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The Social Dynamics of Religion in the Public Domain. Introduction

Heidemarie Winkel and Gladys Ganiel (2017)
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For decades, secularization theories have dominated the sociology of religion across Europe. The early theorists of secularization have been much-criticized for predicting that religion would decline to the point of disappearance or irrelevance. In 1968 Peter Berger told the *New York Times* that by ‘the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture’ (quoted in Stark 1999: 250). It is well known that Berger (2014) has reversed his analysis, and now argues that pluralization rather than secularization better explains the social dynamics of religion in contemporary societies. Berger identifies two pluralisms: religious pluralism, and the pluralism of religious and secular coexistence, which combine to ‘result in an overall intensification of pluralism, not least in the individual mind’ (Woodhead 2016: 41). But the pluralization of religion has also been public: religion, in various institutional forms, is inescapably part of the public domain in Europe and throughout the world.

As a consequence, religion is perceived by many as a source of socio-political division, in particular in the case of Islam (Pollack et al. 2014). In contrast, Nilüfer Göle (2016) succeeds in bringing sober, unemotional arguments into the debate. On the basis of rich data from 21 European cities she makes ordinary Muslim everyday life visible – including new forms of coexistence. She does not neglect conflicts, but examines them also in light of how Muslims have been dehumanized. Against this background it is sometimes forgotten that the pluralization of religion has also prompted questions about the social dynamics of religion in public domains beyond Islam. So for example, Grace Davie (2015: 205) identifies a ‘paradox’ that while active membership has declined in churches, in Britain and in other European contexts this has happened ‘alongside the growing significance of religion in public – and therefore political – life.’ Gladys Ganiel (2016) writes of ‘mixed’ religious markets, in which a variety of religious institutional forms, including traditional churches, faith-based organizations, and individualized and de-institutionalized ‘extra-institutional’ expressions of religion, vie for eminence in the public domain. Linda Woodhead (2016) explores how some people now refuse to

categorize themselves as religious *or* secular, raising questions about how to define public religion, and about what it means to be ‘religious’ at all. Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt (2012) offer the concept of multiple secularities to explain the multiple forms of boundary making towards religion, in as well as beyond Europe. Heidemarie Winkel (2017a) suggests instead to conceive the variety of religious reality as multiple religions consisting of different structural, institutional and symbolic configurations allowing for a deeper understanding of social continuity and persistence, for example in terms of conservative or fundamental expressions in the realm of gender relations. Berger’s (2014) ‘many altars of modernity’ range from relativistic to fundamentalist forms of religion, each with their own challenges to so-called ‘secular’ states. Consequently, in many European societies the emergence of religion in the public domain is a socially, politically, legally and morally contested issue. In some contexts, public religion is associated with fear and intolerance (Casanova 2009; Göle 2008, 2013; Pickel and Yendell 2016), and European societies struggle to cope with Islamophobia (Hajjat and Mohammed 2013) and anti-Muslim racism (Attia 2009).

In post-migrant European societies Christian immigrants and refugees also may be more ‘religious’ than their European hosts. Religion then may be used to ghettoize newcomers, casting them as divisive ‘Others’ or serving as a barrier to their constructive engagement with host governments and societies. But as José Casanova (2004) observes, in Europe ‘immigration and Islam are almost synonymous,’ so that in many cases religion becomes the main barrier to meaningful social and political participation. Indeed, ‘The immigrant, the religious, the racial, and the socio-economic disprivileged “other” all tend to coincide’ (Casanova 2004: 9). A consistent discursive connection between Islamism and terrorism obscures the evidence that religious fundamentalism is not solely a Muslim problem (Riesebrodt 1998, 2001). Fears of religious fundamentalism and radicalization can result in prohibitions on religious freedom, with people’s ability to express and practice their religion in the workplace and other public spaces compromised. The resulting prohibitions in turn can fuel the very radicalization they were intended to prevent.

At the same time, secularization theories continue to be a subject of controversy and debate. Talal Asad (1993, 2003), for example, questions the universalising notion of

secularization in anthropological and sociological theory; he argues that secularization is a central political resource of liberal democracy and reveals the socio-historical particularity of the secularization paradigm (Winkel 2017b). Casanova (2006:10) also critiques the notion of religion ‘as a universal globalized concept’ and as ‘a construction of Western secular modernity’. Charles Taylor (1996, 2009) denotes this as the *immanent frame* of Western-European societies. Primarily Taylor is interested in the question of how secularization has been enforced as a kind of political ethics in competition with religious ideas since the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648). Craig Calhoun (2010: 37) concludes that secularization (as it developed in the aftermath of the 17th century) ‘is not simply a neutral antidote to religious conflicts,’ but rather a political solution that intends to neutralize religious conflicts. While Calhoun suggests that Western-European social theory is trapped in an epistemic scheme of methodological secularism that deems religious experience as a non-intelligible form of knowledge, Jürgen Habermas (2001) argues that it is necessary to adjust European societies to the social reality of religion’s ongoing presence in the public domain. He captures this conviction in the notion of the ‘post-secular’ society and criticizes European societies for not preserving spaces for the articulative power of religious language (Habermas 2001: 12). All in all social theorists uncover *the secular* as a worldview (Asad 2003) that constitutes the ‘real ground of being’ (Rafudeen 2014: 56) in Western modernities and that locates religion *within* this reality of the ‘secular faith,’ as Calhoun (2010: 37) terms it.

Accordingly, sociological analysis of religion should take into account that the *secular understanding of religion* is a specific worldview; it also has to consider that the boundaries between secular and religious motives are not clear-cut and that both realms are not as incompatible as differentiation theory supposes.¹ Following among others Shmuel Eisenstadt (2000) we argue that the relation between religion and (secular) politics is characterized by manifold interdependencies and overlaps. As the boundaries between *the secular* and *the religious* are fluent, the question arises, how is sociological research tracing the social dynamics of religion in the public domains of European societies – and beyond? How is sociological research identifying empirical examples and

1 Today, theorists of social differentiation question that social systems are operating as specialised and autonomous as social systems theory assumes (Schwinn 2011, 2013). This also holds true for religion.

constructing theories that help us to better understand religious pluralization, as well as relationships between the so-called religious and secular?

The contributions in this special issue address these questions in their own ways, analysing the role of religion in the organization of social life as well as in its relation to secular publics. In the first contribution, *Erin Wilson* goes beyond the European realm: she questions political notions of global justice from a post-colonial perspective. Wilson starts from the assumption that non-secular ways of thinking about justice are devalued by secular norms that typically guide concepts like human rights, humanitarian aid or development. Wilson argues that the dominance of secular ideas causes epistemological injustice, and that this may be a particular blind-spot in European foreign aid and development policies. Further, a failure to consider religiously-framed conceptions of justice – as articulated by informants in Wilson’s empirical material from Malawi and South Africa – may hinder development. While secularism is usually viewed as providing the guarantee for seeming neutrality in the public sphere, Wilson argues that secular frameworks may instead prop up ideological support for classism, neoliberalism and racism. Thus Wilson considers post-secularism as a possibility that enables alternative ways of thinking and acting, e.g. based on religiosity.

The next contribution focuses on religion in the public legal domain of European nation-states. *Annette Schnabel, Florian Grötsch and Kathrin Behrens* study the constitutions of all EU member states. In a quantitative document analysis the authors examine how religion is institutionally anchored and regulated within these constitutions. The documents mirror power struggles in relationships between society, state and religion as well as societies’ normative rules and values. The results demonstrate that Europe is not as uniformly secular as is often assumed and that the religious self-understanding of the EU member states varies according to nation-specific developments. There are no commonly shared patterns of religious regulation. All constitutions mention religion, and they do not define EU member states as explicitly secular. Viewed in this light the analysis reveals a varying religious self-understanding among EU member states. But the authors also emphasize that the growing regulation of religion in younger constitutions reflects an increasing degree of secularity. Consequently, the authors conclude that religion appears to be unlikely as a common denominator for European integration.

Nonetheless the results demonstrate that the nation-states provide religions with considerable access to the public domain.

This also holds true for the following contribution. *Eila Helander* shows that the EU allows for an active public role for religion. She demonstrates how national churches have gradually become politically involved in the European public sphere since the early 2000s, taking the national church in Finland as empirical example. With the Treaty of Lisbon (2007) the EU established a legal basis for a regular dialogue between EU institutions and the (national) churches. This strengthened various advocacy groups' positions in public, transnational ecumenical networks. Helander focuses on the advocacy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) in European Parliament elections, that is: the involvement of the ELCF in the public domain of the EU. The author argues that the advocacy work proves to be a means of gaining additional power and outreach in the public domain. Helander describes this as a clear resurgence of religion in the public domain and a contribution to European integration.

Dorota Hall's contribution also deepens understanding of religion's relevance in the public domain. Moreover, her work demonstrates how far the boundaries between *the secular public* and *the religious* are blurred. In an empirical study on the press coverage on reparative therapy in Polish catholic newspapers and non-catholic journals, Hall examines the influence of religion in public debates about homosexuality. Based on discourse theory Hall demonstrates how pathologic subjectivities are constructed in the public sphere and how religious as well as secular, political actors commonly contribute to the discourse of reparative therapy. She also argues that this discourse developed as a kind of platform for the articulation of concerns about Polish post-communist democracy and that it mirrors how religion is influencing state policies. All in all reparative therapy is introduced as a project that has been successful in attracting public attention and mobilizing the formation of subject positions like the 'Catholic intelligentsia' and 'LGBT communities'. Reparative therapy turns out to be a discourse field in which religion and religious actors are publicly present and the boundaries of religious as well as political thinking are fluent.

Luis Manuel Hernández Aguilar's contribution also analyses the power of discourses related to religion. He explores how the *German Islam Conference* has been incorporated,

as an institution representing Islam, in the public-legal frame of the state. Aguilar argues that German Muslims are trapped in a paradox: while they might want to improve their legal situation and their public perception through participation in the *Conference*, this institution functions as a site of political control. Muslim organizations are discursively framed as a national security problem as well as a political ally of the government. Also in this case the boundaries between religion and politics are merging and interdependencies between both spheres are discernible.

Amir Sheikhzadegan's and *Michael Nollert's* contribution about the relationship between right-wing anti-immigration politics and the increasing visibility of Islam underlines this insight. The authors examine two selected protagonists of this political controversy, namely the Swiss People's Party and the Islamic Central Council Switzerland, which is an Islamist organization. The analysis shows that both organizations are concerned with a particular form of identity politics that is characterized by boundary making and exclusive imagined community building. This conflict about the visibility of Islam also demonstrates that the boundaries between *the secular public* and *the religious* are blurred and structured by interdependencies, although – or because – this is exactly the point of debate.

All contributions in this special issue demonstrate that religion is highly visible in the public domains of European societies, whereas the secular becomes identifiable as a political resource of liberal democracy within the *immanent frame* of European modernity. Thus the special issue contributes to reflection on secularization's epistemological premises and furthers understanding of the social dynamics of religious pluralization. We cordially thank all authors and *European Societies* for the cooperation.

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