CHAPTER 23

Secularism and Religion in the Public Sphere in Contemporary Brazil

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Introduction

José Casanova, in revisiting Eisenstadt’s concept of ‘multiple modernities’ (Eisenstadt 2000), highlights that notions of modernity and secularization have their own particular genealogies, and that these reflect the historical trajectories of specific nation-states. The author argues that, consequently, every reflection on secularization requires “a critical examination of the different structures of differentiation and fusion of the religious and the secular, as well as their mutual formation” (Casanova 2008: 4). Our overview and description of the specific characteristics of contemporary Brazilian secularism draws on Casanova’s approach, treating the transition from monarchy to republic in 1889 as a historical milestone, and applying the Foucauldian concept of ‘genealogy’ to the model of secularism developed at the end of the nineteenth century and its subsequent transformation after the 1988 Constituent Assembly. We take the structural role of the Catholic Church in the formation of the Brazilian nation-state as a point of departure, in order to demonstrate the several arguments.

The first argument concerns the relationship between secularism and the separation of the political and religious spheres, which might be formulated thus: the dynamics of secularization in Brazilian society have been connected to the Catholic religious imagination as well as to the political and social actions of the ecclesiastical professionals and intelligentsia due to the extent of Catholic religious homogeneity in Brazilian society, at least until the beginning of the 1960s. This was related to a weak civil society, whose process of construction began with the separation Church and State in 1889. In other words, the secularization of Brazilian society was not the result of a process by which the Christian faith was confined to the private sphere; rather, secularization took hold because of the actions of ecclesiastical institutions.

The second argument concerns the religious sphere: the constitutional process that culminated in the 1988 Constitution and the expansion of the modes of participation of other religions in decision-making fora: Spiritism, Afro-Brazilian religions and, especially (representing 22% of the current population) Evangelical groups. This new visibility, which had been the result
of a slow process of articulation between popular religions and the middle class since the 1950s, crystalized for the first time the general and positive perception that society is constituted by various religious forms that are as equally respectable as Catholicism. This new sensitivity has grounded the legal configuration of a religious pluralism that had first been formulated as the right to religious freedom and was then reformulated as the right to difference. This process, in which religious organizations were progressively presented in the public sphere in terms of difference, led to an important transformation in the collective understanding of religion, and it became increasingly associated with secularized ideas of tradition, culture or social action. In order to understand the nature of this transformation, it is necessary to proceed to a detailed description of the particular characteristics that have defined the historical dynamics of the production of a secular and laical society in Brazil.

The Construction of Secularism in Brazil

Contemporary literature on secularization agrees that the legal separation of Church and State is not enough to immediately and unequivocally create a secular society (Martin 1978; Casanova 2008; Portier 2012). Moreover, the correlation of forces prevailing in the political context in which this transition occurs concomitantly defines the parameters according to which state sovereignty and possible modes of religious regulation are instituted. The dynamics of secularization in a society are thus profoundly associated with the model of secularism instituted by a sovereign state.

In the Brazilian case, two fundamental elements characterize the historical matrix of its model of secularism: (1) the continuation of Patronato Real as the legal form of Brazil's relation to the Catholic Church following independence and the establishment of the monarchy; and (2) the State's decision to give freedom of worship to Protestant missions, in order to foster the immigration of European settlers, despite the restrictions set forth in the Constitution of 1824. These institutional frameworks both consolidated the dissemination of a secular political culture that predated the legal separation of Church and State; they also consolidated a model of state neutrality *avant la lettre* that acknowledged the official hegemony of Catholicism, but legally authorized and protected the organization and manifestation of other religious confessions (particularly Protestant denominations). These dynamics each had consequences for the constitution of Brazilian secularism.