

"The Public Role of Religion" Editorial Notes

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When examining the role religion plays in the public sphere, from a sociological perspective, the *coherence* between religion and its public role emerges as the most salient feature (Casanova 1994). In fact, one (the public role) is present in the other (religion) as a constant variable. Obviously, this (independent) variable is multifaceted, and both acts upon and shapes other interconnected (dependent) variables.

Consequently, there are those who, unsystematically, devoid of any methodological or ideological framework, take it upon themselves to publish a sort of ranking on the “state of health” of religious freedom in the world, pointing out innumerable vulnerabilities at the level of human (and religious) rights. There are also those who in turn make every effort to improve the conditions for the exercise of religious belonging and practice. Finally, there are those who, instead, create ever increasing problems for believers of various faiths. To document these violations, detected in various countries, a periodical Report is prepared by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). According to USCIRF, eight countries fall under the commission’s category of “particular concern”: Burma (Myanmar), China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan, where torture, prolonged detention without charge, disappearances or other violations of the right to life, freedom (including religious freedom and personal freedom) have occurred. Seven other countries are also reported as reaching a threshold of “particular concern”: Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Vietnam, which are registered as having “negative trends” that could lead to serious violations of religious freedom. Finally, in eight other national contexts, levels of non-compliance were not far removed from those classified as “of particular concern”: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Laos and Russia.

The Report contains a series of very detailed factsheets, broken down by country. The data reported refers to restrictions, repressions and violence detected in each country and are followed by specific recommendations for appropriate action according to US policy, in response to ongoing violations. Everything reported is presumably empirically well-founded. However, it must be pointed out that these are almost always nations with communist regimes (China, North Korea and Russia, for example) or non-Christian, but particularly with Islamic origins (Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), Buddhist origins (Burma, Laos and Vietnam), or are firmly opposed (especially Cuba) to the international policies of the United States.

Criticism of this monitoring by the United States does not imply that the violations reported do not correspond at all to real situations. Indeed, in the countries listed, there are, for various reasons, considerable difficulties with freedom of expression, including freedom of religion. Nevertheless, equally significant phenomenologies in other parts of the world should be considered, especially if the concept of “public role” (and space) is interpreted in a sociologically reliable manner. There are many suggestions in this regard.

In the first place, notably, the conceptions of role in general and public space in particular have changed over the centuries: From a representation linked to common sense and almost coinciding with the surrounding physical reality to a more nuanced, less defined view, extended to planetary dimensions. While Descartes limited everything to the environment within which the phenomena are observed, Spinoza and Leibniz instead attributed a more elusive character to the question of social roles and space. And Kant described it as “an a priori form of sensitivity”. In short, role and space escape precise limits that can be defined once and for all. However, on a strictly sociological level, they are seen as, in any case, a social and, moreover, socially constructed context. If it is true that role and space are often disputed, dismembered, misunderstood, colonized, expropriated, maintained and/or neglected, nevertheless they are part of social and community life. In other words, they are shared by individuals who are also social, who have their say on the meanings of these roles, on the right to space, on the use of freedom, especially if they carry the connotation of something characteristically public.

Even Durkheim was well aware of this and considered space to be a purely sociological category, since it emerged from the social experience of society itself. From this perspective, social space is just the space occupied by those who offer matter/concrete material and content, to indicate/delimit and qualify space. Any act carried out within that area has direct consequences for the organization of the whole society. Therefore, extending Durkheimian’s idea of social space, to include the public role, this phenomenon has considerable weight in every event, in every manifestation and therefore in all of society. In practice, the presence or absence of religion in the social and public space cannot but have reverberations on the social system, on its structure and in fact on the *Weltanschauungen* (worldviews) that operate there.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that space is resilient to any attempt at change. In short, it is invariant, while its contents (which include religion’s role) may or may not act as both independent and dependent variables.

In this regard, the question arises of political and religious power that relegates upstream, through legislation, and norms for religion downstream, with regard to both the social role and public space. Much depends on relations between States and religions, between governments and denominational organizations, between vertical domination and subordination of citizens (and the members of every religion). On this soil agreements and disagreements, compromises and conflicts flourish. From time to time, they appear as political, but are substantially religious and vice versa. They present themselves as reasons of State, but conceal motivations and roots of a “fideistic” nature. In any case, it should not be overlooked that the position occupied in the social space is larger and in the public role it is more limited, but highly significant and crucial to the possible trends of conspicuously large numbers of human groups.

It is not by chance that the competition for and the discussion of the presence of symbols in public places, is a decisive juncture on which many phenomenologies depend, and almost always within the process of change. In other words, the role of religion in the public space is the combination from which, to a great extent, the preservation or the increase of the rate of religiosity is derived (or not, in case of absence) in a vast set of social actors, whose agency—intention or ability to act—predisposes the evolution of social trends in progress and prepares the future social trends, thereby building a new social reality. This can be read in terms of symbolic interactionism or rational choice, ethnomethodology or social construction, and without significantly changing the configurations and/or their effects.

In regard to social or public roles and spaces, some social psychologists remark on these as organized mental categories, which organize role and space according to different areas that intertwine and contemplate multiple solutions, according to different basic ideological options, which are therefore often decisive for the propensity for action that arise from them. Diversity in the same context is at the same time a source of contrasts and temporary convergences, sometimes instrumental, but preordained by the purpose to be achieved. Inter-subjective relations and religious conceptions move individual and collective action together, starting from the legitimization-recognition linked to the historical tradition of belonging. For instance, the case of the esplanade of the temple in Jerusalem where

Jews, in front of the “Wailing Wall”, and Muslims, in the great al-Aqsā mosque, pray to their God, juxtaposing themselves, but also opposing each other, at a few meters distance. Both form a public space, accessible to all, with certain precautions taken by both parties. The cogency of history and the strenuous defense of roles and places, similar to that which is also recorded in the basilica of the Holy Sepulcher, in Jerusalem itself, and in the basilica of the Nativity, in Bethlehem: In both, different branches of Christian religious spaces and times are disputed. Note that in the shrine of the Holy Sepulcher, within just a few square meters of each other, the three communities of Latin, Greek and Armenian Christians have placed three copies of each painting and furnishings to emphasize their specific identity even with regard to the same object of worship.

Therefore, role and space as conceptual categories and the objects that they occupy are an eloquent extension of the socio-religious presences and of their reciprocal relations, traced in a visible and theatrical way in the places visited by the public. This kind of settlement, open to the public, fully demonstrates that there are different images of reality: Even if not perfectly traceable to their religious doctrines of reference, they become quite recognizable in their historical and cultural peculiarities, traceable in the style of paintings and cultural instruments.

Moreover, the behaviors are prearranged in connection with the various parts of the public role and space in use. There are areas where some activities are not permitted and others where they are fully justified. The name of the roles and spaces is also an indicator of their more or less accentuated sacredness. Not to mention what is obscured, positioned within a space accessible to the public, however, inaccessible to the public, and often not even visible, within it: A prime example is the area of a temple that is taken from view due to iconostasis, the wall with images of saints in the Orthodox liturgy separating the celebrant from the devotees, or as in the case of the Sancta Sanctorum, formerly a private papal chapel, which at the top of the Holy Stairs in Rome, is not usually open to visitors.

But the idea of public role and space has indeed even wider connotations than those within religious customs. According to Oldenburg ([Oldenburg 1993](#)), in fact, public space is provided in those places where, outside of family and work, there is the possibility of building social relationships and meanings. These are spaces whose tertiariness (third spaces) allows greater freedom and tranquility. From the experience of the company “after-hours” (but not completely controlled by the companies and managed independently by the workers) to that of clubs, associations and organizations, created for the use of free time, it is all a swarm of forms and rules, membership and participation. These spaces are undoubtedly corporate facilitators in which the exercise of the right to speak and to express opinions is implemented and developed more than ever. It is there that movements and orientations, both political and social in the broadest sense, based on values that tend to be shared, are born and flourish. And of course, religion has its own significant role to the point of characterizing certain typical modalities in sports associations and in the world of communication, in the educational and cultural offerings of various institutions. In these crucibles new attitudinal and behavioral realities are forged and merged, resulting in tendencies that are then examined by sociologists as new collective effervescences of the Durkeimian type (or not).

The transformation of a public place also implies a change in its identity and relevance. Milligan ([Milligan 1998](#), pp. 1–33) clearly underlines this. If a public space changes location and therefore moves to another area, even the sense of belonging suffers, the community that gathered there suffers, as it no longer recognizes its boundaries, tends to break up, which occurred with the Jewish diaspora first and then with the Shoah.

Finally, for Du Bois ([Du Bois 2001](#), pp. 30–45) the architecture of public space itself seems very influential. It can have a particular impact on social interactions, namely in strategic places for the social construction of world visions and for the propensity for social action.

To conclude, we can say that despite prohibitions and sanctions, persecutions and marginalizations, history documents and sociology confirms that religions have usually sought and obtained their own role within the public space. Even in an overall picture in which accentuated forms of religious individualism prevail, there is no lack of moments and appointments in which religion

presents itself on the public stage, accompanies ceremonies and celebrations that are in themselves devoid of any religious meaning, and indicates its presence in various ways. Obviously, there is no lack of this presence and it will continue growing, according to various indicators and empirical data.

In a sacred society, it is superfluous to speak about the public role of Religion. Only in a secular and pluralistic society, is this discussion relevant, because in this situation religion can easily become an inward and closed process and its effects on society as a whole would result in the individual practice of religion. In this case, we could hardly tell that a religion is acting objectively toward the public reality as such.

The reason for this is that, in the secular world, what must determine the rules is universal reason—statements that can be objectively confirmed and accepted by any member of the society. Inevitably, many propositions stated as universal are not accepted by all members of the society, but the reason why a member does not accept some concept that determines public policies must also be presented under the same rational premises. This excludes those faithful to a given religion—believers. It does not mean that a belief is not truth not even that it is irrational, but the issue is that any belief is ultimately based on faith. Faith is not less than reason, weaker or hazardous—in fact, many times reason is weaker and more hazardous than faith—but faith is not open to trans-subjective demonstration. Therefore, it cannot be imposed on public order as a universal policy.

With this premise, we can define the public role of religion on at least three fronts: (1) the processes of transformation that religion triggers in the subjects with the effects in the social construction of reality; (2) the fight for the rights of religions and the religious to serve a public role, as a minority in the society (as religious people are always a minority, because they are never the society as a whole); and the specific contributions this role imparts in terms of knowledge, values, principles and practices to the entire society. In this last case, the public sphere can absorb those items spontaneously, in the culture itself, but usually or hopefully, specific contributions will pass on to the public sphere through parliamentary instances advised by theologians, philosophers and scientists.

The essays of this publication, as we can see, address each one of these aspects:

- (1) *Psychiatry, a Secular Discipline in a Postsecular World? A Review*—by Ricko Damberg Nissen, Frederik Alkier Gildberg and Niels Christian Hvidt. In this article, the authors research how the post secular perspective “reveals a (potential) bias against the religious worldviews inherent in the secular. Post secular theory can contribute to the ongoing discussions of how psychiatry, as a secular discipline, approaches the religious in the lives of patients and psychiatrists”. We can see here a typical way in which science tries to untie the Gordian knot of religion in the public sphere with a sword, as did Alexander. The results present some problems as the article shows.
- (2) *Religionization of Public Space: Symbolic Struggles and Beyond—The Case of Ex-Yugoslav Societies*—by Danijela Gavrilovic and Dragoljub B. Đorđević. The authors present us how “the public sphere has become a battlefield in which public space is being occupied, and a particular way of life and values is imposed” in the case of ex-Yugoslav societies. An example of how religion faces the temptation of crossing the principles of democratic institutions, informed by philosophy and science, to enrich the public sphere with its historical values.
- (3) *Multi-Faith Spaces Uncover Secular Premises Behind the Multi-Faith Paradigm*—by Ryszard Bobrowicz. In this paper, the author “analyse[s] recent developments of MFSs [Multi-Faith Spaces] to detail their main problems and answer the following question: can MFSs, and the underlying Multi-Faith Paradigm, be classified as a continuation of secularism?” As we can foresee, the answer will be affirmative, because the alternative to that would be a non-secular society where pluralism would not be tolerated. The experiment of MFS is a rich example of the creative role religion plays in the public sphere.
- (4) *The Theological Foundation of Democracy According to Ratzinger*—by Andreas Gonçalves Lind. This paper is a precise example of the third way in which religion interacts with the public sphere, imparting specific contributions in terms of knowledge, values, principles and practices to the

entire society, which was one of the main goals of the papacy of Benedict XVI, clearly described in this article.

- (5) *A Cristo moreno in Barcelona: The Staging of Identity-Based Unity and Difference in the Procession of the Lord of Miracles*—by M. Esther Fernandez-Mostaza and Wilson Muñoz Henríquez. “The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze certain elements of the procession, which champion not only the idea of unity (religious, cultural, ethnical, and national), but also the sociocultural differences”. The procession is a way in which an ethnic group can increase its visibility in public life in the country in which it resides. There is no universal perspective in it, but rather the affirmation of its particularity and the right of its existence.
- (6) *Drugs and Religion: Contributions to the Debate on the Science–Religion Interface*—by Orivaldo Lopes, Jr. and Janáina Costa. In this paper, the authors try to show how the religious way of dealing with drugs opens a creative perspective of interaction between religion and science in order to shape public policies on drugs.
- (7) *Post-Secularism in a World-Historical Light: The Axial Age Thesis as an Alternative to Secularization*—by Benjamin Schewel. “The aim of this article is to examine the contours of one specific post-secular narrative of religious change—the one that has crystallized around the concept of the axial age—and consider how it can be used to reconceptualize the public role of religion in the modern world”
- (8) *New Frontiers and Relations between Religion, Culture and Politics in Western Europe*—by Alfonso Pérez-Agote. The author shows in this paper how private-public relation in which religion is involved challenges classical sociological perspectives. The new possibilities are operative only in circumstances where a non-hierarchical relationship is constructed.
- (9) *Social Dynamics, Transnational Flows and Public Incidence of Religion in the Frontier in Latin America*—by Anaxsuel Fernando da Silva. The paper seeks to discuss how very diverse religious practices have been organized and maintained in the social, dynamic and multiform context of the frontier region. This specific situation opens up a more creative way of religious groups interacting with the public sphere. The work describes a sense of minority and an intense plural configuration that does not obliterate religious presence, but enhances it.

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