

## RELIGIOUS IDEAS OF HABERMAS, BOURDIEU & FOUCAULT

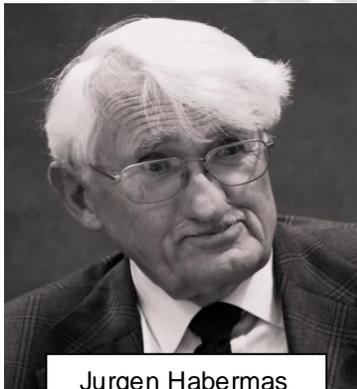
### Basic Premise

This section aims to discuss the religious ideas propounded by such contemporary social and cultural theorists like Jurgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault. Although the emphases on religion in their respective works are limited, their contentions cannot be bypassed as these are equally important in theological studies, especially in the field of Sociology of Religion. A study of these thinkers as critiques of, and contributors to the field of religion is therefore essential, before reviewing the applicability and usefulness of their religious deliberations in present-day society.

### Religious ideas of Habermas

#### *Religion in the Public Sphere:*

In his earlier work, Jurgen Habermas was largely influenced by Weber's theory of rationalization and secularization. His theory of religion is a concomitant of his understanding of the dual structure of society consisting of system and life-world, the latter comprising of traditions, values, and religion on which communicative competence is based.



Jurgen Habermas

For Habermas, religion is fundamental to social evolution. In *Legitimation Crisis*, he asserts that the process of modernization has restricted religion to questions of meaning and purpose only. Therefore, religion loses its significance in the modern society, where the authority of the holy is gradually replaced by that of an achieved unanimity.

There is one exception where religion may have a function- in the communication process of the life-world. In *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), Habermas' view on religion is based on a developmental process whereby God is transformed into an abstraction and shares those characteristics that Habermas describe as the ideal form of communication. This process is termed as "the linguistification of the sacred." However, full communication is not possible under the conditions of religion as the mythical world has failed to demarcate between culture and nature, or between language and the wider world. The discourses mostly comprise of talking of the truth and rightfulness of religion. It does not provide an uninhibited communicative action in any way.

#### *Criticisms:*

Habermas' theory of the public sphere has drawn criticisms from many scholars. Some have pointed out that his ideal speech community assumes a singular public sphere rather than a multiplicity of public spheres (Calhoun, 2003). Some others have questioned his interpretation of

religion as “monolithic and reified phenomenon” and his ignorance of the philosophical influences upon it (Dillon, 1999). By polarizing religion and reason, Habermas also prevents an understanding of reasoned debates within various religious traditions, like, doctrine, interpretations, and scripture.

Habermas has often been mistakenly criticized as an anti-religious thinker. In reality however, he was a secularist who greatly acknowledged the role of religion in shaping the identity of the West, as well as viewed it as a fundamental part of the life world. In fact, Habermas has opened up an avenue to the idea that religion can contribute to social development in a positive way. Despite his emphasis on the transformation of religious statements made in the public sphere into a general language, he also reiterates that secular actors must be willing to understand religion.

Nevertheless, Habermas sees religion as a phenomenon that is detached from practical reason, social context, and everyday experiences. He fails to identify that religious identity can be one of the many identities that contravene each other in many instances as, for example, the identity of being homophile and fundamentalist Christian (Thumma and Gray, 2005; Wilcox, 2003).

Habermas’ theories have also been discussed in the works of European and American theologians. They are important in the sense that their relevance for sociological analyses of the role of religion in liberal democratic societies cannot be overlooked. They suggest that there is a place for reason, emancipation and rational-critical communication in contemporary liberal institutions of society. Therefore, his approach to religion also, in many ways, reflects the changing role of religion in the world.

## Religious ideas of Bourdieu

### *Religious Field and Habitus:*

Pierre Bourdieu’s (1930-2002) studies on religion hold ample significance in the sense that some of his important concepts like “belief” (croyance) and “field” (champ) have been developed from the social-scientific study of this field of religion itself. His views on religion, which have often been termed “paradoxical,” were first published in 1971. Later, this set the scene for *Outline of a Theory of Practice* in 1977.

The articles evince that Bourdieu was heavily inspired from the works of such classical sociologists as Marx and Weber. His position was to identify those strategies which the dominant classes use to sustain their power and prestige. He analyzed Weber’s theory of religious power by employing his concept of “field,” thereby maintaining that urbanization and division of labour formed a relatively autonomous “religious field.” This field, he says, is characterized by the structure of relations among various categories of laypersons and religious agents, like prophets and priests.



Pierre Bourdieu

The competition for religious power is associated with that of religious legitimacy, that is, the legitimate power exercised by specialists to improve the practices and world view of lay men by imposing on them a “religious habitus.” Speaking of habitus, it encompasses the “matrix of perceptions” or “the basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences.” The dynamics of the religious field then become characterized by the conflicting relations between specialists, as well as by the exchange relations between specialists and lay men.

Weber’s idea of charisma and legitimacy also inspired Bourdieu in developing the theory of symbolic power. The term “symbolic” refers to the construction of that reality which establishes order and meaning in the social world. Bourdieu further employs the term “misrecognition” of the real conditions in his understanding of how religions produce legitimation. He puts that religious legitimacy is produced by simultaneously producing such misrecognitions, that is, production of “false consciousness” or “denial” of the fundamental interests at play in a given set of practices.

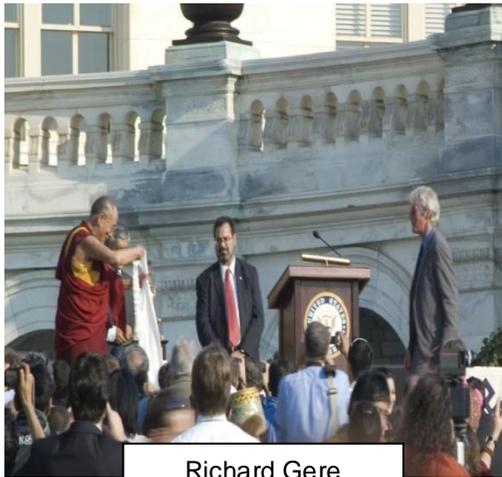
Bourdieu went on to view religious legitimacy as a reflection of the religious power relations at the time. It is related to the degree to which an agent has control over what he terms as “material and symbolic weapons of religious violence,” like, the excommunication of a priest. He has also emphasized that the dominant culture always establishes distinctions and categories of “true religion” versus “heresy.” This implies that the dominated tend to diminish themselves and their religious views. Thus results religious violence- another form of symbolic violence.

Bourdieu’s sociology of religion presented itself in varied forms throughout the years. While in the 1970s he thought of religion as one of the many symbolic systems of classification, in the 1990s, he subsumed his work on religion under that of culture. Nevertheless, the worth of his contribution lies in the fact that several scholars even today find many of his concepts like habitus, capital, and field useful in understanding the interaction between the individual and the social dimensions of religion. These concepts have been used in studies of competition in the religious field in societies characterized by sharp social class and/or ethnic divisions (Rey, 2007), religio-political ethnic movements (Yadgar, 2003), as well as more general issues of struggle over religion in the United States (Swartz, 1996).

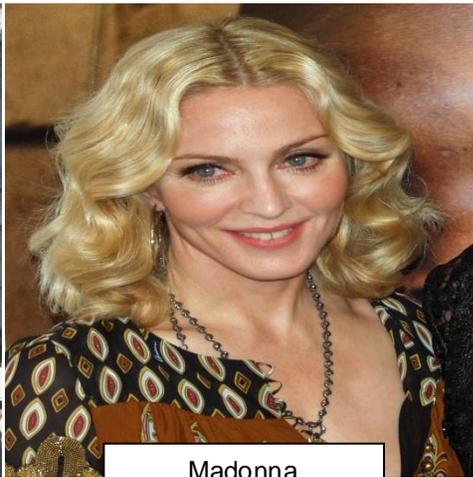
Bourdieu’s concept of habitus has also been used in analyzing the interactions and relations between Muslim women of different ethnic and national backgrounds. A study concerning predominantly Asian Muslim women in their early teaching careers in England showed that differences in social habitus impacted their relations with colleagues. These women felt lonesome in their communication with secular teachers as conversations on such topic as daily lifestyle were poles apart to their way of living. Although they could relate to other white Christian teachers and non-Muslim Asian women, their deepest level of connecting and communicating was only with other Asian Muslim women (Benn, 2003).

Bourdieu’s most noteworthy work, *Distinction*, was published in 1979, in which he analyzed the disparities in taste between various social classes. Religious tastes and practices of high-status individuals have had a broad impact on religious diffusion, the examples being such celebrities

as the Beatles (Transcendental Meditation), Richard Gere (Tibetan Buddhism), Madonna (Kabbalah) (Verter, 2003) among others.



Richard Gere



Madonna

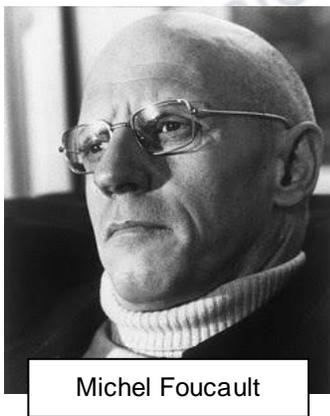
To sum up, it can be said that Bourdieu's studies on religion has related this subject to power and domination. His conceptual tools are conducive in the understanding of how formation of meaning and identity can be developed from power, and how religion itself functions as a "distinction" in the modern society.

### Religious ideas of Foucault

*Religion, Governmentability, and the Body:*

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) has not extensively discussed about religion and its associated themes.

In his early works of the 1950s and 60s, he focused on the repressive nature of religion, and engaged in the "death of God" discourse. His books *Madness and Civilization* and *The Birth of the Clinic* present religion as a part of culture that has an effect on how madness and medicine have been comprehended in the West.



Michel Foucault

In *The Order of Things*, he examines how knowledge becomes revamped in different historical periods. He names these particular knowledge forms as episteme.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, he examines how power and knowledge are bound up in a complex "network of relations," and also validates how different forms of punishment have a base in religion.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault explicitly discusses about Christianity with his examination of confession and ethics of self. Sexuality, he says, is not given, but historically constructed. The

early notions of sexuality as found in the Greco-Roman world have been modified by Christianity through its ideas about “finitude, the Fall and evil.”

In such texts as *Omnes et Singulatim*, Foucault has shown how Christian “pastoral modality of power” led to those practices in contemporary society that seek to govern or control almost all aspects of life. This Christian pastoral practice engendered the idea that every individual “ought to be governed and ought to let himself be governed” by orienting himself to salvation by God, to whom he is bound to complete obedience. Religion therefore, comprises of those disquisitions and practices that aim to regulate the behavior and conduct of individuals and groups of individuals.

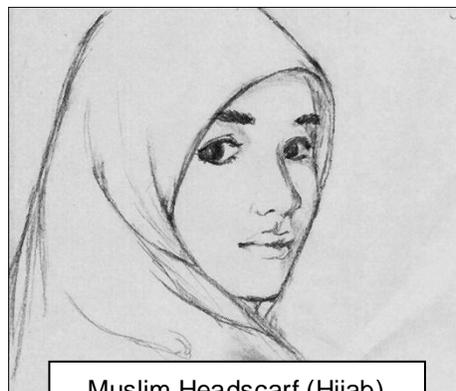
Foucault has also provided a more positive side of religion in *What is Critique?*, where he shows “how not to be governed” or “not accepting it as true because an authority tells you that it is true.” He further shows in *Useless to Revolt* how revolutions can have a positive side when they are religious in nature and bring about a social change.

A paramount figure in debates on body and sexuality, Foucault’s views on religion, sexuality and the body is equally substantial. They help in the understanding of how religious practices have been applied to discipline the body and how these can be related to power. Due to such uniqueness in his analyses, his work still holds relevance to studies of religion and power, religion and culture, and religion and the body.

### **Power & Religion – The Common Theme of the Three**

A common theme in the works on religion by Habermas, Bourdieu and Foucault is ‘power.’ For a detailed understanding, the example of Muslim headscarf will be discussed in this sub-section of the paper.

The Muslim headscarf is a contested religious symbol since it is oft-questioned in terms of power in contemporary Western and some Muslim societies.



Muslim Headscarf (Hijab)

In Habermas' theory of power, communicative power is one of the most important concepts. This kind of power arises between those actors who in companionship try and search for correct norms for social interaction and act appropriately. If the same is applied to the case of the Muslim headscarf, it seems that it predominates only in the private sphere of the lives of those women.

On the other hand, in the public sphere, identity politics forms a key aspect. Movements that are social and religious in nature concentrate more and more on the minority groups - precisely, on the formation of their personal identity and soliciting respect for their differences. This "politics of recognition," Habermas admits, is the primary concern of the public culture.

In his later works, Habermas has spoken of religion only by drawing its references to rationality. In that, the headscarf or hijab can be used by the Muslim women in the public sphere as a religious symbol and statement only if they argue for the use of this symbol in accordance with universal norms for a rational controversy. Thus, hijab, whose practice was delimited in the private sphere only, can be brought out into the public sphere as well.

For Bourdieu, the hijab denotes a symbol of misrecognition, where the real and worldly conditions are concealed. That is to say, male religious authorities exercise their power and domination over the women, despite the presence of a few female scholars.

To shed light on the views of Foucault in this context, an understanding of "body politics" is essential. He puts that the experience of the body undergoes many changes, since religious groups continue to engage in "body politics" and debates about what ought to be done with the body. In this sense, the hijab embodies a part of "body politics" that has pertinency for key political issues in multicultural societies.

## **Conclusion**

The views expressed by Habermas, Bourdieu and Foucault in their study of religion and power reveals a relatively negative position of religion. Specially, in the works of Bourdieu and Foucault, bodily religious symbols as the hijab has been seen as oppressive. They have given insights into the relation between religion and power, how religion can be used as an oppressive device, as well as the bodily aspects of religion. Habermas' perspective however, cannot be completely ignored as he emphasized on the rights of Muslim women and other minority groups by connecting power to laws, norms, and most importantly, principles. Therefore, all of the three thinkers have, in their own way, enabled us to take cognizance of the dynamics of the religiously multifarious modern societies.

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