Varieties of Deprivatization: Revisiting Religious Communities in the Public Sphere

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1. Public Religions Under the Conditions of Globalization

This issue's thematic section on Religious Communities in the Public Sphere brings together three revised papers presented in the course of a joint panel organized by Hans G. Kippenberg at the twentieth World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) in Toronto in 2010. All papers have one common denominator: they explore a religious studies perspective on current discussions about the variety of religious deprivatization. In doing so, they start from discussions that gained considerable momentum with José Casanova’s modern classic Public Religions in the Modern World (1994) and its central hypothesis that: “we are witnessing the ‘deprivatization’ of religion in the modern world. By deprivatization I 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.”

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In this quotation Casanova highlights the two main dimensions of his approach to public religions. On the one hand, he suggests that we are witnessing a deprivatization of religions and a return of religious communities to the level of the state, the party system, and—most of all—the level of civil society. On the other hand, Casanova emphasizes that modernity must not be equaled with secularization. According to Casanova, secularization has three dimensions (i.e. social differentiation, the decrease in religious beliefs and practices, as well as the privatization of religions), which are independent of each other. While social differentiation is crucial to modern society, the assumption of a decrease in personal religious belief is not. In other words, in a secularized society private convictions have to be defended in the public sphere and issues of the public sphere are disputed as affecting personal religiosity: “By bringing publicity into the private moral sphere and by bringing into the public sphere issues of private morality, religions force modern societies to confront the task of reconstructing […] their own normative foundations.”

Over the last fifteen years, this concept of public religions was exposed to two major strands of critique. First, it was primarily Talal Asad who questioned Casanova’s concept of religion. In a 2006 article, Asad argued that Casanova’s idea of religion actually focuses on the US model of Christian denominations, a model that cannot be generalized. Second, Casanova’s concept of ‘public space’ has been characterized as too narrow, focusing on civil society as a very specific aspect of the ‘public’ and neglecting for example the media or the wide spectrum of popular culture. Along those lines, Timothy Fitzgerald has argued that Casanova’s focus on civil society is actually bypassing the social struggles and controversies that are an essential part of the establishment of religion in the public sphere.

In his most recent writings, Casanova has responded to some of these challenges, proposing that his notion of public religions is actually a

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2) Ibid., 229.