# Religion, Culture and Identity in a Democratic Society

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The paper argues for sustained critical reflections and research on religions in postcolonial societies that benefit from the theories of Casanova and Castells. Both have explored some recent developments at the end of the 20th century after the death of religion seemed certain to many. Casanova argues for the critical role of religion in democratic societies, while Castells discusses the revival of religion in the context of globalisation and information-flows. Both are insightful but they only present imperfect markers and signposts for understanding the vitality and relevance of religions in postcolonial democracies. The paper therefore attempts to account for the unique history and place of religion in these societies as well.

## Introduction

This essay problematises the place of religion in a democratic society, and thereby problematises issues of identity and culture in such societies. My ultimate focus is on the nature of religion in postcolonial democratic societies. Debates on religion in democratic societies have revolved around theories that have focused on European and American examples. Detailed analyses of religions apart from these Eurocentric models are few and far between. The question of public religions, ubiquitous as the phenomenon is in postcolonial societies, has not received sufficient attention in a theoretically sustained manner. We have great numbers of case studies and some brilliant analyses of religion in Asia, Latin America and Africa. However, I believe that a systematic study of religion in colonial and postcolonial contexts awaits the attention and guts of scholars of religion. In order to achieve this, religion must be perceived in a unique way. From a theoretical point of view, a state religion in a democratic, plural society

is a contradiction. An officially sanctioned state religion flies in the face of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. Any special consideration given to one particular religion or tradition violates the rights and privileges granted to all. Political offices, courts of law and other organs of the state may not be hijacked or exploited to given preference to one religion against any other.

A pluralist democratic society presupposes a certain transformation of religion. Real freedom of conscience and belief imply certain expectations on the part of religious traditions. Adherents have to accept the fact that they do not have the automatic right and privilege to use their absolute truth of God in order to assert their authority in the public sphere. They may not demand more time on television, or more symbolic space, by virtue of the fact that truth is on their side. They may develop their full religious potential in a private, individual sense, but may not force such development in the public domain. This is the dominant view of religion in a democratic society.

The relationship between actual religious traditions and democratic political cultures is a bit more complex in reality. Some have state churches with clipped wings, while others enjoy only limited official recognition. Some states insist on a secularist orthodoxy while others do not mind the occasional blessing from religious dignitaries. Some states do not mind support from religious institutions in areas of social delivery; while others welcome the support for individual well being. More recently, it has been accepted that religion may play an even bigger role in democratic societies. Analysis of such a presence provides us with an opportunity to begin asking questions about the nature of religion in postcolonial societies.

## Revisiting Secularisation

I propose to begin this process by taking up an issue that has been extensively debated in academic circles at the end of 20th century, and which opens a window to the meaning of religion in postcolonial democratic societies. It is common knowledge that the secularisation thesis dominated the theoretical approaches of the social sciences until the late 1970s. According to this thesis, modern society was progressively secularised to such an extent that religion could only play a marginal role in society. At best, it ought to play a role in the private affairs of family and individual life. In the words of Wilson, religion was relegated to a peripheral role in society:

> ... an alternative culture, observed as unthreatening to the modern social system, in much the same way that entertainment is seen as unthreatening. It offers another world to explore as an escape from the rigors of technological order and the ennui that is the incidental by-product of an in-

creasingly programmed world. (Wilson 1985: 20)

This was not simply a description of religion in particular societies, but a model for religion in the modern world. The iron cage that Weber predicted of modern industrial society might provide a space for religions. Beyond this, religion had nothing to offer. This particular vision of religion in a secular society was then packaged for export. Development agencies promoted it for the third world, and international advisors guided postcolonial states towards this outlook in their relation with religions. Not many actually followed this recipe, as religions were sometimes seen as intractable and sometimes as convenient sources of legitimisation.

With the Islamic revolution in the late 1970s and other similar phenomena, observers began to notice that religion had not disappeared. In fact, it was thriving and re-asserting its role in public life. Theorists located in the West began to question the secularisation model, and dropped the thesis as quickly as others had earlier embraced it (Casanova 1994: 11). Others like Bryan Wilson argued that secularisation was essentially conducive to Christian and Jewish societies. Only the latter religions promoted modernisation through their devotion to theological coherence and exclusiveness (Wilson 1985: 16). Echoing this phenomenon, Seyyed Hossein Nasr argued "not having a Divine Law to govern the external life of man as well as the spiritual domain, Christianity facilitated this secularization of political and social life and its divorce from revealed principles which in turn brought about the major upheavals of modern times" (Nasr 1994 (1966): 32). For such scholars, secularisation was only successful in populations dominated by Christianity and sometimes Judaism. The revival of religious politics in Islamic countries was particularly regarded as a counter trend of Europe and North America.

On the other hand, Bruce Lawrence saw the resurgence of religion as a much wider phenomenon not exclusively reflecting the non-Christian traditions. Tracing the revival of religious fundamentalism across the globe, and across religious traditions, Lawrence interpreted the rise of fundamentalism as a rejection of the modernist project. According to Lawrence, the fundamentalist turn in modern society was a reaction to the dogmatic stance of the modern project. Fundamentalists shared one thing in common: "opposition to all those individuals or institutions that advocate Enlightenment values and wave the banner of secularism or modernism" (Lawrence 1989: 6). In spite of the competing positions, these observations of religious revival reflect the overturning of the paradigm of secularisation in the study of religion in the modern world. The paradigm dominated perceptions and outlooks in Western academia, and the debate to reject and replace the outmoded paradigm continues unabated.

I believe that no sufficient attention is paid to the role and place of religion in non-western, previously colonised societies. I would like to open this debate

by carefully looking at two recent studies that evaluated the shape of religion beyond the death of religion thesis, and beyond the essentialism of particular religions. The first is Jose Casanova who follows a Habermasian approach and argues that religion has an important role to play in a democratic society. The second is Manuel Castells who makes some important suggestions about religious identity in the context of globalisation and information-flows.

Casanova takes issue with crude secularisation theories that predict the death of God and then the death of religion. However, he believes that some insights from the theory may be salvaged for understanding the role of religion. A revised version of secularisation theory has something to offer to both the shape and limit of religions in a liberal democratic state. Directly concerned with Western democratic states, Casanova argues that the differentiation of society into spheres of activity is still valid. The factors that have given shape to differentiation, and the demotion of religion in economic, political and social spheres, remain: "The Protestant reformation; the formation of modern states; the growth of modern capitalism; and the early modern scientific revolution" (Casanova 1994: 21). These factors have had a different history in different societies, but they have produced similar effects. Firstly, the religious sphere has become a "less central and spatially diminished sphere within the new secular system" (Casanova 1994: 20-1). Secondly, freedom of conscience has been entrenched in societies. According to Casanova, these elements of religion in a democratic society cannot be given up. If they do, they will undermine fundamental democratic values.

The decline of religious belief and privatisation of religious practice were also thought to be necessary aspects of the factors mentioned above. However, the decline of religion has not been conclusive in democratic societies. It seems merely a European exceptionalism, with interesting variations in America and Canada. And secondly, according to Casanova, privatisation is a historical option but not a necessary one. The authoritative role of religion in Europe facilitated the privatisation of religion. The exclusive limitation of religion to the private domain of life did not necessarily flow from the factors that gave rise to secularisation. The public role of religion may be compatible with democratic institutions. That means that the religious sphere may not completely overtake political society or the state, but it could play an important role in civil society by humanising the rational systems of modernity:

> The theory of secularization should also be complex enough to account for the historical "contingency" that there may be legitimate forms of "public" religion in the modern world, which have a political role to play which is not necessarily that of "positive" societal integration; that there may be forms of "public" religion which do not necessarily endanger modern functional differentiation; and that there may

> be forms of "public" religion which allow for the privatization of religion and for the pluralism of subjective religious beliefs. (Casanova 1994: 39)

Religions that take a critical view of the modern systems may play an important role in the public space. They may assist in the unfinished project of modernity in the Habermasian sense (Casanova 1994: 231). They have a role to play addressing the concerns of the poor, and the marginalised. They ought to speak against the wanton degradation of the environment, and the blight of racism. Of course, this implies that religions accept the differentiation of society, and the development of the scientific method. According to Casanova, public religion can have a legitimate role in a democracy on condition that religious traditions accept the Enlightenment critique of religion.

Parallel to Casanova, Castells reviews the shape of the world in a global age of information. He argues from a slightly different perspective that religion in a global age is given a new lease of life. Information-flows break down barriers between societies, and create their own possibilities and limitations. For Castells, identity in a global world of information-flows is dislodged from any stable historical space: "subjects, if and when constructed, are not built any longer on the basis of civil societies, that are in the process of disintegration, but as prolongation of communal resistance" (Castells 1997: 11). As nation states crumble or weaken, so do civil societies that are located in a particular space, and share a particular history.

The question of religion appears in Castells's work in the context of identity, an important social concept in the information age. Castells argues for three kinds of identities in a global age of information-flows: legitimating, defensive, and project. Legitimating identities were the privilege and preserve of the nation state that has now lost its status as a stable entity in an information age. Defensive identities are best expressed as cultural and religious identities that get a new lease of life through the recovery of images, and historical perceptions. Unlike legitimating identities that are bound to state and space, defensive identities can exploit the new freedom of information-flows. Access to information produces the possibility of new combinations or the recovery of once-forgotten resources. Most importantly, they offer some escape from rapid change and instability as they infuse meaning in a highly organised society: "language, and communal images, are so essential to restore communication between the autonomized bodies, escaping the domination of a-historical flows, yet trying to restore new patterns of meaningful communication among the believers" (Castells 1997: 66). Defensive identities give religious identities a new lease of life. They "surge from the depths of historically exhausted social forms, but decisively affect, in a complex pattern, the society in the making" (Castells 1997: 108). Rising from the ashes, Castells conjures the image of religion thriving through global infor-

mation-flows. The domination of the Internet by religion gives a sense of how religion has adopted new opportunities with enthusiasm and dedicated resources. In summary, then, Castells does not believe that religious identities will disappear. But they remain defensive in a world which is rapidly changing. They simply do not have the capacity to sustain themselves on a long-term basis as a legitimating identity. They can only be invoked for expressing anger, rejection and therefore meaning among believers of a particular space, or history.

But there is yet a third type of identity in the information age, according to Castells. Project identities are not located in a specific place. They thrive in a world of information-flows as they connect people and places to an immediate cause. As the name suggests, project identities are limited to certain specific arenas like the environment, or the battle against AIDS, or the promotion of human rights, that appropriate a multitude of symbols and values in the service of a cause. They are global, and can mobilise information, resources and supporters for specific goals. Beyond a project, the individual may take on other identities. The environmentalists are a good example of Castell's project identity. Religion, according to Castells, sometimes provides support and resources for project identities. For Castells, then, the revival of religion signals the mobilisation and voice of groups and peoples left on the periphery of the information age. At the same time, religion may also be mined for constructing new project identities as humans struggle against collective global problems like poverty and AIDS.

Castells and Casanova come to slightly different conclusions about religions at the end of the 20th century. Casanova uses the secularisation thesis to show that religions can and perhaps should play a very important critical role in democratic societies. They can only do so under certain conditions: they should not aspire to take over the state, they should respect freedoms, and accept societal differentiation. Castells considers the new opportunities in the age of information, and believes that religious traditions will be invoked to protect the casualties of the information age, or those who simply refuse to be part of the game. On the other hand, religious values might be quarried for project identities. Castells sees a greater possibility of focused projects that may draw on religious resources. He does not consider the transformative possibilities that Casanova believes exist in Western religious traditions. Taking a global view, he takes the defensive nature of religious identities to be dominant; a feature that Casanova believes makes religions incompatible with, or even threatens, democratic cultures.

Of the two, Castells tells us more directly about religion in post-colonial societies. Casanova is careful to limit himself to Western democracies, but often makes judgements about religions in the rest of the world. I believe that their insights about religion in modern societies must be combined to reflect on religion, culture and identity in postcolonial democracies. Castell's thesis helps us to understand the defensive nature of religion on the margins of a global order. I

believe, however, that it is not sufficient to say that religions are defensive. We ought to carefully consider the historical conditions where such defensiveness is invoked, and then consider the agency of those engaged in constructing these defensive identities. And more carefully, we need to ask what roles do religions positing defensive identities play in democracies. We ought to make sense of the responses of religious traditions as they shape themselves in democratic societies.

Both explicitly and implicitly, debates on the rise of religions in the modern era are dominated by models taken from Europe and North America. In a fairly recent article, Yamane has suggested that Canada presents a case mid-way between the demotion of religion in Europe and the thriving of religion in the United States of America (Yamane 1997). The very different history of religion in colonial societies will pose an even more daunting task. I believe, however, that the wheel need not be reinvented. Some of the conditions that gave rise to secularisation are still present in the world as a whole. Modernity represents an axial shift of global proportions, and it would be a mistake to think of absolutely unique experiences in colonial and postcolonial societies. A reading of the transformation of religion in the public sphere leads me to identify four important facets of religion in postcolonial societies. These facets are a challenge to those who would like to understand the role of religion in democratic societies, and suggest the lines along which the debates within democratic societies might begin.

Firstly, religion is a symbol of cultural authenticity in most postcolonial societies. This is part of the legacy of colonialism when religion was sometimes employed to create legitimacy; sometimes to create divisions; and sometimes to denigrate the culture of a people. Fanon's analysis of the Algerian war of independence alerts us to the cultural struggle involved from both the French and Algerian nationalists. British interests in Nigeria supported Muslims and Christians in different ways. And African Traditional Religion was at the receiving end of all political and religious groups. In response, religion became a symbol of the authentic roots of the colonised peoples. It was commemorated, and more importantly cast in stone as the foundation of individual and social authenticity. True authentic religion became a bulwark against the other, whether a foreigner, a neighbour or a potential friend.

Closely related to the first point is the fact that religion played an important role in the liberation from colonial rule. The possibilities of religion in colonial and post-colonial societies, real and imagined, stand in competition with its limitations experienced in Europe. The success of religion to mobilise against colonialism, and in future possibly against poverty, AIDS, and debt, stands in stark contrast to the limits of the postcolonial state. Compared to the experience of Europe where the critique of religion has been sustained and relentless, the experiences of colonisation have shielded religious communities from such debates. The critics of religion are seen as agents of Western powers, while the

limitations of religion are downplayed in the name of authentic religion, which can never be what religion has actually become. The problems of the postcolonial condition are not attributed to the failures of religions and religious consciousness. In fact, authentic religion thrives at the failures of the postcolonial state.

Thirdly, Mamdani's thesis of the bifurcated colonial state alerts us to yet another dimension of religion after independence. Colonial policy "one-sidedly opposed the community to the individual, and thereby encapsulated the individual in a set of relations defined and enforced by the state as communal and customary" (Mamdani 1996: 51). This particular policy has left a legacy where culture (and by extension religion) in colonial Africa is potentially and actually played up against civil society. The postcolonial state has found it tempting to continue exploiting culture and religion as a source of loyalty and support. Thus, the postcolonial state does not tolerate the development of religion as a critical voice. More importantly, most religious traditions themselves find it difficult to take such a critical role. In principle excluded from the development of civil society during colonialism, they are most comfortable demanding protection from change. In post-independent societies, they seem happy to demand a fair share of the state's support and resources in exchange for loyalty.[1] There is no real benefit in being a critical voice in a democracy, compounded by lack of resources.

Fourthly, the differentiation in Europe where religion takes a back seat to science and political power, has no counterpart in postcolonial societies. The principle of differentiation, so central to Casanova's thesis, is significantly flawed in colonial and postcolonial experience. Casanova's prime factors of differentiation are either absent or distorted. A *religious reformation* is thwarted by state (colonial and postcolonial) support for one or the other form of benign religion; *state formation* is subject to interminable obstacles from outside interference in global politics; *capitalism* is skewed as raw materials are extracted to the benefit of the global markets; and *scientific developments* are hampered by inadequate state policies and cultural obstacles. Clearly, we cannot simply transport Casanova's model of differentiation to these societies. It is clear that we have to begin with a critical discussion of religion from another place. Unlike Europe, where debates raged within religious traditions about the transformation of society, critical debates are almost non-existent. We have much factionalism, but hardly any debates about the meaning and authority of religion in relation to the state, science and modern culture.

## Conclusion

Making sense of religion in democratic societies demands theoretical insight into the nature of religion and its transformation in colonial and postcolonial contexts. I have used Casanova and Castells to explore some developments in

religions after the death of religion prognoses, and in the context of globalisation and information-flows. These are insightful but they only present imperfect markers and signposts for understanding the vitality and relevance of religions in postcolonial democracies. What is called for, are sustained critical reflections and research on religions in such societies that may not have to throw out these theories. But they will have to explore more widely than has currently happened. I have only used two profound interventions that have shed light on the nature of the challenges that affect countries, and showed briefly how these fell short of the demands on postcolonial democracies.

## Notes

[1] See, for example, the work of Constantin (1993) for Islam in East Africa in support of this.

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