2008. "Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the "Public Use of Reason" by Religious and Secular Citizens." In *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays.* Polity.

Herdt, G., and R. Kertzner. 2006. "I Do, but I Can't: The Impact of Marriage Denial on the Mental Health and Sexual Citizenship of Lesbians and Gay Men in the United States." *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 3 (1): 33–49.

Lafont, Cristina. 2007. "Religion in the Public Sphere: Remarks on Habermas's Conception of Public Deliberation in Postsecular Societies." *Constellations* 14 (2) (June): 239-259.

———. 2009. "Religion and the Public sphere: What Are the Deliberative Obligations of Democratic Citizenship?" *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 35 (1-2) (January 1): 127-150.

Rawls, John. 1993. *Political Liberalism.* New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 2005. "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited." In *Political Liberalism*, 440-490. New York: Columbia University Press.

Schmidt, Thomas M. 2007. "The Semantic Contents of Religious Beliefs and their Secular Translation: Jürgen Habermas' Concept of Religious Experience." In *Religion: Immediate Experience and the Mediacy of Research. Interdisciplinary Studies in Objectives, Concepts and Methodology of Empirical Research in Religion*, ed. H.-G. Heimbrock and Ch. Scholtz, 175-188. Göttingen.

Walhof, Darren. 2011 (forthcoming). "Habermas, Same-Sex Marriage, and the Problem of Religion in Public Life." *Philosophy & Social Criticism.*

Yates, Melissa. 2007. "Rawls and Habermas on Religion in the Public Sphere." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33 (7) (November 1): 880-891.