

Religion as a Communicative System: the reasonableness of religious contents in the public sphere

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Abstract

Recently, Jürgen Habermas has dedicated many of his works to the discussion of the relationship between religion and the public sphere, in light of democratic possibilities of mutual learning. He contends that even though religious contents can inspire motions of solidarity, constitutional and legal arrangements should reflect universal, secular reasons only. Drawing on the sociology of religion, I will demonstrate that religious narratives contribute to shape moral views and self-perceptions, impacting on the ways societies define political norms. Assessing the flaws of deontological theories, I resort to an Aristotelian view of democratic justice, whereby historical traditions and religious narratives come to inform the contents of evaluative moral discourses. Analyzing the case of South Africa, where communitarian notions of forgiveness prevailed over retributive justice, I argue that principles of public morality stem from contextual struggles, negotiations and exchange of aesthetic-cognitive meanings. With this in mind, I finalize with a formulation of the concept of religion as a communicative system, affirming the capacity of religious traditions to impart reasons that can be generally accessed and apprehended by participants in historical processes of learning.

Keywords

Communicative Rationality; Postsecularism; Public Reason; Religion and the State.

Resumo

Recentemente, Jürgen Habermas tem dedicado muitas de suas obras à discussão sobre o papel da religião na esfera pública, tendo em conta as possibilidades democráticas de mútuo aprendizado. Habermas defende que, embora conteúdos religiosos possam inspirar moções de solidariedade, arranjos legais e constitucionais devem refletir apenas a universalidade das razões seculares. Partindo da sociologia da religião, eu demonstrarei que as narrativas religiosas contribuem para moldar visões morais e autopercepções, que, por sua vez, impactam no modo como as sociedades definem suas normas políticas. Ponderando sobre as limitações das teorias deontológicas, eu recorro a uma abordagem aristotélica da justiça democrática, na qual as tradições históricas e narrativas religiosas provêm os conteúdos para o processo de avaliação das normas morais e políticas. Analisando o caso da África do Sul, onde o apelo pela reconciliação prevaleceu sobre uma concepção retributiva de justiça, eu demonstro que os princípios de moralidade pública são informados por conflitos contextuais, negociações e o intercâmbio de significados estético-cognitivos. Tendo isso em conta, eu termino com uma formulação do conceito de religião como um sistema comunicativo,

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afirmando a capacidade das tradições religiosas de transmitir razões genericamente acessíveis, que podem ser apreendidas pelos participantes em processos históricos de aprendizagem.

Palabras-chave

Racionalidade Comunicativa; Pós-secularismo; Razão Pública; Religião e Estado

Introduction

Jürgen Habermas's communicative theory purports a dialogical view of the process of assessment of conceptions of truth and moral rightness, which in modern societies has replaced traditional sources of political authority, now incapable of providing normative guidance amid the plurality of worldviews. He believes that individuals from different cultural backgrounds can come together in dialogue, and make their moral claims publically accessible by translating their contents into a procedural language for argumentative purposes. As Habermas (1996: 19-21) contends, in communicative action, participants cannot reach consensus "if they did not presuppose, on the basis of a common (translatable) language, that they conferred identical meanings on the expressions they employed". When it comes to religious reasons, Habermas also applies the translation proviso to force them out of the public sphere in its juridical and administrative domain. Accordingly, political decisions should appeal only to reasons that are believed to be accessible to every citizen. But is Habermas correct in stating that religious contents cannot be made available in communicative procedures of evaluation?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to consider the role of religious reasons in supporting moral and political worldviews. Drawing on the literature of the sociology of religion, I will demonstrate that the capacity for shaping public morality is one of the main features of religious traditions. I will argue that it is in view of the moral dimension of religious traditions that their contents can be generally accessible to the public, since – in contrast to claims from Kantian deontological theories – public morality draws on particular aesthetic meanings that emerge from the life of ethical communities.

Religion as a moral resource

The investigation of the aspects of the religious phenomenon that can be considered object of rational analysis requires the differentiation of possible categories of evaluation that compose discursive acts. Even if one concedes that scientific-instrumental rationality is located within the domain of secular reasons, it should be noted that moral norms derive from more complex processes of lifeworld communication.

As Habermas acknowledges in *Religion in the Public Sphere* (2006: 9-10), the Rawlsian conception of public reason – which requires citizens to set aside their comprehensive doctrines – precludes the possibilities of mutual learning between secular and religious citizens in public forums. He contends that the indispensable institutional separation between religion and state must not impose "an undue mental and psychological burden for those of its citizens who follow a faith", especially when those citizens believe that they cannot reason about political matters without referring to their comprehensive worldviews. On the contrary, since religious discourses articulate moral intuitions that

make them “a serious candidate to transporting possible truth contents”, secular citizens must be willing to engage with their claims. However, for Habermas, the translation of religious arguments in the formal public sphere is still necessary, as the legitimation of political authority depends on reasons that can be generally accessed, which means that the language of legal norms must be secular.

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Indeed, Habermas’s stance against the use of religious discourses in that domain can be understood in light of what he calls the “ideal character of semantic generality”, which presupposes the possibility of a common vocabulary in processes of intersubjective evaluation. Even though he makes more concessions than Rawls in allowing religious reasons in the wide domain of public will formation, his scepticism towards the public justification of religious contents leads him to oppose the idea of a “postsecular state”. Against this perception, I want to pursue the idea of religion as a communicative system, which articulates reasons that can be accessed even by non-believers.

In defining religion as communicative system, I do not intend to close this approach to other possibilities of understanding religion. In fact, the diversity of ways of conceiving religious doctrines and practices makes it difficult for one to provide a definitive account of the concept of religion. There can be forms of religiosity that privilege adherence to communitarian values and identities and that are cynical towards the possibility of conveying religious reasons to non-believers. Other religions may offer resources of spirituality that can be meaningful to people only in a limited way, as they do not draw on narratives or mythologies that are aimed to make sense of fundamental aspects of the human life. Given that, the question I am raising concerns about the ways in which religious reasons can articulate generally accessible validity claims, and I will present my argument in terms of the particularities of religious traditions in their relationship to conceptions of truth and justice. In order to do so, I refer now to Émile Durkheim’s, Clifford Geertz’s and Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s studies of the religious phenomenon.

In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), Émile Durkheim provides some particular insights into the problem of conceptualising religion. The sociologist undertakes this task by pointing out common characteristics of the religious phenomenon that can account for an understanding not only of the internal features of religious cults, but of the social role of religion in human societies.

In that work, Durkheim argues that religion should not be conceived with reference to idea of the supernatural, that is, “of the mysterious, of the unknowable, of the un-understandable”. The reasons for this are twofold: firstly, the idea of a distinction between the natural and the supernatural world is a contemporary one, which cannot be transposed to primitive societies. In this sense, even those rituals that, for a modern scientist may seem intelligible, for the primitive man, they are considered natural: “for him there is nothing strange in the fact that by a mere word or gesture one is able to command the elements, retard or precipitate the motion of the stars, bring rain or cause it to cease” (DURKHEIM, 1915: 25-26). Secondly, even if the sentiment of mystery has been given some importance in certain religions, there were moments in history in which this notion was left aside – or put in a secondary place – especially in rationalized religions such as Christianity. In his terms:

(...) For the Christians of the seventeenth century, dogma had nothing disturbing for the reason; faith reconciled itself easily with science and philosophy, and the thinkers, such as Pascal, who really felt that there is something profoundly obscure in things, were so little in harmony with their age that they remained misunderstood by their contemporaries (...)² (DURKHEIM, 1915: 25).

The concept of religion must not rely on the belief in deities either, as in some religious systems, rituals are not designed to establish a connection between the faithful and a spiritual being. In Buddhism, for example, individuals turn to meditation in order to suppress desire, accept the ephemerality of the world and seek the achieving of wisdom, but this movement towards oneself prescinds an external spiritual assistance.

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Importantly, though, Buddhism, just like Christianity, is founded upon a mythological discourse that provides its religious system with a framework of moral reasons that binds its adepts together in a collective life. This is what distinguishes these forms of religiosity from magic, as even though magicians may be attached to some elementary forms of myths and dogmas, there are no lasting bonds between magicians and those who consult them. Similar to other religions, magic is based on a set of beliefs that establishes a cosmological division between the sphere of the sacred and the profane – with the elements of the latter being interdicted and kept at distance from the former. However, since its practice does not require commitment to a socially organized Church, even when there are ties of solidarity among magicians, it cannot be considered a religion: “a Church is not a fraternity of priests; it is a moral community formed by all the believers in a single faith, laymen as well as priests. But magic lacks any such community” (DURKHEIM, 1915: 45).

Such a characterization of religion may be flawed due to the fact that it places too much emphasis on the functional aspects of religion, especially on its capacity to tie believers into social communities, dismissing other spiritual experiences, which for Durkheim seems not to be relevant to the ordering of society. As Grace Davie (2013: 31) underscores, “the repeated emphasis on society as a reality *sui generis* brings with it the risk of a different sort of reductionism - taken to its logical conclusion religion is nothing more than the symbolic expression of social experience”.

Nevertheless, there is one point worthy of consideration in Durkheim’s description of religion. He states that moral practices are only distinguishable from rites in that the object of the latter is the sacred. Nonetheless, in both cases, what is at stake is the dichotomy of what one ought or ought not to do, is being in relation to good or evil, or to the interdictions placed from the sacred over the profane (DURKHEIM, 1915: 36-39). The moral character of religious communities is binding because, in their categorization of the sacred and the profane, they set out norms of behaviour derived from the contents of their myths and classificatory explanations of the world. In this sense, religion brings about a unitary conception of life: “To-day we are beginning to realize that law, morals and even scientific thought itself were born of religion, were for a long time confounded with it, and have remained penetrated with its spirit” (DURKHEIM, 1915: 70).

This relationship between the symbolic aspects of religion and the ordering of society is analyzed by Clifford Geertz, who explores how the disposition of religious practices, with their meanings and moral imaginaries, contributes to shape the ways individuals conceive the empirical world. Defining religion as a cultural system, he acknowledges the role that religious symbols have in embodying historically transmitted patterns of meanings, to the communication and perpetuation of moral attitudes towards life. As he contends: “(...) sacred symbols function to synthesize a people’s ethos – the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood – and their world view – the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order.” (GEERTZ, 1993: 89).

Geertz clarifies this point when he explains how the religious perspective differs from the commonsensical to the scientific and aesthetic ones. In contrast with the commonsensical perspective, which implies a naïve acceptance of the world, its objects and processes, the religious perspective moves beyond the realities of everyday life to raise questions of meanings, by which the ordinary reality is also shaped. This perspective also differs from the scientific one in that it questions reality not through the logic of a hypothetical rationality, but in terms of non-hypothetical truths. Finally, it differs from art in that it is not aimed to lead individuals to a detachment from the issue of factuality, but to foster an engagement with reality with a deeper concern for those higher questions (GEERTZ, 1993:111-112).

The importance of the symbolic meanings conveyed by religion is associated with the moral contents articulated within a framework of beliefs and ritual practices which are intertwined with representations of the “real”, to the extent that they contribute to defining the social and political world. When a Bororo, Geertz argues, says he is a parakeet, he is affirming his membership to a clan that regards the parakeet as their totem and this sense of belonging leads him to undertake certain duties and fulfill obligations related to the assumed identity: “we parakeets must stick together, not marry one another, not eat mundane parakeets, and so on, for to do otherwise is to act against the grain of the whole universe” (GEERTZ, 1993: 121-122). In this sense, the moral consequences that the propositional truths of the religious perspective entail bring reality into conformity with the symbolic aspects of religion. In Geertz’s own terms:

“Religion is sociologically interesting not because, as vulgar positivism would have it, it describes the social order (which, in so far as it does, it does not only very obliquely but very incompletely), but because, like environment, political power, wealth, jural obligation, personal affection, and a sense of beauty, it shapes it” (GEERTZ, 1993: 119).

This relationship between religious meanings and socio-political order can be illustrated by the conversion of thousands of Maharashtrian Untouchables to Buddhism, under the leadership of B. R. Ambedkar, who was one of the main architects of the Indian Constitution of 1950. The Mahar community belonged to a caste of “Untouchables”, associated with roles that were considered “polluted” by the elites of Brahminical system. During the first half of the twentieth century, British rule facilitated the establishment of new connections between the Mahars and other religious communities in India, through wider labour networks created by Metropolitan enterprises. In order to overcome the ideological constraints that had kept the Mahars under a symbolic structure of domination, Ambedkar found in Buddhism a counter-ideology that would offer an alternative interpretation of the Mahars social status (GOKHALE: 1986: 272). The conversion of the Mahar community opened up new possibilities for social ascension, political organization and interpersonal relationships. It revealed how religious narratives can contribute to shaping worldviews with direct implications in moral attitudes and political behaviour.

Finally, linking up with the question concerning the relationship between the moral character of religion and its role in shaping socio-political structures, it is worth mentioning Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s concept of religion as a chain of memory. Even though she acknowledges the problem of defining religion according to its functional features, as in Durkheim’s categorization, she realizes that, by confining the religious phenomenon to transcendental beliefs that could provide responses to the uncertain character of individual and social life, one risks losing the grasp of the special capacity of religion

to perpetuate meanings that bring about social cohesion, even in modern contexts of structural heteronomy.

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In her definition, Hervieu-Léger combines the transcendental character of religious belief with the functional roles played by religious tradition in informing moral attitudes, sustaining modes of social organization and mediating conflicts among people. The moral elements contained in those traditions are especially important in modern societies, where the ideal of self-affirmation and individual autonomy “produces what is of essence contrary to it, namely heteronomy, submission to an order endured, received from the outside and not willed” (HERVIEU-LÉGER, 2000: 93). In fact, she contends, the uncertainties of a society in constant change, which are increased by a structural affirmation of individuality, have imposed the need for traditional meanings of community life even stronger. The creative impetus that leads individuals to resort to religion with a view to reinforcing social ties in fragmented societies stems from the need to reassert the willed order amid the moral chaos that modernity brings about. In the face of suffering, calamity, sickness and death, it renders individuals “vulnerable to the sense of their own limitations, which may be acute in periods of instability” (HERVIEU-LÉGER, 2000: 96).

Traditional religions have the potential to articulate meanings which do not only serve the purposes of individual realization, but help to create – and re-construct – shared bonds capable of fostering solidarity and a sense of responsibility among people:

It is in places where an imagined reference to tradition, which re-emerges from modernity itself, encounters modern expressions of the need to believe – linked to the endemic uncertainty of a society facing constant change – that the religious productions of modernity come into being (HERVIEU-LÉGER, 2000: 97).

In *The Role of Religion in Establishing Social Cohesion*, Hervieu-Léger (2006: 49) recalls the conflict generated by the demand for the acknowledgement of the Christian heritage in the European Constitution, for which she makes a case. Hervieu-Léger contends that, in order to understand the position of religion in Europe, it is not enough simply to refer to objective indicators such as the decline of religious practices. Rather, it is by looking into “the political, cultural, ethical and symbolic structures that make up the framework for collective life” that the presence of religion in European societies can be analyzed. At this level, she argues, one can observe how institutions and mentalities are imbued and shaped by religion.

Hervieu-Léger contends that many social and political values of European societies are rooted in religious narratives, historically developed through history. The concept of autonomy, for instance, goes back to the Jewish idea of covenant (Brith), as the foundation of the relationship between God and humans, being reconfigured during the Reformation, when individuals were empowered with cognitive and political means to challenge ecclesial structures of mediation. Hervieu-Léger (2006: 49-51) also stresses how this very notion of political autonomy was appropriated in different ways in France and Germany, as a result of the distinct nature of the relationship between religion and state in each territory³.

However, the affirmation of individuality may compromise the basis of solidarity when traditional bonds are replaced by atomistic ways of life. When it comes to scientific development, now deprived of moral referents and conducted according to instrumental reasons, ethical questions about the limits of medical practice and biological research are

raised. In this context, the symbolic resources of religious traditions can be re-articulated in order to provide guidance in matters related to the scientific control of nature (HERVIEU-LÉGER, 2006: 57-58).

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Hervieu-Léger (2006: 61-62) concludes by saying that the acknowledgment of the religious heritage of Europe does not entail the supremacy of organized religions in the political domain, but it is aimed at keeping alive, in collective memory, shared meanings of social solidarity. In this sense, autonomy could be redefined with reference to Judeo-Christian concepts of otherness and mutual relations, while teachings about the Creation could shed light on the issue of the dominion over nature, by emphasizing responsible use according to ethical standards.

The reasonableness of religious narratives

Even though Durkheim, Geertz and Hervieu-Léger's accounts of the religious phenomenon differ according to the emphasis given to community, culture and tradition as primary unities of analysis, they all share a common concern with the moral elements of religion. In fact, it seems that for each of them, morality is the main attribute defining religious systems, as moral precepts set out normative principles, reinforce social cohesion and give meaning to lifeworld practices and experiences.

In Durkheim's description, sacred interdictions (totemic or theistic) bind society together around norms of behaviour and precepts that discipline interactions among religious followers and regulate social structures of organization. For Geertz, religious symbols objectify moral and aesthetic preferences that shape social reality at the same time as they represent that reality with cognitive meanings and moral sentiments that individuals experience as truth. Finally, Hervieu-Léger points out the creative capacity of religious traditions to inspire moral motives and counterweight tendencies of heteronomy in modern societies. As it can be observed, there is an intrinsic link between religion as a system of meanings and the organization of society according to moral standards. What I want to stress is that religion, conceived in terms of its moral attributes, depends on narratives that provide meanings and contents that believers find appropriate and employ in evaluative moral processes. These narratives contribute to integrating the social and political world into a framework of meanings that are intersubjectively assessed, giving justification and supporting structures for social interaction.

In *The Logic Status of Religious Belief* (1970), MacIntyre links the act of worship, which presupposes, from the beginning, a particular conception of the sacred and the transcendental, with the mythological narrative on which that conception is founded. MacIntyre stresses that the use of the word myth, in this sense, carries no implication as regarding the truth-values of those narratives. Rather, it provides moral guidance through stories that deal with happenings or lessons that refer to a world outside the history of the human race, or describes the trajectories of its main characters or saints. In an Aristotelian sense, myths have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and as in poetry, they are concerned with central themes of human life (love and death, pain and grief, marriage and birth, etc.). Hence, once one accepts a myth, one makes it a directive of one's behaviour, since "to accept a sufficiently comprehensive myth is to accept a whole way of living" (MACINTYRE, 1970: 176-181). These narratives not only establish a rule or code of rules, but provide imaginative stimuli in critical moments where rules become outdated. In moments of crisis, where there is no

clear rule, religious mythologies contribute, with their reservoir of meanings, to inform moral attitudes and choices. The growth of the moral agent, as MacIntyre defines it, is the result of this dialectical process of re-inventing the rules in critical contexts in light of the mythological narratives made available through the traditions of religion.

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Hervieu-Léger alludes to this re-inventive character of religious traditions, noting that, in modern societies, the focus on autonomy and independence in private life has paradoxically produced reactive forces that turn to traditional ethical systems of values in the search for meaning. Sometimes they even assume totalitarian forms and promote violent activities. On the other hand, the state may also attempt to recover collective meanings, as in France with the demands of *lycéens* in 1990 whose schools should be like living communities (HERVIEU-LÉGER, 2000: 94). In contrast with Durkheim (1915: 427), who characterized modernity as a “stage of transition and moral mediocrity”, where religion is likely to be replaced by rationalized forms of religion – such as Auguste Comte’s secular humanism – Hervieu-Léger maintains that modernity brings about new demands for religious belief, and that traditions play an essential role in producing collective meanings that can revert the fragmentation of liberal societies into an individualistic ethics of rights.

So, by emphasizing the capacity of religious traditions to provide normative reasons through their myths and exemplary stories, I want to make the case for the reasonableness of religious discourses in terms of moral narratives, while defining the proper ways in which religious moral claims can be the object of intersubjective evaluation.

In his *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas contends that propositional and normative claims of truth and rightness should account not only for the fit between utterance and the objective world, but also for reasons relating to “the totality of all legitimately regulated interpersonal relations”, that is, the social world, and “the totality of the experiences of the speaker to which he has privileged access”, which is the subjective world (HABERMAS, 1984: 99-100). In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Habermas (1990: 67-68) moves away from the “monological” character of Rawls’s conception of justice, and proposes a perspective of “real-life argumentation”, whereby disagreements emerging from contextual disturbances in moral consensus are handled intersubjectively – and not from the perspective of the veil of ignorance. For Habermas, the assessment of validity claims, as an intersubjective rational procedure, is not orientated towards an instrumental view of the person, or a merely procedural conception of democracy, but takes into account the experiences of the social world, contextual struggles and even cultural worldviews in an open-ended process of evaluation⁴.

Habermas, then, alludes to the potential of religious reasons to make contributions in terms of moral self-perceptions, as opposed to a naturalist approach to knowledge: “This radical form of naturalism devalues all categories of statements that cannot be reduced to controlled observations, nomological propositions or causal explanations; in other words moral, legal and evaluative judgments are no less excluded than are religious ones” (HABERMAS, 2006: 16). In his *Acceptance Speech*, he uses the concept of common-sense, as norms derived from reason-based constructions, to state that science alone cannot cope with normative demands arising from interpersonal relations:

When we describe a phenomenon such as a person’s behavior, we know for example that we’re describing something not as a natural process, but as something that can be justified if necessary. Behind this is an image of personhood, persons who can hold each other accountable, who at

home and away are involved in normatively regulated interactions and who encounter a universe of public fundamentals (...)

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(...) Common sense is thus concerned with the consciousness of persons who are able to take initiative, make mistakes and correct those mistakes. It asserts against the sciences a stubborn perspectival structure. With this consciousness of autonomy which cannot, I think, be grasped naturalistically, common sense on the other hand asserts also the perspective of a religious tradition whose normative rules to which we equally assent (...) (HABERMAS, 2001: 4).

Habermas concedes that religious traditions, whose normative contents define interpersonal relations in the social world, should also count in discursive acts in view of their moral potential. He raises similar concerns to those mentioned by Hervieu-Léger, especially when he alludes to the challenges emerging from bioethics and the vulnerability of human life (HABERMAS, 2001: 4-7; 2006: 10-16).

But if Habermas's theory of communicative rationality allows for perceptions, interpretations and moral concepts that are not associated with the strict logic of scientific rationality, and the perspective of "real-life argumentation" demands from participants in discourse a performative attitude towards ethical reasons in an open-ended process of rational evaluation, then the requirement of translation comes up as misplaced. Religion, as with other non-scientific reasons, enters in communicative processes as a perspective of the social and subjective world, with truth claims that must be addressed on the same grounds.

It should also be noted that the deontological character of Habermas's communicative theory relies on the procedures that provide for discourse acts to take place among participants in conditions of equality and freedom, but it is constructive in the sense that the contents of the discourses and the consensual outcomes are not determined a priori. The limitations of this approach lie in the conflict between universal justification of moral claims and particular application, which as Matthew Miller (2002: 76-78) points out, leaves unresolved the dispute between a Kantian and a Hegelian moral philosophy. In fact, while Habermas insists on the distinction between ethics and morality, requiring the conversion of communitarian ethical concepts into universal moral reasons, Hegel embraces a dialogical perspective that holds traditional worldviews in sight, with judgment moving dialectically from ethical contexts to a view of the whole. As Miller (2002: 81-82) contends:

The exacting language of discourse, which Habermas prescribes as the antidote to the most recalcitrant contemporary moral conflicts, fails to include language's expressive function, which Hegel understood as essential to the attainment of the ethical goal of mutual recognition. Language that ardently eschews contradiction fails to grasp the dialectical nature of thought and language. It cannot perform its function as the medium of recognition. For Hegel, the self, as a universal, is constituted by the particular details of its context and history. In Hegel's view, it is only with the full cognizance of the details of the individuals involved, that moral dialogue, rather than mere moral argument, can be carried out.

Habermas's departure from Hegel's conception of ethical judgment is also a rejection of the neo-Aristotelian solution, such as the one proposed by MacIntyre, of a rational dialectics that takes place within the boundaries of tradition and makes use of the vocabularies of their language communities. In *An Awareness of What is Missing*, Michael Reder (2010: 43) questions the alluded distinction between ethics and moral reasons

saying that “concepts of the good life not only represent a resource for individual citizens but they also represent substantive normative concepts for which rational grounds can be adduced”.

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In order to reconcile Habermas’s moral theory with the communitarian perspective and assert the reasonableness of religious reasons, I would like to refer to Jeffrey Stout’s conception of deliberative democracy. Starting from the critique of Rawls’s political liberalism, especially the notion of common reasonableness, Stout advocates a Hegelian perspective that conceives reasonableness in terms of epistemic responsibility. In short, a person is reasonable in accepting or rejecting a commitment if she is epistemically entitled, on the basis of solid or compelling reasons, to do so (STOUT, 2004: 67). Against the thin description of Rawls’s principles of justice, Stout argues, with Hegel, that the substance of a common ethical life does not reside in explicit formulated abstract norms, but derives from “the myriad of observations, material inferences, actions and mutually recognitive reactions that constitute the dialectical process itself” (STOUT, 2004: 79).

He goes on to endorse the view that citizens ought to enjoy equal standing in political discourse, while also being allowed to express their own (idiosyncratic) reasons and direct “fair-minded, non-manipulative, sincere immanent criticism against one’s opponent’s reason (STOUT, 2004: 84). When it comes to religion, Stout (STOUT, 2004: 86-87) distinguishes faith-claims – which deny interlocutors any reasonable account of reasons – from religious claims, which may defy common accepted principles, as reasons that are generally held in common, but can be made accessible through the improvisational expression of one’s own point of view. Normative concepts, according to Stout’s Hegelian theory of democratic reason, do not aim to establish fair terms of social cooperation in advance, but it is founded in the process of mutual recognition in which individuals hold one another responsible. Religious forms of reasoning, in this sense, with their particular vocabularies and possibilities of expressive freedom, call for the redefinition of rules and normative concepts based on common-accepted reasons.

But how can traditional narratives inform religious arguments in the public sphere and bring about conceptual change in discursive acts? As an illustration, I want to bring up Nigel Biggar’s case against euthanasia, as he draws on theological narratives to articulate reasons that are designed to be delivered to the wider public. Biggar starts from a critique of certain philosophical theories that make a distinction between an objective account of the value of human life, in terms of the individual possession of certain capacities – for understanding, appreciating, intending and engage in personal relationships –, and a subjective one, associated with the determination of individuality. In contrast with this view, Biggar proposes a theological account of the value of human life, characterized in terms of the capacity of human beings to exercise responsibility (towards goods given prior to human choice – created goods – and towards the vocation given by God to each individual to play an inimitable part in the salvation of the world). Biggar argues that this conception is superior to the one presented by other philosophers in that it affirms an object moral order and gives value to the human individual as such, not only the rational specimen. He notes that this view expands the boundaries of worthwhile human life to include more passive or appreciative responses to goods – as when a handicapped child’s face lights up with the sound of music.

Against a consequentialist perspective, Biggar contends that one should not aim to kill a human being, even though in some cases one may perform an act whose foreseen effects

will probably or even certainly destroy a life. This would be morally acceptable only if the act itself was orientated towards the achievement of a good – such as relief of pain – and if there are proportionate reasons to accept the risks of the unintended evil.

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Finally, he admits that when a human being has been rendered incapable of responsibility, it seems that it could be permissible to kill. However, he qualifies this conclusion by differentiating possibility from feasibility. Biggar maintains that even though it could be permissible to kill in that situation, it does not mean that one should kill. In fact, the case for legalization of euthanasia “displays a striking complacency about the security of humane and liberal values that the history of the twentieth century does not warrant” (BIGGAR, 2009: 156). Here, he recalls the atrocities of the Second World War, agreeing with Margaret Battin, who states that “after Hitler, we are, I trust, beyond extermination of unwanted or dependent groups” (apud BIGGAR, 2009: 156). Biggar then argues that once exceptions are made in particular cases, soon the delimitations of those exceptions will be contested (e.g. must volunteers be about to die, or should intolerable pain be a sufficient requirement?; must the pain be physical or should emotional suffering be also taken into account?). Given the difficulty of reaching a consensus about these issues and the cultural dominance of the ideology of individual autonomy, the theologian argues that general prohibition of euthanasia should be maintained.

Importantly, Biggar sees this argument against the intentional killing of patients as driven mainly by theological motives, even if it does not articulate religious reasons directly at every turn. He contends that it is shaped by theology at every appropriate point: the value of human life is conceived in terms of responsibility towards creation and one’s own vocation; the criticism of consequentialism is informed by an awareness of the limited responsibility of the creatures, in view of God’s plan; the understanding of the morality of acts is defined according to the will’s intention, while accepting is based on a view of the earthly life as a responsible preparation for the life to come; finally, the notion of a humane society of mutual support is anchored in the Christian presupposition that suffering is to be viewed without ultimate despair in light of the doctrine of Resurrection.

In line with the MacIntyrean perspective of the capacity of mythological narratives to provide moral guidance where there are no clear rules of action, Biggar points out the link between his argument and the biblical framework upon which it is construed:

The Bible and the Christian Tradition are authorities because they are the source of certain truths. Once those truths have been grasped they can be affirmed and elaborated without constant reference back to the place where they were discovered – notwithstanding the fact that he who elaborates them should make regular pilgrimages to the place of discovery, in order to check his grasp for correction or improvement. Certainly, some of the discovered truths depend upon the theological story about the history of the world that is told in the Bible; and there is indeed a danger that, in being distanced from their source, they will be abstracted from that story, with the consequence that their meaning loses its proper shape (BIGGAR, 2009: 158).

Regardless of the objections that may be raised against Biggar’s argument, it appeals to deeply-rooted moral convictions that, especially amongst Western societies where the notion of the dignity of human life has been appropriated as a liberal value, make them reasonable even for those who do not share his religious views. In his defense of the value of human life, he addresses the issue of the conflict between consequentialist and deontological reasons, articulating reasons that contribute to providing individuals with a sense of hope amid the adversities of life, thereby giving meaning to suffering.

Needless to say, science has little to offer in terms of moral reasons in such cases, as it is not sufficiently equipped to evaluate the value of life in situations of vulnerability, where the search for happiness is frustrated by the natural conditions in which the patient lies. Hence, moral reasons that are brought out in the evaluative process can only emerge from the reservoir of meanings available in a society.

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These moral impulses that stem from religious narratives inform public discourses not only in formal procedures of evaluation, but throughout the national and cultural life of a particular society. An element of rationality, which is not scientific-instrumental, but aesthetic-cognitive is still present in the assessment of religious traditional narratives. When a suffering patient accepts his fate in view of a higher ideal, when a collective economic ethos is chosen over the forces of privatization and when two conflicting communities decide to move on and embrace the promise of a shared life of harmony and peace, they are assenting to a set of meanings that come to shape their moral perceptions. These reasons, however, emerge from specific contexts, where the trajectories of the individuals involved are associated with local stories from which the substance of the moral claims draws its force. Here, Aristotle's socio-embedded conception of reason converges with a Hegelian dialectics of ethical claims. But what does this perspective really entail in terms of principles of justice? In other words, what are the sources of political moral norms? I shall now turn to this important question.

The sources of public morality

Comparing different theories of moral action, Rosalind Hursthouse (1991) outlines the main characteristics of deontological and consequentialist perspectives, while proposing an alternative virtues ethics. The argument develops as follows:

1) Deontological theories are based on a set of premises and assumptions that guide moral action irrespective of matters of context and agency. Accordingly, they have basically a similar framework:

P1: An action is right if it is in accordance with a moral rule or principle.

P2: A moral rule is one that:

- is laid on us by reason; or
- is required by rationality; or
- would command universal rational acceptance, or
- would be the object of choice of all rational beings.

2) Consequentialist theories, in turn, can be represented according to the following framework:

P1: An action is right if it promotes the best consequences.

P2: The best consequences are those in which happiness is maximized.

3) Finally, virtues ethics theories can be framed in this way:

P1: An action is right if it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances.

P1.a: A virtuous agent is one who acts virtuously, that is, one who has and exercises the virtues.

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P2: A virtue is a character trait a human being needs to flourish or live well.

As can be observed, the framework of the virtues theory relies more on the character traits that an actor needs to incorporate into his being – so they can make a moral decision according to their understanding of what is “good”, “pleasant” and “worthwhile” – than on the provision of single answers in critical circumstances. Hursthouse acknowledges that the concept of human flourishing – what Aristotle calls *Eudaimonia* – is not easy to grasp, and there can be different perspectives about what it entails. However, this is not a problem that moral theories that focus on universal conceptions of rationality and the individual attainment of happiness do not share. The difference is that virtues theories aim to address ethical dilemmas through a common understanding of what is “worthwhile” in life. What I want to argue is that this requires a significant amount of empathy in the resolution of conflicts, which can only be propitiated by a communitarian sense of identity.

Hursthouse illustrates her arguments with some examples of situations in which people may have doubts about which attitude is rational, or what can bring the greatest amount of happiness:

I want to know whether I should have an abortion, take my mother off the life-support machine, leave academic life and become a doctor in the Third World, give up my job with the firm that is using animals in its experiments, tell my father he has cancer. Would I go to someone who says she has no views about what is worthwhile in life? (HURSTHOUSE, 1991: 232).

The author points out that deontological theories would hardly present any solution to these dilemmas, considering that one same rule or principles (such as the preservation of life) can yield contrary instructions in a particular case. Should a pregnant mother whose life is at risk seek to preserve her own life or the life of the helpless and unprotected child? In fact, consequentialist theories would not provide a clearer rule either, as the loss of any of those lives in this circumstance cannot be easily balanced with possible gains, and any possible outcome may be regarded as tragic. Resembling the case of euthanasia, judgements on these kind of issues would rely mostly on reasons and meanings available in the sphere of the lifeworld.

Thus, in virtue theories, moral decisions depend on the circumstances and may imply different answers to similar problems. If I rented a car and got it crashed later – say, because I was too stressed with work issues and missed a red light – I will be held responsible and forced to pay for the damage. However, if it was my father’s car that I had borrowed, and if I try to explain the circumstances of the accident, he may be willing to excuse my fault and drop any charge against me. It is not accurate to say that my father’s attitude would be unjust, as it stems from an actual moral judgement based on the evaluation of the circumstances and a disposition to look for what is worthwhile in our lives and relationships.

In the political world, this logic is analogous to the one employed by peace activists in contexts of transitional justice, when violations of human rights, crimes or war debts are forgiven for the sake of unity and for the good of society. What is necessary in any case is a willingness to re-create social ties with a view to a common perception of the good. Justice, in this sense, will not be based on abstract rational imperatives, detached from contextual demands of the lifeworld and the meanings individuals attribute to

their personal and social existence. On the contrary, in contexts where two different worldviews, once holding distinct claims of justice, struggle for peace, discourse acts designed to test moral claims must take into account conceptions of good life and participants' understandings of what is "worthwhile".

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It is no wonder that Kant considered be a "need of reason" for humans to be associated to each other, as in an ethical community, with a view to encouraging and strengthening their moral resolve against evil tendencies emerging from the social order and from individuals' own inclinations:

The rule of the good principle, therefore, to the extent humans can work toward it, is not otherwise achievable, as far as we can tell, except through the establishment and expansion of an association according to laws of virtue and for the promotion of those laws. This would be an association which has taken on the task and duty of encompassing the entire human race in its scope through reason (KANT, 2013: 91).

Puzzled by the contrast between justice and happiness, Kant postulated a "Kingdom of Ends", which would rescue reason from the paradox of a moral life pursued without purpose: "for the concept of divinity actually arises only from the consciousness of these (moral) laws and from the need of reason to assume a power which can supply to these laws the effect possible in a world and commensurate with the final moral purpose" (KANT, 2013: 104). Even though he did not abandon the idea of the priority of justice over the good, his disappointment with the fatidic reality of the miserable, just person signals a disruptive moment in Kant's deontological reason, which had led him to look for meaning in a prospective life. But if reason cannot cope with the possibility of justice without happiness, and have to postulate a "Kingdom of ends" as a necessity, then it seems that moral norms and the highest good – which can be associated with human flourishing – bear a common appeal to the rational actor.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle underscores this necessary link between morality and the ends of the community, stating that friendship – which entails a common orientation towards the good – underpins political justice:

Friendship seems too to hold states together, and lawgivers to care more for it than for justice; for unanimity seems to be something like friendship, and this they aim at most of all, and expel faction as their worst enemy, and when men are friends they have no need of justice, while when they are just they need friendship as well, and the truest form of justice is thought to be a friendly quality (ARISTOTLE, 1999: 127)

The idea here is that principles of justice, derived from practical rational enquiry, depend on the capacity of individuals to form relationships for the common pursuit of goodness – and not only for the sake of utility. Practical wisdom, in this sense, draws on particular meanings, attributes and historical values that shape interpersonal relationships for the provision of moral principles. That is why, according to Aristotle, young men lack practical wisdom, even though they can be good mathematicians: "the cause is that such wisdom is concerned not only with universal but with particulars, which become familiar from experience" (ARISTOTLE, 1999: 98). Justice, in this sense, is the result of a historical process whereby members of a particular society give meaning to their social existence. Hence, happiness and flourishing (Eudaimonia) become every citizen's concern, as the disruptive character of human misery, irrespective of its origin, elicits reason in an effort to make sense out of the chaos in which it encounters itself.

Contemporarily, the spirit of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission illustrates this relationship between justice and Eudaimonia, revealing the limitations of a deontological perspective that draws on universal norms of morality. Explaining the rationality upon which the commission was based, Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999: 26-28) outlines some reasons that led the new government to reject the example of Nuremberg. The cleric says that, unlike in Germany, where perpetrators were brought to the courts by foreign judges, in South Africa they came from the same society of which the victims were also members. Given the tension between the white and black community, there should be an arrangement capable of repealing the propensity for retaliation and propitiating a peaceful environment. Tutu stresses that it was only because African societies shared a common view of personhood, as formed in relation to the community, that it was possible to promote forgiveness and reconciliation in the country. Between the extremes of Nuremberg retribution and blacked amnesty, there was a third way, he argues. Perpetrators would not be punished by national justice, as long as they were willing to confess their guilt. The victims would take this confession as an invitation to peace, and let themselves be healed by an attitude of forgiveness.

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Ubuntu, Tutu contends, "a central feature of the African *Weltanschauung* (or world-view)" was what "constrained so many to choose to forgive rather than to demand retribution" (TUTU, 1999: 34). The conception of *Ubuntu* can be understood in terms of the relational character of self: "a person is a person through other people". As Tutu highlights:

A person with *Ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good; for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated and diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as they were less than who they are.

Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* – the greatest good (...) (TUTU, 1999: 34).

Tutu (1999: 35) goes on to say that, according to this understanding of humanity, even the perpetrators of apartheid atrocities "were victims of the vicious system which they implemented and which they supported so enthusiastically". In inflicting pain and suffering to others, they were being inexorably dehumanizing as well.

Michael Battle elucidates how the religious understanding of *Ubuntu*, both in African culture and in its Christian appropriation, contributed to providing peace-makers with a political conception of justice based on that worldview. He explains that the African concept of God, particularly in the Bantu culture, is that of a Supreme being who is the cause of all *ntu* (beings). When God gives existence to the *ntu*, he endows them with properties of creation – the capacity for reproduction and activity. While this notion entails a transcendent conception of the divine, who lies beyond the creation, it also embraces an immanent view of nature as the reflex of God's design - a dialectical relationship between the plurality of the *ntu*, whose identities are creatively diversified, and their interdependence in the creative process. Likewise, Christian theology promotes the idea of a God who makes the world *ex nihilo*, but who also provides human beings with creative reason, inviting them to continue his project of creation.

The capacity of coloring the world with creative meanings, through relationships, vocabularies, concepts and artistic enterprises is what makes a person human. It entails an epistemological approach that conceives the self with reference to aesthetic meanings

that cannot be reduced to scientific notions. As Tutu observes:

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“The physical scientist can quite legitimately and properly speculate about decibels of sound and vibrations and airwaves – that would be one way of describing what happened when a group of people gathered under the baton... But it would be woefully inadequate to be the only description of a Beethoven Symphony... [and re: a female companion] I mean the scientist could describe her in terms of mass, her bones, etc., but the essential person would have escaped the one whose face could launch a thousand ships.... Just ask anyone who is in love and who has experienced those electrical sensations down the spine at the touch of their beloved, what they thought of as a phenomenological description of their beloved” (apud BATTLE, 2009: 52).

The apparent incommensurability of worldviews, which defines individual and collective identities, can be overcome once one realizes that the subjective perceptions that give meaning to people’s lives are interrelated. According to Tutu: “We learn how to think, how to walk, how to speak, how to behave, indeed how to be human from other human beings” (apud BATTLE, 2009: 54). This view of the interdependence of the individual selves entails an attitude of openness and dialogue, since the acknowledgement of the relational character of the personhood leads individuals to pursue an encounter for mutual knowledge. In fact, in *Ubuntu*, it is only through knowing my neighbour that I can know myself. Following this view, Tutu concludes that apartheid cannot be justified:

“That is why apartheid and all racism are fundamentally evil for they declare that we are made for separation, for enmity, for alienation, and for apartness. Ubuntu enables reconciliation and forgiveness especially when hearts have been inflicted with such pain.... This is how you have Ubuntu – you care, you are hospitable, you’re gentle, you’re compassionate and concerned” (apud BATTLE, 2009: 54).

It is possible to notice how *Ubuntu* informs a view of public morality that draws on traditional narratives for the pursuit of common ends. This perspective allows Tutu to avoid two misconceptions of the sources of justice: that it is based on rational principles disassociated from the existential meanings that shape individual and collective identities; and that it is based on naïve concepts exempted from any reflexive attitude. While Habermas (1996: 117-118) claims that postconventional modes of justification are required in complex societies – where the components of the lifeworld are no longer bound together by the integrating forces of the ethical life – thereby distinguishing principles of morality from tradition-constituted norms of action, in view of their narrowness, Tutu makes use of elements of a virtue ethics with a view to providing common principles of justice that are able to reconcile two different communities by appealing to shared meanings. Importantly, this conception does not rely only on pre-existing social meanings for the pursuit of common goals. Rather, it entails a dialogical attitude that leads persons to exchange concepts, interpretations, and perceptions, acknowledging the relational character of the personhood, along with its uniqueness. Like the performative attitude in Habermas’s communicative theory, which is the participant’s orientation towards common understanding, *Ubuntu*, as a concept whose meaning is generally accessible to African communities, also requires rational assent. At the moment when a person becomes conscious of their own interdependent self, they are provoked by reason to give a response to their neighbours in terms of entailed duties. *Ubuntu*, in this sense, is considered to have been grasped: “To the Bantu-speaking people, a phrase, such as ‘Mary has Ubuntu’ would mean Mary is known to be a caring, concerned person who abides faithfully in all social obligations. Mary is conscious, not only of her personal rights, but also of her duties to her neighbor” (BATTLE, 2009: 3).

Habermas is nonetheless correct in realizing that communicative rationality cannot cope with the demands of democratic justice without regard to the intuitions that emerge from disruptive moments in the everyday life of a historical community. However, the imposition of methodological barriers to the access of lifeworld meanings in the evaluation of validity claims is a precipitated step, since moral norms derive from these constitutive meanings of the self. In terms of political liberalism, the Rawlsian perspective that confines religious comprehensive views in the democratic deliberative process to translated secular versions – what Rawls (1997: 783-784) calls public reasons, as opposed to background culture – is misleading as it fails to acknowledge that in some cases comprehensive values inform principles of justice in ways that a deontological approach would not be able to do. In the case of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Ubuntu is the background culture and reconciliation, rather than retribution, is its corollary. As a principle, it draws its force from the reservoir of meanings that define self-understandings and shape public morality in South Africa and other African societies⁵. It is constitutive of those societies' self-identities, but it is also contingent to the interactive process of socialisation, by which vocabularies, interpretations and conceptions are reflexively negotiated – within the constraints of the conceptual schemes available in a particular language community.

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With this in mind, I finalize by referring to David Carr's (2004) analysis of the capacity of literature and mythological narratives to provide contents for the formulation of truth and moral claims in contexts of cultural embeddedness. Carr argues that views, perceptions and moral insights articulated in literature works such as Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* must not be dismissed over the charge of dealing with facts that are not true – in a scientific and historical sense. Those stories, Carr argues, elicit a rational attitude for the evaluation of the moral claims implicated by the set of interactive actions carried out by each of the characters in the plot, along with their thoughts and subjective feelings. Likewise, traditional myths provide normative guidance to members of a particular society by informing their mindset with meanings that shape their very sense of identity as well as their moral perceptions.

In line with Tutu's argument against the reductionism of the significance of a love relationship by scientific explanations, Carr alludes to the relationship between identity and moral norms by pointing out that meanings shape relationships in ways that define the actors involved. Accordingly, poetry does not touch only on the subjective senses of the lovers, but by describing and enhancing sensitive states of the soul, it brings about meanings that shape the very reality of a relationship: "we should not suppose that any non-literal poetic or other language through which we might seek to capture such experience would not refer to anything objectively real. As Wittgenstein maintained: "Love is not a feeling. Love is put to the test" (CARR, 2004: 51).

This logic leads Carr to endorse a communitarian conception of justice, as he understands that – as in a love relationship – narratives, perceptions and meanings determine the ways members of a particular society deal with moral questions and practical issues:

Indeed, it seems to be just this feature of poetry and myth that is registered in the communitarian view that great religious and other cultural narratives are not just normative but identity-constitutive (...). On this view, the growth and cultivation of moral sensibility and motivation is less a matter of the grasp of abstract principles of interpersonal reciprocity or negotiation and more a

personal encounter with moral ideals and aspirations themselves exemplified and personified in the trials, tribulations and triumphs of gods, saints, sages and heroes of great cultural narratives. Again, any element of personal encounter here should not be assumed to be merely subjective. For Christians, indeed, it could hardly be clearer that the imitation of Christ to which they are urged to aspire is also a matter of the cultivation of virtues of love and forgiveness that also belong to an objective and transpersonal divine nature (CARR, 2004: 52).

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Thus, religion raises truth claims whose strength derives not so much from the assumption that their mythological narratives can be attested in scientific terms, but from the fact that religious narratives provide meanings that shape social and political lifestyles and constrain individuals' moral perceptions. When challenged by a moral dilemma, the citizens of a particular state might soon realize that abstract principles of justice are helpless in the resolution of critical issues. If a dispute arises between me and my friend, and I decide to be overly polite and strict about damages, it is not at all certain that this attitude would help to bring about balance in our relationship. Should I engage in a reconciliatory dialogue with her, I would rather use informal language, recall common experiences and try to settle the issue by appealing to a view of shared goals. Here, the Habermasian perspective of normative rationality is reframed and expanded, in terms of an aesthetic-cognitive rationality: disruptive moral disagreements elicit reason towards the effort to find common grounds of consensus through the (re)negotiation of meanings, interpretations, perceptions and emotions – and not with a view to reach a single right answer. Empathy, along with the performative attitude, becomes a central element to the process⁶.

Conclusion

I have expatiated upon the topic of the adequacy of religious reasons in public discourses in order to explain the relationship between tradition and public morality. As I have demonstrated, religious mythological narratives can convey moral intuitions that provide normative guidance for the evaluation of political actions. I shall now conclude by articulating my definition of religion as a communicative system.

After drawing on Durkheim, Geertz and Hervieu-Léger to stress the relationship between religion and morality, I have explicated some of their ideas about community and culture and linked them up with my own communicative conception of rational discourse. Durkheim was right in accounting for the moral elements of the life of religious communities, but only because communication among religious systems, and between them and the secular audience, occurs through the discursive imparting of moral beliefs. I do not want to argue, as Durkheim did, that any kind of magic, or non-communitarian form of spirituality, cannot be considered a religion. Actually, I do not intend to provide a limited definition for a multifaceted phenomenon such as religion. However, it is my contention that the necessary condition for a religion to be a communicative system is that it must be based on meaningful narratives that convey moral reasons in a collective way.

I must also qualify, though, the contention that religion is contained in the boundaries of the Church. As far as communication is concerned, moral arguments can be conveyed through different faith communities, sometimes belonging to the same religious

tradition. Geertz's conception of religion as a cultural system is valid, even though, in his anthropological approach, he focuses too much on the link between religious signs and the socio-political order. Although I agree that sometimes there is a coincidence between religion and the political community, and that in many societies, as the example of the Mahars conversion denotes, religion substantially shapes the character of the state, I would rather side with Hervieu-Léger's view, which conceives religion as orientated towards transcendental realities – even though I prefer the term “sacred”, to avoid confusion with immanent cognitive states – where religious traditions have a prominent role in informing public discourses. With this perception, the focus of the research is taken away from the Churches and organized religions, while privileging non-denominational forms of ethical discourses that nonetheless derive from specific religious traditions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islamism, Sikhism, etc.). Moreover, this framework would reflect most the association between moral reasons and mythological narratives which, according to MacIntyre, is the key for an understanding of the ways religious motives provide guidance in new historical and situational contexts.

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That being said, and bearing in mind the dialogical conception of discourse acts, it follows that: *religion as a communicative system is a set of symbolic meanings, embodied in traditional mythological narratives, with an orientation to the sacred, which convey moral reasons that can be disclosed and generally accessed in public discourse acts.* Once this concept is clear, it is possible to conclude that Habermas's translation proviso is odd and needs to be relinquished, as religious reasons can convey generally accessible contents in evaluative processes of normative rightness, providing moral foundations to constitutional and legal arrangements in the formal domains of the state.

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Notas

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2. Durkheim also adds in a note that “this same frame of mind is also found in the scholastic period, as is witnessed by the formula with which philosophy was defined at this time: *Fides quærens intellectum*” (DURKHEIM, 1915: 26).

3. The sociologist refers to Pierre Bouretz, who claims that even after the French Revolution, the idea of a unitary conception of citizenship – characterized by Rousseau's idea of general will – preserved the propensity of ordaining society according to a universal reason. In Germany, on the other hand, the absence of a strong state contributed to promoting a different version of the Enlightenment, in which Heder and Hegel, reacting to the universal rationalism of Kant and Goethe, formulated an original conception of German citizenship, opposed to the formalism of the French model, under the influence of their protestant heritage (apud HACHÉ, 2005: 603-606). These different approaches to the idea of political autonomy, emerging from different branches of an Enlightened rationality, are reflected in the ways France and Germany address the question of the public role of religion, with the latter providing special constitutional concessions in terms of partnership, particularly in the field of public education, whereas the former emphasises differentiation and adherence to common values.
4. From a psychological point of view, Norma Haan conceives moral development as an open process of negotiation, in which participants hold equal status in the exploration and resolution of a controversial issue, and in good faith bring out “cognitive-affective considerations”, which involves logical arguments about the reality but also emotions and contextual perceptions (apud POORMAN, 1993: 43). Alan S. Waterman, in turn, notes that scientific research has not much to offer in the evaluation of moral practices. Alluding to the distinction between consequentialist and deontological reasons, he observes that, for the latter, science is helpless since the a priori nature of deontological approaches precludes any empirical evaluation, and for the former, science can only determine the possibility of the realization of an expected outcome, while the deliberation about which consequences are the most desirable is the task of philosophical enquiries. Here, Waterman mentions what he considers three consequentialist perspectives and their attributes: “(a) one that promotes the greatest self-knowledge and self-actualization (eudaimonism), (b) one that promotes the greatest good for the greatest number (utilitarianism), (c) one that promotes the greatest improvement in the lot of the least advantaged participant in an enterprise (Rawlsian fairness)” (WATERMAN, 1983: 1254-1255).
5. Currently, Ubuntu informs a significant part of South Africa's customary law and educational policies (South Africa, Department of Education, “Curriculum 2005,” Life Orientation, sec. 4) while its constitution recognises the contribution of religious communities to the process of national formation through the accommodation of religious activities in public institutions (South Africa, Constitution, sec. 15).
6. The Aristotelian conception that associates citizenship with friendship is essential to an understanding of virtue theories. As Tutu (1999: 51) noticed: “this is a far more personal approach, which sees the offence as something that has happened to people and whose consequence is a rupture in relationships. Thus, we would claim that justice, restorative

justice, is being served when efforts are being made to work for healing, for forgiveness and for reconciliation". Even when it does not reject the Kantian rational imperative as a whole, it redefines it in broader terms, allowing for a conception of rationality that includes the evaluation of aesthetic elements.

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