

The Manifestation of Religion in the Public Sphere: A Contemporary Debate

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Abstract

Religion is ever present with human being. This is because man from his origin is seen to be incurably religious; hence he is addressed as homo-religiosus. It is important to note that with the advancement of technology and the development of the society, some scholars tend to posit that religion in no distant time will give way to secularization, but despite the rate of secularization in Europe and other western societies, religion still plays a vital and prominent role to human being. This work will be studied sociologically and will adopt the theory of crossing and dwelling. This is because religion is not a stagnant phenomenon but crosses and cuts across every facet of life. The paper therefore observes that religion is not only relevant to human being but it maintains a prominent position in the public sphere. It also finds that man is a religious animal and as long as he exists, religion will exist. The paper concludes that religion gives ultimate answers to ultimate questions which neither science nor philosophy has answered. Therefore its place in human being and society cannot be done away with as long as man exists.

Key Words: Manifestation, Religion, Public Sphere, Contemporary, Debate

Introduction

Public religion, desecularization and post-secularity are the new words in the scientific study of religion. They mark a new era, perhaps a new paradigm of academic thinking about religion. The supporters of this new trend purport that secularization theory was wrong: religion is neither disappearing nor suffering significant losses in the context of modernity. Instead, religion is as vivacious as ever. For many of these observers, the age of secularity has ended while religion is resurging; even the societies of Western Europe which once served as a prime example for secularization theory are experiencing a resurgence of religion. Here, the continuing and rising presence of religion becomes particularly manifest in the public sphere. According to this view, Religion is assuming a new public role and thereby refutes the long-standing assumption of a privatization of religion. However, are Western European societies currently experiencing such a deprivatization of religion? Are we facing a new age of public religion? In today's academia, we face an increasing debate about the public role of religion. Concepts that highlight the public presence of religion enjoy a strong popularity and an almost unquestionable status. Nevertheless, it is unclear if this popularity is due to the fact that these approaches capture the empirical reality in an authentic way or if their popularity is rather the product of a hype of these concepts in academic debates about religion. This work will throw more light on these issues as the paper goes intrinsically on this topic.

Theoretical Framework

The theory adopted in this work is the theory of crossing and dwelling by Thomas Tweed. Tweed (2006) follows the theoretical analysis with an investigation into the importance of defining

constitutive terms in various academic disciplines. Understanding that religion is not a native term but it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes. Having defended the importance of defining the term 'religion' and after suggesting the shortcomings of contemporary theories, Tweed presents the reader with his own definition of religion. In his definition, Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and superhuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries. (Tweed, 2006:54). He uses the plural form of his constitutive term in order to clarify that interpreters and theorists never find 'religion-in-general' rather there are only situated observers encountering particular people in particular contexts. The two major orienting metaphors of his theory 'dwelling and crossing' signify that religion is about finding a place and moving across space, and aquatic metaphors (confluences and flows) signal that religions are not reified substances but complex processes. Hence, each religion is a flowing together of currents, some enforced as 'orthodox' by institutions traversing multiple fields, where other religions, other transverse confluences, also cross thereby creating new spiritual streams (Tweed, 2006:60). His use of aquatic and spatial metaphors is an attempt to avoid essentializing religious traditions as static, isolated, and immutable substances, choosing to understand them instead as the swirl of translucial currents where religious and nonreligious streams propel religious flows. With this in mind, he describes religions as sacrosapes and thereby inviting scholars to attend to the multiple ways that religious flows have left traces, transforming peoples and places, the social arena and the natural terrain.

Recognizing that religion involves emotion, Tweed also suggests that religions intensify joy and confront suffering,

meaning that they provide the lexicon, rules, and expression for many different sorts of emotions, including those framed as most positive and most negative, most cherished and most condemned. He includes human and superhuman forces in the definition because, adherents appeal not only to their own powers but to superhuman forces, which can be imagined in varied ways, as they try to intensify joy and confront suffering. The final phrase of the definition, make homes and cross boundaries is described by as 'the heart of the theory.' The itineraries that religions position women and men in natural terrain and social space and enable and constrain terrestrial, corporeal, and cosmic crossings (Tweed, 2006:75).

Tweed emphasizes that religions are not only about being in place but also moving across. He details three specific types of crossings that religions enable adherents to make thus; terrestrial, corporeal, and cosmic. Terrestrial crossings including pilgrimage, mission, social space, compelled passages and constrained crossings, vary according to the shifts in travel and communication technology. Religions do not only mark shifting economic and social boundaries, but prompt crossings that traverse social space. Corporeal crossings confront embodied limits and traverse the life cycle, defining the limit between the embodied self and the natural world and marking not only the cycle of the seasons but also the transitions of the life cycle including birth, rites of passage, and death. Finally, cosmic crossings involve transporting and transforming teleographies that can be analyzed according to the horizon they imagine, the space they highlight and the crossing they propose (Tweed, 2006:152)

Conceptual Understanding

In addressing the place of religion in the public sphere, it is pertinent for us to look at what is meant by the phrase ‘public sphere’. The term public sphere in the opinion of Elom (2005) invokes a common societal organization. It may be said to mean the organized and concretized common space of a given population. It is clearly separate from private space which allows individuals and family to live their religions privately. In viewing the state as the first intermediary between society and citizens for Europeans, the public sphere is the space where the state exerts its authority for the benefit of all and at the service of all.

Furthermore, since public-religion-approaches refer to the presence of religion in the public sphere, the public sphere can also be defined as an open social arena in which a significant part of the population of a society participates passively or actively. This arena (sphere) is dedicated to the gathering, production and distribution of information and opinions and is shaped by the presence of mass media (Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1991: 44-59). The most visible and crucial public sphere is perhaps the political public sphere. Its debates can potentially affect the whole population of a society and intermediate between the citizens of a society and its political system. Public religion approaches often refer to this sphere, in which they posit a significant and/or rising presence of religion.

On the other hand, another concept that needs to be clarified in this write up is religion. Religion which we view as communications and/or practices referring to a supernatural reality has defiled a consensus definition which has given rise to its numerous definitions. In this work therefore, we will adopt the definition of Thomas Tweed as an operational definition which is so because of its closeness to the point in discussion. In his

definition, Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and superhuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries. (Tweed, 2006:54).

The Secularization Debate on the Departure of Religion and the Reappearance of Public Religion

Secularization thesis was seen to have constituted the most accepted and undisputed concept in the study of religion. In the words of Stark and Finke (2000: 57-79), the thesis dominated academic debates about religion until the 1970s. In the context of the secularization debate, the early Berger (1990) and Luckmann (2000) were those who highlighted the privatization of religious belief. Berger hypothesized that by means of socio-economic development, religion would be crowded out from the public sphere. The private sphere would remain the last sphere available for religious practice: religion would become a private issue. Luckmann on its own added to the idea of religious privatization while rejecting the idea of secularization at the same time. Instead of asserting a decline of religion, he assumed that religion would just become 'invisible'. According to him, the social appearance of religion had been altered in modern societies and was now often hardly recognizable as religion, religion is not disappearing or declining but just changing its form and becoming more individualistic and private (Luckmann, 2000).

Following this new thesis, religion would be banned from the public sphere and confined to the invisible private sphere of individuals. The practice of religion would become more and more a matter of private choice and cease to have any effect on the public sphere (Wilson, 1977: 176). This was the so called 'privatization-thesis' of religion which redefined the secularization

theory and became a mainstream position in the study of religion. In contrast to the classical secularization thesis, supporters of the 'privatization' thesis supposed a privatization of religion but not necessarily a decline in the individual practice of religion. The dominance of the privatization thesis was challenged by the pioneering work of Casanova (1994). In his book, 'Public Religions in the Modern World', Casanova subdivided the secularization thesis into three different hypotheses: (a) the functional differentiation of secular spheres from religion, (b) the decline of religious practice and belief, and (c) the privatization of religion. It was the third hypothesis, the privatization-thesis, which he tried to refute in this work. Instead of an advancing privatization of religion, Casanova supposed that in many modern societies, religion would still assume a public role. Moreover, a deprivatization of religion might even be taking place in many societies (Casanova, 1994: 41). He defined deprivatization in the following way: it mean the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them (Casanova, 1994: 5).

According to this view, the privatization of religion was not a necessary imperative of modern societies. In many cases religion maintained its public function and refused to be confined to a marginal, private role. In some cases religion might even assume a new and enhanced public role (Casanova, 1994: 39,215). With the publication of *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Casanova coined the term 'public religion'. The term refers to religion or religious organizations participating effectively in the public sphere of modern societies. The idea of public religion became increasingly salient in scientific debates and marked the beginning of a new discourse about religion in modern societies. Despite this

success, Casanova has made several changes to his approach since the 1994 publication of his seminal work. He reacted to criticisms – that charged him with Western-centrism and methodological nationalism by assuming a more global perspective and arguing that the predominant concept of secularization is mainly a Western European ideology (Casanova, 2003). At the same time, he maintained his general assumption of a deprivatization of religion and even extended the argument in two ways. First, Casanova became more open to the idea of religion acting in the political sphere. While he was keen to limit public religions in his earlier work to the domain of civil society, he posits that the presence of religion in the political public or even the state may not necessarily contradict the requirements of democratic politics. Second, he assumes a clearer position with regard to the case of Western Europe where he witnesses a rising presence of religion in the public sphere (Casanova, 2006).

There were other scholars that contributed to promoting the idea of the reappearance of religion in politics and public affairs among which are Huntington (2003) and Berger (1999). In his work ‘Clash of Civilizations’, Huntington identified religion as a key factor for the presumed clash of different cultures. However, his general argument about the clash of civilizations was treated with skepticism among scholars of religion. Instead, the ideas of Berger were more openly received in the academic discipline. Berger refuted his previous privatization thesis and argued in ‘The desecularization of the World’ that the ‘world today is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more than ever’ (Berger, 1999: 2). Authors like Casanova shifted the academic debates about religion to a new direction toward a new paradigm, a paradigm which would declare the death of secularization theory

and proclaim a rising public importance of religion in late modernity.

Understanding the Public Religion Approach as a Trend in the Study of Religion

The argument of Casanova on public religion prompted the emergence of a new trend in the scientific study of religion. The idea of public religion spread fast and gained popularity within academic debates. From this point on, one could see many publications rejecting the privatization thesis of religion and claiming a deprivatization and/ or coming back of religion. Academic and public debates began to insinuate a rising role of religion in the public sphere of modern societies. According to Meyer and Moore (2006), the idea of the persistent and mounting importance of religion in the public sphere of modern societies almost achieved the status of an axiom in academic discourses. Today's academic discourse about public religion is a trans-disciplinary one in which different academic fields such as sociology, political, religious study, theology and philosophy participate. Although the contributions may draw on different disciplinary backgrounds, they all have at least one thing in common: they refer to the presence of religion in the public sphere of approaches. The assumptions and hypotheses of public religion approaches vary according to the particular theory. But we can identify common assumptions which are

- a. Religion can be empirically found in the public sphere of modern Western societies.
- b. There is a persistent or even rising presence of religion in the public sphere of modern societies.
- c. Religion has a significant and/or increasing impact on public debates.

These assumptions characterize with some variation what can be defined here as public religion approaches. This characterization forms a generalization which implies that the description and the following arguments do not correspond to every contribution to the debate about public religion. The aim of this article is not to create an exhaustive description of the variety of public religion approaches, but to point to some frequent flaws in the debate about public religion in the Western European context. Although some of the arguments could also be raised with regard to the general debate about public religion, the arguments in this article will draw particularly on contributions assuming a rising presence of religion in Western Europe's public.

One can classify public religion approaches that refer to Western Europe into roughly three camps: first, approaches witnessing and welcoming a new presence of religion in Europe's public; secondly, approaches describing a new presence of religion without assuming a normative position; and thirdly, a very small camp of approaches viewing the impact of public religion on Europe's democracies critically. In the following, it will be necessary to mention some examples for each camp. The most famous author from the first camp is Habermas (2001), he argues that a new age, the age of post-secularity has begun. Previously, vastly secularized societies like the highly developed countries of Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, would experience a new awareness of religion and attribute a new public role to religion. From now on, religion would constitute a relevant dialogue partner in the public debates of these societies (Habermas, 2008). Moreover, Habermas presents a normative argument about public religion; he recommends that post-secular societies should facilitate religious contributions to the public sphere. Religious reasoning could contribute to public debates about the ethical

values of contemporaneous and future societies. Habermas believes that modern societies might find some answers to the moral questions of our time by listening to religion in public debates (Habermas, 2001). A similar position to that of Habermas is proposed by Leclerc (2001) and French sociologist Willaime (2004). Willaime observes that even the highly secularized public and political sphere of France is exhibiting a new, more open attitude towards religion.

The hyper-secularity of France would stimulate a restructuration process of religion. According to Willaime, religion can form an important resource for public debates and be engaged in the identity construction process of individuals and collectives. Contributions from this camp emphasize the positive role that religion can play as a discursive resource in public debates of post-secular societies. The second camp assumes a more descriptive perspective by observing and explaining the supposed presence of public religion in Western Europe. The most prominent example of this camp would be, of course Casanova. Another famous sociologist of religion who addresses the topic of public religion in her recent work is Grace Davie (2006). She believes that the immigration of individuals from different parts of the world has put the European model of secularization into question. While the European secularization model advances the privatization of religion, many of the 'newcomers' have different ideas with regard to the appropriate place of religion in society. Consequently, Europeans do not only have to launch debates about the public role of religion, but religion also becomes increasingly present in Western Europe's public: hence Davie (2006: 33) posits that religion will increasingly penetrate the public sphere, a tendency driven largely by the presence of Islam in different parts of Europe.

Two further examples for this camp are Koenig and Eder. Koenig (2008) argues that religion has gained a new presence and vitality in the public in the context of the European unification process. According to him, the process of European integration is resulting in a new, privileged role of religion in the European public. Eder (2002) and Bosseti and Eder (2006) suppose, similarly to Habermas, the existence of a process of 'post-secularization'. Post-Secularization in the opinion of Eder, means that religion is becoming more and more public and less private. He supposes that religion is returning to the public sphere in Western Europe. Although the authors from this camp generally assume a descriptive perspective, they tend in some occasions toward positions similar to that of the first camp by pointing to the positive potential of religion.

Finally, the last camp views the alleged presence of religion in the public sphere from a more critical perspective. One example for the last camp is Thomas Meyer (2006). Meyer posits that religion is becoming increasingly involved in the public and political sphere. He regards this process, in opposition to Habermas, Willaime and Leclerc, not as positive but as a potential threat to the secular foundations of the modern state. However, Meyers' point of view does not seem to reflect the common position of public religion approaches. In general, scholars rather appear to welcome the supposed new presence of religion in Western Europe's public spheres.

This classification provides a brief overview of contributions that assume an increasing presence of religion in Western Europe's public spheres. In addition to this literature that stresses the case of Western Europe, there is a wide range of studies that address the topic of public religion. These contributions form part of an increasing academic debate which circulates around the idea of

public religion. None of these studies questions critically if there is indeed a significant or rising presence of religion in the public sphere of modern Western societies. The existing and still rising number of publications concerning public religion illustrates that Casanova's ideas have become a popular concept in the academic debate about religion. Today, the concept of public religion is perhaps the most 'trendy' approach in the scientific discourse about religion. Criticism of the idea of public religion is rare, if not absent. One exception is perhaps Dalferth (2010), who points out that post secular societies are indifferent towards religion instead of being religious or secular.

Religious Contributions to the Public Sphere

Following a general definition of religion, we will use the reference to the supernatural as a criterion for the presence of religion. Keeping this criterion in mind, one can examine if actions and communications that are generally denominated as 'religion' by public-religion-approaches fit this definition of religion. Let us note two types of communication to which public religion approaches refer: (a) public debates about topics related to religion and (b) contributions of religious actors to the public sphere. Regarding the first type, it is evident that public debates about topics related to religion do usually not fulfil the criterion for religious communication. For instance, mass media reports of some killing referred to the religious motives of the perpetrator but did not employ religious communication themselves while describing the event. Western European mass media coverage of topics related to religion will generally not employ any type of mediation with the supernatural and is therefore hardly of a religious nature. Instead public agents will use a secular scheme of reasoning abstaining from references to the supernatural.

The second type of communication is more complicated. Religious actors often represent a religious organization when they emit public communication. Yet, not every public contribution from religious actors is necessarily a religious communication. According to the proposed definition, only those public communications which apply a religious argument by referring to a supernatural entity or concept are religious. Organizations, groups and individuals associated with religion can involve themselves in different ways in the public sphere. Representatives of religious organizations can participate in a direct way in the public sphere by joining TV talk shows, or radio programs. Moreover, they can publish their opinions in books, journals, or on web-pages. One of the most important ways of public communication for religious actors is the release of press statements. Thus, in order to explore the public communication of a religious organization, one can analyze its press statements. One can take the press-releases from the Church of England and the Evangelical Church in Germany. Both institutions represent a large share of the religious market in their home countries and are therefore assumed to be highly influential religious actors in the public sphere.

Place of Religious in the Public Sphere

There are different public spheres in modern societies. The wider public sphere of modern societies consists of a variety of different publics which focus on different topics and are based on different logics. The public sphere which attracts most attention and forms the key area of the public is the political public sphere. Besides this, there are other public spheres which correspond to specific sub-systems of the society (Dalferth, 2010). Among these, there are specific public spheres in which religious communication is facilitated or even requested. In some sites of Western Europe's

media space, we can observe religious communication on a daily bases, such as religious TV and radio programs, journals and internet pages. They form public niches which are dedicated to religious communication. Here, religious actors can communicate in a religious way and refer to supernatural concepts without being rejected or mocked. Yet, these spheres are located in the periphery of the media space and constitute small and remote isles of religious communication. Individuals may publicly communicate and practice religion on a daily basis in these media spaces, but their communication stays remote from the key areas of the public sphere.

These niches of religious communication are different from the political public sphere. They are neither involved nor directly connected to the political public sphere. The fact that religious communication takes place in the remote periphery of the public indicates the position and role of religious communication in the public sphere of Western European societies: it is marginal. In the main arenas of the public sphere, religion forms an exceptional case for very seldom occasions, while the daily media appearance of religion is situated in the remote periphery of the public.

This can be seen further by the various religious activities that are going on within the governmental circle. In a practical example with Nigeria as a case in point, one can see that virtually all the presidents and governors that have assumed their offices have always given room for prayers in their gathering. Most of them before embarking on campaign rally first observe prayers and religious advice. In most government houses, they have chapels where prayers are always made for them. The observation of observation of some religious holidays in Nigeria is a clear show that religion is a focal aspect of human being which cannot be separated. Hence this debate which has scholars' opinions but still

skewing towards the same point of the presence of religion in every human endeavour.

Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to raise some critical questions about public religion approaches. Public-religion-approaches emphasize the public presence and impact of religion in modern societies. They posit a significant and rising impact of religion on the public sphere of modern societies, including Western Europe. However, their conclusions about a significant presence and impact of religion are based on diffused and excessively wide concepts of religion. Applying the term ‘religion’ to a variety of social phenomena which are often hardly of a religious nature allows them to diagnose an unprecedented impact and presence of religion in the public sphere.

There is a rise of public religion or a major presence of religion in Western Europe’s public spheres. Public religion does not appear to be a daily phenomenon: it remains rather limited to exceptional cases and contexts. Instead of becoming more and more religious, the public sphere continues to be mainly a secular sphere in which religious actors participate by conducting non-religious communication. Rather than reflecting the empirical reality, the assumption of a rise of ‘public religion’ seems to be merely a theoretical trend in the academic community. The arguments raised here indicate some general flaws of public-religion approaches and question their assumption of a significant and rising presence of religion on the public sphere of modern societies.

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