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## Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology, edited by Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza

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## The Journal of Religion

theologian concerning the validity of Christianity vis-à-vis other religions, concerning the truth of his or her tradition within Christianity and its concomitant construal of the “essence of Christianity” (Ernst Troeltsch emerges as an important partner in the conversation), and finally with regard to any truth claims or interpretations of the meaning of human existence in histories riven by suffering.

The presentations of the three positions are workmanlike and accurate, the critiques judicious and balanced. The clearest exposition (not surprisingly) is of Pannenberg’s position. With the other thinkers Colombo’s prose sometimes reproduces the opacity for which Adorno, Horkheimer, and Metz are infamous. There are a number of typographical errors and faulty quotations (as well as a decision to forgo definitions of the crucial terms, “nonidentity” and “identity,” until the last chapter) that mar the text’s intelligibility. Having challenged us to accept the cost of speaking of Christianity as a historical religion, he only tantalizes us in his final chapter with some fascinating suggestions as to what such theology would look like. Nor does he seriously engage those thinkers (in the history of religions and in theology) who would question the claim that all religions, as religion, concern a totality of meaning proleptically articulated.

But one book cannot do everything. As he himself admits (p. 223), Colombo does not so much *defend* his understanding of religion and of the essence of Christianity as a historical religion as articulate the *cost* of such an understanding. This is an important task, and the book is valuable for attempting it, as well as for grappling with difficult thinkers who deserve broader consideration. Many theologians, however, have concluded that the cost is too high, the project incoherent. Only a defense of the position can justify the cost. After so cogently counting the cost, this reviewer hopes that Colombo will proceed to such a defense.

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BROWNING, DON S., and SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, FRANCIS, eds. *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology*. New York: Crossroad, 1992. vi+258 pp. \$24.95 (cloth).

The work of Jürgen Habermas increasingly attracts the attention of theologians and scholars of religion. Most of the essays in this present collection were first delivered at a 1988 conference at the University of Chicago Divinity School. There are contributions from six theologians and two social scientists and a response to the essays by Habermas himself. Several of the essays were previously published elsewhere, three of them in *Habermas und die Theologie*, edited by Edmund Arens (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1989). In addition to his own essay, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza has contributed an introduction and an annotated bibliography.

The theologians in this volume value Habermas on a number of grounds. David Tracy finds most helpful the linkage between the analysis of rationality and of modernity and confesses that the latter has not been well attended to by correlational theologians such as himself. Helmut Peukert attends to an ethic of intersubjective creativity, grounding both freedom and reconciliation. Fiorenza represents churches as communities of interpretation which want to participate in the public realm and shows convincingly how they have internalized the principles of the Enlightenment—thus correcting Habermas’s more mythological view of religion. For Matthew Lamb, communicative praxis resists nihilism and so can be utilized by religion both in its task of humanizing society and resisting domination

and, in a self-critical way, to cleanse religion of its own tendencies toward the abuse of power. Gary Simpson's essay seeks to correct Peukert's great work, *Science, Action and Fundamental Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1986), allowing a greater role for Habermas in assisting in the formulation of a "political theology of the cross." Charles Davis's contribution, excerpted from his 1980 book, *Theology and Political Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press), argues that the new social identity Habermas constructs is paralleled by a new religious identity emerging in modern society.

The two essays by social scientists are very different. Fred Dallmayr's lengthy piece on the idea of reconciliation in fact attempts to vindicate a Hegelian understanding more in tune with the early Frankfurt School than with Habermas's revisionist critical theory. Robert Wuthnow's work offers a sociologist's overview of Habermas's later work, concluding with a few remarks about the "resacralization of culture" that may be precipitated by the kind of protest and countercultural movements for which Habermas seems to have more than a sneaking sympathy. Neither Dallmayr nor Wuthnow seems to have much to say about the value of Habermas for a public theology, perhaps because neither of them is a theologian.

Habermas's response to this collection is quite fascinating. One cannot help but notice the vast gap between the large claims made on the part of many of the essayists for Habermas's significance in the study of religion, and the amiable, humble, and quizzical head scratching of the great man himself, who is a little embarrassed, if not totally nonplussed, by all the attention, and does not want to offend anyone by saying that he really does not think religion is all that important any more. Nevertheless, he is in the end more genuinely appreciative of the contributions of the theologians than of the two social scientists in the volume. He gently points out Wuthnow's limited acquaintance with his thought, while calling his essay "thoughtful." Much less irenically, he accuses Dallmayr of "an astonishingly prejudiced critique" (p. 245) of his work and attacks his right-Hegelian concept of an Absolute. But to the theologians he gives quite a bit of ground. He admits that methodological atheism is only a "currently plausible hypothesis," allows that correlational models of theology work "without restraint," and sees monotheistic traditions as quite possibly possessing "a language whose semantic potential is not yet exhausted" (p. 229); however, he will not budge on the non-necessity of a transcendent reality. While Peukert, Tracy, and Davis seem to assume that some Christian hope is necessary for us to be moral at all, he says, in fact since there are no good grounds for not being moral, no "self-surpassing" of morality is necessary, and emancipatory praxis does not need to be grounded in any religious certainty (p. 239).

Most of the essays are strong individual pieces, but the volume shows some editorial weaknesses. In particular, it is not clear why certain essays not presented at the original conference were included here, especially as Habermas's response really does not address them (though the editor claims the response was expanded to take account of them). Even more peculiarly, Habermas responds at some length to an essay (by Sheila Briggs) which was not included in the final volume. Nevertheless, this is a useful collection of essays on a thinker who is clearly important to the project of public theology.

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