

A Debate on the Public Role of Religion and its Social and Gender Implications

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Acronyms

CE	Common Era
CEB	Christian-based communities
TAO	Treasure, Authority, Organization
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
US	United States

Foreword/Avant-propos/Prólogo

Foreword

Religious actors, institutions, movements and idioms have clearly gained renewed public and political visibility over the past three to four decades. A number of seemingly unrelated developments are often identified as signifiers of this shift, including the 1979 revolution in Iran; the rise of *Solidarnosc* in Poland; the role of Catholicism in the political conflicts of Latin America; and the public re-emergence of conservative evangelical Protestant groups and organizations (such as the Moral Majority) in the United States. It is clear by now that the narrative of declining faith and diminished public role for religion had only a partial and localized significance, thereby putting into question the grand predictions of sweeping secularization as the inevitable companion to modernization and development.

The present publication features a debate between two leading thinkers—José Casanova and Anne Phillips—on the relation between religion, politics and gender equality. In rethinking the relevance of secularism in his 1994 book, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, José Casanova introduced an early and useful analytical disaggregation between the different meanings and manifestations of secularization: secularization as the institutional differentiation of the secular spheres (of state, economy and science) from religious institutions and norms; secularization as the decline of religiosity (that is, individual beliefs and practices); and secularization as the “privatization” of religion. One of the key arguments emerging from Casanova’s early analysis was that the “de-privatization” of religion is both empirically irrefutable and morally defensible—a position that he continues to maintain in his present contribution. He also considers a public role for religion to be compatible with democracy and gender equality in the context of a vibrant civil society where religious actors engage in open public debate on a range of common public concerns and issues.

Feminists, however, wonder where this leaves gender equality. Has the ascendance of politicized religion made it harder for women to pursue equality with men? Viewing the relationship between religion and politics in “quasi-corporatist terms”—a relationship between democratic political institutions on the one hand, and religious communities and authorities on the other—as Anne Phillips argues, pays far too little attention to the ways in which each of these may misrepresent or coerce their members. Hence for her, the relationship between religion and politics also needs to be viewed through the lens of *individual* rights and needs, including those of members of minority religious communities, rather than assuming that their interests are simply represented by the principles and practices as defined by religious leaders and spokespersons.

In view of the public visibility of religious forces and their contested implications for women’s rights, it seems critical to examine the different manners in which politics and religion interface across diverse historical and national contexts, their effects on gender inequality, and how women as actors, both individually and collectively, engage in this arena to contest or reinforce patriarchal social norms. Hence, in 2006, with financial support from the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) Regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe, UNRISD was able to initiate the research project *Religion, Politics and Gender Equality*, with a small regional component, embracing case studies on Poland, Serbia and Turkey. The project was able to expand its scope considerably in 2007, thanks to the financial and intellectual support given by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, which entered into partnership with UNRISD to carry out the full project, comprising eight additional country studies (Chile, India, Iran, Israel, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan and the United States) and the two thematic papers published here.

The relation between religion and gender is highly controversial, not only among scholars but also public actors. The divisions among scholars are profound and often revolve around the question of whether religion is “good” or “bad” for the status of women in society. On the one hand, there are those who argue that religiosity promotes gender inequality, and on the other, those who point to the long history of religious progressivism on a range of social issues and to the growing voices of religious feminists as indicators of the compatibility of

religion and gender equality. There are also questions about how to protect gender equality: some people argue that the separation of the state from religious bodies is enough to protect rights of all kinds, including women's rights, while others are less convinced that a "wall of separation" can hold or be a sufficient guarantee. The import of these questions is only intensified by the ways in which gender has become a central marker in national and international debates over religion and secularism, even as scholars have begun to rethink the premises of the religious-secular divide.

The project takes this debate forward through 11 country case studies exploring (i) how religion and politics have interfaced in different national settings, and (ii) the implications of this nexus for gender equality and feminist politics: that is, how women as actors—both individually and collectively—have contested (or reinforced) hegemonic norms and representations that may be inimical to their gender interests.

The case studies spanning diverse regional contexts, encompassing both developed and developing countries with populations belonging to diverse religious traditions (including Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim) reflect on these two key questions. In so doing, they engage with some of the most contested of contemporary issues—the promises of "actually existing" secularisms and their discontents, the social and political forces pushing religious organizations and discourses into the public and political arena, and the implications for human rights agendas, and women's rights agendas more specifically, when religions "go public".

The project questions whether religion was ever a purely private matter, and whether it was indeed absent from the actually existing *secularisms* that took hold, which were themselves highly diverse and often developed in relation to particular *religious* formations (be it Protestantism in the United States, Hinduism in India, or Sunni Islam in Turkey). Modernist and secularist pretensions notwithstanding, few "secularist" states were willing to risk their political survival by radically interfering in matters of the family, marriage and personal laws, which were widely seen as the domain of religious authorities and where religious precepts continued to hold sway. The price paid for this pragmatic non-interference on the part of the state was the official endorsement of formal gender inequality in family/personal status (and sometimes also criminal) laws.

In the process of establishing nation-states, modern states have constantly searched for legitimizing ideologies and power bases, including religious ones that are often closely associated with ethnic nationalisms. Recourse to religion has become attractive to political elites as a legitimizing force in contexts of state weakness and failure, and in opposition to global "imperial" domination variously understood to include military, political, economic and cultural manifestations. Where the state in its modern and secular guise has failed to deliver physical security, welfare provisioning or a sense of national purpose and belonging, traditionalist and religious-based groups and scripts have enjoyed a revival as they have rushed in to fill the gaps. At the same time, the resilience of these institutions, their ingenuity in substituting for state services (be it health, education, or some minimal form of social protection) and their effectiveness in providing members with a sense of dignity and purpose can render them indispensable to the communities they serve.

What this project underlines is that from the point of view of women's rights to equality, autonomy and bodily integrity, there is much at stake in how religion and politics interface. The nationalist thrust underpinning the use of religious forces and idioms, as several of the country studies illustrate, has had socially exclusive and divisive outcomes, marginalizing ethnic and religious minorities, and rescinding women's rights across communities, given the fact that cultural/religious norms and identities are often expressed in ways that deeply impinge on women's roles and freedoms.

How are we to square the pursuit of such a closed and exclusive social order, with evidence of religious forces taking an oppositional stance against authoritarian states, sometimes in defence of subaltern groups? The Catholic Church, for example, played a historically

prominent role in opposition to foreign domination and state authoritarianism in countries such as Poland, providing a much-needed space or refuge (physical and discursive) for a variety of oppositional forces (including trade unionists). Likewise, liberation theology has been an important oppositional strand in Latin America, contesting “dependency” and struggling for the emancipation of subaltern groups through Christian Base Communities in which women have also been very active.

Hence, fundamentalism seems to be too narrow a category within which to locate the diverse range of interfaces between religion and politics documented by contextualized accounts. Yet there is unmistakably a recent culturalist turn and narrowing of agendas of various (though by no means all) religious actors and movements around an exclusive moral, ideological and identity-based politics that is producing highly inegalitarian and illiberal outcomes: not only do these groups and movements have little to offer in the domain of political economy (notwithstanding their distributive populism), but their agendas increasingly converge and impinge on women’s rights in ways that show clear signs of the restriction of freedoms and increasing gender inequality. At the global level this convergence has been evident in the alliance forged between some Islamist states and the Vatican (in the context of the United Nations conferences of the 1990s) in opposition to the demands of global women’s movements for gender equality, and most explicitly in reproductive and sexual rights.

While arguments for banning religion from the public arena of citizen deliberation and association (along the lines of the wall of separation) are problematic from a democratic point of view and ultimately counter-productive, seeing the arena of public debate and contestation as a “power-free” and non-hierarchical domain, where discussants deliberate as peers, is also deeply suspect, to say the least. While there are, in most countries, counter-hegemonic discourses and “counter-publics” articulating new social visions, breaking taboos on gender roles, family forms and sexuality, and making rights-based claims on behalf of marginalized groups (be they women, religious minorities, or gays/lesbians), their voices are often muffled. It would thus be dangerous to rely exclusively on civil society to produce egalitarian visions and projects.

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Avant-propos

Les acteurs, les institutions, les mouvements et le langage religieux sont manifestement revenus sur le devant de la scène publique et politique au cours des trente à quarante dernières années. Un certain nombre d’événements apparemment sans lien sont souvent cités comme caractéristiques de ce changement, notamment la révolution de 1979 en Iran, la montée de *Solidarnosc* en Pologne, le rôle du catholicisme dans les conflits politiques en Amérique latine et le retour sur la scène publique, chez les protestants des États-Unis, de groupes et d’organisations évangéliques conservateurs (désignés comme la majorité morale). Il est clair désormais que le discours sur le déclin de la foi et le rôle public restreint de la religion n’était que partiellement juste, et seulement dans des contextes locaux spécifiques, et qu’ainsi les prédictions de laïcisation générale allant nécessairement de pair avec la modernisation et le développement se trouvent remises en question.

La présente publication confronte deux penseurs éminents—José Casanova et Anne Phillips—sur les rapports entre la religion, la politique et l’égalité entre les genres. En repensant la pertinence de la laïcité dans son ouvrage de 1994, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, José Casanova a introduit une première différenciation, utile pour l’analyse, entre les différents sens et manifestations de la laïcisation: comme mode institutionnel de différenciation entre les sphères laïques (celles de l’État, de l’économie et des sciences) et les institutions et normes religieuses, comme déclin du sentiment religieux (autrement dit des

croyances et pratiques individuelles) et comme “privatisation” de la religion. De cette première analyse, José Casanova concluait notamment que la “déprivatisation” de la religion était à la fois irréfutable d’un point de vue empirique et moralement défendable – position qu’il continue à défendre dans sa présente contribution. Il estime aussi qu’un rôle public pour la religion est compatible avec la démocratie et l’égalité des genres lorsque la société civile est dynamique et que les acteurs religieux participent à un libre débat public sur tout un éventail de préoccupations communes et de questions intéressant la collectivité.

Les féministes, en revanche, se demandent ce qu’il reste alors de l’égalité des genres. L’ascendant pris par la religion politisée a-t-il rendu la recherche de l’égalité avec les hommes plus difficile pour les femmes? Considérer les rapports entre religion et politique sous un angle “quasi corporatiste” – entre des institutions politiques démocratiques, d’une part, et des communautés et des autorités religieuses, de l’autre – comme l’explique Anne Phillips, c’est négliger la manière dont chacune d’elles peut fausser la perception de ses membres ou les contraintes qu’elle peut exercer sur eux. Aussi, Anne Phillips estime-t-elle qu’il faut considérer aussi les rapports entre religion et politique à travers le prisme des droits et des besoins *individuels*, y compris ceux des membres des minorités religieuses, et que cela vaut mieux que de partir de l’hypothèse que ce sont simplement les intérêts des fidèles que défendent les principes et pratiques définis par les chefs et porte-parole religieux.

Etant donné la présence visible des forces religieuses dans l’espace public et leur incidence controversée sur les droits des femmes, il semble indispensable d’examiner les différents rapports qu’entretiennent politique et religion selon les contextes historiques et nationaux, leurs effets sur l’inégalité entre les genres et la manière dont les femmes interviennent dans ce domaine comme acteurs à la fois individuels et collectifs pour contester ou conforter les normes sociales patriarcales. C’est pourquoi l’UNRISD a pu lancer en 2006 le projet de recherche *Religion, politique et égalité des sexes*, avec l’appui financier du Bureau régional du Fonds de développement des Nations Unies pour la femme (UNIFEM) pour l’Europe centrale et orientale, et lui donner une modeste composante régionale avec des études de cas sur la Pologne, la Serbie et la Turquie. Le projet a pu sensiblement s’étendre en 2007, grâce à l’appui financier et intellectuel de la Fondation Heinrich Böll, qui a conclu un partenariat avec l’UNRISD pour l’exécution de l’ensemble du projet qui, en tout, a englobé huit études de pays supplémentaires (Chili, Inde, Iran, Israël, Mexique, Nigéria, Pakistan et Etats-Unis) et les deux études thématiques publiées ici.

Le thème des rapports entre religion et genre suscite de vives controverses, non seulement entre universitaires mais aussi entre acteurs publics. Les divisions entre les universitaires sont profondes et tournent souvent autour de la question de savoir si la religion est “bonne” ou “mauvaise” pour la condition de la femme dans la société. D’un côté, il y a ceux qui prétendent que la religiosité favorise l’inégalité entre les hommes et les femmes et, de l’autre, ceux qui évoquent la longue histoire du progressisme religieux sur tout un éventail de questions sociales et le nombre croissant de féministes religieuses qui se font entendre, signe de la compatibilité de la religion avec l’égalité des genres. Des questions se posent aussi sur la

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