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11-3-2009

November 3, 2009: More Calls for Believers to Translate Their Beliefs

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2009). November 3, 2009: More Calls for Believers to Translate Their Beliefs. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/353>

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Title: More Calls for Believers to Translate Their Beliefs

Date: 2009-11-03T17:18:00.001-05:00

11/3/2009—readers of this blog know that I have been critical of the 2006 [call](#) by then-candidate Barack Obama to religious believers to translate their religious concerns into secular language when entering the public square:

“Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all.’

Not only is this direction unnecessary since believers do that now and quite effectively, which is part of the reason they have been so successful in political debate, but how does Barack Obama get to play the part of political language police? In democracy I get to make my proposals in any language I like and if the language puts people off, my proposals will not be accepted. That is how democracy works.

Now comes the German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas making the same point at Cooper Union Thursday, 10/22 at the "Rethinking Secularism: The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere" program sponsored by the Institute for Public Knowledge at NYU, the Social Science Research Council and the Humanities Institute at Stony Brook University. Habermas' talk was entitled "The Political – The Rational Sense of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology." The other speakers were Charles Taylor, Judith Butler and Cornel West.

I don't have the transcript, but here is how Anthony Petro described this part of Habermas' talk at [Religion Dispatches](#): “Habermas, the German intellectual and author of the historic Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, contended that religious voices ought to be allowed into public discussion, but with the proviso that religious arguments be translated into a language generalizable in secular terms.

‘Majority rule mutates into repression,’ he has argued. In order to remain neutral, in other words, enforceable political decisions must be presented in a language common to all citizens, even at the risk of limiting the field to certain players. Secular reason exceeds religious reason, for Habermas, to the extent that it doesn't require “membership” within a specific community.”

Well, maybe Petro misunderstood Habermas. I will listen to the audio transcript. But if this is what Habermas said, shame on him. How did the secular morph into the really acceptable language of politics? There are many forms of discourse I consider illegitimate, such as claims that global warming does not really matter that much because the needs of the future can be economically discounted. The point is, I don't get to decide what people can say in debate. Neither does Habermas. Nor Obama.