

From Jürgen Habermas to George Lindbeck: On Translating Religious Concepts into Secular Terms

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It is an old and venerable tenet of political liberalism that religious ideas can and should be translated into secular terms. The post-metaphysical, liberal political philosopher Jürgen Habermas has championed the task of translation in a series of recent books and articles. It is possible, according to him, to put words like “sin” and phrases like “the image of God” into terms acceptable to everyone. Such translations *can* happen because the world’s religions express moral intuitions that secular terminology can name just as well. The image of God becomes “human dignity,” and so on. Translation *should* happen because these moral intuitions can act as a source of collective ideals. Habermas worries that such ideals (like solidarity or “human dignity”) are in retreat in today’s western democracies, pressed back and even overrun by market logic. Instead of living according to an ethos of mutual respect and recognition, citizens are appealing to their own self-interest. Habermas believes that ideas and intuitions from religious traditions, translated into secular terms, could play an important role in reversing this tide.

They can do so because Habermas (ever the faithful Kantian) thinks that concepts from particular religions conceal moral intuitions that will resonate with everyone. That is to say, the concepts are parochial, but the intuitions within are universalizable. These moral intuitions are not contingent on other particular beliefs (on religious cosmology, etc.), so everyone has access to them, no matter what else they believe. All that remains once the translator has identified this sort of universal intuition is to put it into generally accessible language that everyone can follow.

Can translation perform the task he sets for it? This paper pursues an answer in several parts. First, I will look at why Habermas has turned to religion and why he thinks translating religious ideas is important. In brief, liberal societies are having trouble producing the kind of solidarity they need to survive, and by translating concepts from different religions into generally accessible language, society at large could tap into new sources of solidarity. Then I will show *how* Habermasian translation is supposed to work. He holds that there are universalizable moral intuitions behind or within some religious language, and he argues that these intuitions will still be inspiring once put into strictly secular terms. After analyzing Habermas’ remarks on translation, I will contrast Habermas’ position on religious language with the post-liberal theologian George Lindbeck’s way of reading scripture. Lindbeck argues that the context of scriptural and theological language (its supporting conceptual apparatus and place within the practice of Christian life) grants individual words their motivational power. My thesis is that Habermasian translation risks losing the very motivational force he wants to capture. Ultimately, however, I suggest that “translation” may be a misleading way of understanding the encounter between citizens of faith and secular ones. Their conversation may turn out to be more like an inter-faith dialogue than a translation project.

I. Why Religion?

In order to decide whether or not Habermasian translation will succeed, we need to know what task he hopes it will accomplish. Or, put another way, what problem does translation address? Habermas sees two potential problems for the liberal state: it must justify its legitimacy on philosophical grounds, and it must also create citizens with the democratic virtues necessary for its survival. With regards to justification, Habermas thinks liberalism, though it may share a genealogy with religious thought, needs no support from religion now. A democracy, to the extent that it allows input from all of its citizens, establishes its own legitimacy because its citizens draw up the laws that they then live under.¹ The question of how a state will ensure that it has good citizens (that it to say, people who want to participate and, even more importantly, who seek out and respect the participation of others) is harder to answer.

The question is difficult because a law requiring civic participation would be a contradiction in terms. (You cannot coerce someone into voting and still have “free” elections.) More importantly, the state cannot require a sense of solidarity, a willingness to care about strangers and even sacrifice one’s own immediate self-interest for their good. Habermas calls willingness to participate in democratic life on behalf of one’s (sometimes distant) neighbors “political virtue.” A liberal society needs this kind of virtue, but Habermas admits that people usually acquire such virtue outside of the public sphere: in their churches, their homes, and all of the places where citizens become involved in each other’s lives and learn to balance their desires with the well-being of others. To be sure, Habermas insists that the liberal state can encourage such virtue. The democratic process itself (everything from writing laws and debating them to standing in line to vote) can build political virtue, potentially making citizens feel like they are responsible for the nation’s laws and therefore to each other.²

But if a liberal society can both justify itself and create the virtues necessary for its survival, then why has Habermas spent more than a decade writing about “vibrant world traditions” and in dialogue with religious (especially Catholic) thinkers?³ The answer is that democratic political virtues turn out to be vulnerable to capitalism. The state of western liberal democracies seems to alarm Habermas: where he should find a sense of collective purpose, he instead finds atomization and appeals to self-interest. Market imperatives like cost-benefit analysis are replacing democratic norms and ideals.⁴ Worse still, market mechanisms are taking over areas of life that used to be regulated by the state, which means that

¹ Jürgen Habermas, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. Florian Schuller, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006). See 24-28 and especially 26. Those who wish to learn more about Habermas’ form of “Kantian Republicanism” (or dispute it) will find a fuller defense of it in *The Inclusion of the Other*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998). Habermas also recommends chapter three of *Between Facts and Norms*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

² *Ibid.*, 29-32.

³ Apart from a few passing references to Buddhism, Habermas deals almost exclusively with Christianity. As such, this paper considers what problems Christianity may pose the Habermasian translator. Other faiths may pose different problems, but those problems are outside the scope of the present paper.

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, “‘The Political’: The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance in Political Theology,” *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*. 16.

the space for public deliberation, and the space controlled by public deliberation, is shrinking.⁵ The increased capitalization of democracy could lead to a vicious cycle: private interests take over public space, which leads to less public deliberation, hence weaker democratic virtues and stronger market values. Consequently, it will become easier for the private interests to take over more public space. In everything from personal encounters to international trade and development, parties will regard each other as competitors rather than as partners in the common enterprise of ensuring justice for all.⁶

Habermas is concerned about a breakdown of societal solidarity, and he turns to religious traditions, most often Christianity, because he thinks they still inspire a sense of belonging and mutual obligation in their adherents. By contrast, a purely rational morality “unavoidably loses its grip on the images, preserved by religion, of the moral whole—of the Kingdom of God on earth—as collectively binding ideals.”⁷ The way to capture and redeploy these images and ideals will be by means of translation into secular language.

II. Why Translation?

At the same time, as a liberal philosopher in good standing, Habermas cannot use words like “the Kingdom of God on earth” in legislation, or even in public debate. Unlike John Rawls, Habermas welcomes religious speech into the public square, but because words and images from particular religions will only resonate with some, they must be translated into generally accessible terms that everyone can accept. There are two situations that require translation.⁸ First, religious terminology cannot enter the official pronouncements of “parliaments, courts, ministries and administrations.”⁹ Habermas dubs this the “institutional proviso.” Second, he requires that the work of translation be done outside of institutions, in the “pre-parliamentarian” domain of public life.¹⁰ After the work of translation is done, the formerly-religious ideal can enter the nation’s legal code or, even more importantly, serve as part of a society’s “background consensus,” the abstract values and principles that bind a society together. (Such principles might be adumbrated in a nation’s constitution, for instance.) Habermas thinks this background consensus is essential to a society’s health: it inspires solidarity between citizens and creates a sense of collective purpose.

Secular and religiously-affiliated citizens should perform the task of translation together, in conversation with one another. In fact, a liberal culture should *expect* its secular citizens to “play their part in the endeavors to translate relevant contributions from the

⁵ *Dialectics of Secularization*, 35-6.

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, “A Reply,” *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post Secular Age*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), 73-74

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006), 8-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, “Dialogue: Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor,” *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Van Antwerpen, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 65.

religious language into a language that is accessible to the public as a whole.”¹¹ In conversations with Catholic priests (including Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI) and Protestants (including Cornell West), he has called for and modeled an ongoing conversation between secular and religious citizens. By participating in these kinds of dialogues, Habermas hopes to demonstrate that the translation requirement will not place a lop-sided burden on people of faith.¹² Furthermore, I suspect that Habermas wants translation to take place in the pre-parliamentarian hubbub of public life because by co-operating on this task (offering and correcting new translations), citizens may well build the political virtues he thinks a democracy needs, regardless of whether or not the translation itself succeeds.

Of course, Habermas has an idea of *what* in particular he wants to translate. He wants what he calls a religion’s “moral intuitions”: “The insight that vibrant world religions may be bearers of ‘truth contents,’ in the sense of suppressed or untapped moral intuitions, is by no means a given for the secular portion of the population.”¹³ Despite what a portion of the secular population might think, “vibrant world religions” express “moral intuitions,” meaning that their truths are ethical rather than historical or cosmological. Moral intuitions are the subjects of Habermasian translation. Furthermore, he finds candidates for translation not in ritual but in sacred scriptures and theology (that is to say, in a religion’s language).

Although translation is of course a cognitive project, the real success or failure of Habermas’ translation surely depends on the extent to which its products, too, can inspire “an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven.”¹⁴ Ever the pragmatist, Habermas is after more than justification, which he thinks liberal political philosophy already provides. A translation must have the proper consequences. It must have a reasonable prospect for creating the solidarity and awareness he wants.

III. How Does Translation Work?

Now we come to the question of how Habermas thinks translation works. *How* does one translate the moral intuitions from particular religions into generally-accessible terms? The first thing to say about Habermasian translation is that it is not like translating from one natural language to another, not like going from “red” to “roja” (or, more to the point, from “sin” to “sünde”). That would be “strict” translation. Instead, here as elsewhere, he says that a religious idiom contains what he dubs “semantic potential” or “semantic resources.”¹⁵ “If all goes well,” Habermas says, “The outcome is not disagreement, nor is it strict translation either, but lifting for [the] wider public semantic potentials [that] would

¹¹ *Dialectics of Secularization*, 51-2. Cf. “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 10.

¹² One popular objection to Habermas’ translation requirement has been that it does in fact place an unequal burden on people of faith, despite his best efforts to the contrary. See especially Woltersdorff in *Habermas and Religion*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 320.

¹³ Habermas, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 27. For another place where Habermas connects “truth contents” to “moral intuitions,” see “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 15.

¹⁴ *An Awareness of What Is Missing*, *Ibid*, 19.

¹⁵ See, for instance, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” 17 or *An Awareness of What Is Missing*, 76-77.

otherwise remain sunken in the idiom of particular religious communities.”¹⁶ Habermas never defines “semantic potential” neatly in his writing on religion, but as I understand it, by “semantic” he means the content of the moral intuition, and by “potential” he means that this content is vague (as “intuitions” are) and may give rise to further thoughts or explication. The implication here is that the “particular religious community” has named or specified an intuition one particular way, but the same intuition could have any number of other names. The translator’s task is to “lift” the content/intuition out of its religious idiom so that it can be renamed and recognized by all.

Crucial to Habermas’ understanding of how this translation process works is the idea that it is possible to name the same intuition with different words. Here, for instance, is how Habermas describes the translation of the Biblical idea of humankind being made in the “image of God” (famously in Genesis 1:27) into the Kantian idea of equal human dignity:

One such translation that salvages the substance of the term is the translation of the concept of “man in the image of God” into that of the identical dignity of all men that deserves unconditional respect. This goes beyond the borders of one particular religious fellowship and makes the substance of biblical concepts accessible to a general public.¹⁷

The concept of “man in the image of God” contains a vague moral intuition that, once raised out of its biblical context, can be renamed (de-christened?) “the identical dignity of all men” and used in a secular context. A concept that had been rooted in one group’s fellowship thereby becomes accessible to the “general public.” Max Pensky has identified Habermas’ basic assumption as follows: “... [T]heological concepts maintain their semantic meanings even after they have been removed from their living contexts, and that those meanings still capture aspects of the human experience without any dependence on the transcendence of ritual, or overtly religious or metaphysical language.”¹⁸ I would only amend this formulation in one way: whereas Pensky limits Habermas to “theological concepts,” Habermas himself draws on a broader array of sources, especially (as in the case of the *imago Dei*) from the Bible. Still, Pensky is surely correct to say that for Habermas, translation is a form of *analogical reasoning*. Ideally, the new translation functions in its secular context like the old word functioned in its religious context. If this is possible, then Habermas, or another translator, can bring the moral intuitions within scripture or theology (its “truth content”) into the public sphere. If the new intuition fits into society’s “background consensus,” then it will give society as a whole a vocabulary that conveys a set of “collectively binding ideal[s]” without any admixture of religion.

Also crucial is the idea that translation need not create a new moral intuition in secular citizens because the intuition is already there. Remember that rational morality “unavoidably loses its grip” on the moral whole, meaning that the problem is forgetfulness

¹⁶ *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 115.

¹⁷ *Dialectics of Secularization*, 45. For more on Kant’s role in translating the *imago Dei* into ideas about autonomy and human rights, see *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 63.

¹⁸ Max Pensky, “Solidarity with the Past and the Work of Translation,” *Habermas and Religion*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Van Antwerpen, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 320.

rather than any fundamental lack.¹⁹ As Habermas said in conversation with the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor: "... I'm convinced that there might well be buried moral intuitions on the part of a secular public that can be uncovered by a moving religious speech. Listening to Martin Luther King, it does make no difference [sic] whether you are secular or not. You understand what he means."²⁰ A secular person like Habermas understands King not because he (Habermas) knows the basics of Christianity and has read the book of Exodus, but because the Exodus narrative touches on a moral intuition he shares: the desire for liberation from injustice.²¹ Of course, if King's speeches were to enter public policy or society's background consensus, they would require translation. What is important, though, is that secular citizens already have King's intuitions. They were buried in the secular citizens all along; King's Christian idiom just dredged them up.

Some Christian theologians have been wary of this kind of translation project. Nicholas Adams has argued that "Habermas is not really interested in religion or theology as practices or living traditions, but sees them as powerful, sometimes dangerous, sometimes inspiring ancestors to modern self-consciousness."²² In part, this is incorrect. For Habermas, religion is more than an "ancestor" of philosophy. In engagements with living theologians, in person and on the page, Habermas has treated them less like doddering grandparents and more like siblings. (He consistently dates both Greek philosophy and a certain kind of religious thought to the Axial Age.²³) And yet, when Adams offers his arresting thesis (Habermas wants "the power and inspiration [of religion] without the danger"), it rings true. Why? Perhaps because Habermas is ultimately interested not in any religion *per se* but in the universalizable moral intuitions that Christianity (or Buddhism, or Islam, Judaism or Daoism) might offer a liberal society. He wants its power, its inspirational moral intuitions, without its potentially dangerous parochialism. But again, the questions of what he wants and how the conversation should go both presume that a particular religion's semantic contents, its moral truths and intuitions, are separable from its words and devotional practices. Is this the case?

IV. Lindbeck on Scripture and Translation

Certainly not always—or at least, as Habermas is fond of saying, "not yet." Kant may have successfully translated a biblical phrase like "the image of God" into the idea of equal respect for all people, but nobody, Habermas admits, has yet found an adequate secular equivalent for "sin." Everyone can understand a word like "culpability" but "[w]hen sin was converted into culpability, and the breaking of divine commands to an offense

¹⁹ *An Awareness of What Is Missing*, 19.

²⁰ Habermas, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 63-65.

²¹ See also "Religion in the Public Sphere," 10: "Secular citizens or those of other religious persuasions can under certain circumstances learn something from religious contributions; that is, for example, the case if they recognize in the normative truth content of a religious utterance hidden intuitions of their own." Again, secular citizens learn nothing new. Rather, their own intuitions are "hidden" from them, and religious speech uncovers them.

²² Nicholas Adams, *Habermas and Theology*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 13.

²³ See for example: Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Ciaran Cronin, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008), 141-2.

against human laws, something was lost.”²⁴ The moral intuition behind “sin” remains hidden behind the word itself, sunk out of sight in a particular religious idiom.

Why might this be the case? How would we have to understand scripture and theology differently in order to see why no adequate secular translation for a concept like sin has been found? The post-liberal theologian George Lindbeck offers a possible answer. Though in some ways they are also very much alike, Lindbeck and Habermas understand religion, the Bible, and Christianity in importantly different ways.²⁵ The main difference is that while Habermas tries to capture intuitions *within* biblical phrases or concepts, Lindbeck sees those intuitions arising from a whole context of belief and practice. Biblical and theological language makes sense, and therefore inspires people to action, as a system rather than as individual words or phrases.

In his book *The Nature of Doctrine*, Lindbeck argues that stories, symbols, and worship are the mediums which make moral intuitions possible. Drawing on what he calls the “cultural-linguistic” model of religion, Lindbeck writes, “From a cultural-linguistic perspective, it will be recalled, a religion is first of all a comprehensive interpretive medium or categorical framework within which one has certain kinds of experiences and makes certain kinds of affirmations.”²⁶ The cultural-linguistic frame includes not only doctrines and symbols, but also rituals and devotional practice. Through education and participation, members of a religious community learn to see the world through this frame, and their frame in large part determines how they experience the world and act in it. The important point here is that a religion’s words and practices do not cover or encapsulate a more general, universalizable moral intuition. The frame precedes experience and action.

One should not overemphasize the importance of the “cultural-linguistic” model to Lindbeck’s theology. Peter Ochs has argued that it is ultimately a heuristic in service of explaining how he (Lindbeck) reads scripture.²⁷ Lindbeck refuses to read any biblical story or verse in isolation. Instead, he uses what he calls “classical hermeneutics,” the idea that the Bible is a unified story/canon; it is self-referential and the best aid for interpreting any one verse can be found in another.²⁸ It centers on Christ, and its principle story is the story of the triune God’s relationship with a chosen people. Any verse may be typologically

²⁴ Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 110.

²⁵ They are alike in combining pragmatic and transcendental reasoning. That is to say, they reason in transcendental terms but in response to local, specific problems or crises. For Lindbeck’s theology as a pragmatic transcendentalism, see Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 201), esp. 40.

²⁶ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 80. Habermas’ picture of religion is closer to what Lindbeck calls the “experiential-expressivist” model of religion, favored by liberal theologians like Paul Tillich, in which each religion points beyond itself to something universal. What they are pointing to, of course, are the generally accessible intuitions named by liberal political philosophy.

²⁷ Ochs, *Another Reformation*, 36.

²⁸ George Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James J Buckley (London, UK: SCM Press, 2002), 203. The most succinct and moving formulation of this view belongs, of course, to George Herbert: “This verse marks that, and both do make a motion / Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie” (“The H. Scriptures II,” 5-6).

relevant to contemporary readers, guiding their action and self-understanding now.²⁹ As readers learn the story and become proficient in a large part of its theological language and ecclesial practice, the Bible becomes what Lindbeck calls a “habitable text”: “[I]t must in some fashion be construable as a guide to thought and action in the encounter with changing circumstances. It must supply followable directions for coherent patterns of life in new situations.”³⁰ Whether over the course of a life or in a radically new circumstance, the Bible is supposed to provide Lindbeck and his fellow Protestants with guidance through its laws, aphorisms, stories, and moral exemplars. Only as they inhabit and live according to this text, thinks Lindbeck, do people become capable of experiencing what Habermas would call the “moral intuition” that comes along with a word like “sin.”

When one considers Christianity in Lindbeck’s terms, it is easy to see how it becomes a source of “collectively binding ideals”: its doctrines and practices shape the subjectivities of its adherents.³¹ Lindbeck and his fellow Protestants share a common vocabulary, common practices, and common experiences: in short, a life together. On Lindbeck’s account, “sin” means what it does within the context of other Protestant doctrines, practices, and narratives: grace and judgment, acts of confession and proclamations of forgiveness, the narrative of fall and crucifixion.

Lindbeck sometimes seems to deny the possibility of translation completely. What he means, though, is that translation from a biblical to a secular idiom would always entail a loss: “In short, the Bible as interpreted within the Christian mainstream purports to provide a totally comprehensive framework, a universal perspective, within which everything can be properly construed and outside of which nothing can be equally well understood. This double claim of comprehensiveness constitutes the general form of untranslatability.”³² When one looks through the biblical lens, the world comes into focus. When one looks through secular spectacles instead, the world appears distorted. Again, for Lindbeck it is the framework that makes the individual biblical concept comprehensible, whereas for Habermas the concept functions alone. It covers something ultimately outside the framework (a universalizable moral intuition) that any other vocabulary could name.

For my purposes, the important thing is this: if Lindbeck’s Protestantism not only *names* the “substance” of sin but also *teaches* it through catechesis and stories and then *enacts* it through confession and processes of reconciliation, then Habermasian translation becomes extremely difficult. Habermas wants to capture the moral intuitions expressed by single words like “sin” and introduce them to the public in a neutral language, but according to Lindbeck, the word “sin” does not express a moral intuition in isolation. Instead, “sin” takes on meaning and moves believers to action within the system of Lindbeck’s Protestant thought and practice. This is a problem for Habermas, because it means that treating individual words and phrases one at a time is not enough. Habermas would have to find an analogous situation, too, complete with contextualizing concepts and an appropriate political praxis. Only then would the translation perform an analogous function: inspire action, build solidarity, and so on.

²⁹ Herbert again: “For in ev’ry thing / Thy words do finde me out, & parallels bring, / And in another make me understood” (“The H. Scriptures II,” 10-12).

³⁰ Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, 219.

³¹ *The Nature of Doctrine*, 33.

³² Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, 232. See all of 231-233.

With Lindbeck's account in mind, it is now easy to see how Habermasian translation might fail both on a conceptual and practical level. Conceptually, his new translation might have no place in society's "background consensus," no network of concepts within which it made sense. Practically—and this would finally be even more damaging to the goal of engendering solidarity—the new translation might have no mooring in the daily lives of secular citizens, no place in their political habits and practices. Without a ready-made place in society's "background consensus" or in its democratic procedures and practices, it would therefore end up having what Habermas admits is the "motivational weakness of a rational morality."³³ The Habermasian translator would be confronted with a tragic irony: the more the intuition behind a word like "sin" is missing from a society's background consensus, the more difficult it will be to translate effectively. It seems to me that any understanding of Christian terminology (or Buddhist, or Islamic, or Jewish, or Daoist) that ties single words into larger frameworks (to say nothing of giving them a home in ritual practice) will raise similar problems for a Habermasian translator. A successful translation process would either have to include transforming the political habits and practices of secular society, or it would have to find the appropriate habits already there.

There is reason to believe they will often not be. Habermas says that the main difference between secular and religious forms of morality is that "[s]ecular morality is not inherently embedded in communal practices. Religious consciousness, by contrast, preserves an essential connection to the ongoing practice of life within a community..."³⁴ He assures us that children can learn his kind of Kantian morality from their families and from books and in the classroom, but he also admits that, as a result, they will rely primarily on their own judgment. Community, the moral whole, comes second if at all. The process of translation deliberately severs the connection to community (and must, if the translation is to be universal rather than parochial), and yet absent such a connection, the new translation will command no loyalty or build community of any kind, let alone one strong enough to resist the constant centrifugal pressure of global capitalism.

V. Might it Work Otherwise?

Habermas expresses impatience with anyone who doubts that religious concepts can be translated into a generally accessible language.³⁵ I find this odd, especially given his admission that "sin" stubbornly resists translation. He might, as usual, say that no translation has "as yet" been found, but if Kant is the translator *par excellence*, and if his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) seems "less than convincing"³⁶ when it recasts "sin" as "radical evil," then perhaps the wait has gone on long enough. Thinking about *why* translations fail, as Lindbeck does, is surely worth our while. Given Lindbeck's criticisms, I can imagine two ways forward: one that incorporates his criticisms into a chastened theory of translation, and another that does away with "translation" altogether, casting the dialogue between secular and religious citizens as a joint effort to agree on the consequences of their shared concepts.

³³ Habermas, *An Awareness of What is Missing*, 74.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁵ Habermas, "Reply to My Critics," *Habermas and Religion*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 388.

³⁶ Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 110.

Lindbeck's position need not make translation, as Habermas understands it, impossible. If world religions only point to moral intuitions that secular citizens always already have (Habermas), then translation will succeed, sooner or later. But if a sense of "sin" requires a biblical lens (Lindbeck), then the translation's success will depend on how much of that lens, and in what form, a secular society still possesses. It might share quite a bit: as Habermas frequently points out, many of the terms secular philosophy takes for granted (autonomy, justification, emancipation, etc.) have roots in religious traditions.³⁷ And Lindbeck finds religious attitudes even in secular citizens who have given up on organized ritual and belief: "Admittedly the patterns impressed by a religion may become latent in a community or individual in the form of generalized attitudes and sentiments that are no longer supported by the original rituals and beliefs."³⁸ Drawing Habermas and Lindbeck together, the secular "background consensus" and Christian "lens" may overlap. If so, then a translation of "the image of God" into "human dignity" might well resonate with both Christian and secular citizens. The success of a translation would now depend a good deal less on the ingenuity of the translator than it would on the "background" beliefs of secular citizens. Historical and sociological forces would constrain the realm of possible translations. In some cases, there would not be enough shared background for a success. For instance, it seems there is currently no difference "between what is morally wrong and what is profoundly evil" against a liberal, secular background.³⁹ Furthermore, while Habermas speaks of things being "not yet" translatable (which makes it sound like we are always moving toward success), if Lindbeck is right, then as a society becomes increasingly irreligious, translation will become increasingly difficult. Old translations could even start to lose their sense.

But perhaps the very word "translation" misleads us. Calling the fruits of religious/secular dialogue a translation is politically attractive because it strikes a mutually-beneficial compromise: the liberal state draws strength from religious intuitions without compromising its neutrality, and people of faith can hear their intuitions echoed in the nation's "background consensus." Everyone wins. The boundary between the state and faith remains intact. If the problem is how to get the inspiration of particular religions idioms without the danger of their parochialism, then given the requirement of boundaries (as in Jefferson's wall of separation), translation seems like a solution so perfect as to be almost irresistible. After all, *translatus* is Latin for "to carry over." I suspect that the appeal of "translation" has blinded us to its limits.

And yet, the conversation between religious and secular citizens could be understood differently. Lindbeck spent his professional life looking for ways to engage in fruitful dialogues both between Christian denominations and with people of other faiths, so the question of how people with seemingly different beliefs can talk and come to agreement is as important to him as it is to Habermas. In what follows, I will briefly explain why Lindbeck thinks interdenominational dialogue is possible and then suggest that, on these grounds, dialogue between religious and secular citizens should be possible, too. Even if it changes Habermas' means (as it would no longer be recognizable as "translation"), it might still meet his ends (engendering solidarity across religious divides). What I am suggesting

³⁷ *Dialectics of Secularization*, 44-45.

³⁸ *The Nature of Doctrine*, 62.

³⁹ *The Future of Human Nature*, 110.

is that instead of seeing “translation” as a unique endeavor, we could understand the kind of conversation Habermas imagines between secular and religious citizens as an inter-denominational or inter-religious dialogue.

What would be required for such a dialogue? Lindbeck says that the theologians Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Barth both used “classical hermeneutics” when interpreting the Bible. Consequently, despite Barth’s Protestantism and von Balthasar’s Catholicism, they had a common basis for discussion and disagreement.⁴⁰ If they had been approaching the Bible from competing perspectives (Lindbeck gives the examples of Marxism and Idealism), they would have found themselves at loggerheads, but with a common canon and method of interpretation, they could understand one another and, even better, possibly even settle their differences. If that were possible between two giants of Protestantism and Catholicism, then Lindbeck hopes the same might be possible, eventually, for their respective churches. Reading the Bible along the lines of “classical hermeneutics” further ensures that theologians will share a vocabulary as those who put it into different contemporary idioms will not.⁴¹ Their arguments will not be over translations but about how to specify the “vague” concepts they share (vague in Charles S. Peirce’s sense of needing determination within context by usage, says Lindbeck).

It seems to me that Christian and secular citizens, at least,⁴² are actually in an analogous situation. Lindbeck sometimes suggests that religious and philosophical worldviews may often turn out to be incommensurable.⁴³ Incommensurability implies that religious and secular discourses lack any basis on which to compare themselves to each other. This is surely incorrect, because Christian and secular discourses share so many terms. As Habermas points out, secular philosophy has a religious genealogy, and early Christian theology borrowed heavily from Greek metaphysics.⁴⁴ Consequently, words like responsibility, autonomy, justification, emancipation, embodiment, and fellowship have meaning to theologians and secular philosophers alike.⁴⁵ On this point I agree wholeheartedly with Habermas. Christian and philosophical discourses are not mutually exclusive of one another, but the conversation would look different than Habermas imagined it. Instead of trying to translate the meaning of exclusively biblical terms like “sin” from a religious idiom into a secular one, we would be better served by talking about terms like “embodiment,” which the discourses share, and asking ourselves what practical consequences might follow from our understandings of them. Habermas and Benedict XVI could equally discuss what it meant to treat each other as made in “the image of God” or possessing “human dignity.”

Admittedly, Habermas would almost certainly reject the comparison of his post-metaphysical liberal political philosophy to a denomination, and vehemently. After all, if liberal political philosophy is like a denomination rather than a set of procedures designed to deal fairly with *different* denominations, then whence its neutrality? Yet I submit that my proposal actually honors Habermas’ pragmatism. Habermas’ political thought marries

⁴⁰ Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, 219-220.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 212-3.

⁴² Again, I leave questions about secular reason and other religions (eastern as well as other near-eastern religions like Judaism and Islam) for others who know them far better than I do.

⁴³ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 49.

⁴⁴ Habermas, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 27.

⁴⁵ Habermas, *Dialectics of Secularization*, 44.

Rawlsian analytic philosophy with American pragmatism. His problem is that, when talking about religion, he relies too much on his analytic tradition. He is too wedded to the (ultimately Fregean) idea that description means classification.⁴⁶ There is a long history of analytic philosophers treating words as labels for objects. “The image of God” and “human dignity,” then, would be two signs to hang on the same peg. A more pragmatic approach would consider what consequences follow from the use of those terms. What does treating someone as “made in the image of God” or as having “human dignity” entail?

This conversation would aim at agreement rather than translation. And what might the fruits of such a conversation be? Take a word like justice, which is used freely by both religious and secular people. Rather than arguing about whether justice means fairness or loving mercy and walking humbly with your God, we could look at what we, secular citizens and citizens of many faiths, count as acts of justice. Of course, we might simply disagree and recognize how different our understandings of our shared words really are. But if we agree on what counts as justice, then it seems to me that we could at last “go on,” stop trying to translate intuitions about justice and start doing it. Perhaps the conversations will yield no agreements, but if we do reach agreement, then we will have formed a community of sorts: “we” will be the ones who agree that justice means starting a soup kitchen, marching in the streets, running for Congress, who knows? My point is that such a conversation between people of different faiths (and none) in the context of the public sphere could establish practical, shared commitments on particular goals. Those commitments, the ones we hold in common, are what might resist the atomizing imperatives of global capitalism, if anything can.

⁴⁶ Cora Diamond, “Losing Your Concepts,” *Ethics* 98, vol. 2 (1988), 266.