

What are the promise and the limitations, if any, of Habermas's critical theory for "a theology of the public realm"?

1. To answer this question, one must first ask and answer another: With reference to what, exactly, are promise and limitations to be measured? Promising with respect to what? Limitations with respect to what?

2. I take it that whatever, exactly, is to be understood by "a theology of the public realm," it must in any case be theology. So my answer to the first question is that it is with reference to theology, or the task of theology, that any promise and limitations of Habermas's critical theory are to be measured. If his critical theory is promising, it is promising with respect to theology or its task; and if it has limitations, they are limitations with respect to theology or doing what theology has the task of doing.

3. I would then make two assumptions: (1) that Habermas's critical theory is a properly philosophical theory; and (2) that, in general, a properly philosophical theory, and so also his critical theory, can both be promising and have limitations with respect to theology, or the task of theology.

4. Philosophical theory in general and Habermas's critical theory in particular can both be promising and have limitations with respect to theology or its task, because, while theology has to do its own thinking and speaking and cannot delegate even the least part of it to any nontheological field, discipline, or specialty, including philosophy, theological problems—especially the most fundamental such problems—are not *only* theological problems; and theological solutions, accordingly, have to be, in at least some important respects, not *only* theological solutions. Insofar as theology thinks and speaks about human existence, and therefore human praxis, culture, and history, its problems in doing so are, in the nature of the case, philosophical as well as theological problems. Similarly, because theological thinking and speaking have to be credible to human existence as well as appropriate to Jesus Christ, its solutions to its problems have to be philosophical as well as theological solutions. In other words, although theology's problems are its own, and although it has to do its own thinking and speaking in trying to solve them, theology can and should think with philosophy's resources as

well as its own in reaching its solutions—provided always that its solutions, exactly like its problems, are really its own.

5. But now the second question that has to be answered in order to answer the main question is, What, exactly, is to be understood by the phrase, "a theology of the public realm"? Given that, being a genitive phrase, it is systematically ambiguous, how is it to be understood—as a objective genitive or as an subjective genitive?

6. I contend that it should be understood in both senses. Insofar as it is understood as an objective genitive, it means a properly theological reflection that has the public realm as its object. On the other hand, insofar as it is understood as a subjective genitive, it means a theology that is not only *in* the public realm, but also *of* it, in that it is a reflection that takes place in accordance with the same relevant standards of reflection that prevail in the public realm generally .

7. I think one can reasonably argue that Habermas's critical theory, like critical theory generally, is promising and has limitations with respect to a theology of the public realm in both senses of the phrase. As for its being promising with respect to a theology of the public realm in the first (objective) sense, this seems to me to lie in its being, as it were, a thick description of human existence, and thus of human praxis, culture, and history in general as well as of the present human situation in particular. Its limitation in this respect, in my opinion, is its failure adequately to account for the properly existential question as an irreducible human question, fundamental to, and therefore both related to, and distinct from, the other basic human questions concerning the true, the right, and the beautiful. At this point, it has to be supplemented by analyses like Schleiermacher's, of religion as neither knowing nor acting but feeling; or Tillich's, of religion as ultimate concern; or Rahner's, of human existence as in principle self-transcendence into absolute mystery; or Hartshorne's, of religion as worship, or what any self-understanding individual does with her or his fragmentariness relative to the integral, all-encompassing whole of reality as such, and so on. This means, among other things, that Habermas's metaphysical or philosophical anthropology can and should be supplemented by a metaphysical or

philosophical theology and cosmology, as well as by a general metaphysical ontology.

8. But Habermas's critical theory is also promising with respect to a theology of the public realm in the second (subjective) sense. This is because, for one thing, it clarifies the general distinction between life-praxis and discourse so as to avoid identifying them even while also avoiding separating them. It is also because it clarifies the logical structure of discourse in the other important realms of science, morality, and art. Its corresponding limitation, however, is that it quite fails to clarify the logical structure of discourse in the even more fundamental realm of religion. In this connection, it also fails to clarify the relation between religion as a realm of truth and the closely related realms of metaphysics and morality.

Chicago, 7-8 October 1988