RELIGION, POLITICS AND GENDER EQUALITY
PUBLIC RELIGIONS REVISITED

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to revisit the argument first presented in **Public Religions in the Modern World** in order to ascertain the extent to which the theoretical-analytical framework developed there needs to be critically revised and expanded in response to two main challenges.[2] The first arises from the global imperative to develop comparative analytical frameworks which are applicable beyond Western Christian contexts. The second challenge derives from the equally urgent need to place the politics of gender equality and the related religious-secular debates into the center of any discussion of "public religion" anywhere in the world today.

The central thesis of the book was that we were witnessing a process of "deprivatization" of religion as a relatively global trend. As an empirical claim, the thesis has been amply confirmed by subsequent developments practically everywhere. In a sense, the best confirmation of the thesis can actually be found in the heartland of secularization, that is, in Western European societies. Even though there is very little evidence of any kind of religious revival among the European population, if one excludes the significant influx of new immigrant religions, nonetheless religion has certainly returned as a contentious issue to the public sphere of most European societies.[3] Most importantly, one can sense a noticeable shift in the European *Zeitgeist*. When first presented fifteen years ago, the thesis did not find much resonance among European audiences. The privatization of religion was simply taken for granted both as a normal empirical fact and as the norm for modern European societies. The concept of modern public religion was still too dissonant and the public resurgence of religion elsewhere could simply be explained or rather explained away as the rise of fundamentalism in not yet modern societies. But more recently, there has been a noticeable change in the attitude and the public attention given to religion throughout Europe.[4] There are very few voices in Europe today simply restating the old thesis of privatization. Prominent intellectuals, such as Jürgen Habermas, not only are ready to accept some role for religion in the public sphere of modern democratic societies, but have initiated a discourse on "post-secular society."[5] Even the self-assured French *laïcité* is on the defensive and ready to make some concessions.

In this respect, more important than the empirical confirmation of the global trend of deprivatization of religion has been the widespread acceptance of the basic analytical-theoretical and normative claims of the thesis, namely that the deprivatization of religion did not have to be interpreted necessarily as an anti-modern, anti-secular, or anti-democratic reaction. This was in my view the most important contribution of the book, the critique it offered to prescriptive theories of privatization of religion and to the secularist assumptions built into social theories of Western modernity and into most liberal theories of modern democratic politics. The critique was made possible by two new analytical contributions.

The first contribution was the analytical disaggregation of the theory of secularization into three disparate components or sub-theses, namely, a) the theory of the institutional differ-

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2   José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994)

3   José Casanova, "Die religiöse Lage in Europa," in Hans Joas und Klaus Wiegandt, ed., *Säkularisierung und die Weltreligionen* (Frankfurt, Fischer, 2007), and "Immigration and the New Religious Pluralism: A European Union / United States Comparison," in Thomas Banchoff, ed., *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)

4   José Casanova, "Religion, European secular identities, and European Integration," in Timothy A. Byrnes and Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *Religion in an Expanding Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

5   Jürgen Habermas, "Notes on a post-secular society," in http://www.signandsight.com 18/06/2008

entiation of the secular spheres, such as state, economy, and science, from religious institutions and norms, b) the theory of the decline of religious beliefs and practices as a concomitant of levels of modernization, and c) the theory of privatization of religion as a precondition of modern democratic politics. Such an analytical distinction makes possible the testing of each of the three sub-theses separately as different empirically falsifiable propositions. Since in Europe the three processes of secular differentiation, religious decline and privatization have been historically interconnected, there has been the tendency to view all three processes as intrinsically interrelated components of a general teleological process of secularization and modernization, rather than as particular contingent developments. In the United States, by contrast, one finds a paradigmatic process of secular differentiation, which is not accompanied, however, either by a process of religious decline or by the confinement of religion to the private sphere. Processes of modernization and democratization in American society have often been accompanied by religious revivals and the wall of separation between church and state, though much stricter than the one erected in most European societies, does not imply the rigid separation of religion and politics.

The second main analytical contribution was the distinction of three different types of "public religion," corresponding to the analytical distinction between three different areas of a modern democratic polity: "state," "political society," and "civil society." Established state churches would be the paradigmatic example of public religion at the state level. Religions which mobilize their institutional resources for political competition through political parties, social movements, or lobbying agencies would be examples of public religion at the level of political society. Finally, public religions at the civil society level would be exemplified by religions which enter the public square, that is, the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society, to participate in open public debates about the *res publica*, that is, about public issues, public affairs, public policy and the common good or commonwealth.

Obviously, this is an analytical, one could say, "ideal-typical" distinction. In actual empirical reality the boundaries between the three areas of the polity are by no means so clear cut and therefore the delineation of the different types of public religion can also not always be clear and distinct. Nevertheless, the purpose of the analytical distinction was to put into question any rigid theory of privatization which would like to restrict religion to the private sphere on the grounds that any form of public religion represents a threat to the public sphere or to democratic politics. Empirically, the case studies illustrated various instances in which public religious mobilization had contributed to the democratization of authoritarian polities in Spain, Poland, and Brazil or to the enlivening of democratic politics and the public sphere of civil society in the United States. Obviously, one could easily adduce many other empirical instances in which, by contrast, the political mobilization of religion may have undermined or endangered democratic politics. Consequently, the meaningful question cannot be whether "public religion" in general, much less whether "religion" in the abstract, is good or bad, ally or threat, but which kind of public religion, in which particular context, for which particular purpose?

While I still think that the analytical-theoretical framework developed in **Public Religions** is generally useful and still defensible today, nonetheless the framework needs to be revised critically and expanded in order to address specifically the issues of globalization and gender equality. I can see three main shortcomings or limitations of the argument I developed there: 1) its Western-Christian centrism, 2) the attempt to restrict, at least normatively, modern public religions to the public sphere of civil society, and 3) the empirical framing of the study as church-state-nation-civil society relations from a comparative national perspective,

neglecting the transnational global dimensions. I would like to proceed by offering first a revision and expansion of the analytical framework of "public religions" in order to make it more amenable to a global comparative perspective beyond the Christian West.[6] The second part of my paper will attempt to address some of the ways in which the central issue of gender equality impacts upon religious politics and some of the ways in which the deprivatization of religion may in turn affect the politics of gender equality.

I. Revisiting Public Religions from a global comparative perspective

Since my comparative-historical study was focused on the two main branches of Western Christianity, Catholicism and Protestantism, it could function with a relatively unreflexive category of "religion." The moment one adopts a global comparative perspective, however, this is no longer possible. Yet, the difficulties of formulating a satisfying general definition of religion, not to speak of the even more serious difficulties of constructing an adequate general theory of religion are well-known. In fact, while the social sciences, particularly the sociology of religion, still function with an unreflexive category of religion, within the newer discipline of "religious studies" the very category of religion has undergone numerous challenges, as well as all kinds of critical genealogical deconstructions.

This is not the place to revisit the debates of the last two decades concerning the competing genealogies of the "modern" category of religion, and its complex relation to the pluralization of Christian confessions and denominations in early modernity, to the Western colonial expansion and the encounter with the religious "other," to the triumph of "secular reason," the hegemony of the secular state, and the disciplinary institutionalization of the scientific study of religion, as well as to the Western "invention of the world religions" and the classificatory taxonomies of religion which have now become globalized.[7] But it is appropriate to begin a discussion of religion in the contemporary global age with the recognition of a paradox, namely that scholars of religion are questioning the validity of the category of "religion," at the very same moment when the discursive reality of religion is more widespread than ever and has become for the first time global.[8] I am not claiming that people today everywhere are either more or less religious than they may have been in the past. Here I am bracketing out altogether the question which has dominated most theories of secularization, namely whether religious beliefs and practices are declining or growing as a general modern trend. I am only claiming that "religion" as a discursive reality, indeed as an abstract category and as a system of classification of reality, used by modern individuals as well as by modern societies across the world, has become an undisputable global social fact.

It is obvious that when people around the world use the same category of religion they actually mean very different things. The actual concrete meaning of whatever people denominate as "religion" can only be elucidated in the context of their particular discursive practices. But the very fact that the same category of religion is being used globally across cul-

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[6] This section builds upon the analysis first developed in José Casanova, "Public Religions Revisited," in Hent de Vries, ed. *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

[7] Cf. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Hans Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002; Tomoko Mazusawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); Russel McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Mark C. Taylor, 269-284 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Hent de Vries, ed. *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

[8] Peter Beyer, *Religions in Global Society* (London: Routledge, 2006).

tures and civilizations testifies to the global expansion of the modern secular-religious system of classification of reality which first emerged in the modern Christian West. This implies the need to reflect more critically upon this particular modern system of classification, without taking it for granted as a general universal system valid for all times and places..

1. Rethinking Secularization beyond the West: Towards a global comparative perspective

While the two minor sub-theses of the theory of secularization, namely "the decline of religion" and "the privatization of religion," have undergone numerous critiques and revisions in the last 15 years, the core of the thesis, namely the understanding of secularization as a single process of functional differentiation of the various institutional spheres or sub-systems of modern societies remains relatively uncontested in the social sciences, particularly within European sociology. Yet one should ask whether it is appropriate to subsume the multiple and very diverse historical patterns of differentiation and fusion of the various institutional spheres (that is, church and state, state and economy, economy and science) that one finds throughout the history of modern Western societies into a single teleological process of modern functional differentiation.[9]

Talal Asad called our attention to the fact that "the historical process of secularization effects a remarkable ideological inversion…. For at one time 'the secular' was a part of a theological discourse (*saeculum*)," while later "the religious" is constituted by secular political and scientific discourses, so that "religion" itself as a historical category and as a universal globalized concept emerges as a construction of Western secular modernity.[10] Thus, any thinking of secularization beyond the West has to begin with the recognition of this dual historical paradox. Namely, that "the secular" emerges first as a particular Western Christian theological category, while its modern antonym, "the religious," is a product of Western secular modernity.

But as I pointed out in my response to Asad's critique, contemporary genealogies of secularism fail to recognize the extent to which the formation of the secular is itself inextricably linked with the internal transformations of European Christianity, from the so-called Papal Revolution to the Protestant Reformation, and from the ascetic and pietistic sects of the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries to the emergence of evangelical, denominational Protestantism in nineteenth-century America.[11]

The contextualization of our categories, "religious" and "secular", should begin , therefore, with the recognition of the particular Christian historicity of Western European developments, as well as of the multiple and diverse historical patterns of differentiation and fusion of the religious and the secular, as well as of their mutual constitution, within European and Western societies. Such recognition in turn should allow a less Euro-centric comparative analysis of patterns of differentiation and secularization in other civilizations and world religions, and more importantly the further recognition that with the world-historical process of globalization initiated by the European colonial expansion, all these processes everywhere are

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[9]   For a poignant critique of the thesis of differentiation see, Charles Tilly, "Four more pernicious postulates," in *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York: Russell Sage, 1984) pp. 43-60.
[10]   Asad, *Formations of the Secular,* p. 192.
[11]   José Casanova, "Secularization Revisited: A Reply to Talal Asad," in David Scott and Charles Hirschkind eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern*: *Talal Asad and his Interlocutors"* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006) pp. 12-30.

dynamically interrelated and mutually constituted. Without questioning the actual historical processes of secular differentiation, such analysis contextualizes, pluralizes and in a sense relativizes those processes by framing them as particular Christian-Western historical dynamics, that allows for a discourse of multiple modernities within the West and of course even more so for multiple non-Western modernities.

From the comparative perspective of the axial revolutions, the process of Western secularization appears as a radicalization of the great disembedding of the individual from the sacred cosmos and from society that was first initiated by the axial revolutions.[12] In the context of a general theory of "religious" evolution, one may understand this process as a redrawing of boundaries between sacred/profane, transcendence/immanence, and religious/secular. All too often we tend to view these dichotomous pairs -- sacred/profane, transcendent/immanent, religious/secular -- as synonymous. But it should be obvious that these three dichotomous classificatory schemes do not fit neatly within one another. The sacred tends to be immanent in pre-axial societies, transcendence is not necessarily religious in some axial civilizations, and obviously some secular reality (the nation, citizenship, the person, and individual human rights) can become sacred in the modern secular age.

Within this perspective, the religious/secular dichotomy is a particular medieval Christian version of the more general axial dichotomous classification of transcendent and immanent orders of reality. Unique to the medieval system of Latin Christendom, however, is the institutionalization of an ecclesiastical-sacramental system of mediation, the Church, between the transcendent *Civitas Dei* and the immanent *Civitas hominis.* The church can play this mediating role precisely because it partakes of both realities. As *Ecclesia invisibilis*, "the communion of the saints," the Christian church is a "spiritual" reality, part of the eternal transcendent City of God. As *Ecclesia visibilis,* the Christian church is in the *saeculum,* a "temporal" reality and thus part of the immanent city of man. The modern Western process of secularization is a particular historical dynamic that only makes sense as a response and reaction to this particular medieval Latin Christian system of classification of all reality into "spiritual" and "temporal", "religious" and "secular."

As Charles Taylor has clearly shown, the historical process of modern secularization begins as a process of internal secular reform within Latin Christendom, as an attempt to "spiritualize" the temporal and to bring the religious life of perfection out of the monasteries into the saeculum, thus literally, as an attempt to make the religious "secular."[13]   The repeated attempts at Christian reform of the *saeculum* began with the papal revolution and continued with the emergence of the spiritual orders of mendicant and preaching friars bent on Christianizing the growing medieval towns and cities as well as with the emergence of lay Christian communities of brothers and sisters committed to a life of Christian perfection in the saeculum, in the world. These medieval movements of Christian reform already established the basic patterns of secularization which will be later radicalized first by the Protestant Reformation and then, from the French Revolution on, by all subsequent modern civilizing and reform processes.

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[12] For recent debates on "axiality" and "modernity" for which the work of Shmuel Eisenstadt has served as catalyst see,
Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Yitzhak Sternberg, eds., *Comparing Modernities. Essays in Homage to Shmuel N. Eisenstadt* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), and Johan P. Arnason, S.N. Eisenstadt and Björn Wittrock, eds. *Axial Civilizations and World History* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).
[13]   Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007)

The Protestant path, which will attain its paradigmatic manifestation in the Anglo-Saxon Calvinist cultural area, particularly in the United States, is characterized by a blurring of the boundaries and by a mutual reciprocal infusion of the religious and the secular, in a sense making the religious secular and the secular religious.[14] The French-Latin-Catholic path, by contrast, will take the form of laicization, and is basically marked by a civil-ecclesiastical and laic-clerical antagonistic dynamic. This explains the central role of anti-clericalism in the Catholic pattern. Unlike in the Protestant pattern, here the boundaries between the religious and the secular are rigidly maintained, but those boundaries are pushed into the margins, aiming to contain, privatize and marginalize everything religious, while excluding it from any visible presence in the secular public sphere.

In the Latin-Catholic cultural area, and to some extent throughout continental Europe, there was a collision between religion and the differentiated secular spheres, that is, between Catholic Christianity and modern science, modern capitalism and the modern state. As a result of this protracted clash, the Enlightenment critique of religion found here ample resonance; the secularist genealogy of modernity was constructed as a triumphant emancipation of reason, freedom and worldly pursuits from the constraints of religion. The secularist self-narratives, which have informed functionalist theories of differentiation and secularization, have envisioned this process as the emancipation and expansion of the secular spheres at the expense of a much diminished and confined, though also newly differentiated, religious sphere.

In the Anglo-Protestant cultural area, by contrast, and particularly in the United States, there was "collusion" between religion and the secular differentiated spheres. There is little historical evidence of any tension between American Protestantism and capitalism and very little manifest tension between science and religion in America prior to the Darwinian crisis at the end of the nineteenth century. The American Enlightenment had hardly any anti-religious component. Even "the separation of church and state," that was constitutionally codified in the dual clause of the First Amendment, had as much the purpose of protecting "the free exercise" of religion from state interference and ecclesiastical control as that of protecting the federal state from any religious entanglement. In the United States, the triumph of "the secular" came aided by religion rather than at its expense and the boundaries themselves became so diffused that, at least by European ecclesiastical standards, it is not clear where religion begins and the secular ends.

The purpose of this comparison is not to reiterate the well-known fact that American society is more "religious" and therefore less "secular" than European societies. While the first may be true, the second proposition does not follow. On the contrary, the United States