

The POWER
of RELIGION
in the
PUBLIC SPHERE

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments VII

Introduction: *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*

EDUARDO MENDIETA AND JONATHAN VANANTWERPEN I

“The Political”: *The Rational Meaning of a Questionable
Inheritance of Political Theology*

JÜRGEN HABERMAS 15

Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism

CHARLES TAYLOR 34

Dialogue: *Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor* 60

Is Judaism Zionism?

JUDITH BUTLER 70

CONTENTS

Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalist Civilization

CORNEL WEST 92

Dialogue: *Judith Butler and Cornel West* 101

Concluding Discussion: *Butler, Habermas, Taylor, West* 109

Afterword: *Religion's Many Powers*

CRAIG CALHOUN 118

AFTERWORD: RELIGION'S MANY POWERS

CRAIG CALHOUN

Religion is threatening, inspiring, consoling, provocative, a matter of reassuring routine or calls to put one's life on the line. It is a way to make peace and a reason to make war. As the great Iranian sociologist and Islamic reformer Ali Sharyati put it: "Religion is an amazing phenomenon that plays contradictory roles in peoples lives. It can destroy or revitalize, put to sleep or awaken, enslave or emancipate, teach docility or teach revolt."¹ No wonder debates about religion in the public sphere can be so confusing.

The prominence of religion still has the capacity to startle secular thinkers who thought it was clearly destined to fade in the face of enlightenment and modernity. Jürgen Habermas, the most prominent social and political theorist of our age, may have been among the startled. Certainly he startled others when, after decades of analyzing the public sphere in entirely secular terms, he insisted that religion needed central attention.

Though they seem new to some, these issues appear to us now in a perspective that has been forming since the 1970s. It is shaped by the rise of Evangelical Christianity and the prominence of the "new

religious right” in the U.S. It is sharpened by Western anxiety about Islam, which is old but made current by the conflict over Palestine and Israel, armed confrontations that have been nearly continuous since the Yom Kippur War and extend into terrorist tactics deployed in the West, the OPEC crisis and awareness of growing Arab wealth, the Iranian Revolution, and the immigration of Muslims to Europe. The prominence of Ultra-Orthodox Jews unsettles Israeli politics (and that of some American municipalities). The sense that religion matters more in public is reinforced by growth of both Islam and Christianity around the world, including in the former Soviet Union and East Asian countries. The sense that it is poorly understood is informed by new conservative alliances that unsettle the Anglican communion, link African bishops to American parishes, and make a special issue of homosexuality. Hispanic migrants to the US have not only changed American Catholicism but also in large numbers joined Pentecostal and Evangelical churches—a trend also present, if less pronounced, in Central and South America.

But confusion and struggles over religion in the public sphere are much older than this. Religion has been a source of anxiety for the liberal public sphere at least since the English Civil War. Debate then was intense. It was conducted both in print and in public meetings. It connected members of different classes, different regions of the country. It mobilized the greatest thinkers of the day and it mobilized people who hadn’t learned to read. It addressed the most basic questions of the nature of English society and the extent to which citizens could choose the institutions and moral order under which they would live. It also addressed the most basic questions of astronomy and physics, the nature of science, and the possibility that new knowledge could transform the world. And indeed, it addressed the most basic questions of religion, the relation of human beings to God, whether and how God intervened in the temporal world, and how religious authority should relate to politics. The seventeenth-century English debates helped to create what we now call the modern world as well as the idea of public reason as a central part of

that world. They also led to regicide and civil war. The emerging theory of a reasoned public sphere was partly a response to religiously informed conflicts. These left many of the best thinkers of the next century profoundly afraid of zealotry and fanaticism. Much thinking about the public sphere was devoted not simply to ensuring openness but to disciplining participants so that conviction would not eliminate the capacity to entertain contrary views and faith would not become “enthusiasm”—the determination to act immediately on inspiration without the mediation of reflection or reason.

These issues informed the founding of the United States, and American history reminds us how recurrently central they are. Protection of religious freedom was a central theme in debates shaping both federal and state constitutions. Protection of those professing a non-Christian faith, or no religious faith at all, was bundled with concern that the new government should not favor one among several versions of Christianity active in the colonies. Each might present a “comprehensive worldview,” but both the constitution and public understanding recognized the legitimacy of a plurality of such worldviews. The idea of an institutionalized separation of church and state was discussed, but, as Charles Taylor notes, only gained momentum much later. Christian values and rhetoric were central to the public life of the country. Indeed, the single greatest conflict in the history of the American republic was understood in profoundly religious, and specifically Christian, terms. These were the terms of battlefield prayers but also political justifications. While Southerners reached back to Aristotle for doctrines of natural slavery, they also relied on the Bible to justify a form of domination most Christians now consider beyond the pale. But, if there was a religious movement that changed the course of American history by its interventions in the public sphere, it was the anti-slavery movement. From eighteenth-century Wesleyan and Moravian opposition to the slave trade to the conviction that slavery was a “national sin” that spread during the Second Great Awakening, the opposition to slavery was in large part a Christian intervention in the public sphere.²

The Social Gospel movement of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries addressed social issues from inequality and slums to crime and the need for better schools. It stretched into pacifist opposition to World War I. It informed the development of settlement houses and ministry to immigrants and the poor—and even early social science (though, for some, social science was a secular channeling of initially religious impulses). As Walter Rauschenbusch, one of the leading preachers of the Social Gospel, argued: “Whoever uncouples the religious and the social life has not understood Jesus. Whoever sets any bounds for the reconstructive power of the religious life over the social relations and institutions of men, to that extent denies the faith of the Master.”³

Religion was entangled in complicated ways with politics, trade unionism, and social activism during the early decades of the twentieth century—and not consistently on one side or the other. Christianity figured prominently in the populism of William Jennings Bryan and his followers. If Bryan’s attacks on Darwinian evolutionary theory presaged one enduring theme engaging American Evangelicals in the public sphere, his populist attacks on bankers and others in Northeastern monied classes presaged another (and should remind us that religion is not inherently of the left or right). When Bryan thundered, “you shall not crucify mankind on a cross of gold,” his target was a deflationary currency reform that threatened indebted farmers and other borrowers. But the power of the speech came significantly from its biblical allusions. Like many populists, Bryan was a complicated figure pressing issues from economic nationalism to prohibition, but always in solidarity with common people who benefited less than elites from the Gilded Age boom and suffered more after it went bust. Writing in 1922, John Dewey grasped that to many in the educated elite Bryan seemed at best backward, and his followers more so. Dewey noted that part of the issue was the place of religion in the public sphere. Bryan speaks, he said, for “the church-going classes, those who have come under the influence of evangelical Christianity.” Yet, Dewey suggested, sophisticated elites ignored

the populists at their peril. “These people form the backbone of philanthropic social interest, of social reform through political action, of pacifism, of popular education.”⁴ To be clear, Dewey—a “secular humanist”—was not endorsing Christianity or any other religion; he was criticizing elite condescension.

Churchgoing classes again figured centrally in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s. Black churches were central to the mobilization, providing it with “free spaces” to organize, a network infrastructure, the Exodus narrative of liberation, much of its rhetoric and many of its most important leaders including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Predominantly white churches contributed support, and proportionately Jewish support was even more important. The same goes for broader struggles against poverty and inequality (and as Jürgen Habermas notes, religiously framed concerns informed the young John Rawls as he began his lifelong focus on issues of justice).⁵ Opposition to the Vietnam War also drew on religious roots.

None of these mobilizations was specifically a religious movement. There was religious opposition to each. Yet each movement drew importantly on religious sources. These included not only motivations but also social networks, practical experience in public speaking, resources of physical space and funds, ideals of justice, visions of peace, language for grasping the connection between contemporary problems and deeper moral values, and capacities to both generate and recognize the power of prophetic disruptions to the complacency of everyday life. And if I have recounted these movements as an American story, that should not obscure the importance either of religiously informed internationalism from Christian participants in the Peace Corps or later humanitarian and human rights movements or the broader international context in which the American events were entwined with the rise of liberation theology in Latin America, the reforms of Vatican II, or the commitment to peace in the mainly Protestant ecumenical movement.

Yet, from the Social Gospel to the peace movement of the 1960s, there was also questioning about how much religion should inform

the public sphere. There were many who advocated keeping religion within the private realm, perhaps influencing public action by giving it moral motivation or restricting it by shaping individual consciences. At the same time, many of public movements and institutions shed their religious identifications. The place of religious rhetoric in organizing public discourse declined (albeit unevenly, with mainline Protestants losing their voices faster than Catholics, and churches remaining more important in the black public sphere—alongside the Nation of Islam). Many, especially elites, understood this as simply part of a long-term, modernizing process of secularization. Accordingly, they paid too little attention to renewals of faith that gathered strength. Some of these, like Pentecostal Christianity, were minimally engaged in public life. There was a renewal of religious observance among Jews (shaped both by rising numbers of Orthodox, including Hasidim, and by revitalization of ritual participation among Reform and Conservative Jews). For the most part this was also “private,” though Jewish public support for Israel, if anything, grew stronger after the Yom Kippur War (during which many Jews who had thought themselves simply secular were surprised by the extent of their own identification). And immigrants—various Asians, Hispanics, Russians, Arabs; Evangelicals, Orthodox Jews, Catholics, Buddhists, Muslims—also increased active religious participation rates with long-term implications for American religion, though initially without much public engagement.

But there was growing public engagement, mostly among what was quickly dubbed the “new religious right.” Disproportionately Evangelical Christian, this movement built historically unprecedented bridges to Catholics, largely through participation in the anti-abortion movement, and also connections to some conservative Jews. These interdenominational connections eventually underwrote generic reference to “people of faith,” but this shouldn’t obscure the fact that for most, faith was specific not generic. Political alliances didn’t mean ecumenical transformations of beliefs or rituals; demanding recognition as part of a widespread renewal of

faith that included Muslims as well as Christians around the world—and to some extent Buddhists mobilized in new collective forms like Nichiren Shoshu or Tsu Chi—didn't mean that being religious became a substitute for being Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or Buddhist.

Most of America's educated elite, including social scientists, did not immediately recognize this as a challenge to the widespread "subtraction story" of secularization as simply the progressive removal of religion from the public sphere and eventually from more and more of life.⁶ It was viewed more as an aberration than a trend or a continuation of a long-term pattern of ebb and flow in public religion. It was often analyzed with reference to the history of conservatism and rightist politics rather than to the history of public religion or for that matter populism. Part of Dewey's message in 1922 was that sophisticated elites (or those who understood themselves as such) failed to see the importance of populism because they looked down their noses at it. This remains true today, when the mobilizing frame is the Tea Party rather than the Moral Majority or Father Coughlin's American version of fascism. Neither populism nor religion (nor more specifically Evangelical Christianity) is inherently right wing or left. Populist anger and sense of disrespect and disenfranchisement can be appropriated and steered by rightist demagogues but also by more progressive social movements. Religiously informed criticism of existing social conditions—or moral outrage at specific abuses—can be voiced without allegiance to any specific political party or movement of the right or left, or it can be claimed with varying degrees of success for one brand of this-worldly, secular politics.

It has now been twenty-five years since Richard John Neuhaus wrote *The Naked Public Square*—an effort to understand what lay behind renewed religious mobilization on the right.⁷ Neuhaus did not think the public square was actually "naked"; in fact he thought this an impossibility, for there could be no such thing as engaged democratic public life that didn't depend on and connect to citizens' deeper

moral commitments. In the U.S., he argued, public life would necessarily involve religiously motivated and religiously framed participation, because a democratic public sphere was necessarily open to all citizens and open to them in terms they themselves had a central role in defining—and, in America, religion was important to most citizens. But, Neuhaus suggested, when so many believe in a public sphere stripped of religion, they actually, ironically, cede much of the democratic impulse in the public sphere to groups like the then prominent Moral Majority of the Rev. Jerry Falwell. The peril in this is not simply that the Moral Majority is conservative. It is that “it wants to enter the political arena making public claims on the basis of private truths.” As Neuhaus continues: “The integrity of politics itself requires that such a proposal be resisted. Public decisions must be made by arguments that are public in character.”⁸ This is precisely the issue taken up in the present volume, most directly in Jürgen Habermas’s opening contribution.

Neuhaus’s argument was a call from a conservative but centrist position in American politics to recognize the power of religion in the public sphere. Such calls came earlier in the United States. But even in Europe—where religious practice declined most and secularization theory seemed most to apply—the issue of public religion is now very much on the agenda, partly because of anxiety over migration and Islam. It is often framed as contestation over the heritage of the Enlightenment. Many misleadingly assume the Enlightenment was essentially secular. And certainly there was a largely secular branch of eighteenth-century philosophy that had huge historical influence, not least when amplified by the anticlericalism spawned in France by the alliance of the Catholic Church to antirepublican reactionary politics. But the Enlightenment was also a movement among religious thinkers.⁹ Joachim Israel calls this the “moderate” Enlightenment. The term is apt (though not Israel’s implication that the “radical” Enlightenment was simply a more extreme and thereby purer, less compromised version of the same thing).¹⁰ The project of religiously informed public reason was understood to depend on a

certain moderation not of faith but of *enthusiasm*. This was the term—along with *fanatic*—used to describe Puritans and others in seventeenth-century England who insisted with absolute confidence on what was revealed by their “inner lights” and brooked no public compromises. The ideas of the enthusiasts as well as religious moderates and both monarchists and antimonarchists all circulated in a vibrant public sphere made possible by a combination of preaching and other oral performances and printed circulation of sermons, pamphlets, and other texts.¹¹

Those who developed the idea that the public sphere was central to modern, especially democratic, society often described their own work as enlightenment—advancing the intellectual maturation of humanity—and in these terms they embraced resistance to enthusiasm. Emphases on education, discipline, and orderly conduct of public debates shaped elite views of how the public sphere should advance. Sometimes these became matters of class distinction; liberal elites feared the debasement of public life if nonelites were admitted.¹² The inclusive ideal of publicness has recurrently confronted arguments that exclusion was in fact necessary. Some of these have centered on religion. But, equally, religious thinkers have often held that public reason is not only an arbiter of policy decisions but also a vital means for advancing all sorts of understanding, even of religious convictions and their implications. Religious voices have remained active in the modern public sphere, sometimes in pursuit of enlightenment and sometimes in reaction to the Enlightenment or post-Enlightenment secularism. Even in Europe, secularization of public political debate only became pronounced after World War II.

Nonetheless, in both academic and public understanding, both the Enlightenment and the birth of the modern public sphere came to be understood in overwhelmingly secular terms. Jürgen Habermas’s classic book, to which we owe today’s commonplace usage of the term *public sphere*, is an influential case in point.¹³ Habermas offered a genealogy in which the eighteenth-century literary public sphere informed the development of a public sphere of rational-critical debate

that gave individuals in civil society a way to influence politics. He generally ignored religion in his historical account of the public sphere, as he has acknowledged.¹⁴ And, until recently, religion did not figure in his further considerations on communicative action and the organization of modern society. So it is significant that Habermas in the last decade has begun to argue that finding ways to integrate religion into the public sphere is a vital challenge for contemporary society (and theories of contemporary society).¹⁵ His work is appropriately a point of departure for the discussions in this book.

Habermas's argument is an elaboration of the fundamental premise that the public sphere of a democratic society must be open to all. It is imperative to include religious citizens both as a matter of fairness and as a matter of urgent practicality. Religiously informed actors, including Christian fundamentalists in America and Islamists in Europe, matter so much in contemporary political life that we endanger the future of the democratic polity if we cannot integrate them into the workings of public reason. Further, Habermas sees political liberalism as in need of new moral insights and commitments and recognizes religion as a potential source of renewal. Such renewal should not take the form of a direct appeal to religious doctrines or comprehensive worldviews in ways that foreclose public debate. His opening examination of Carl Schmitt's political theology is precisely an attempt to put to rest the notion that political authority can derive either directly from religious revelation or from the self-founding sovereignty of an absolutist state. Insisting on a homogeneous mass society as the basis for the constitutional state, and relying on the shifting moods of such a society for political motivation, can only in the most superficial sense be seen as involving democracy. Schmitt's approach is both impossible, because society has become irretrievably pluralist, and directly authoritarian despite its democratic disguise. Political religion could have similar implications. What prevents this is commitment to public reason—and on this Habermas is in accord with Neuhaus. Religious and nonreligious citizens meet as equals, and religious ideas inform the public sphere through

argument rather than through simply dissemination (let alone top-down authority).

Because the public sphere is for Habermas a realm of rational-critical argumentation and propositional content, admission is a matter of ability and willingness to participate in open debate. He worries that religious commitments inhibit this, both because faith or revelation are reasons that can't hold weight for those who don't experience them and because religious ideas come in language that is not accessible to those outside particular traditions. Accordingly, he calls for the potential truth contents religious people bring to public discourse to be "translated" so that they are stated in ways not dependent on specifically religious sources. Translation should not be a burden only on religious citizens, but an ethical obligation for non-religious citizens who should seek to understand what is said on religious grounds as best they can. But not all that religious citizens have to say is "translatable"; the residuum can be allowed in informal public discourse, but an institutional filter must exist to keep it out of the formal deliberations of political bodies.

Habermas's arguments leave the worries that the translation proviso is necessarily asymmetrical and that the call to recognize explicitly religious voices in the public sphere is at least partially instrumental—a call to include ideas because they are useful while implicitly doubting that they may be true.

Charles Taylor's approach speaks to each of these worries. Taylor approaches religion in the public sphere indirectly, as it were, through competing meanings of secularism. He is not concerned with every dimension of the topic and has addressed more in *A Secular Age*. Here his focus is specifically on what sort of stance toward religion is required of a modern democratic state with a diverse population. He agrees with the notion that states must achieve neutrality, but sees two problems with most discussion. First, there is the tendency to fixate on religion, as though it posed radically different questions from all other sorts of differences among citizens. It doesn't, suggests Taylor. And the issue is not just a misunderstanding

of religion but also a misunderstanding of the relationship of both culture and personal agency to public reason. Deep differences requiring translation—and perhaps further work to reach common understandings—are not limited to religious differences. Reason is always rooted in culture, experience, and what Taylor has called “strong horizons of evaluation” (that citizens seldom make fully explicit in either public reason or their own private reflections). “The point of state neutrality,” he writes, “is precisely to avoid favoring or disfavoring not just religious positions, but any basic position, religious or nonreligious.”

Taylor’s second point follows from this. Given the importance and variations of deep commitments that orient citizens, there is no solution to be found by means of an institutional arrangement demarcating where deep values may be asserted and where they may not. At best, formulae like “the separation of church and state” are shorthand heuristics. But much more important for democratic societies is exploring ways to work for common goals—like liberty, equality, and fraternity. Constructing a democratic life together may depend more on being able to engage in such shared positive pursuits than on any institutional arrangement (or, indeed, agreement on all the reasons to engage in common pursuits). This also suggests that we should not understand the public sphere entirely in terms of argumentation about the truth value of propositions. It is a realm of creativity and social imaginaries in which citizens give shared form to their lives together, a realm of exploration, experiment, and partial agreements. Citizens need to find ways to treat each other’s basic commitments with respect; fortunately they are also likely to find considerable overlaps in what they value.

Like Habermas, Taylor is concerned with identifying ways in which the public sphere can help to produce greater integration among citizens who enter public discourse with different views. Habermas stresses agreement and clearer knowledge while Taylor stresses mutual recognition and collaboration in common pursuits. But both see excluding religion from the public sphere as undermining the

solidarity and creativity they seek. In different ways, Judith Butler and Cornel West ask about the limits of optimistic visions of the public sphere in which harmonious integration is the apparent telos.

Butler emphasizes occasions when it is impossible to achieve intellectual (or political) integration, including agreement on truth and value. Religious sources of ethical insight may matter enormously precisely when deliberation in the public sphere fails. Deep differences may remain—and remain troubling and troubled. Religion may provide a guide to action in the face of divisions it cannot undo. This is true especially when the realities of state power and geopolitics bring people into the same place, not necessarily by choice, and into social relationships, though they do not understand themselves to constitute a single people or polity. Pluralization is not always a challenge to be overcome.

Butler offers the idea of cohabitation as an alternative, or perhaps a crucial supplement, to that of integrative public reason. It is an understanding of what is both possible and ethically right that she draws from Jewish tradition, shaped by the historical experience of statelessness, subjection, and partial autonomy under states Jews did not control. The ethic of cohabitation thus has an internal relationship to being Jewish—and on this basis criticizing state violence that is at odds with cohabitation must be “a Jewish thing to do.” Butler sees this as more than simply distinguishing “progressive” Jewish positions from others, because it entails taking seriously the limits of any identitarian concept of Jewishness—of identifying Jews with a nation-onto-itself in the manner of much nationalist rhetoric rather than with the position of people always already engaged in relationship with non-Jews.

Cohabitation guides an ethics on which Jews should act independently of whether it is met by a symmetrically commitment on the part of non-Jews, though they may hope that it will be. It is thus a religious contribution to the public sphere that does not depend on agreement but applies in its absence. Its significance comes from un-

derwriting recognition of the importance or at least inevitability of continued life in the same place, even when values, identities, and practices cannot readily be reconciled. It is an understanding of what is materially necessary and an ethics following from this that does not depend on theory or discourses of justice—and may even be impeded by the attempt to ground all action in resolution of claims to justice. Taking cohabitation seriously indicts attempts to base politics exclusively on consensus, even when this is approached as a matter of the most inclusive possible public reason.

Cornel West, blues man in the life of the mind, jazzman in the world of ideas, challenges conceptions of public life limited to rational arguments, ethical consensus, and even cultural harmony. The secular need to hear the music of religion, he says, but also vice versa. Mutual understanding is achieved through empathy and imagination, learning the rhythm of each other's dances and the tunes of each other's songs. This sort of knowledge is tested in action, not in propositions; the capacity to understand each other is not derived from arguments. Of course, this partially prediscursive ability to understand each other may be the condition of good arguments in which participants feel they make progress toward knowledge.

West hopes for reconciliation and mutual understanding, but he doesn't see religion offering this in a neat package. In the first place, he joins the others in this book in suggesting that we live in a multiplicity of different intellectual, cultural, and religious frameworks. We are called to find ways to relate well to each other, ideally to understand each other, but not to erase these differences. Indeed, participation in the public sphere offers not just collective benefits but also the personal good of existence enriched by greater ability to put oneself in the shoes of others. This is not simply an instrumental good conducive to potential agreement; it is valuable in itself. More than this, West insists that the Christian message (at least, and he doesn't rule out similar messages from other traditions) is not simply a logic of equivalence—Rawlsian justice—but of a superabundance

of love. Justice would be good, I think he is saying. It would be a big improvement. We should feel “righteous indignation against injustice.” But in itself justice cannot be entirely definitive of the good.

Perhaps most important, West calls on us to find resources within our traditions, including especially our various religious traditions, to disrupt harmonies that disguise underlying discord. He calls on us to bear witness to suffering (even when we do not yet know how to end it). He insists that prophetic religion has a place in the public sphere, for its very disruptions are calls to attention that make people see realities that make them uncomfortable. Calls to attention are not arguments or propositions that should be subjected to critique; they are performances of a different sort. Prophetic religion is neither consensus building nor simply dissent; it is a challenge to think and look and even smell (funky) anew; it is not a matter of gradual evolutionary progress but of urgency. The demand prophecy makes on us is not that of faith but that of truth—or, rather, potential truth, for the prophet articulates not only the evils at hand but the possibilities of a future in which we are damned for what we have done and a future in which we have the chance to do better.

To say that religion has power in the public sphere is not to say that it can be easily absorbed or that it should be. It is a basis for radical challenges and radical questions; it brings enthusiasm, passion, indignation, outrage, and love. If enthusiasm is sometimes harnessed to unreflective conviction, passion is also vital to critical engagement with existing institutions and dangerous trends. The public sphere and the practice of public reason have power too. And they not only take from religion but also offer it opportunities to advance by reflection and critical argument.

The public sphere is a realm of rational-critical debate in which matters of the public good are considered. It is also a realm of cultural formation in which argument is not the only important practice and creativity and ritual, celebration and recognition are all important. It includes the articulation between deep sensibilities and explicit understandings and it includes the effort—aided sometimes

by prophetic calls to attention—to make the way we think and act correspond to our deepest values or moral commitments.

NOTES

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7. Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Sphere* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1984).

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12. A. Benchimol, “Cultural Historiography and the Scottish Enlightenment Public Sphere: Placing Habermas in Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh,” in A. Benchimol and W. Maley, eds., *Spheres of Influence: Intellectual and Cultural Publics from Shakespeare to Habermas* (Bern: Lang, 2007), pp. 105–150.

13. Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989). Since people sometimes obsess over terminology, it is worth noting that though the term public sphere (*sphäre*) was

considered in the original German, the title and most of the text focused on “publicness” (*öffentlichkeit*); the French translation was *L’espace public*.

14. See Jürgen Habermas, “Further Reflections on the Public Sphere,” in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

15. See especially essays gathered in Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).