
THE CHURCH AND THE CHRISTIAN IN PUBLIC ARENA

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Abstract

Ever since Biblical times, Christians had a serious preoccupation in trying to understand God's call for them in regard with their role in the public arena. More or less, theology was leading the public policies in countries where Christian religion had been dominant over the years. Major events, as Renaissance, Protestant Reform or French Revolution, crashed the public symbiosis, or even dominance, of Church-State construct. Different approaches had been embraced throughout the centuries since then, but the debate on that is still a vivid one. Each democratic government tried to find a way to deal with the latter development and public understanding on the role of Church and Christian thought, or presence, in public arena. Government's ideologies played an important role over the decision. Religious groups tried to maximize their influence as well. Political leaders or theorists, church people or theologians, and many other opinion leaders, were all interested to present their own view over the issue. Advantages or disadvantages, costs or benefits, dogmatic doctrines or ethical issues etc., were all included in the debate. From secular fundamentalists that promote excluding religion, or religious influence, from public arena, to religious fundamentalists that promote full control of religion over government, or public arena, a multitude of perspectives were presented as potential options for contemporary societies. What is the best decision? What is the role of the Church in public arena? How should Christians see the public arena? Does the Christian have a divine call for the public arena? Are there ethical, political or theological implications over different perspectives? Throughout this present article I will try to answer some of those questions and many that were not included.

Keywords: church, Christian, God's call, public arena, civic responsibility

1. Preliminaries

The European societal construct has been tremendously influenced by the Judeo-Christian thought. Basically the whole life, either we talk about the social, economical, cultural or the political, has all been inseparable combined into an *ethos* of Christianity [1].

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2. Public arena's religious evolution

At the beginning the Christian religion has been regarded as a *religio prava* [2], a depraved or indecent religion, even as an 'illicit' religion [3]. Due to that, Christians were heavily persecuted [4]. They regarded the persecution as a sign of their strong faith [5], and more than that, as a distinction between the two spheres, political and spiritual. They regarded themselves as ones that do not belong to the temporary world [6].

Even before the Christianity, between the spiritual sphere and the public sphere was almost no line of demarcation, mainly due to common interests or leaders that have been supervising both spheres by their prerogatives. That is the reason that different leaders never differentiated the political power from the spiritual authority. For example, Caesar Augustus concentrated all the powers from Imperium under his authority: the one of *imperator* – military power (being the supreme commander), *princeps* (first magistrate, including the authority to administrate and judge), and the *augustus* (spiritual power – having *auctoritas*, that legitimated his religious authority) [7]. Under those prerogatives Constantine issued The Milano Edict (313 B.Ch.), leading letter on to became the state religion under Theodosius [7, p. 80]. Following this momentum, the Caesar-Pope construct dominated the European Continent for centuries, as the socio-political thought has been modelled by theology. Even thou the Christian preaching was declared to be only about the doctrinal issues, in reality there was an intermixture and a constant influence between political and spiritual spheres. Most of the time there were attempts to legitimate by theology the governance, and the political authorities used the church to accomplish their interests [7, p. 95-98].

The politic and religious life were mixing in such a manner, that the Pope desires a temporal role, and the most powerful kings see themselves many times as God's representatives. The great paradox of medieval history is that the strong tie between politics and religious sphere continue to exist beside the theological idea of eternal separation between spiritual and temporal [7, p. 98].

Theodosius II (408-450) introduced the *Theodosius Codices* (438), an ample project including ecclesial edicts in regard with the organization of society [5, p. 46]. The ecclesial law was the same with the law of society, thus the clerks dictated the whole socio-political life. Peter Brown considers that "the Christian rituals supported the world, but the kings ruled over it" [5, p. 291]. The whole society was in fact modelled by the theological hermeneutic. The symbiosis of state-religion dominated the whole public arena for centuries, irrespectively of the sphere of public area we have in mind. The Medieval Europe was characterized by "osmoses and interference, where religion was omnipresent, and the intervention of society or public authorities in the life of the church was not regarded as an inference of foreign forces...the spirit of the age regarded as legitimate this symbiosis" [8].

Several major events marked the history of church-state construct, producing a disconnection between the Church and state. That led to the elimination, or at least limitation, of ecclesial presence in the public arena. Edward Norman considers that this has not to be regarded as lack of interest of the individuals for the spiritual matters, but as a transformation of religious preoccupation and less loyalty to the religious institutions [9]. Grace Davie considers that people have not become less religious, but religious in a different way [10]. Events such as: Great Schism, Renaissance, Protestant Reform and French Revolution, were very significant in the process of limitation of church influence in the public arena. The Renaissance crushed the epistemological sphere, leading to humanism, whose scholars separate themselves from scholastic and medieval religious thought [7, p. 270-271]. The Illuminist's intent was to separate the religion from profane, which led to an isolation of acts from values in the decisions [11], knowing that most of the values in society were religious ones. The Protestant Reform questioned the Catholic Church authority and its legitimacy in influencing the public sphere. The Protestants have much supported the idea of individual conscience in matters of religion and morals, and as result, the individualism spread all into the political and social thinking [12]. This generalized fragmentation of society got to be what is known as homogeneity of pluralism [13]. The French Revolution (1789-1795) was the start of the laicization in society, pushing most of the time to extreme the process, transforming it into a secularization process. The revolutionaries attacked vigorously the Catholic Church, producing antipathy in society against ecclesiastic influence in public arena [14]. Robespierre accepted to transform the Notre Dame Cathedral in the Temple of Reason which worships the Supreme Being [15], and leaders as Fouche, started a process of listing over the cemeteries the message: "Death is an eternal sleep" [16]. Roger Scruton considers that the Revolution tried to replace a religion with another one that made the zeal and fanaticism so evident [17]. But only Napoleon I Bonaparte succeeded in transforming the state into a complete laic one, model that has been copied by other states [18]. Bismarck in Prussia starts even an anti-Catholic program, *Kulturkampf*, which concentrate on expelling the Pope role in public sphere [18, p. 114].

The ditch into this traditional state-church construct has already been produced, its transformation being irreversible, amplified and extended to the whole Europe. Marginalization of religion into the private sphere, gave the Christian a less important role into the public arena. Privatization of religion led to a creation of a gap between Christian moral and society ethic, being regarded as private, personal choice of the individual. The dissociation of citizenship from faith, disconnecting the state from religion, acceptance of pluralism, distancing of religious precepts from society preoccupation etc., redefined the political positions, crashing mainly the religious ones, and irreversible introduced the public sphere into a complete metamorphosis.

3. Public sphere's religious contemporary status

French Revolution pressed all that has to do with religion and spirituality into the religious sphere. The new proclaimed *laïcité* of state was considered sacred for the new societies that arose on European territories. But a better understanding of the new setting could explain some of the deficiencies and new opportunities that exist for religion. The new *status* does not exclude the presence of religion or spirituality, but is an attempt of redefining its role and place in society. The term *laïcité* define a non-controlled state by religion, where there is no dominant religion imposed by state to everyone [19], meanwhile a state that respect religion. The concept implies the disconnection of state from religion, being such viewed as an independent state from religion interference in governing the society. This neutrality of states toward religion, come with the theoretical obligation to respect all religions, non-discriminate on basis of religion, but more then that, facilitate all manifestations of religions or personal creeds.

On the other hand, secularism have been much confused and assimilated at the begging with *laïcité*, although right now got a different connotation. Owen Chadwick considers that is inappropriate to imagine a society that was all religious, that suddenly lost its religious essence, when in fact secularism existed even before that [20]. S.S. Acquaviva distinguishes between the lost of sacred significance dimension in social structures (secularization) and lost of intensity of sacred experiences (desacralization). He proved that the time allocated to sacred experience is much reduced [21], while Teofil Tia considers that this has to do more with institutional practice [21, p. 83].

Different perspectives were advanced in regard with secularization and de-sacralisation of society. Calvin considers *saeculum* as a scene where the glory of God develops, a view similar to Zwingli that desired to re-establish the Christian living on *saeculum* [22]. Luther had seen it as a necessary evil in society. The post-Reform wars destroyed the social cohesion given by religious factor [23], and the process of sacralisation of *saeculum*, the intention of the reformers, transformed into the process of deserialization. More then that, the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg see those wars destructive of common public culture and social unity given by religion, and generative for a culture of secularization [24]. Pannenberg view also the protestant ethic perspective as the mean by which the absolute truth concept got into the relativism process [25]. This generated a process of atomization in society that allowed more religions or none in same state, putting away all pressures from individual to accept the accepted axioms of society [20, p. 23]. Church leaders and theologians view of secularization is very different. Bonheoffer, for example, separates religion from believe, considering that religion lost its relevance, and the society didn't felt a need anymore for religion [26]. Gogarten [27] or Berkhof [28] looked at secularization as the means by which society could be better understood. Cox announced the transcendental religion dismissal, wishing the new secular city a brave future [29, 30].

“Christianity contributed to the raise of the modern world; but the modern world surmounted Christianity; thus Christianity dig its own grove [...] as much as the Church become more united with modern world, so it compromised more and dig deeper its own grove.” [31]

The adoption of new values, external to Biblical precepts, led to what got to be known as internal secularization. Thus, we look at secularization from two perspectives, the one from exterior that promote the exclusion of religion from public arena, and the internal secularization in within the Church. So, “institutionalized Christianity lost its capacity to influence the culture, and the culture has been progressively secularized” [9, p. IX].

But, secularization got also to be regarded as an attempt to push religion outside of public sphere, limit all religious manifestation to private sphere, or even exclude the religion from society practices and public manifestations. Because of that, secularism became a form of fundamentalism, being regarded even as an enemy to the *laïcité* state, because this form of state accepts freedom of religion in society. The fundamentalist secularism allows religion only in the private zone of individual. Strident laicism is also a term that describe an attitude that militate to eliminate the religion from public arena, mainly regarded as a political laicism, antireligious, intolerant toward all public manifestation of religion.

4. Toward God’s call - Christian responsibility for public arena

Peter Berger considers that the experiments of secularism to fulfil the needs of society have all failed [32]. Beside the differential theses of secularist’s theorists [33], all predictions have failed. Contemporary society records rather new forms of religion identity, that due to the individual’s identity crisis [34]. The theory of compensation could not be applied with other material forms, as those correspond to different registers. Anther advanced hypothesis is of a civil religion [35] that could appear. This should be a religion that will combine elements from many religions and will be acceptable by contemporary society. But, irrespectively of the potential case, mainly knowing the spiritual vacuum of society, Christians have a Biblical mandate for civic sphere and public arena. Newbigin considers that the confrontation of society with Christian values and principles perfectly fits with the militant character of a Christian, even if rejection could appear [36].

The religious discourse is often been regarded as irrelevant in public arena. John J. Coughlin considers that the spiritual dimension of individual is very important in the context of society. The irrelevance of religion in society has also been argued as only political power lead society. But, globalization proved that on international arena is mainly led my autonomous spheres of influence with great impact on states, groups and individuals. Religion has greatly proved its impact and efficiency on leading people, the state being not the only actor to lead societies. Secularist’s reflexes in society push often religion in private arena, but that doesn’t mean that it could not play a role into

the public sphere. On contrary, recent major events (see 9/11) proved that such an approach could lead to social catastrophes. At the other extreme are the promoters of religious idealism that considers that religion should be imposed to all society. Examples of that attitude are the fundamentalist's states (see Iran for example). A cost and benefit approach has been also suggested, or even a utility or opportunity approach toward religious presence in society. Jim Wallis, on the other hand, considers that religion is imperative to be in public arena, as it played an important progressive role in society. Positive examples of that are: the abolition of slavery, elimination of discrimination, civil and human rights positive results etc., all well known in the American history of democratization [37]. Wallis affirms that instead of saying "we don't talk about God", is better to have a serious debate on religious and moral ground, to find solutions in regard with security, health, education, care for disabled, or other public policies. Without a debate on that on the ground of religion, society loses the spiritual dimension of human being, which so much enriched public policies in forming the modern states [37, p. 59-61]. From individual perspective, religion goes beyond the material sphere, including transcendental and spiritual preoccupations. This equilibrates and enriches the public debate [37]. Neuhaus considers that a community with moral actors should include with obligation into the public debate the transcendental 'good', as that could otherwise lead to social conflicts or will generate religious enclaves where there is a common language for truth, justice, virtues and good. But, he considers that those themes should be included in public debates, debates that should accommodate all religious believe that are ready to talk about freedom, equality, rights, etc. [38].

Jeff Fountain presents a biblical approach to the public arena. He considers that all the areas of life where peace (*shalom*), could be established, in the way that God intended to be, has to be permanently in the Christian's interest. Fountain mentions only several of those areas, like: "nationalism, racism, urbanization, pollution, immigration, unemployment, aging of population, sexual slavery, corruption in business and governance, absence of values", and those are only few of them [39]. Numerous references from the Bible mention the *polis* area of Christian responsibility [Jeremiah 29.7, 1 Timothy 2.1-4], and those are in regard with all the areas of public sphere. The interrogation of Christian responsibility reveals a great mandate given to Jesus Christ's followers, not only to be fulfilled in the church, but mainly in public arena. John Wesley understood the proclaiming of the Gospel as a mission of social transformation [J.F. Engel, *Christianity Today*, 8 November 2000]. John Stott [Developing a Christian Impact on Society, in *Hope of Europe* (available at http://www.hfe.org/cms_images/docs/christianImpact.pdf, accessed, 10 May 2010)] affirms that promoting the values in society, Christ's ideas and standards, are to be done through Christians that understands the hermeneutic of 'salt' and 'light' for the public arena.

5. Conclusion

Christians have to understand their call and responsibility for public arena. In the context of a laic state, public arena has to be open to all ideas and opinions, welcoming all that is good for society, even if transcendental 'good' is brought into debate. Based on Biblical hermeneutic, Christians have more than an opportunity, but an obligation to be present in the public arena, mainly to present its values and principles, which could enrich the debate and bring progress to society. In the context of freedom of religion, Christians have the same rights as all the others to be a voice in the society, to influence lives and destinies of people, and give people hope, individual believe or meaning to their faith. That is not only a great opportunity in our contemporary society for the Church, but God's call for his believers as well.

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